

**ABOUT CINEMA AND SOME ISSUES IT INVOLVES**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article addresses some of cinema’s anthropological and historical backgrounds. Etymology is also taken into account. Cinema is a hybrid kind of art which deals directly with movement. Having its roots in Ancient times, maybe in pre-history, cinema stems directly from photography. Its hybridism is due to the fact that it combines features of architecture, painting, sculpture, music, poetry and dance (the six classical arts that are historically precedent in relation to cinema) into a single work of art – hence the title “seventh art”. The article also stresses the fact that technological progress and innovation in general (e.g., 3D film) do not necessarily mean quality improvement; paradoxically as it may seem, the opposite is closer to the truth, since the excess of facilities becomes a difficulty in itself – a rule valid for cinema, the other arts and each and every human activity in general.

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*Cinema is a matter of what's in the frame and what's out.*

Martin Scorsese (quoted by Veronika Adams in *Martin Scorsese Unauthorized Biography*)

*His majesty enquired if he [Dr Johnson] was then writing anything. He answered, he was not, for he had pretty well told the world what he knew, and must now read to acquire more knowledge.*

James Boswell (*The Life of Samuel Johnson*)



*Quantity does not mean quality; it can even blur our capacity of distinguishing one from the other.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Cinema is the art of movement. Such an assert sounds as a pleonasm. The close relationship between cinema and movement is evident from the analysis of the very word we use to denominate it. Indeed, “cinema” derives etymologically from the Greek word *kinesis*, which means movement. The Latin source introduces us to the same semantic field. When we say we are going to the movies, we evoke the Latin verb *movere*, the etymological ancestor of “to move” and “movement”.



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Movement is the most convincing phenomenon that represents the ephemeral face of reality. It is the perception of movement – as well as of any kind of change or transformation in general – that gives us the notion of the passing of time. A film shows visual images in movement, giving them a logical meaning within temporality – i.e., in terms of sequence. A sequence of photos of the same event shown in an adequate speed gives the spectator the illusion of reality itself; things seem to move in front of his eyes. It looks as though he is a real witness of that event. Cinema deals with reality in the level of happening. In this sense, cinema can be considered more figurative than any other form of artistic manifestation. Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses confines the prophet to the immobility of the stone. Paralysed, the marble body seems to be detached from the fleeting face of reality. The same can be said with regard to a painted portrait or even to the photograph of a seashore: both the person portrayed and the sea water photographed do not move anymore.

One should not confound the duration of an event in real life with that displayed in a movie. Ordinarily, the length of time covered by the narrative is shorter than the period covered by the story narrated. Bertolucci's *1900* lasts a few hours, albeit referring to a period of several decades. Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) stands out as an example of film in which narrative's time corresponds exactly to that of the story itself. Unusual in cinema is also a sequence of scenes that lasts longer than the events they represent. The emphatic repetition of the explosion of a house in Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) illustrates this possibility.

Cinema is an art that delves deeply in the sequential aspect of reality and in its ontological support, which is time – always remembering that what time provides for sequence, space provides for simultaneity. In any case, music and dance are essentially arts of movement too. The difference is that cinema and dance are accessible through the eyes, while music is perceived by the ears; and that is why we call cinema and dance visual arts, and music an auditory one. Just as it happens in a dance piece, a film integrates spatial and temporal elements into a single event; no wonder films are called "moving pictures". The very possibility of numerically estimating movement is provided by time; hence Aristotle's definition of time as the "number of change in respect of the before and after" (1). Oddly enough, we do not have a specific sense organ to perceive time; in contrast, our sensibility is directly connected with space. In Kant's terminology, one could say that space is the medium a priori that contains everything we see, hear, touch, smell and taste. Space is the ontological basis for the external world that surrounds us. Naturally spatial beings are also temporal beings; they "occupy" time as well, since they are subject to changes. However, we do not see, hear, taste, smell or touch time in the external world; its existence is a much more introspective one.

An important analogy between space and time arises when we think in terms of succession and position. Time is ruled by succession; space is ordered through position. Time is filled with happenings, whereas space is occupied by three-dimensional bodies. Facts take place in time. If they make sense, they give birth to what we call a story. If it is registered through a camera and then is reproduced with the proper means, we have cinema. This does not mean, however, that a moving picture has necessarily to tell a story. In the beginning, there was no explicit compromise between cinema and the dynamic of narration. It was basically an instrument of register, that could serve the press and help scientific investigations; it could also be considered an appendage of painting or even a form of entertainment (2).

### **CINEMA, A HYBRID KIND OF ART**

Facts take place in time, and connection between them is the basis for what we call "story". Not all movies narrate stories, it must be said. In its early days, cinema had no clear commitment with story-like narration – never forgetting that telling stories is a universal phenomenon, maybe as old as mankind itself. As a matter of fact,

Story-telling can take many forms – myths, legends, ballads, folk-tales, rituals, dance, drama and can be seen to serve apparently different social functions –, from entertainment to religious instruction. It seems that story-telling is part of our cultural experience, inseparable and intrinsic to it (3).

Cinema's first purpose was to provide images to the press and scientific investigation in general; soon, however, it started to function as an appendage of painting and also as a form of entertainment. In the course of time, this late role outshone the others; cinema became intrinsically linked to the capacity of telling stories, a function

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hitherto reserved to theatre and literature as a whole. This meant promotion: cinema got emancipated from the level of a mere technical and mechanic device to the higher status of a noble art (4).

Whenever we change the position of things inside a place, the whole spatial configuration changes as well. Changing the sequence of facts (= their order in time) of a story tends to make it incomprehensible; or to turn it into a different story. Yet the change or even the inversion of a factual sequence can work as a positive factor in a film, inasmuch as the utilization of time's flexibility intensifies the internal cohesion of the plot, as well as such an utilization requires from the spectator more involvement with the story that is being told. Returning to events that took place in the past through flashbacks is a frequent device in films; a much less common device in films is its counterpart, the flash-forward: "a transition (in literary or theatrical works or films) to a later event or scene that interrupts the normal chronological development of the story" (5). Roman Polansky resorts to it explicitly in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), through the protagonist's first nightmares, in which she herself is a spectator of facts that will take place later. In Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981), we come across a subliminal (but not less powerful) flash-forward: for Archy (Mark Lee), winning the race in Australia is a prelude of the scene of his death, at the end of the film. Quentin Tarantino became a master at combining those two techniques (flashback and flash-forward), *Kill Bill* (2003) being perhaps his best achievement in such a combination – comparable to *Before the*

*Rain* (1992), Milcho Manchevski's masterpiece, and to the excellent *Amores perros* (2000), directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu.

In *Les visiteurs du soir* (1942), Marcel Carné explores the flexibility of time in a very particular way. At a certain moment, time stops passing; for some characters, things cease to happen. Notwithstanding, this does not damage the plot, nor puts into risk the credibility of the story. It is contextually coherent, hence credible: Carné makes us believe that time had really ceased to pass; and such a resource (that of altering not only the speed, but the very essence of time) represents one of the greatest innovations brought about by the seventh art. As André Bazin puts,

Only the screen could allow Charlot to accomplish this perfect mathematical union of the situation and the gesture, where the maximum of clearness is expressed in a minimum period of time (6).

In a movie, time is primarily perceived through vision, although it can also be accessible through hearing. Sound is not an essential feature in a film; originally, cinema was an exclusively visual art. Yet shortly thereafter, cinema turned into a hybrid art, insofar as it combined features of its other six older colleagues (7). A film can integrate architecture, painting, sculpture, music, poetry and dance (the six arts that are historically precedent in relation to cinema) into a single work of art. This, withal, is not enough to explain what a film is. A film is more than the sum of the elements originated from its six older pairs in the field of art. Cinema is the seventh pair that, albeit hybrid, claims for individuality as a new form of art. It is a situation that can be clarified through a comparison. Let's choose something from our daily life, e.g., a certain amount of curry. Curry, as we know, is an Indian dish, which results from a complex combination of spices or herbs. No matter how deep we know the flavour of each component of that particular amount of curry; such knowledge does not enable us to identify the flavour of the curry in its own identity, because once its components are due combined, a new flavour emerges, that of the curry itself.

Hybridism became, indeed, the fundamental feature of cinema. As an art, cinema has a compromise with beauty. The point is this: what kind of beauty is that we enjoy in a film? Veritably, we can refer to a film as an aesthetic unity, giving equal value to each element involved; but we can also regard it as beautiful in a most particular way, stressing one or more of its components isolated – so we say, for instance, that a film pleases in terms of photography, but not for the story that it tells.

### SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS

Certainly, Plato's allegory of the cave is a historical precursor of the filming process, inasmuch as it introduces the possibility of projecting shadows on the wall of a dark room. But this example taken from Ancient Greece is far from being the only one, in terms of precedence vis-à-vis the cinema properly said. In fact,

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Projection of images can occur naturally when rays of light pass through a small hole and produce an inverted image on a surface in a dark area behind the hole. This phenomenon is known as *camera obscura* or pinhole image.

Its oldest known recorded description is found in Chinese Mohist writings dated to circa 400 B. C. However, people have probably witnessed and made use of occurrences of the phenomenon since prehistoric times. It has been suggested that distortions in the shapes of animals in many Paleolithic cave paintings were possibly based on distortions seen in pinhole images formed through tiny holes in tents or in screens of animal hide. Some ancient sightings of gods and spirits, especially in temple worship, are thought to possibly have been conjured up by means of camera obscura or proto magic lantern projections (8).

In Western culture, the first researches concerning the persistence of the visual image on the retina traces back to Alexandria, in Hellenistic times. In the Middle Ages, “very occasionally the *camera obscura* was thought of as an instrument for live projections of performances to entertain an audience inside a darkened room. Purportedly Arnaldus de Villa Nova did so at the end of the 13th century” (9). During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, giants of the visual arts, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Vermeer, were particularly interested in the same device – let alone Giambattista della Porta, who in 1589

imagined how the *camera obscura* could be used to project hunting scenes, battles, games or anything desired. Real or artificial forests, rivers, mountains as well as animals could be used for scenes on an outside stage and projected into a dark room with spectators (10).

Notwithstanding the fact that, in Europe, the projection of images on a wall of a darkened room through the use of lens can be dated back to 1550, officially cinema was born in 1895. Indeed,

The Brothers Lumière held their first private screening of projected motion pictures in 1895. This first screening on 22 March 1895 took place in Paris, at the “Society for the Development of the National Industry”, in front of an audience of 200 people – among which Léon Gaumont, then director of the Comptoir de la photographie. The main focus of this conference by Louis Lumière were the recent developments in the photograph industry, mainly the research on polychromy (colour photography). It was much to Lumière’s surprise that the moving black-and-white images retained more attention than the coloured stills photographs. The American Woodville Latham had screened works of film seven months earlier on 20 May 1895. The first public screening of films at which admission was charged was a program by the Skladanowsky brothers that was held on 1 November 1895, in Berlin (11).

Three decades later, more precisely in 1927, the first sound film was released: *The Jazz Singer*, directed by Alan Crosland and Gordon Hollingshead. Such a delay was not due to technical limitations; between 1911 and 1912, there were already technical conditions for the introduction of sound in films. The delay was caused by economical by economical factors: the introduction of sound in movies meant new investments, along with the risk of failure.

Paradoxically, the release of the first sound film was also influenced by economical circumstances: in the beginning of the 20th century, during the great economical crisis that followed the First World War, the movie industry regarded the use of sound as a positive factor, a sort of antidote against the loss of public caused by the recession (12).

The truth is that the first moving pictures were not necessarily 100% “mute”. Musical accompaniment was commonly utilized with the purpose of giving the public the emotional atmosphere required by the story. Occasionally, subtitles were added as well. In some cases, they have proved to be essentials – as, for example, in the last scenes of Chaplin’s *City Lights* (1931), when the ex-blind girl (Virginia Cherrill), after recognizing the tramp Charlie as his beloved benefactor, responsible for rescuing her from blindness, answers to his question (“Can you see now?”), by saying: “Yes, I can see now”. It is significant that the introduction of sound gave rise to severe reactions from eminent figures of the first half of the 20th century such as Luigi Pirandello, René Clair, Pouvodkine and Charles Chaplin himself. They considered sound film represented decadence, the failure of the cinema – a prelude for Quetin Tarantino’s recent criticism against digital film; according to him, “digital projection is the death of cinema. The fact that most films aren’t presented in 35mm means that the world is lost. Digital projection is just television in cinema” (13). As for Chaplin’s group’s opposition against sound film, it

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must be remembered that, by that time, more than a few cinema producers saw the possibility of mixing image and sound as a mere source of profit; cinema ran the risk of becoming a mere pretext to display and explore the hit-parades (14).

On talking about mute cinema, attention should be paid to the great difference between a film in which the words are necessary and another in which the absence of words is part of its artistic language. Both kinds of film coexisted since the advent of the seventh art. In the first case, the introduction of words was a gain, since it helped to complete the visual spectacle. In the second case, however, words would be redundant; expressiveness was completely concentrated on the visual devices: first French avant-garde, Soviet school and German expressionism are the best examples. Absence of sound, as well as of colours, are not defects in themselves; on the contrary, they can serve to bring about a certain degree of unreality, which is beneficial for the artistic phenomenon itself. Joel and Ethan Coen's neo-noir *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) is just unconceivable as a movie in color.

### **CINEMA: ART THAT BEST IMMORTALISES THE PAST**

André Bazin was right in saying that one of the few cultural habits one usually finds in each and every human society is that of immortalizing the past; and cinema, he thought, is the art that best meets that need (15). As seventh art, cinema is the art typical of our era. This is due not only to the sophisticated technical devices required, but also to the fact that cinema has the property of uniting the other arts into one single whole; better than theatre (Aristotle) or opera (Wagner), cinema achieves the goal of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total artwork"). During the last one hundred years, arts have expanded their own and traditional borders, so that they often merge into one another. Many decades ago, Theodor Adorno said that

The borders between the artistic genres are flowing into one another; more precisely, their demarcation lines are fraying. (...) It is as if the artistic genres, by negating their firmly outlined forms, were gnawing away the concept of art itself (16).

More recently, Arthur Danto dealt with the same subject, putting extra emphasis on the fact that traditional media of manifestation of the arts have become more and more imprecise within their own contours:

It is a practice in which painters no longer hesitate to situate their paintings by means of devices which belong to altogether different media – sculpture, video, film, installation, and the like (17).

Under these circumstances, the classical criteria for the classification of the arts tend to become obsolete; in fact, the very concept of art has been put at stake. As we know, since the beginning of the 20th century, avant-garde artistic movements (notably Dadaism and its several branches) have been opposing the idea of art as a privileged field of human activity. Is it really true that anything can be considered a work of art, as the cliché goes? Could the mere whim of being trendy replace the canonical criteria of order and harmony that had prevailed from Paleolithic times till the end of the 19th century?

In any case, the emergence of modern art coincides chronologically with the coming into being of cinema; such events do overlap in history and that is not a mere coincidence. Cinema is a hybrid art; it depends on the other arts to its very come into being, but it has its own artistic personality and form of expression. Television and video do not replace cinema. The experience of going to the movies is completely different, in terms of physical and psychological involvement. As Graeme Turner asserts,

While video may supply narrative to its audience, it does not offer them the event of cinema-going, nor does it replicate the experience of the darkened cinema with its larger than-life and Dolby stereo sound (18).

Federico Fellini's comparison between cinema and television is also elucidative; as Marcelo Mastroiani recalls, "One day Fellini said to me: 'Look, formerly we looked at a Marilyn Monroe this way, gigantic. Now we look down and see her small'. It is really different'" (19). A projection room is a place of dream, as Mastroiani, on talking about his youth (that is, during the first half of the 20th century), describes:

I fed myself with films, like all the other boys of my generation. That magic room, dark, mysterious! The ray of light, with the smoke of the cigarettes... Cinema was also something fascinating (...) How one could describe the

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beauty of the cinema of that epoch? Were we more naïve and less exigent, in such a way that just a few was enough to make us fell enchanted and enthusiastic (20)?

### THE EXCESS OF FACILITIES BECOMES A DIFFICULTY IN ITSELF

Seeing a film in a projection room is an aesthetic experience in itself, insofar as it requires specific conditions, and offers the opportunity of having emotions and sensations that we would not have in another place. A point to be emphasized is that technological progress and innovation in general (e.g., 3D film) do not necessarily mean quality improvement (21); the opposite is closer to the truth, since quality has undoubtedly waned in the field of cinema (and of the other arts as well) during the last three of four decades, a phenomenon easy to perceive at both the collective and individual levels. Consider, for example, the filmography of Werner Herzog, icon of the New German Cinema. His great feature movies belong all in the 1970s and 1980s; everything he directed from the 1990s onwards seems to be dwarfed by his *Kaspar Hauser* (1974), *Herz aus Glas* (1976), *Nosferatu* (1979) and so on. Take TV series – a genre in which mediocrity has unfortunately become a trademark –, such as Henrik Björn's *Jordskott* (2015), Michael Hirst *Vikings* (2013), Ronald D. Moore's *Outlander* (2014) etc. All of them together are not worth even one single episode of Ed Spielman's *Kung Fu* (1972-75), Richard Levinson's and William Lin's *Columbo* (1971-2003), let alone Sydney Sheldon's *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-1970). I cannot help being of opinion, that the excess of facilities becomes a difficulty in itself – a rule valid for cinema, the other arts, as well as for technology, and each and every human activity of achievement in general.

### REFERENCES

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2. See Jacques Aumont: "Cinema e narração", in *A estética do filme* (trad. Marina Appenzeller), São Paulo, Papirus, 1994, p. 89.
3. Graeme Turner. *Film as Social Practice*, 2nd ed., London/New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 67.
4. See Jacques Aumont: "Cinema e narração", in *A estética do filme*, op. cit., p. 89-91.
5. <http://englishthesaurus.net/antonym/flashback>.
6. André Bazin. "Théâtre et cinéma", in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, 2nd edition, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1997, p. 133.
7. Nowadays, the expression "hybrid art" has often been used to designate "a contemporary art movement in which artists work with frontier areas of science and emerging technologies". It can also be applied to "a non profit Arts education company in the United Kingdom", set up in 2003 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybrid\\_arts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybrid_arts)).
8. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precursors\\_of\\_film](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precursors_of_film).
9. *Ibidem*.
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11. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auguste\\_and\\_Louis\\_Lumi%C3%A8re](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auguste_and_Louis_Lumi%C3%A8re).
12. See for instance, Jacques Aumont: "O filme como representação visual e sonora", in *A estética do filme*, op. cit., p. 45.
13. Quoted by Nigel M. Smith. "Quentin Tarantino Blasts Digital Projection at Cannes: 'It's the death of cinema.'", in *IndieWire*, 23/05/2014 (accessible on <http://www.indiewire.com/2014/05/quentin-tarantino-blasts-digital-projection-at-cannes-its-the-death-of-cinema-26176/>).
14. See Lo Duca. *Histoire du cinéma*, Paris, P.U.F. 1951, p. 64.
15. See Noël Carroll. *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory*, Princeton/New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 64.
16. Quoted by Wolfgang Welsch. "Description and Explanation in Art Exegesis, in *Filozofski Vestnik. XIVth International Congress of Aesthetics. Aesthetics as Philosophy*, Ljubljana, 1998, v. II, p. 222. Economic factors are always to be taken into special account when it comes to cinema. Let be remembered that "Fortunes are still spent and lost in making movies" (Graeme Turner. *Film as Social Practice*, op. cit., p. 95).
17. Quoted by Wolfgang Welsch. "Description and Explanation in Art Exegesis, in *Filozofski Vestnik. XIVth International Congress of Aesthetics. Aesthetics as Philosophy*, op. cit., v. II, p. 222.
18. *Film as Social Practice*, op. cit., pp. 97-98.
19. *Eu me lembro, sim, eu me lembro* (translated by Therezinha Monteiro), São Paulo, Dórea Books and Art São Paulo, 1999, p. 32.



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20. *Idem, pp. 31-32.*

21. *Strictly speaking, 3D films exist in some form since 1915. High costs and technical restrictions caused it to be relegated to a niche in the motion picture industry. However, “3D films were prominently featured in the 1950s in American cinema, and later experienced a worldwide resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s driven by IMAX high-end theaters and Disney themed-venues. 3D films became more and more successful throughout the 2000s, culminating in the unprecedented success of 3D presentations of Avatar in December 2009 and January 2010” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/3D\\_film](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/3D_film)).*