

DOUBTING VISION

Film and the Revelationist Tradition



MALCOLM TURVEY

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*To my father, George Henry Turvey, and in memory
of my mother, Lorna Lesley Turvey*

The concept of “seeing” makes a tangled impression. Well, it is tangled.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

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Introduction

I

The major goal of film theory before the 1960s—what today is known as “classical” film theory—was to prove that the cinema is an art on a par with, or perhaps even superior to, the other arts.¹ Due to its novelty, the prejudice against its photographic medium (the claim that photography is mere mechanical reproduction and therefore not art), and its quick development into a form of mass entertainment, the cinema was not accepted as an art, at least initially. Classical film theorists therefore set out to show why and how the cinema is art. They did this, as Noël Carroll has demonstrated, by answering a series of questions about the cinema’s unique properties, the role or value of these properties, and the stylistic techniques best suited to exploiting such properties.² This was because classical film theorists adhered, for the most part, to the doctrine of medium specificity, the view that in order for the cinema to be accepted as a legitimate art, it must be shown to possess valuable attributes of its own, ones that the other, preestablished arts do not have. Needless to say, theorists proposed different answers to these questions. This book is about one such answer, as well as its influence on contemporary film theory. According to this answer, the cinema’s most significant property, one which the other arts do not possess (or at least do not possess to the same degree), is its ability to uncover features of reality invisible to human vision. The value of this property is that it can reveal the true nature of reality to viewers. And the techniques best suited to exploiting it, for reasons I will explore shortly, are those that least resemble human sight. I call this the revelationist answer.

The cinema’s revelatory capacity is often mentioned in passing by classical film theorists when making arguments about the difference between cinema

and the other arts. For example, Walter Benjamin claims that the cinema is helping to diminish if not destroy the “aura” traditionally possessed by works of art in part because it can reveal “entirely new structural formations of the subject” invisible to human vision. “Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye,” he suggests.³ The cinema’s revelations in turn elicit a more analytical, “testing” attitude on the part of its viewers, he asserts, one that is antithetical to the reverence encouraged by auratic art.

There are, however, four classical film theorists who view the cinema’s revelatory power as its most important attribute and who devote a considerable amount of space to it in their writings rather than simply mention it in passing. These are Jean Epstein (1897–1953), Dziga Vertov (1896–1954), Béla Balázs (1884–1949), and Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966). As Epstein put it in 1935, “cinematography renders perceptible through sight and sound individual beings we thought invisible and inaudible and divulges the reality of certain abstractions.”⁴ And, according to Epstein, one of the abstractions revealed by the cinema is the fourth dimension of time, which human beings cannot see. As I show in the pages that follow, Vertov, Kracauer, and Balázs make similar arguments about the revelatory capacity of the cinema, although they differ considerably concerning the truths about reality it supposedly uncovers. Epstein and Vertov, who were filmmakers, also attempted to exploit this capacity in some of their films.

In advancing their claims about the cinema’s revelatory power, these four theorists and filmmakers employ an analogy with considerable significance for their theories. They compare the cinema to microscopes and telescopes, arguing that, like them, it is capable of revealing truths about reality that are invisible in the sense that the human eye is incapable of seeing them unaided due to its limitations. It is this property, they seem to believe, that sets the cinema apart, because the other arts, with the exception of photography, lack the technical means to reveal such truths. And while photography does possess some of these technical means, as an atemporal art its revelatory capacity is limited. For example, they frequently highlight the magnificatory power of the close-up, arguing that it can reveal various mobile features of reality that human vision is too weak to see, much like a microscope can reveal bacteria invisible to the naked eye. Balázs wrote:

By means of the close-up the camera in the days of the silent film revealed also the hidden mainsprings of a life which we had thought we already knew so well. Blurred outlines are mostly the result of our insensitive short-sightedness and superficiality. We skim over the teeming substance of life. The camera has uncovered that cell-life of the vital issues in which all great events are ultimately conceived; for the greatest landslide is only the aggregate of the movements of single particles.⁵

They also often invoke the fact that the cinematic image is a photographic “trace,” to use philosopher Gregory Currie’s word, of what it depicts.⁶ Although this property does not differentiate the cinema from photography, it does distinguish it from representational paintings, drawings, and sculptures.

For however reliable and accurate, hand-made representational art is a depiction of what its maker thinks or believes he or she is seeing (or has seen). A photograph, however, is independent of thoughts and beliefs in the following way: when working properly, a camera records, in the form of a photograph, what is in front of it, regardless of what the camera operator thinks or believes is in front of it. (Of course, whether and how photographs are created is not independent of thoughts and beliefs.) This independence from intentions has meant that many have viewed the cinema and photography as fundamentally different from the other arts, including Epstein, Vertov, Balázs, and Kracauer, although none of these theorists developed a theory of the photographic trace as others, such as André Bazin and, more recently, Kendall Walton have.

II

Nobody has investigated this answer to the question, what is cinema, although scholars have often noted its presence in classical film theory.⁷ In the first half of this book, I undertake just such an investigation of the versions of it found in the writings, and where relevant the films, of Epstein, Vertov, Balázs, and Kracauer. Such a study is needed not only because their work constitutes an important but neglected tradition within the history of film theory, but because it has profound implications for film theory today.

The basic argument made by these four theorists and filmmakers is that certain cinematic techniques—the close-up, slow motion, time-lapse photography, editing—can reveal features of reality that are invisible in the sense that it is impossible for the human eye to see them without assistance. This claim is, in itself, perfectly reasonable; it is widely recognized that, in addition to being an art form, the cinema is a revelatory visual technology much like microscopes and telescopes. Indeed, it was at least in part invented by amateur and professional scientists, such as Marey, Muybridge, and Janssen, in order to discover and observe features of a diverse array of natural phenomena partially or wholly inaccessible to sight, such as the precise wing movements of birds or the exact leg positions of galloping horses. In the cinema's early years, before the industry-wide standardization of the narrative feature-length film in the mid-1910s, filmmakers often exploited the revelatory power of the cinema for entertainment purposes, making popular “scientific” films with “views of cholera germs, human sperm, fleas, plant pollination, and other subjects.”⁸ In his work of film theory of 1916, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, Hugo Münsterberg describes this use of the cinema in his characteristically elegant fashion:

After overcoming tremendous difficulties, the scientists succeeded in developing a microscope cinematography which multiplies the dimensions a hundred thousand times. We may see on the screen the fight of the bacteria with the microscopically small blood corpuscles in the blood stream of a diseased animal. Yes, by the miracles of the camera we may trace the life of nature even in forms which no human observation really finds in the outer world.⁹