Introduction: the essence of cinema

Tired of the ponderous prescriptivism that dogged much film aesthetic (and, until recently, much aesthetics in general), film theorists frequently tell us they have put aside "essentialism". Why bring it back? My essentialism is not especially prescriptive: no more so than the claim that water is essentially H_2O. Films, like samples of water, have something in common that makes them films rather than something else. It's more than just being films, and it's more than just family resemblance. It's an essence, but knowing what that essence is doesn't help much in figuring out what films are good, typical or paradigmatic.[1] Since the subject of this book is film, I ought to say something about the essence of film. What I say has some bookkeeping significance for what follows, but not much intrinsic interest. This is the boring part; let's get it over with. Alternatively, you can skip it and come back if and when you need to.

[1] Claims about the aesthetics of film based on some supposed essence of the media are still made. Sometimes they are very strained. Thus Stanley Cavell: "The most significant films . . . will be found to be those that most significantly discover and declare the nature of the medium of film . . . a feature of the medium of film . . . is film's power of metamorphosis or transfiguration. In remarriage comedy, this feature . . . is expressed as the woman's suffering creation, which cinematically means the transfiguration of flesh-and-blood women into projections of themselves on the screen. Hence the obligation in those films to find some narrative occasion for revealing . . . the woman's body" ("Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly", pp. 222–223).

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I.1 FILM AS REPRESENTATION

Representations come in a variety of kinds: words written and spoken, gestures established by convention or made up on the spur of the moment, pictures drawn and painted, carved or moulded shapes, smoke signals, flashed headlights, sound recordings, photographs, the projected images of film. Just about anything we do or use can be a representation, though some things are richer than others in their representational capacities; they are more apt to allow the communication of complex meanings, and what cannot be represented cannot be communicated.

Film is a representational medium; it is a means by which representations, themselves distinctively cinematic, are produced and displayed. What distinguishes cinematic representations from those of other kinds? One thing separating them from representations of *some* other kinds is their pictorial character. One of the peculiarities of recent film theorizing is that it has been concerned almost entirely with what the theorists regard as the supposedly hidden or "deep structural" features of film – the supposed codes by which films are "read" – and has had nothing of significance to say about the matter film so obviously does trade in – pictures. Perhaps the reason is that it is assumed by the theorists that the idea of a picture needs no independent explanation, because picturing is just one kind of linguistic or semiotic representation. I shall argue later that pictures and linguistic signs are different kinds of things. There is no language of pictures, and pictures have little of theoretical interest in common with linguistic items. Nor is their representational function significantly the product of, or mediated by, convention. That is as true of cinematic pictures as of any other kind.

Cinematic pictures are not like the static images of painting, nor are they made in the way that paintings and drawings are made. These are differences we need to take account of; in Part I we shall do so. But these differences must not obscure the fact that film is a pictorial medium; it gives us – exactly – moving pictures.

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I.2 FILM AND THE VISIBLE

Films, like other kinds of pictures, are meant to be seen. The cinema, by which name I denote the medium to which particular movies belong,[2] is a visual medium. A work in the cinematic medium is an artefact with certain properties accessible to sight, and no one has made appropriate contact with the work unless she is visually acquainted with these properties. Movies often have other properties, accessible through senses other than sight, and appropriate contact with those movies requires acquaintance, through the right sense, with those properties. Auditory properties are the most obvious and widely used, but there are other less well explored, and perhaps less rewarding, possibilities: recall Smellorama and Sensurround. But all these, including sound, are incidental accretions so far as cinema itself is concerned, because there can be, and in fact there are, works in the medium which eschew all sensory engagement except the visual. Visual properties are what cinematic works *have* to have.

But the same is true of painting, still photography, sculpture, mime and musicless dance. What, then, distinguishes cinema from these other media? Typically, a cinematic work involves projection onto a surface of an image that is capable of giving the appearance of movement. (Later I will ask whether this appearance is illusory or not.) But it is unclear whether any of these standard conditions are essential to the medium.[3] Imagine

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[2] I have no interest in distinguishing movies and films here, and I use those terms interchangeably, always to refer to particular works, specified or unspecified, within the medium of cinema. But a distinction can be made, and might be useful in other, more aesthetically conscious contexts. See, e.g., Gerald Mast, *Film/Cinema/Movie*.

[3] Attempts to identify the essential features of cinema have not been very successful. Gerald Mast's idea that projection is the essential feature of the cinematic medium is especially off the mark. Television's failure to achieve the clarity, luminosity and size of the cinema screen is, as Mast concedes (ibid., p. 267), likely to be a temporary restriction that future technology will overcome without resorting to projection. Nor is it true that projection ensures the pastness of the events we are watching (p. 266). And while projection may emphasize the artificiality of cinema (p. 270), so would many other salient pieces of technology devised to deliver an image; see text immediately following.

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a device you load film into, then plug directly into your brain
to give you visual sensations exactly like those you would get
if you were watching a conventionally projected film. Isn't that
cinema without the projection of an apparently moving image
on a surface? If so, what is essential to cinema is the visual
experience, irrespective of how it is delivered. Difficulties also
arise when we try to specify the more distant causes of the ex-
perience – the existence of animated film shows that the cause
need not be photographic.[4] What, anyway, constitutes a photo-
graphic method? Creation of a series of images by exposure to
light? Expectant parents can testify to the cinematic, or at least
televisual, quality of images produced by ultrasound. What is
so special about light rays?[5]

But we need not get involved in a debate about what, exactly,
constitutes allowable methods of production and delivery for
the cinema in the ordinary sense of the term. Instead we can
shape a concept of our own to suit our theoretical purpose.
There is a group of artefacts, interesting and worthy of study
because of the problems to which they give rise, which we may
characterize in the following way. They are produced by pho-
tographic means and delivered onto a surface so as to produce,
or be capable of producing, an apparently moving image. Things
of that kind I am going to call movies, films or works of cinema.
As long as it is remembered that the expressions ''movie'',
''film'' and ''cinema'' have here this quasi-stipulative use, we
can concentrate on the class of entities they name when so used,
and forget verbal issues. What I shall say about cinema in this
sense will be applicable in some degree to the plug-in, sonic,
and other nonstandard forms, as well as to real-life relatives of
film like television; but I leave it to others or another occasion
to work out precisely what degree that is.

Cinema as I define it is an essentially visual medium. Movies
may or may not present audible speech and other sounds as
well as visual representations, and such auditory accompani-
ments may or may not constitute part of the fictional content

[4] As Gerald Mast points out (ibid., p. 5).
[5] For more on light rays and seeing, see Chapter 2.

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the movie presents (sound, where it occurs, may be ''intra-'' or ''extradiegetic'', in the favoured lingo). The auditory, as well as the olfactory and the rest, are optional. Where these things do accompany the visual component we have a work that is more than purely cinematic; it has the features a thing must have to be a cinematic work, and it has others besides.

The claim that the auditory is optional needs careful handling; it is not the claim that we could delete sound from films that possess it without loss to our understanding or appreciation of them: an obviously false proposition. Nor is it the claim that the sound possessed by a given film is inessential to it; we need to distinguish what is optional for the medium and what is optional for any particular work in the medium. Thus I take it to be an essential (that is, an obligatory) feature of a film with diegetic sound that it *has* diegetic sound; to run *Lawrence of Arabia* without the sound would be to fail, in some degree, to give access to that film. My claim concerns the medium itself, not any particular work that exemplifies it. That's just one example of the difference between what is essential to a thing which happens to belong to a kind, and what is essential for belonging to that kind of thing. On one view, a person's origin is essential to his or her identity; no one lacking the parents Albert had could be Albert. But having Albert's parents is not a condition for membership in the kind *human being*.

I am not claiming that we would make better films if sound were not available, or that films of the very best kind would not employ sound because ''being of the very best kind'' means being an example of pure cinema, which in turn means having no optional elements. Nor, finally, am I claiming that visual properties always or usually contribute more to the value of particular films than do auditory properties (a somewhat more plausible claim than the others, but still controversial). Those are all aesthetic claims, and mine is not of that kind; it is the claim that a work without visual properties would fail, for that reason, to count as a cinematic work of whatever value. Auditory properties are not like that; they are optional so far as the medium is concerned.

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I.3 DEGREES OF INESSENTIALNESS

We can take our analysis a little further than a simple distinction between the optional and the obligatory. Consider three changes to cinema that have been controversial at one time or another: sound, considered as something synchronized with the action and as part of the diegesis, colour and the wide screen. These developments are not all on the same footing. Wide screen is optional in that the screen does not have to be – and once was not – wide, where ''being wide'' means having an aspect ratio of 1:2.35 or something like it. But the basic technical machinery of cinema requires that there be *some* ratio of screen dimensions. The determinable property, *having some ratio of width to height*, is an obligatory property of cinema in the sense that a cinematic work must have that property; but no determinate of that determinable (say a screen ratio of 1:1.33) is obligatory.[6] Diegetic sound is innovative in a quite different sense; *having this combination of diegetic sounds* is a determinate property optional for a cinematic work, but so is the determinable property, *having some combination of diegetic sounds*, since films don't have to have any combination of diegetic sounds. Wide screen is merely a weak option, while sound is a strong one. An option is weak if some option of that kind must be chosen, and strong if no option of that kind need be chosen. (Slightly more technically: an option is weak if it is an optional determinant of a determinable that is obligatory, strong if it is a determinant of a determinable that is not.)

This rather scholastic-sounding distinction gives us theoretical backing for the intuition that the introduction of sound was a more dramatic change to cinema than was the introduction of the wide screen – a more dramatic change because sound is a strong option and wide screen a weak one. Is colour a weak or a strong option? That depends on how we conceptualize the relation between colour and monochrome cinematography. If black and white and shades of grey are colours, then having

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[6] The meaning of ''determinate of a determinable'' should be clear from the context. Another example: *red* is a determinate of the determinable *colour*.

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colour is an obligatory determinable, while the precise choice of
colour is optional, and so colour is weakly optional. If black and
white are considered not to be colours, then colour is strongly
optional. But the question whether black and white are colours
in the sense relevant here seems to be dangerously verbal. So
the issue of whether colour is a strong or a weak option also
sounds dangerously verbal. The best we can say is that colour
doesn't fall obviously into either of the categories occupied, re-
spectively, by wide screen and sound. If we think of it as falling
between the two, we again match theory with intuition, since
colour seems less innovative than sound and more innovative
than the wide screen.

1.4 THE VISIBLE AND THE PICTORIAL

It is one thing to say, as I have said, that the cinema is a visual
medium; it is another to say, as I have also said, that it is a
pictorial one, that it is a medium that trades essentially in pic-
torial representations. So far I have ignored this distinction, but
it is theoretically crucial. All pictorial representation is visual,
but not all visual representation is pictorial. Subtitles and those
helpfully orienting dates and place names that used to appear
on the screen (and occasionally still do) are visual representa-
tions and not pictorial ones. The subtitles are visual because they
have to be seen, but they are not pictorial; the name "Vienna"
is not a picture of Vienna – not, anyway, in the sense of picture
I am going to explain more fully in Chapter 3. When the words
"Paris 1939" appear on the screen over an image of the Eiffel
Tower, they serve to inform us about what is fictional – they tell
us that, fictionally, the scene is now Paris in 1939 – but they do
not convey this information pictorially. The reason, briefly, is
this. I have, let us assume, a visual capacity to recognize Vienna.
That is, there are certain things which, if I see them from certain
points of view, let me recognize that what I am seeing is Vienna,
or parts thereof. A painting, a photograph, or a cinematic image
is a picture of Vienna when it is possible to recognize what it
represents by deploying my visual capacity to recognize Vienna
when I see it. But the word "Vienna", though I may recognize

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it as referring to Vienna, does not represent Vienna pictorially.
The visual capacity to recognize Vienna alone would not enable
me to recognize that ''Vienna'' represents Vienna. I need, in ad-
dition, some knowledge of English. More on this in Chapter 3.

On the other hand, if the hero is shown reading a letter, and
the camera closes in to show the letters and words on the page
for us to read, there is a sense in which the visual image here
functions pictorially. That is, it functions in one way pictorially,
as well as in another way nonpictorially. The shapes and other
visual properties of the letters on the page inform us pictorially
about something that is part of the fiction, that the character who
wrote the letter formed words with just those shapes and other
visual properties (this might, or might not, be important to the
development of the fiction, but even if it is unimportant it is still
part of the story). The capacity I deploy to recognize the shapes
displayed on the screen is exactly the capacity I would deploy
to recognize the shapes on the page if I were looking at it. Here
the visual image functions pictorially *and* nonpictorially; picto-
rially to inform us about what is fictional concerning the shapes
and other visual properties of certain written characters, and
nonpictorially to inform us about what the content of the letter
was – what was actually said in it. For no purely visual recog-
nitional capacity will enable me to know the meanings of words.

The conclusion is, then, that among the ways in which visual
images can function to inform us about what is fictional, three
broad categories can be distinguished. There are images or ele-
ments of images which function only pictorially (as an image of
red wallpaper may function pictorially to tell us that it is fic-
tional that events are taking place in a room wallpapered thus,
while not telling us anything about what is fictional). There are
also visual images which function nonpictorially, as with sub-
titles and scene setters. Finally, there are images that function
in both ways, as with the camera-attracting letter, read by a
character.

There is a corresponding distinction to be made for the way
that sound represents in film. If the sound includes the audible
speech of characters, that sound will function in two ways. It
will represent sonic qualities of the fiction – the tone and volume

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of a character's voice, for example. The capacities I deploy in order to recognize the tones and volumes of sounds on the sound track are just the capacities I use to recognize the tones and volumes of speech directly heard. But sound here will also function to convey semantic properties of the fiction, the meanings of words and sentences uttered by the characters. In the first way it functions as the audible analogue of a picture; in the second way it is analogous to the visual but nonpictorial use of the image.

When image and sound function to represent visual and auditory features of the fiction itself, let us say that their function is a *sensory* one. Our sensory experience of those images and sounds is crucial to our understanding what is represented; if the shapes or colours onscreen were different, we would understand that the shapes and colours of objects represented were different. And if the sensed quality of the sounds were different, we would understand the characters to be speaking in a different tone of voice. Literary representation is not like that; it does not matter, for the purpose of conveying what is true in the story, what exact shapes or colours go to form the words on the page. Replacing the author's handwriting with print does not affect what is true in the story. Literary forms like the novel are not sensory; we may read by looking at the print, but exactly how it looks doesn't matter.

1.5 FICTIONAL PICTURES

Suppose we have a visual image that functions pictorially. The image I see onscreen is a pictorial representation of a man. That image represents a fictional character who appears in the story the film presents: Harry Lime. Seeing that image tells me all sorts of things about what is fictional in this story, for example, that the man called "Harry Lime" has a certain visual appearance. If the image I see onscreen were different in various ways, it would tell me different things about what is fictional in the story: that Harry is slimmer or shorter, or has a different facial expression. What we seem to have here is pictorial representation of a fictional character.

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There is a problem. Cinematic images certainly are represen-
tations of the people and objects of which they are photographs;
the photograph (or the sequence of photographs that makes up
the film) of Orson Welles represents Orson Welles. It also pic-
torially represents him; the capacity to recognize that this is a
film image of Welles is the capacity to recognize Welles when
and if I see him. But if our concern is with movies like *The Third
Man* that present narrative fictions (rather than, say, documen-
taries about film stars) we are surely concerned with the rep-
resenting relations that hold between the cinematic images and
the fiction itself, its characters and events. So far as the fiction
goes, we are concerned with Harry Lime rather than with Orson
Welles. But the problem is that, at least in typical cases, there
are no such things as those characters and events, and so there
are no relations, representing or otherwise, between the movie
and fictional things.[7] And so our image is not, after all, a picture
– or any other sort of representation – of Harry Lime.[8]

One way to solve the problem would be to deny the obvious
– to insist that Harry Lime does exist (or that he has some other,
positive grade of being), and that the film images represent him
pictorially. Another would be to say that images can pictorially
represent the nonexistent as well as the existent. I shall not at-
tempt a solution of either kind.[9] On the other hand, we should
not give up too easily; the problem posed by the nonexistence
of fictional characters looks like a technical hitch. If cinematic
images are not, literally, pictorial depictions of (nonexistent) fic-
tional things, then whatever representational function they do

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[7] Sometimes the characters of fiction are real things, as Hitler is a character in
The Last Days of Hitler. There the cinematic images represent (in fact misrep-
resent) him pictorially. But this is not the typical case. There are also cases
hard to classify. Is Erich von Stroheim a character in *Sunset Boulevard*, played
by himself, a character of whom it is fictional that (among other things) his
name is Max von Mayerling?

[8] This problem is not peculiar to film. In any medium that represents pictori-
ally, there are fictional representations: pictures and sculptures of imaginary
beings, plays that tell us about people who never lived and events that never
happened.

[9] For reasons, see my *Nature of Fiction*, chapter 4.