

I

Prolegomena

CHAPTER I

Fade-In

British novelist, artist, art historian, and filmmaker John Berger once summarized a fundamental change, which came with photography and continued into the age of the moving image:

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) . . . The camera – and more particularly the movie camera – demonstrated that there was no centre . . . The invention of the camera changed the way men saw.¹

Berger was chiefly concerned with modern times, but there is no reason why his point should not be applied equally to the arts of the past, not excluding its verbal arts. Visual and verbal storytelling has become exponentially more complex after and because of photography and with cinematography. Film scholar James Monaco echoed Berger in 1981:

Film and the electronic media have drastically changed the way we perceive the world – and ourselves – during the past century, yet we all too naturally accept the vast amounts of information they convey to us in massive doses without questioning how they tell us what they tell.²

The invention of the camera equally changed the ways of writing. This is itself a fascinating topic, but it is not part of my book. As a brief reminder, here is what British novelist and short-story writer Elizabeth Bowen concluded in 1937 about the short story: “The cinema, itself busy with a

¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC / Penguin, 1972; several rpts.), 18. Berger’s immediate context (“the centre”) is that of perspective in painting. Beaumont Newhall, “Photography and the Development of Kinetic Visualization,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 7 (1944), 40–45, is a classic introductory account of early photography (Daguerrotypy, Talbotypy) and its connections to depicting movement.

² James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, and Beyond: Art, Technology, Language, History, Theory*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17 (from preface to second ed.).

technique, is of the same generation: in the last thirty years the two arts have been accelerating together. They have affinities – neither is sponsored by a tradition; both are, accordingly, free; . . . both have, to work on, immense matter.”³ A few years later, H. E. Bates, British author of stories and novels, agreed: “This is strikingly true. Indeed, the two arts have not only accelerated together but have, consciously or not, taught each other much.”⁴ The best example for the fusion between literature and cinema is modernist French novelist, screenwriter, and director Alain Robbe-Grillet. He is, of course, not the only one.

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Greek filmmaker Antoinetta (or Antouanetta) Angelidi said a few years ago:

as the main function of art is to produce new language and to offer new ways of seeing, the gift of poetic cinema to the world is double: it discovers what cinema can do and reveals the world anew.⁵

In an essay titled “Visibility,” Italo Calvino observed about the close ties between reading and cinematic viewing:

We may distinguish between two types of imaginative process: the one that starts with the word and arrives at the visual image, and the one that starts with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression. The first process is the one that normally occurs when we read . . . according to the greater or lesser effectiveness of the text, we are brought to witness the scene as if it were taking place before our eyes, or at least to witness certain fragments or details of the scene that are singled out.

In the cinema the image we see on the screen has also passed through the stage of a written text, has then been “visualized” in the mind of the director, then physically reconstructed on the set, and finally fixed in the frames of the film itself. A film is therefore the outcome of a succession of phases, both material and otherwise, in the course of which the images acquire form. During this process, the “mental cinema” of the imagination has a function no less important than that of the actual creation of the

³ Elizabeth Bowen, “Introduction,” in Bowen (ed.), *The Faber Book of Modern Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937; rpt. 1941), 7–19, at 7.

⁴ H. E. Bates, *The Modern Short Story: A Critical Survey* (London: Nelson, 1941; several rpts.), 21, after quoting Bowen.

⁵ Quoted from Rea Walldén, “Conversing with Dreams: An Encounter with Antoinetta Angelidi,” *FILMICON: Journal of Greek Film Studies*, 4 (2017), 184–194, at 194. I return to Angelidi in Chapter 7.

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sequences as they will be recorded by the camera and then put together on the moviola. This mental cinema is always at work in each of us, and it always has been, even before the invention of the cinema. Nor does it ever stop projecting images before our mind's eye.⁶

Berger's dictum, Angelidi's view of her artistic medium, and Calvino's elegant summary may be regarded as general guidelines for my chapters. Another one is the following passage that forms the opening paragraph in a critical survey of the history of film theory; I quote only the most relevant parts:

One of the founding images of Western philosophy has also provided film theory with a key metaphor for the cinema. In Book 7 of *The Republic* [the Cave Allegory, my subject in Chapter 5], Plato projects a kind of moving picture of the relationship of human beings to reality . . . This image seems to anticipate and correspond to key aspects of the classic cinematic experience . . . The classic experience of cinema . . . is also a *philosophical* fascination that makes us ask: what is going on here? What is its relationship to our wider life in the world? Is it, perhaps, a microcosm of that life, the modern version of Plato's cave? It is these questions, and others like them, that have led film theorists to create cinemas of the mind: philosophical models of the nature and operation of film.⁷

On the next page Plato reappears in juxtaposition to John Locke and Jacques Derrida, neither of whom is said to have superseded Plato.⁸ The final page of this book's main text even calls the Cave Allegory "one of the oldest philosophical movies."⁹ More significant, however, is the following point:

the key problem of film theory remains the problem illustrated by the image of Plato's cave: the relation of representation to reality. That problem takes us into all the other questions of cinema.¹⁰

⁶ Quoted from Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, tr. Patrick Creagh (1988; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1993), 83. Calvino next turns to the *Spiritual Exercises* by Ignatius of Loyola.

⁷ Quoted from Nicolas Tredell (ed.), *Cinemas of the Mind: A Critical History of Film Theory* (Duxford, Cambridge: Icon Books / Totem Books, 2002), 9 (in editor's introduction). The book is an annotated textual anthology.

⁸ Tredell (ed.), *Cinemas of the Mind*, 10. The accompanying endnote (235 note 3) is both instructive and amusing.

⁹ Tredell (ed.), *Cinemas of the Mind*, 235.

¹⁰ Tredell (ed.), *Cinemas of the Mind*, 11. The subject of representation or imitation – *mimēsis* in Greek – is too important and vast for me to deal with adequately in this book. Even so, it is always present. Readers interested in pursuing the matter might wish to start with Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), from Plato to Neoplatonism. See further Fabio Massimo Giuliano, *Platone e la poesia: Teoria della composizione e prassi della ricezione* (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2005).

This question acquired a crucial new importance in 2016 with the presidential election in the United States and its concomitant Fake News, Deep-State and other conspiracies, the Big Steal of the 2020 election, and much more. Most of these phenomena center on visual media, now inescapable and ubiquitous. Here is one commentator's summary conclusion:

It [the Steal] testifies . . . to the sheer animal spirits of the media beast Donald Trump, who still [after losing the 2020 election] effortlessly dominates the news cycle, seizing the spotlight from his successor . . . That American politics was destined to be absorbed by television and the communication and entertainment media it spawned could be foreseen as far back as John F. Kennedy, but the "reality star" Donald Trump is this new world's first grand apotheosis.¹¹

Classical antiquity developed a body of works and concepts that, in principle, anticipated what the cinema achieved in reality much later. André Bazin, one of the preeminent and most influential critics in the history of the cinema, once practically pointed this out. He wrote in 1946: "The cinema is an idealistic phenomenon. The concept men had of it existed, so to speak, fully armed in their minds, as if in some platonic heaven, and what strikes us most of all is the obstinate resistance of matter to ideas rather than of any help offered by techniques to the imagination of the researchers." Bazin illustrated his point with a classical reference: "the myth of Icarus had to wait for the internal combustion engine . . . But it had dwelt in the soul of every man since he first thought about birds. To some extent, one could say the same thing about the myth of cinema."¹² Conversely, the cinema can gain in understanding or appreciation when considered alongside antiquity. The one illuminates the other. The result I hope for with this book is a greater appreciation of the nature of ancient and modern artistic achievements. Ultimately, my goal is twofold. On the one hand, I hope to show by examples not only *that* but also *how* something old – the classical cultures – can be approached from new perspectives, ones which reveal that well-known and well-understood

¹¹ Quoted from Mark Danner, "The Slow-Motion Coup," *The New York Review of Books* (October 6, 1922), 39–41, at 40.

¹² André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* New ed., ed. and tr. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 17–22; quotations at 17 and 22, slightly corrected. Tom Gunning, "The World in Its Own Image: The Myth of Total Cinema," in Dudley Andrew (ed.) with Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 119–126, argues for a different interpretation of Bazin's essay from mine (and others'). His points are worth keeping in mind, but the earlier views of it fit the wider context I propose in this book quite well.

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works are more fascinating than they have previously been considered to be. This we may call a cinematic approach to antiquity. On the other hand, a new technological and artistic medium, the cinema, stands to gain in anybody's appreciation when it is being considered alongside Greece and Rome. As we shall see, this is especially the case when films turn to specific, and sometimes problematic, aspects of ancient texts.

Readers hesitant to see the ancient past and the modern present side by side may consider the following observations by film historian Charles Musser as providing a kind of historical – and cultural-artistic-technical – bridge:

The origin of screen practice – as distinct from either earlier uses of projected images or the later introduction of cameras – can be traced back to the mid 1600s . . . The much later invention of motion-picture projection was only one of several major technological innovations that transformed screen practice in the course of its history . . . Cinema did not emerge out of the chaos of various borrowings to find its true or logical self: it is part of a much longer, dynamic tradition, one that has undergone repeated transformations in its practice while becoming increasingly central within a changing cultural system.¹³

Even if the origins of screen *practice* go back “only” to the 1600s, the origins of screen *thought* go back much further, as we will see in Chapters 3 to 7 and elsewhere. As great a cinema figure as Sergei Eisenstein provided a shining example of extensive, if necessarily unsystematic, intellectual and emotional engagement with the *pre*-history of screen practice.

At this point I should address a perspective on the nature of cinema from which I heartily dissent. In a presumably unconscious echo of Bazin, Jacques Aumont, a well-known French scholar of film and visual culture, once stated: “Nothing about the cinema, neither its invention nor any of the detours of its history, has descended from the heavens, as our historicist age continues to discover. . . a genuine film history . . . has begun to establish new foundations.” This is, in principle, unobjectionable. What immediately follows, however, is a different matter:

Whatever progress will be made in the historical study of film . . . it remains difficult to speak in historical terms of the cinema as an art of representation – that is, in relation to the other neighboring arts. There are of course minimal demands easily satisfied. No one any longer employs hyphenated formulations suggesting a unilinear filiation such as “painting-photography-cinema”;

¹³ Charles Musser, *History of the American Cinema*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Scribner's, 1990), 16–17 (in chapter titled “Before Cinema”).

fortunately neither does anyone still invoke the mediocre notion of “pre-cinema,” which justifies the discovery of “cinematographic” procedures in Homer, the Bayeux tapestry, and Shakespeare.¹⁴

Pre-cinema – the term was coined by French art historian Pierre Francastel – is the subject of my Chapter 3. Homer, seen from Eisenstein’s point of view, will be discussed soon; he will appear again in Chapter 4. Both chapters will attempt to demonstrate that what Aumont dismisses out of hand is anything but mediocre to readers and viewers who keep an open mind. Nor does it presuppose any unilinear filiation.

Aumont’s is a curious case. How can someone exclude a visual narrative from long before the advent of the cinema – his example is a medieval tapestry – and still maintain: “Canaletto painted with a ‘camera,’ but it was Constable who made cinema”?¹⁵ No less a towering figure than Eisenstein coined the term *cinematism*, a synonym of *pre-cinema*, and did the very thing Aumont disparages: finding filmic aspects in Homer, Shakespeare, and a slew of others. Aumont’s dismissal of pre-cinema becomes nearly inexplicable since he is himself a leading Eisenstein scholar.¹⁶ In his book on Eisenstein Aumont wrote, appropriately and appreciatively:

there is no one else in film history who has so intricately combined filmmaking, film teaching, and film theorizing; no other director has written as much, has commented on his own work at such length, or has so obviously thought of himself as an aesthete, a journalist, a philosopher, a semiotician, and a draughtsman.¹⁷

It seems unlikely that someone described in such glowing terms should have been capable of the low intellectual level that Aumont imputes to

¹⁴ Jacques Aumont, “The Variable Eye, or the Mobilization of the Gaze,” tr. Charles O’Brien and Sally Shafto, in Dudley Andrew (ed.), *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 231–258; quotations at 231. This article originally appeared as a chapter in Aumont, *L’œil interminable: Cinéma et peinture* (Paris: Séguier, 1989). Revised and augmented edition: *L’œil interminable* (Paris: La Différence, 2007).

¹⁵ Aumont, “The Variable Eye,” 254 note 6, quoted in its entirety. Why does this note not appear in the 2007 edition? Aumont, *L’œil interminable* (2007 ed.), 51 note 1, adds the comment that Eisenstein did not consider cinematism teleologically – correctly so, but with this he either contradicts or corrects himself, as we will see in Chapter 3 – but as “the comparative mode of similarity of formal processes.” I see little if anything objectionable in Eisenstein’s perspective on literature and the arts, least of all anything worthy of dismissal *de haut en bas*, even if his enthusiasm may occasionally carry him a bit farther than some of his readers may wish to follow him.

¹⁶ Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, tr. Lee Hildreth, Constance Penley, and Andrew Ross (London: BFI / Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). The French original, based on Aumont’s dissertation, was published in 1979. On the book see Daniel Fairfax, *The Red Years of Cahiers du cinéma (1968–1973)*, vol. 2: *Aesthetics and Ontology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 575–579 (in chapter on Aumont).

¹⁷ Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, vii (in “Preface”).

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pre-cinematists, not least since Francastel was among the many from whom Aumont himself had learned:

Aumont's research has probed the vast constellation of art history and theory, taking succor from the writings of twentieth-century figures such as Arnheim, Panofsky, Warburg, Gombrich, Francastel and Auerbach.¹⁸

Moreover, Aumont's dismissal of pre-cinema neglects one of Eisenstein's chief works: *Method*, a comprehensive study of culture across history.¹⁹ It has been characterized in the following terms:

Method is Eisenstein's search in world history, literature, ethnography, psychology, medicine, and biology for examples of sensory-emotional thinking and its appeal for us. It explores the ways conscious and unconscious modes of perception are joined in the production and perception of art forms of all kinds . . . Along with montage, this is Eisenstein's key contribution to aesthetics, and it underlies everything he wrote from about 1932 until the end of his life . . . Since the early 1930s . . . Eisenstein had been fascinated by the presence of the past, in all its forms, in our individual and collective lives, examples of which he found seemingly everywhere he looked . . . Most of his subjects came from classical European myth and ethnographic studies of "primitive" peoples of Asia, indigenous Americans and Latin Americans, Africans and Pacific Islanders.²⁰

Sensory-emotional thought was, to Eisenstein, archaic and pre-rational; he identified it as ecstatic and Dionysian, i.e. classical. All this was what Eisenstein called (in German) the *Grundproblem*: the "fundamental problem." His own thought was nearly all-encompassing. He was not only a filmmaker, not even in the many facets that the term implies. Two classical examples that illustrate Eisenstein's astonishing range when addressing the *Grundproblem* through various artistic manifestations and complement each other are what he called the "montage sequence" in Homer, discussed

¹⁸ So Fairfax, *The Red Years of Cahiers du cinéma (1968–1973)*, 581.

¹⁹ It was left unfinished and was never published during Eisenstein's life but is now available in two scholarly editions (Russian only): *Metod*, 2 vols., ed. N. I. Klejman (Moscow: Muzej kino: Eijzenshtein-tsentr, 2002); *Metod*, 4 vols., ed. Oksana Bulgakowa (Berlin: PotemkinPress, 2008). Various excerpts from *Method* have appeared, unsystematically, in English. An extensive selection is now in Sergei Eisenstein, *The Primal Phenomenon: Art*, ed. Bulgakowa and Dietmar Hochmuth; tr. Dustin Condren (Berlin: PotemkinPress, 2017). There is also a German-language edition of the latter.

²⁰ So Joan Neuberger, *This Thing of Darkness: Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible in Stalin's Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 111–112.

below, and his filmic understanding of the sequential architecture on the Acropolis of Athens as a visitor would experience it.²¹

In his introduction to Eisenstein's understanding of montage, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith gives a concise summary explanation of montage that specifically refers to the Acropolis:

Eisenstein's original concept of montage was that meaning in the cinema was not inherent in any filmed object but was created by the collision of two signifying elements, one coming after the other and, through the juxtaposition, defining the sense to be given to the whole. The obvious vehicle for such a form of meaning-construction is the shot . . . montage exists not only in time but in space, and not only in the object but, crucially, in the perception of it. Montage as a principle is not limited to cinema: it is found in literature, in theatre, in music, in painting, even in architecture. But it is in cinema that it finds its highest expression . . . In the Athenian Acropolis Eisenstein finds an example of the disposition of masses in space which can only be grasped in its ensemble through a montage effect.²²

In view of the preceding, one may be justified to ask: How defensible is it summarily to throw out a major side of art-historical and cinematic theory, one which has been documented in Eisenstein's writings over many years? And: Whose perspective deserves greater credence or carries greater conviction – that of a critic of cinema or that of one of its greatest artists? To me, Aumont's is a case of *sit pro ratione voluntas*.²³ What I conclude, at least for myself, from the preceding, I here put into an allusion to the Latin version of a famous Greek saying: *Amicus Admontanus sed magis amicus Ferrisilex*.²⁴

Reference to another great French scholar and, like Aumont, an academic is appropriate here. At just the time when Francastel's concept of

²¹ Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage and Architecture," in Eisenstein, *Selected Works*, vol. 2: *Towards a Theory of Montage*, eds. Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor; tr. Michael Glenny (1991; rpt. London and New York: Tauris, 2010), 59–81. This translation had appeared earlier, with an introduction by Yve-Alain Bois, in *Assemblage*, 10 (1989), 110–131. Bois's introduction (111–115 and 130–131 [notes]) contains valuable information and references. The title "Montage and Architecture" may not be Eisenstein's.

²² Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Eisenstein on Montage," in Eisenstein, *Selected Works*, vol. 2, xii–xvi; quotation at xv.

²³ Juvenal, *Satires* 6.223.

²⁴ The original Latin is about Plato: *amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas* ("Plato is my friend, but the truth is a greater friend"). It adapts a Greek saying about Socrates (attributed to Plato) that was in turn applied to Plato (attributed to Aristotle; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a). On this see Ingemar Düring, *Aristotle in the Ancient Biographical Tradition* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1957), 132 (on the late-ancient *Vita vulgata* 9). Comparable sentiments are at Plato, *Phaedo* 91c and *Republic* 595c.

2 Film Directors on Antiquity

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pre-cinema was *en vogue*, the very period Aumont disparages, Henri Agel published an article on the *Odyssey* from a pre-cinematic point of view.²⁵ Agel referred to some of his earlier publications from the late 1940s, in which he had taken a comparable approach to literature and had taught it to his students. Agel was probably more significant a scholar in his time than Aumont became later, as may be seen, for example, in Agel's influence on Christian Metz.²⁶

2 Film Directors on Antiquity

Perhaps we should turn to practitioners rather than critics of the cinema for a better understanding of the theme addressed in this book. A number of major filmmakers have, across several decades, expressed views sympathetic to my own. Here are some examples. Their words about the cinema and classical culture may serve as *amicus curiae* briefs from committed experts on behalf of what I hope to show throughout.

French filmmaker Abel Gance, best known today as pioneering director of screen epics on historical (*Napoleon*, 1927) and contemporary (*La roue*, 1923) topics, once poetically described the cinema as a modern *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a consummate work that combines various art forms in an ultimate synthesis:

It is *music* in the harmony of its visual turns, in the very quality of its silences; *painting* and *sculpture* in its composition; *architecture* in its construction and ordered arrangements; *poetry* in its gusts of dreams stolen from the soul of beings and things; and *dance* in its interior rhythm which is

²⁵ Henri Agel, "L'Odyssee et le pré-cinéma," *L'Age nouveau*, 14 no. 109 (April–June 1960), 60–64. The article includes filmic analyses of specific lines. This is Eisenstein's own method, as we will see in Chapter 4 in connection with the *Iliad*. This issue of *L'Age nouveau* was devoted to pre-cinema and will become important in that chapter.

²⁶ See on this André Gaudreault and Philippe Gauthier, "De la filmologie à la sémiologie: Figures de l'alternance au cinéma," *Cinémas*, 25 nos. 2–3 (2015), 159–173. On Agel as educator see, e.g., Pascal Laborderie, "L'enseignement du cinéma dans le *Précis d'initiation au cinéma* (Agel H. et G., 1956)," *Mise au point*, 7 (2015); unpaginated. This article is chiefly on an influential book by Agel and his wife Geneviève. Fairfax, *The Red Years of Cahiers du cinéma (1968–1973)*, 575, reports that Aumont's application for an academic post was once rejected because of a letter of denunciation he believed written by Agel. See Jacques Aumont, "Mon très cher objet," *Trafic*, 6 (Spring 1993), 53–69, at 54 note 1 (where Aumont calls Agel a *bien-pensant notoire*). Could this matter be connected with Aumont's rejection of Francastel's stance toward pre-cinema via Agel's, who had adopted it, even if Aumont was influenced by Francastel? Fairfax, 575 note 11, adds: "Aumont now cautions . . . that he has no direct proof that Agel wrote this letter." The *now* is left unspecified, but Fairfax elsewhere refers to interviews he conducted with Aumont for his book. I return to Aumont in Chapter 3.