

## *Introduction: The god of light and the cinema eye*

To the ancient Greeks and Romans Apollo was the patron of arts and sciences like music, poetry, medicine, and prophecy. Apollo also came to be the god of light, literally in his identification with the sun and figuratively as bringer of culture and enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> His most common epithet attests to his essence: *Phoibos* or *Phoebus* (“Shining, Brilliant”). The word expressed the god’s nature so well that the ancients came to regard it as practically a second name. As representative of civilization Apollo was also the *Mousagetês*, the leader of the nine Muses, his half-sisters who were themselves guardians of arts and sciences. Apollo’s half-sister Athena – Minerva to the Romans – was associated with culture and the arts as well.

Apollo is the first god to make a personal appearance in the history of classical literature. At the opening of Homer’s *Iliad* he brings a devastating plague upon the camp of the Greeks by means of his far-reaching arrows. The first Homeric epithet for Apollo is therefore *hekêbolos*: “hitting his mark” but subsequently understood to mean “hitting from afar.”<sup>2</sup> Related to this word is another adjective frequently found in Homer and later authors to characterize Apollo: *hekaergos* – “working from afar.”<sup>3</sup>

For the purpose of the present book the meaning of this latter term will be understood beyond the range that was open to the ancients. The reach of

<sup>1</sup> Apollo has been attested as god of light since the fifth century BC: Aeschylus, *Suppliants* 213–214 and *Fragm.* 83 Mette (from the lost play *The Bassarids*, in which the singer Orpheus worships Helios-Apollo and rejects Dionysus); Euripides, *Phaethon* 224–226 (in *Fragm.* 781 Kannicht). The great *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* already indicates the association of Apollo and the sun. Cahn 1950: 198 note 65 lists additional sources. The identification of Apollo with the sun extends through Greek and Roman antiquity and is regularly attested. Overviews of the variety of Apollonian myths and images in antiquity may be found in standard books on Greek myth and, with greater detail, in Graf 2009 and Solomon 1994. For Apollo’s importance in the later Western tradition, especially in the Renaissance, cf., e.g., Seznec 1953 and Bull 2005: 301–343 and 418–419 (notes). The works here listed are valuable starting points and provide additional references.

<sup>2</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 1.14.

<sup>3</sup> It appears for the first time at Homer, *Iliad* 1.147. The etymological meaning of *hekê-* or *heka-* seems to have been different from what it came to mean in association with *hekathen* (“from afar”).

Apollo as god of light exceeds that of Apollo the archer. In antiquity the rays of the sun could be captured and focused only to a limited degree – if very effectively, as Archimedes demonstrated to the Romans with spectacular success in 212 BC during the siege of Syracuse.<sup>4</sup> Now, however, the light of the sun can be combined with other kinds of light. It can be preserved on film or digitally, and it can be exhibited, either unchanged or after technical manipulation, by means of a projector or comparable device onto a screen or monitor. Consequently, from a modern quasi-mythological perspective Apollo may be linked to the new light that makes cinema possible. The shining god now takes on another important function and becomes the patron of the art of painting with light. Our term *photography* means “light-writing,” while *cinematography* is “movement-writing” (and strictly speaking should be *photocinematography*: “light-movement-writing”). The cinema is a modern Apollonian art form, the most important heir of painting, sculpture, and literature. D. W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916), one of the most famous and influential epic films of the silent era, was advertised as “A Sun-Play of the Ages.” Film theaters and production or distribution companies frequently feature the god’s name.<sup>5</sup> We may even apply another ancient Greek term to Apollo which expresses, quite literally, this new area of his responsibilities. This word is *phôtokinêtês*: “light mover.” It refers to both of the crucial features that make film possible: the light, without which the camera could not record anything and without which the projector or

<sup>4</sup> Archimedes was killed during the Romans’ capture of the city. Epic cinema has paid tribute to his invention of giant convex mirrors to focus the rays of the sun onto the Roman fleet only twice: in an episode of Giovanni Pastrone’s epoch-making *Cabiria* (1914) and in the almost entirely fanciful plot of Pietro Francisci’s *Siege of Syracuse* (1960). Howard Hawks’s sophisticated comedy *Ball of Fire* (1941), co-written by Billy Wilder, contains a clever and witty tribute to Archimedes at its climax.

<sup>5</sup> *ApolloMedia* is a German film and television production company; the two I’s in its name are in the shape of abstract Ionic columns. Various production and technical companies have been called *Apollo Film*. (A large one is now operating in Poland.) *Apollo Cinema* is the name of a Los Angeles-based distribution company; *Apollo Cinemas* are a large theater chain in Great Britain. (“Apollo” is a standard name for film theaters.) A “supreme motion picture” is being advertised as playing “at the Apollo Theatre” in Harold Lloyd’s silent comedy *Speedy* (1928). In Agostino Ferrente’s *The Orchestra of Piazza Vittorio* (2006) the eponymous musicians endeavor to save the Apollo on Rome’s Esquiline, one of Italy’s oldest and most attractive theaters, from being turned into a bingo parlor after it already suffered the indignity of being a venue for pornographic films. The *Apollo Film Festival* regularly takes place in the Apollo Theatre in Victoria West, South Africa. An *Atelier Apollo* had been established in Finland in 1889. The protagonist of Brian de Palma’s political-conspiracy thriller *Blow Out* (1981) works for a sleazy film production company in a seedy part of Philadelphia; appropriately for the film’s context but regrettably for lovers of antiquity, the company’s offices are above an Apollo theater that shows only hardcore pornography. The electronic *Apollo Movie Guide* ([www.apolloguide.com](http://www.apolloguide.com)) promises “intelligent reviews online.” (The level of this intelligence varies.) *Apollo* is also the name of a line of projection screens. *Delos-Film*, a minor German production company that released a few romantic melodramas and comedies in the mid-1950s, had a stylized Ionic column for its logo. The island of Delos is Apollo’s birthplace.

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monitor could not show anything, and the motion that distinguishes film as a series of moving images from static ones. In Greek director Theodoros Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995) Apollo has indeed become the god of cinema, as we will see in Chapter 2. Angelopoulos regards the classical god of light as the spiritual guardian of the most powerful modern medium of art and communication. Apollo's ties to cinema had, however, been established much earlier through his function as *Mousagetês*. French poet, painter, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau repeatedly hailed the cinema as a new Muse: "FILM, the new Muse"; "the Muse of Cinema, whom the nine sisters have accepted into their close and strict circle"; and: "The Muse of Cinema is the youngest of all Muses."<sup>6</sup> Early French cinema even had a star who paid specific tribute to these classical ladies: actress and later screenwriter, producer, and director Jeanne Roques assumed the name Musidora ("Muses' Gift"). She became immortal to film buffs as Irma Vep in Louis Feuillade's crime serial *Les vampires* (1915) and as the screen's first vamp. The god who leads the Muses is even better known. Actress Barbara Apollonia Chalupiec (spellings vary) became one of the silent screen's greatest stars as Pola Negri. Her name is doubly appropriate: "Pola" from Apollo, "Negri" after Italian poetess Ada Negri.

It is a fitting serendipity that the name of the French founding fathers of film should have meant *Light*. The brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière began making short films lasting about fifty to fifty-two seconds in 1895.<sup>7</sup> A modern scholar comments:

Photography, as its name implies, is inscription by light, light that the camera receives from its subjects and retains in its pictures. And out of light the film image is twice made: light inscribes the image in the camera and light projects the image

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Cocteau 1992: 23, 123, and 56 (with slight corrections). That ancient poets invoked their Muse for inspiration is well-known; Homer, *Iliad* 1.1 and *Odyssey* 1.1, and Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.8, are the most famous instances. Ahl and Roisman 1996: 27 point out the pre-eminence of the Muse even over the poet: "As the *Odyssey* opens, the poet asks the Muse . . . to sing in him . . . Once the appeal is completed, the Muse's voice takes over, we are invited to believe. The poet, who appears to know the story he is prompting the Muse to recite through him, vanishes from view and does not intervene again." So, at least in traditional cinematic storytelling, the film's creator may seem to retreat in comparable fashion behind the narrative on the screen, which unfolds as if by superhuman power or magic. (Cf. my quotations from André Bazin in connection with Cocteau's *Orphée* in Chapter 6.) That there still *is* such a creator, though, I argue in detail in Chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> A number of the Lumière brothers' "actualities" from 1895 to 1897 are collected on the DVD *The Lumière Brothers' First Films*. A useful anthology of very early films, including the Lumières', is on the five-DVD set *The Movies Begin: A Treasury of Early Cinema, 1894–1913*. Louis Lumière's famous verdict that the cinema has no future and no business potential whatever is one of the most endearing misjudgments ever made, especially poignant for coming from one of the fathers of the new medium.

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on the screen . . . Lumière's original movie camera doubled as a movie projector: light went into the machine and light came out.<sup>8</sup>

The light of cinema, discovered, harnessed, and presented by the Lumière brothers and their successors, instigated a profound change in Western culture – from reading stories to viewing stories, from literature to image, from linguistic text to cinematic text. As much as this was a radical break with the past, it was also a continuation of the entire tradition of human civilization. I address this topic in greater detail in Chapter 1, but it is appropriate here to quote a knowledgeable if rather rhapsodic witness who testifies to this continuity. French film pioneer Abel Gance had begun writing and acting in films in 1909 and had directed his first film in 1911. He published an article with the prophetic title “The Time of the Image Has Come” in 1927, the year that also saw the release of his six-hour historical epic *Napoleon*. In his encomium to cinema Gance wrote:

In truth, the Time of the Image has come!

All the legends, all mythology and all the myths, all founders of religion and all religions themselves, all the great figures of history, all objective gleams of people's imaginations over millennia – all of them await their resurrection to light, and the heroes jostle each other at our gates in order to enter . . . and it is not just a Hugoesque [i.e. flippant] joke to think that Homer would have published there [i.e. chosen the new medium for] the *Iliad* or, perhaps even better, the *Odyssey*.

The Time of the Image has come!

. . .

Look well! Adorable blue shadows are playing on the figure of Sigalion: they are the Muses, who are dancing around him and celebrating him, vying with each other.

The Time of the Image has come!<sup>9</sup>

With his references to myths and to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the very beginnings of Western literature, Gance was not simply bragging about the cinema or showing off his classical erudition but rather pointing to an ongoing development in the creative arts from antiquity to his own day. His conjuring up of Sigalion and the Muses makes the point more vivid.

<sup>8</sup> Perez 1998: 336.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted, in my translation, from Gance 1927: 96 and 98. For background information about this essay see King 1984: 61. King 1984: 62–79, reprints excerpts in translation of Gance 1929 (as “The Cinema of Tomorrow”), which incorporates material from the earlier essay, including the main part of the first passage quoted here (cf. King 1984: 78). Throughout the 1927 essay, Gance repeats its title phrase in an incantatory manner, thereby not only stating his argument as emphatically as possible but also revealing his love for the still young medium. Who could resist him when he exclaims in the same article: “Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films”?

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Sigalion is the ancient god of silence.<sup>10</sup> Gance names him as a reminder that films at his time are silent, if with the exceptions of the intertitles that provide narration and dialogue and of the music regularly accompanying the screenings.

An ancient Greek novelist with a highly developed sense of the visual corroborates Gance's perspective when he emphasized the visual (and aural) attractions that stories held for ancient listeners or readers. Heliodorus, probably writing around 360 AD, includes a moment in *An Ethiopian Story* when Kalasiris, one of the novel's major characters, recounts his adventures to Knemon, a curious young man. He mentions the ritual procession which he had witnessed at Delphi, Apollo's sanctuary, as part of the Pythian Games held in the god's honor. Kalasiris omits details of the festival from his account since they are not important, but Knemon interferes:

"When the procession and the rest of the ceremony of propitiation had come to an end –"

"Excuse me, Father," interrupted Knemon, "but they have not come to an end at all. You have not yet described them so that I can see them for myself. Your story has me in its power, body and soul, and I cannot wait to have the pageant pass before my very eyes. Yet you hurry past without a second thought."

On Knemon's insistence Kalasiris describes the festivities and mentions a hymn that he heard sung. When he neglects to quote from it, Knemon again insists on being told more:

"For a second time, Father, you are trying to cheat me of the best part of the story by not giving me all the details of the hymn. It is as if you had only given me a view of the procession, without my being able to hear anything."<sup>11</sup>

Kalasiris is forced to yield; he quotes part of the hymn and describes its musical performance. The words Heliodorus puts in Knemon's mouth are revealing. Knemon sees and hears in his mind a story he is being told only verbally, as expressions like "see for myself," "before my very eyes," and "a view of the procession" indicate. This is how all readers mentally imagine what they read. Roughly a century before Heliodorus, Lucian of Samosata had made this point in a comparison of the work of the historian and that of the sculptor:

<sup>10</sup> See Ausonius, *Epistles* 29.26–28.

<sup>11</sup> Heliodorus, *An Ethiopian Story* 3.1–3. Both excerpts are taken from the translation by J. R. Morgan in Reardon 1989: 349–588; quotations at 409 and 410. I have examined Heliodorus' novel in Winkler 2000–2001, with references to earlier scholarship on Heliodorus' visual narrative style.

The historian, we may say, should be like Phidias, Praxiteles, Alcamenes, or any great sculptor . . . When . . . a hearer [we might add: or a reader] feels as though he were looking at what is being told him, and expresses his approval, then our historical Phidias's work has reached perfection, and received its appropriate reward.<sup>12</sup>

What Heliodorus tells us about Knemon's psychological fascination with the visual and aural sides of narrative applies to other forms of storytelling as well. In the cinema we see and hear literally and not, as in Knemon's case, only with our mind's eyes and ears. But our imagination is as strongly engaged as Knemon wants to be involved in Kalasiris' account. Modern terminology like *imagination* (from Latin *imago*, "image"), *fantasy* (from Greek *phainesthai*, "to appear"), *idea* (Greek for "mental picture, perception," from *idein*, "to see"), and *aesthetics* (from Greek *aisthanesthai*, "to perceive visually") all attest to the highly visual nature of understanding, to visual and mental ways of perception. Our expression "I see what you mean" expresses the same idea. What Knemon sees and hears while listening to Kalasiris are moving images and sequences of sound – after all, Kalasiris is describing to him something in motion, a procession. Greeks and Romans could not *make* motion pictures, but they could *imagine* them by visualizing motion in progress. In the first century BC the Roman poet Lucretius described just such a thing. His lines about visions that come to us in our dreams today reads like an ancient account of cinema – the "dream factory," as it is often called – with its forms and figures succeeding each other through dissolves or cuts:

it is not wonderful that images move  
 And sway their arms and other limbs in rhythm –  
 For the image does seem to do this in our sleep.  
 The fact is that when the first one perishes  
 And a new one is born and takes its place,  
 The former seems to have changed its attitude.  
 All this of course takes place extremely swiftly,  
 So great is the velocity and so great the store  
 Of them, so great the quantity of atoms  
 In any single moment of sensation  
 Always available to keep up the supply . . .  
 And what when we see in dreams the images  
 Moving in time and swaying supple limbs,  
 Swinging one supple arm after the other

<sup>12</sup> Lucian, *How to Write History* 51; quoted from *The Way to Write History* in Fowler and Fowler 1905: 109–136; quotation at 132.

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In fluid gestures and repeating the movement  
 Foot meeting foot, as eyes direct? Ah, steeped in art,  
 Well trained the wandering images must be  
 That in the night have learned such games to play! . . .

It sometimes happens also that the image  
 Which follows is of a different kind: a woman  
 Seems in our grasp to have become a man.  
 And different shapes and different ages follow.  
 But sleep and oblivion cause us not to wonder.<sup>13</sup>

The film camera records fixed images at such a rapid pace that they can be projected onto a screen in a manner that makes them appear to be moving. Earlier, the photographer's still camera, reproducing what was put before it in usually black-and-white images and with absolute fidelity, had irreversibly changed the way modern man saw the world. But the camera did not present a completely new way of seeing. That had occurred in the Renaissance, when artists prominently turned to perspective in drawing and painting. Critic John Berger comments:

Today we see the art of the past as nobody saw it before. We actually perceive it in a different way.

This difference can be illustrated in terms of what was thought of as perspective. The convention of perspective, which is unique to European art . . . , centres everything on the eye of the beholder. It is like a beam from a lighthouse – only instead of light travelling outwards, appearances travel in. The conventions called those appearances *reality*. Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world. Everything converges on to the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity. The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God.

According to the convention of perspective there is no visual reciprocity . . . The inherent contradiction in perspective was that it structured all images of reality to address a single spectator who, unlike God, could only be in one place at a time.<sup>14</sup>

Berger is correct in his observation that perspective is unique to European art, but he might have pointed out that its origins are ancient, a fact not as widely known as it deserves to be. The earliest perspectival paintings were the architectural representations on the backdrop of the Athenian stage, the *skênographia* that had been introduced by Sophocles in the fifth century BC. The first painter of perspectival *skênographia* is said to have

<sup>13</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 4.768–776, 788–793, and 818–822; quoted from Melville 1997: 122–124.

<sup>14</sup> Berger 1972: 16; with typography slightly altered, as also in the following quotations.



been Agatharchus.<sup>15</sup> The camera is both new as an advanced technical instrument and traditional in its reproduction of perspective and in the artistic composition of images that perspective demands. The film camera is the best means to put before our eyes realistic-looking images that tell stories and are at the same time artistic compositions.

The perspective in a painting or photograph, at which a viewer is gazing from a distance, literally by being placed at some remove from the image itself and figuratively by being completely removed from the scene being presented, prepares the way for a quasi-divine perspective that is to come with images that move and tell stories. The film camera can show us everything either subjectively from the point of view of characters or (apparently) objectively. It may be detached from individual characters or from the story, appearing to be omniscient as from God's – or a god's – superior position. Hence the recourse in films to the device of the omniscient narrator, who serves a function parallel to that of the divinely positioned camera. The perspective in painting and still photography prepares us for the power of perspective in motion pictures, which also work through a single-eyed gaze. But since film images move, the quasi-divine power to change the place of looking by means of camera movements, dissolves, and cuts introduces a new element, that of time passing. About the still camera as an intermediate stage between painted and moving images Berger goes on to observe:

After the invention of the camera this contradiction gradually became apparent.

The camera isolated momentary appearances and in so doing destroyed the idea that images were timeless . . . the camera showed that the notion of time passing was inseparable from the experience of the visual (except in paintings). What you saw depended upon where you were when. What you saw was relative to your position in time and space. It was no longer possible to imagine everything converging on the human eye as on the vanishing point of infinity . . . Every drawing or painting that used perspective proposed to the spectator that he was the unique centre of the world. The camera – and more particularly the movie camera – demonstrated that there was no centre.

The invention of the camera changed the way men saw. The visible came to mean something different to them.<sup>16</sup>

In 1928 Abel Gance had already commented on the novelty of moving images and their impact on people's ways of perception:

<sup>15</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture* 7 Preface 11, attributes the discovery of fifth-century painting in perspective to Agatharchus, a somewhat problematical dating. Pollitt 1974: 236–247, collects and discusses the ancient sources on *skênographia* and gives further references. See especially White 1956 and Richter 1970b.

<sup>16</sup> Berger 1972: 17–18.



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The most familiar objects have to be seen as if for the first time, producing a transmutation of all our values. This transformation of our way of looking, in an absolutely new domain unfamiliar to our senses, is in my opinion the most wonderful of modern miracles.<sup>17</sup>

The technical, artistic, and psychological impact on traditional ways of seeing that arrived with the film camera led to the kind of exuberance that we can observe in Gance's words and in early filmmaking. The gleeful trickery to be found at the beginning of cinema, for instance in the films of Georges Méliès, is the best example. But the intellectual and artistic challenges that the cinema brought with it had been expressed a few years before Gance's enthusiasm for his medium in an even more ecstatic hymn to cinema and the technical potential of the camera, the essential tool to capture and project light and to inspire the filmmaker's creativity. Russian writer, director, editor, and theoretician Dziga Vertov wrote in 1923:

The main and essential thing is:

The sensory exploration of the world through film.

We therefore take as the point of departure the use of the camera as a kino-eye, more perfect than the human eye, for the exploration of the chaos of visual phenomena that fills space.

The kino-eye lives and moves in time and space; it gathers and records impressions in a manner wholly different from that of the human eye . . .

I am kino-eye, I create a man more perfect than Adam, I create thousands of different people in accordance with preliminary blueprints and diagrams of different kinds . . .

I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it.

Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. I move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an airplane, I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies. Now I, a camera, fling myself along their resultant, maneuvering in the chaos of movement, recording movement, starting with movements composed of the most complex combinations . . .

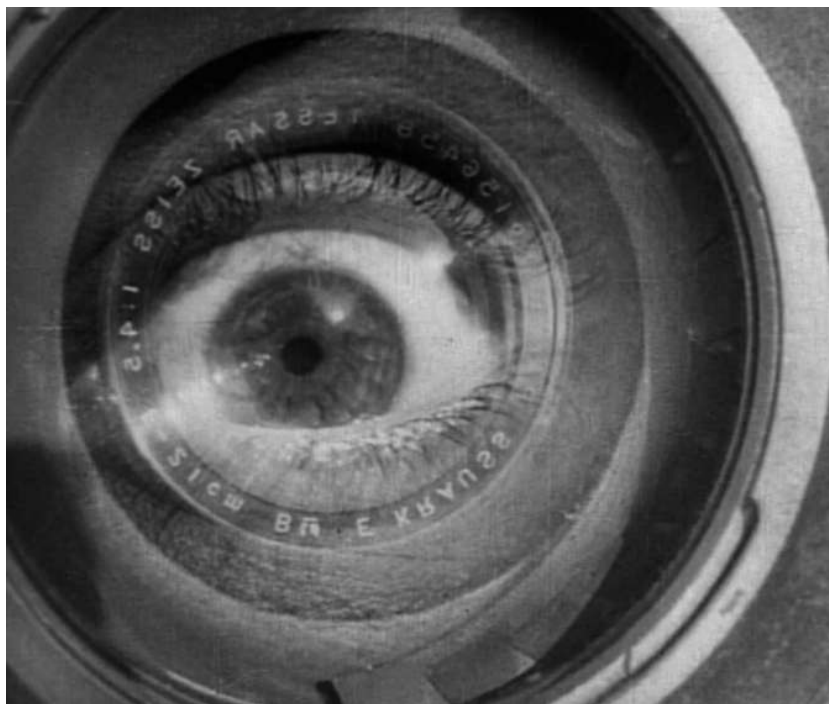
My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you.<sup>18</sup>

Vertov's views of cinema are exemplified in his masterpiece, *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929).<sup>19</sup> This film shows the reality of the cinema eye

<sup>17</sup> Gance 1928: 197–209; quoted from the translation by King 1984: 56.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted from Vertov 1984: 14–15 and 17–18. *Kino* is Russian for *cinema*. Berger 1972: 17 quotes parts of this text in a different translation.

<sup>19</sup> For an analytic introduction to this seminal film see Roberts 2000. On Vertov and the cinema eye see now also Hicks 2007, with updated bibliography. Master cinematographer Nestor Almendros pays tribute to Vertov with the title of his autobiography (Almendros 1984).



**Fig. 1.** *The Man with the Movie Camera*. Dziga Vertov's Cinema Eye, the film's final image. (VUFKU-Image)

in a famous image when a camera lens appears superimposed on a close-up of a human eye; it is impossible to separate the one from the other (Fig. 1). Decades later director Federico Fellini was to observe: “the camera is just my eye.”<sup>20</sup> In 1924 Vertov made a series of four documentaries which he titled *Kino Glas*: “Cinema Eye.” The sensory exploration of the world that Vertov mentions is the chief purview of art, as it has always been. In antiquity such exploration was often but not always divided: either word or image, but not both simultaneously – except in the theater, which combined the visual and the verbal. Our word *theater* comes from the Greek *theatron* (“viewing space”) and is based on the verb *theân* (“to see” or “look at”); our term *drama* is a Greek noun and derives from *drân* (“to do,” “act”), a reference to the actors’ movements on stage. (Latin *actor* literally means “doer.”) The chief modern viewing space for actions is the cinema with its theater (and now home theater). It combines the visual

<sup>20</sup> Quoted from Stevens 2006: 638.