

Potemkin came before it), nor even the rhythmic effects (though I believe they outdid the technical example of *Potemkin* in that direction). What seemed possible of development in the film was the integration of imagery with the movement. The ship at sea, the men casting, the men hauling, were not only seen as functionaries doing something. They were seen as functionaries in half a hundred different ways, and each tended to add something to the illumination as well as the description of them. In other words the shots were massed together, not only for description and tempo but for commentary on it. One felt impressed by the tough continuing upstanding labour involved, and the feeling shaped the images, determined the background and supplied the extra details which gave colour to the whole. I do not urge the example of *Drifters*, but in theory at least the example is there. If the high bravery of upstanding labour came through the film, as I hope it did, it was made not by the story itself, but by the imagery attendant on it. I put the point, not in praise of the method but in simple analysis of the method.

Luis Buñuel

CINEMA, INSTRUMENT OF POETRY (1953)

THE GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE who form the Dirección de Difusión Cultural approached me to ask me to give a lecture. Although duly grateful for the attention, my reply was negative: I have none of the qualities which a lecturer requires and have a special bashfulness about speaking in public. Fatally, the speaker attracts the collective attention of his listeners, only to feel intimidated by their gaze. In my case I cannot avoid a certain embarrassment in face of the dread of what can make me somewhat, let us say, exhibitionist. Although this idea of mine about the lecturer may be exaggerated or false, the fact of feeling it as true obliges me to ask that my period of exhibition will be as brief as possible, and I propose the constitution of a Round Table, in which as a number of friends belonging to distinct artistic and intellectual activities, we can discuss *en famille* the problems pertaining to the so-called seventh art: hence it is agreed that the theme shall be 'The Cinema as Artistic Expression', or more concretely, as an instrument of poetry, with all that that word can imply of the sense of liberation, of subversion of reality, of the threshold of the marvellous world of the subconscious, of nonconformity with the limited society that surrounds us.

Octavio Paz has said: 'An imprisoned man has only to close his eyes to be able to blow up the world.' I would add, in paraphrase: it would suffice for the white pupil of the cinema screen to reflect the light which is proper to it, to blow up the universe. But for the moment we can sleep in peace, because the cinematographic light is carefully drugged and imprisoned. None of the traditional arts reveals so massive a disproportion between the possibilities it offers and its achievements. Because it acts in a direct manner upon the spectator in presenting to him concrete people and objects, because it isolates him by virtue of the silence and darkness from what might be called his 'psychic habitat', the cinema is capable of putting him into a state of ecstasy more effectively than any other mode of human expression. But more effectively than any other, it is capable of brutalising him. And unhappily the great part of present-day cinema production seems to have no other mission: the screens rejoice in

the moral and intellectual emptiness in which the cinema prospers; in effect it limits itself to imitating the novel or the theatre with the difference that its means are less rich to express psychology: it repeats to satiety the same stories which the nineteenth century was already tired of telling and which still continue in contemporary fiction.

A moderately cultivated individual would reject with scorn any book with one of the arguments that serve the film. However, sitting comfortably in a dark room, dazzled by the light and the movement which exert a quasi-hypnotic power over him, fascinated by the interest of human faces and the rapid changes of place, this same almost cultivated individual placidly accepts the most appalling themes.

The cinema spectator, through this kind of hypnotic inhibition, loses an important percentage of his intellectual capacity. I will give a concrete example, the film called *Detective Story*. The structure of its subject is perfect, the director excellent, the actors extraordinary, the realisation brilliant, etc. But at this talent, all this ability, all the complications which the making of a film involve, have been put at the service of an idiotic story, of a remarkable moral wretchedness. This reminds me of the extraordinary machine of *Opus 11*, a vast machine made of the best steel, with a thousand complex gears, with tubes, manometers, dials, precise as a watch, as big as a liner, whose sole use was to gum postage-stamps.

Mystery, the essential element of every work of art, is in general lacking in films. Authors, directors, and producers are at pains not to disturb our peace, by leaving the window on to the liberating world of poetry tightly closed. They prefer to make the screen reflect subjects which could compose the normal continuation of our daily life, to repeat a thousand times the same drama or to make us forget the painful hours of daily work. And all this naturally sanctioned by habitual morality, government, and international censorship, religion, dominated by good taste and enlivened by white humour and other prosaic imperatives of reality.

If we hope to see good cinema, we shall rarely achieve it through bit productions and those which are accompanied by the sanction of the critics and the approval of the public. The private story, the individual drama cannot, in my view, interest anyone worthy of living in his times; if the spectator shares the joys, the sorrows, the anxieties of a personage on the screen, this can be only because he sees reflected in it the joys, sorrows, anxieties of a whole society, and therefore his own. Strikes, social insecurity, fear of war, etc., are the things which affect everyone today, and also affect the spectator; but that Mr X. is unhappy at home and seeks a girl-friend to console him, and finally abandons her to return to his wife all penitent, is no doubt very moral and edifying, but leaves us completely indifferent.

Sometimes the essence of cinema spurts unexpectedly from an anodine film, from a farce or a crude novelette. Man Ray said something very significant: 'The worst films which I have seen, those which send me into a deep sleep, always contain five marvellous minutes, while the best films, the most praised, have scarcely more than five worthwhile minutes.' This is to say that in all films, good or bad, beyond and despite the intentions of the makers, cinema poetry struggles to come to the surface and manifest itself.

The cinema is a magnificent and perilous weapon when wielded by a free spirit. It

is the best instrument to express the world of dreams, of emotions, of instinct. The creative mechanism of cinema images, through its manner of functioning, is among all the means of human expression the one which comes nearest to the mind of man, or, even more, which best imitates the functioning of the mind in the state of dreaming. Jacques B. Brunius has pointed out that the night which bit by bit invades the cinema is equivalent to closing the eyes. Then begins, on the screen and within the man, the incursion into the night of the unconscious; the images, as in dream, appear and disappear through 'dissolves' and fade-outs; time and space become flexible, retrace or extend at will; chronological order and relative values of duration no longer respond to reality; cyclic action is accomplished in a few minutes or in several centuries; movements accelerate their speed.

The cinema seems to have been invented to express the subconscious life, whose roots penetrate so deeply into poetry; but it is almost never used for that end. Among modern tendencies of cinema, the best known is what is called 'neo-realism'. Its films present to the eyes of the spectator slices of real life, with people taken from the street, and with real buildings and exteriors. With a few exceptions, among which I would especially instance *Bicycle Thieves*, neo-realism has done nothing to produce in its films what is proper to the cinema, that is to say, the mysterious and fantastic. What use is all this visual drapery if the situations, the motives which animate the people, their reactions, the very subjects are taken from the most sentimental and conformist literature? The one interesting innovation, not of neo-realism but of Zavattini personally, is to have elevated the anodine action to the status of dramatic action. In *Umberto D*, one of the most interesting products of neo-realism, an entire reel of ten minutes shows a little maid performing actions which, a little while before, would have appeared unworthy of the screen. We see the servant enter the kitchen, light the stove, put a pan on the gas, throw water on a line of ants who advance on the wall in indian file, give the thermometer to an old man who feels feverish and so on. Despite the trivial nature of the situation, these activities are followed with interest and there is even a certain 'suspense'.

Neo-realism has introduced into cinematographic expression certain elements which enrich its language, but nothing more. The reality of neo-realism is incomplete, official and above all rational; but poetry, mystery, all that completes and enlarges tangible reality, is completely lacking in its working. It confuses ironic fantasy with the fantastic and black humour.

'What is most admirable in the fantastic,' André Breton has said, 'is that the fantastic doesn't exist; all is real.' In a conversation with Zavattini, I explained to him a few months ago my disagreement with neo-realism. As we dined together the first example which offered itself to me was that of the glass of wine. For a neo-realist, I said to him, a glass is a glass and nothing more; you see it taken from the sideboard, filled with drink, taken to the kitchen where the maid washes it and perhaps breaks it, which will result in its return or otherwise, etc. But this same glass, contemplated by different beings, can be a thousand different things, because each one changes what he sees with *affectivity*; no one sees things as they are, but as his desires and his state of soul make him see. I fight for the cinema which will show me this kind of glass, because this cinema will give me an integral vision of reality, will broaden my knowledge of things

and people, will open up to me the marvellous world of the unknown, of all that which I find neither in the newspaper nor in the street.

Don't think from what I have just said that I am for a cinema consecrated solely to the fantastic and to mystery, for a cinema which, fleeing or scorning daily reality, would aim to plunge us into the unconscious world of the dream. Although I have just now indicated very briefly the capital importance which I attach to the film which treats the fundamental problems of a modern man, I do not consider man in isolation, as a particular case, but in his relationship to other men. I take for mine the words of Engels, who defined the function of the novelist (understood in this case as that of the film-maker): 'The novelist will have accomplished his task honourably when, through a faithful depiction of authentic social relations, he will have destroyed the conventional representation of the nature of these relations, shaken the optimism of the bourgeois world and obliged the reader to question the permanence of the existing order, even if he does not directly propose a conclusion to us, even if he does not openly take sides.'

PART TWO

Moments from European film history



Tout Va Bien: BFI collections