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1907-1939  Richard Abel

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will deserve even more to be called the Seventh Art, since that is how it has been baptized by those who have faith in its future.

GERMAINE DULAC (1882-1942) was a writer for the feminist magazines, *La Française* and *La Fronde*, before the war. She began directing films in 1916—for instance, *Amis de jours* (1918), *La Cigarette* (1919), *La Mort du soleil* (1922), *La Sournoise Madame Benda* (1923). At the time of this lecture, Dulac was becoming increasingly involved in the French cine-club movement.

The other example was an excerpt from Tourjansky's *Création de Morin* (1924). I have deleted other sequences excerpted from Rescourt's *La Paque du Millionnaire* (Italy, 1922) and *Les Grands* (1924).

JEAN EPSTEIN, "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*"

Translated by Tom Milne in *Alternance* 10 (Autumn 1981), 20-23. Reprinted by permission. Epstein delivered versions of this essay at the Salon d'Automne in November 1923, to the Paris-Nancy Group at Nancy on 1 December 1923, at the Pathe-Palace in Montpellier on 7 January 1924, and to the Philosophical and Scientific Studies Group at the Sorbonne on 15 June 1924. The original French text first appeared as "De quelques conditions de la *photogénie*" in *Ciné-Cine-Paris-tout* 19 (15 August 1924), 6-8.

THE CINEMA seems to me like two Siamese twins joined together at the stomach, in other words by the base necessities of life, but sundered at the heart, or by the higher necessities of emotion. The first of these brothers is the art of cinema, the second is the film industry. A surgeon is called for, capable of separating these two fraternal foci without killing them, or a psychologist able to resolve the incompatibilities between these two hearts.

I shall venture to speak to you only of the art of cinema. The art of cinema has been called "*photogénie*" by Louis Delluc. The word is apt, and should be preserved. What is *photogénie*? I would describe as photogenic any aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction. And any aspect not enhanced by filmic reproduction is not photogenic, plays no part in the art of cinema.

For every art builds its forbidden city, its own exclusive domain, autonomous, specific, and hostile to anything that does not belong. Astonishing to relate, literature must first and foremost be literary; the theater, theatrical; painting, pictorial; and the cinema, cinematic. Painting today is freeing itself from many of its representational and narrative concerns. Historical and anecdotal canvases, pictures which narrate rather than paint, are rarely seen nowadays outside the furnishing departments of the big stores—where, I must confess, they sell very well. But what one might call the high art of painting seeks to be no more than painting, in other words color taking on life. And any literature worthy of the name turns its back on those twists and turns of plot which lead to the detective's discovery of the lost treasure. Literature seeks only to be literary, which is seen as a jus-

tification for taking it to task by people alarmed at the idea that it might resemble neither a charade nor a game of cards and be put to better use than killing time, which there is no point in killing since it returns, hanging equally heavy, with each new dawn.

Similarly, the cinema should avoid dealings, which can only be unfortunate, with historical, educational, novelistic, moral or immoral, geographical or documentary subjects. The cinema must seek to become, gradually and in the end uniquely, cinematic; to employ, in other words, only photogenic elements. *Photogénie* is the purest expression of cinema.

What aspects of the world are photogenic, then, these aspects to which the cinema must limit itself? I fear the only response I have to offer to so important a question is a premature one. We must not forget that where the theater trails some tens of centuries of existence behind it, the cinema is a mere twenty-five years old. It is a new enigma. Is it an art? Or less than that? A pictorial language, like the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt, whose secrets we have scarcely penetrated yet, about which we do not know all that we do not know? Or an unexpected extension to our sense of sight, a sort of telepathy of the eye? Or a challenge to the logic of the universe, since the mechanism of cinema constructs movement by multiplying successive stoppages of celluloid exposed to a ray of light, thus creating mobility through immobility, decisively demonstrating how right was the false reasoning of Zeno of Elea?

Do we know what radio will be like in ten years time? An eighth art, no doubt, as much at odds with music as cinema currently is with the theater. We are just as much in the dark as to what cinema will be like in ten years time.

At present, we have discovered the cinematic property of things, a new and exciting sort of potential: *photogénie*. We are beginning to recognize certain circumstances in which this *photogénie* appears. I suggest a preliminary specification in determining these photogenic aspects. A moment ago I described as photogenic any aspect whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction. I now specify: only mobile aspects of the world, of things and souls, may see their moral value increased by filmic reproduction.

This mobility should be understood only in the widest sense, implying all directions perceptible to the mind. By general agreement it is said that the dimensions deriving from our sense of direction are three in number: the three spatial dimensions. I have never really understood why the notion of a fourth dimension has been enveloped in such mystery. It very obviously exists; it is time. The mind travels in time, just as it does in space. But whereas in space we imagine three directions at right angles to each other, in time we can conceive only one: the past-future vector. We can

conceive a space-time system in which the past-future direction also passes through the point of intersection of the three acknowledged spatial directions, at the precise moment when it is between past and future: the present, a point in time, an instant without duration, as points in geometrical space are without dimension. Photogenic mobility is a mobility in this space-time system, a mobility in both space and time. We can therefore say that the photogenic aspect of an object is a consequence of its variations in space-time.

This definition, an important one, is not simply a mental intuition. A number of films have already offered concrete examples. First, certain American films, demonstrating an unconscious and highly precocious feeling for cinema, sketched the spatiotemporal cinigrams in rough outline. Later Griffith, that giant of the primitive cinema, gave classical expression to these jostling, intersecting denouements that describe arabesques virtually simultaneously in space and time. More consciously and more lucidly, Gance—today our master, one and all—then composed his astonishing vision of trains swept along on the rails of the drama. We must be clear why these racing wheels in *La Roue* comprise the most classic sentences yet written in the language of cinema. It is because in these images the most clearly defined role is played by variations, if not simultaneous at least approximately so, in the spatiotemporal dimensions.

For in the end it all comes down to a question of perspective, a question of design. Perspective in drawing is a three-dimensional perspective, and when a pupil executes a drawing which takes no account of the third dimension, the effect of depth or relief in objects, it is said that he has done a bad drawing, that he cannot draw. To the elements of perspective employed in drawing, the cinema adds a new perspective in time. In addition to relief in space the cinema offers relief in time. Astonishing abridgments in this temporal perspective are permitted by the cinema—notably in those amazing glimpses into the life of plants and crystals—but these have never yet been used to dramatic purpose. If, as I said earlier, a drawing which ignores the third spatial dimension in its perspective is a bad drawing, I must now add that cinema composed without taking the temporal perspective into account is not cinematic.

Moreover, cinema is a language, and like all languages it is animistic; it attributes, in other words, a semblance of life to the objects it defines. The more primitive a language, the more marked this animistic tendency. There is no need to stress the extent to which the language of cinema remains primitive in its terms and ideas; so it is hardly surprising that it should endow the objects it is called upon to depict with such intense life. The almost godlike importance assumed in close-ups by parts of the human body, or by the most frigid elements in nature, has often been noted.

Through the cinema, a revolver in a drawer, a broken bottle on the ground, an eye isolated by an iris, are elevated to the status of characters in the drama. Being dramatic, they seem alive, as though involved in the evolution of an emotion.

I would even go so far as to say that the cinema is polytheistic and theogonic. Those lives it creates, by summoning objects out of the shadows of indifference into the light of dramatic concern, have little in common with human life. These lives are like the life in charms and amulets, the ominous, tabooed objects of certain primitive religions. If we wish to understand how an animal, a plant, or a stone can inspire respect, fear, or horror, those three most sacred sentiments, I think we must watch them on the screen, living their mysterious, silent lives, alien to the human sensibility.

To things and beings in their most frigid semblance, the cinema thus grants the greatest gift unto death: life. And it confers this life in its highest guise: personality.

Personality goes beyond intelligence. Personality is the spirit visible in things and people, their heredity made evident, their past become unforgettable, their future already present. Every aspect of the world, elected to life by the cinema, is so elected only on condition that it has a personality of its own. This is the second specification which we can now add to the rules of *photogenic*: I therefore suggest that we say: only mobile and personal aspects of things, beings, and souls may be photogenic; that is, acquire a higher moral value through filmic reproduction.

An eye in close-up is no longer the eye, it is AN eye: in other words, the mimetic decor in which the look suddenly appears as a character. . . . I was greatly interested by a competition recently organized by one of the film magazines. The point was to identify some forty more or less famous screen actors whose portraits reproduced in the magazine had been cropped to leave only their eyes. So what one had to do was to recognize the personality in each of forty looks. Here we have a curious unconscious attempt to get spectators into the habit of seeking and recognizing the distinctive personality of the eye segment.

And a close-up of a revolver is no longer a revolver, it is the revolver-character, in other words the impulse toward or remorse for crime, failure, suicide. It is as dark as the temptations of the night, bright as the gleam of gold lusted after, taciturn as passion, squat, brutal, heavy, cold, wary, menacing. It has a temperament, habits, memories, a will, a soul.

Mechanically speaking, the lens alone can sometimes succeed in revealing the inner nature of things in this way. This is how, by chance in the first instance, the *photogenic* of character was discovered. But the proper sensibility, by which I mean a personal one, can direct the lens towards increasingly valuable discoveries. This is the role of an author of film, com-

monly called a film director. Of course a landscape filmed by one of the forty or four hundred directors devoid of personality whom God sent to plague the cinema as He once sent the locusts into Egypt looks exactly like this same landscape filmed by any other of these locust filmmakers. But this landscape or this fragment of drama staged by someone like Gance will look nothing like what would be seen through the eyes and heart of a Griffith or a L'Herbier. And so the personality, the soul, the poetry of certain men invaded the cinema.

I remember still *Le Rôve*. As Sisif died, we all saw his unhappy soul leave him and slip away over the snows, a shadow borne away in angels' flight.

Now we are approaching the promised land, a place of great wonders. Here matter is molded and set into relief by personality; all nature, all things appear as a man has dreamed them; the world is created as you think it is; pleasant if you think it so, harsh if you believe it so. Time hurries on or retreats, or stops and waits for you. A new reality is revealed, a reality for a special occasion, which is untrue to everyday reality just as everyday reality is untrue to the heightened awareness of poetry. The face of the world may seem changed since we, the fifteen hundred million who inhabit it, can see through eyes equally intoxicated by alcohol, love, joy, and woe, through lenses of all tempers, hate and tenderness, since we can see the clear thread of thoughts and dreams, what might or should have been, what was, what never was or could have been, feelings in their secret guise, the startling face of love and beauty, in a word, the soul. "So poetry is thus true, and exists as truly as the eye."

Here poetry, which one might have thought but verbal artifice, a figure of style, a play of anitithesis and metaphor—in short, something next to nothing—achieves a dazzling incarnation. "So poetry is thus true, and exists as truly as the eye."

The cinema is poetry's most powerful medium, the truest medium for the untrue, the unreal, the "surreal" as Apollinaire would have said.

This is why some of us have entrusted to it our highest hopes.