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# FILM

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## The Shadows in the Cave

*Some Thoughts on Cinema—By P. N. FURBANK*

SO WONDERFUL a film as Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* appeases a lot of cravings, and quietens many of the fears, that one has in regard to cinema. One's view about cinema, mine anyway, tends to grow too technical; and this film is a corrective. For what it displays is a man of vision and humanity who can do what he likes with film. He is technically inventive, of course, perhaps more than any other director—a most extraordinary trick is brought off in the present film, which one perhaps shouldn't reveal—but he is so only for the reason that any good artist is: that is to say, he innovates when he needs to, and follows traditional procedures when they suffice, and in either case for no other reason than that his "subject" dictates it. However, this is not an article about Buñuel. So let me single out merely one feature of this film, its *pace*.

The fundamental problem in the cinema, as in photography as an art, is, so it seems to me, irrelevancy or superfluity. You open the camera lens, and what floods in is both the things that you want and the things that you don't want. (Among the other arts, only surrealist "automatic writing" offers anything similar.) Poor old photography! How much prejudice it has always had to fight, and how justified the prejudice. Photography can never, I think, be one of the major arts. The appeal of the photographs that one most cherishes (and "cherish" is just the word one would apply in the case of portraits by Alvin Langdon Coburn) is always for extrinsic as well as intrinsic reasons—for nostalgia, relic-worship, sentimentalities of all kinds.

Not so with the cinema. The cinema (films like Buñuel's prove it) is one of the major arts. But the same problem, that if you open a camera lens *everything* rushes in, affects the film-director as well as the photographer. Let us suppose that, in a film, a waiter in a restaurant has to bring a message to one of the diners. Now, all the sequence may be meant to convey is just that one

item of information. In which case it doesn't matter what the waiter looks like, or whether he be old or young, tall or short, or whether he approaches from the right or the left, or indeed anything about him. None the less, since this is a film and not a novel, one cannot just say "A waiter came to the table with a message." There must, inescapably, be concrete detail, and this detail will be superfluous.

The realistic 19th-century novel, it is true, provides a good deal of not strictly relevant detail; the novelist feels a duty to clothe his characters, give them recognisable features, make them do such things as open doors, etc.—even, in the case of Tolstoy, to introduce insignificant accidents, like a garment catching itself on a nail. (It was Proust's avoidance of this that, according to himself, constituted his greatest claim to originality. "*Pas une seule fois*", he wrote to Robert Dreyfus, "*un de mes personnages ne ferme une fenêtre, ne se lave les mains, ne passe un pardessus, ne dit une formule de présentation.*") Nevertheless these novelists had to invent every one of these details; they were not produced mechanically by the mere opening of a lens.

The Eisenstein line on this problem is that *montage* justifies all. Film, at first sight the most "concrete" of media, is in fact the most abstract. The cinema has little relation to the art of photography, and the detail of shots does not, or anyway need not, matter; what matters is the relation between one shot and another and the concept thereby engendered. (Hugh Kenner saw close connections between this and Ezra Pound's "ideograms.")

Fellini has a different solution. It is that you "doctor" and reconstruct reality so thoroughly before you photograph it that what you are photographing is a *tableau* and not an observed piece of the world at all. In this way, you obtain the desired control of your material. This is not a

solution offering salvation to photography proper. The *tableaux* of photographers are merely desperate imitations of paintings and, however sophisticated, take us back to the “property” column and the cardboard backdrop of Venice.

They may be lovely and eye-catching, but they almost instantly reveal their hollowness; they only exist, as art, for the instant in which you first catch sight of them. You cannot scan or explore them—not as art, I mean; for you can do so for other purposes. In the cinema, however, things are different. For there the viewing-time granted for any particular “frame” is closely controlled; you as spectator could not extend it even if you wanted to (or, as Samuel Butler once maliciously suggested, stand in conspicuous reverence before it for a full half-hour by your watch). And this, in a sense, solves our problem. There is a controlled relation between what you are invited to view and the time within which you are invited to view it; and, granted this constraint, there may be said to be no irrelevancy of superfluity. I will remind you of that triumphant sequence in Fellini’s *Casanova*, in which the hero glimpses his long-lost mother in a box at the opera; then, lingering after the performance, he witnesses giant chandeliers being lowered and extinguished with huge fans; and finally, having carried his mother to her carriage, he takes his farewell view of her—a face infinitely aged and tremulous, almost vanishing behind her veils and the carriage-window and the pelting snow. It is an unforgettable passage, an epitome of the fugitive and the dissolving, expressive of just those qualities in Casanova’s picaresque existence. But we are not to think of these magical frames as things to stop and explore, like a painting. (The procedure has nothing to do with that philistine trick, found in later Pasolini films, of making your shots resemble gallery paintings, Pre-Raphaelites or Monets or whatever.)

WITH BUÑUEL, in *That Obscure Object of Desire*, the principle is essentially the same. There is a difference, because most of his sequences are visually realistic—I mean, we are not being shown, as in a Fellini film, spectacles that astonish, like giant chandeliers being extinguished or a giantess being bathed by dwarfs. And for this reason, Buñuel gives us less time to linger over his shots. But the rhythm, like Fellini’s, is most masterly, and there is never a moment when one can feel that one has exhausted a “frame.”

But by how many questions and doubts, none the less, is the notion of cinema assailed. There is a contrast between the cinema and both the drama and the novel. A play is continually renewed by being performed by different actors

and under a different director. This is how a play lives and survives to posterity. And equally, every time you read a novel you “realise” its scenes differently and in terms of different mental images, and this is how a novel keeps alive. And on the other hand, a painting, though always the same as a physical object, is scanned differently by every viewer and differently by the same viewer each time that he looks at it; and it is in this sense that it lives and is not exhaustible. By contrast, a film is just what it is. It demands neither “realising” nor scanning; and the belief that one sees much more in a film at a second or third viewing is, to my mind, false. I went to see *That Obscure Object of Desire* again in the same week and I enjoyed it almost as intensely, though certain surprises had, inevitably, changed into “surprises” in a less literal sense. And I scrutinised certain incidents particularly carefully, to see if I could understand them better than I had before. But in general, I wouldn’t say that I *learned* much more about the film.

This is an important fact about the cinema, and a limiting one. Certain films—say Fellini’s *Satyricon* or *Amacord*, or Buñuel’s *Nazarin* or *That Obscure Object of Desire*—are masterworks and deserving of continual study; but they do not subsist in such an available form as *Anna Karenina* or even *Les demoiselles d’Avignon*. One has to wait till some art-cinema shows them again. And even if one could possess them in the form of video-tape, there would be a doubt overshadowing them, in the fact that they are dead and immutable objects. The critic André Bazin, in *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma* (1958), likened the films to a death-mask. They were “mummified change.” And Hanns Eisler, in *Composing for Films* (1947), expresses a similar feeling that there is something sinister in the film as such. He suggests that movie-music was introduced, partly, in order to appease unconsciously-dreaded evil spirits.

Music was introduced as a kind of antidote against the picture. The need was felt to spare the spectator the unpleasantness involved in seeing effigies of living, acting, and even speaking persons, who were at the same time silent.

There is in this disturbing deadness and unchangeability of films a minor, and dubious, justification for the Hollywood habit of *remaking* very popular films.

There is a better answer to the problem, but this would entail our learning to know films by heart—that is to say, to acquire the faculty of running them through in our head. This is not at all impossible, and I can even do it in some very minor degree myself. But the faculty would have to be developed greatly. And if it were to be, it

would be the answer to the question, how do films *exist* as art-works? A film would be, not so much a particular length of celluloid, as that which a film-lover could recreate in his or her imagination. A film, in this respect, would stand somewhere between a poem and a painting. One would not be able to learn it by heart so completely as a poem, but rather more completely than one could a painting, in that it is less of a unique physical object than a painting and more of a sequence of intelligible ideas.

LET ME TURN to another problematic aspect of the cinema—film-music. One sometimes wonders if the films can possibly be a serious art, when, in them, effects are deliberately created by music which is not meant to be attended to, music which does not pass through the spectator's consciousness (or, to put it in a word, by *muzak*). This seems a basic artistic absurdity—more offensive, perhaps, when the music is by Mozart or Brahms, because of the implication that culture can be “raided” in this way (the way that advertising raids it); but just as ridiculous when it is “music” written especially for the film.

Movie-music is one of the “naïve” elements in the cinema, going back to its infancy. It originated partly as a way of drowning the noise of the projector: partly also, I do think, for the comforting and propitiatory reasons suggested by Hanns Eisler. And it had antecedents in the between-the-acts music of the theatre, and in the “hurry music”, “combat music” and “love-music” accompanying performances in 19th-century theatres. As the cinema developed, one might have expected it to shed music, but on the contrary it has clung to it and allowed it to grow into a fearful parasite. Sophisticated American films, at the moment, are often unbearable because of their subliminal music, their music which short-circuits the consciousness and makes direct and degrading assault on the nervous system. Oddly, Hanns Eisler, though a purist, suggests there might occasionally be a legitimate use for subliminal music. It will be seen that I am bound to disagree, if my notion of “learning films by heart” is valid at all; for one cannot learn by heart what has never passed through the consciousness.

But indeed, I'm inclined to take an extreme view—that music should not and cannot function as music in films. For after all, even if one is consciously listening to it, one is not listening to it at all in the spirit that one does in the concert-hall or the opera-house—not, that is to say, in a properly musical way at all. Thus, music in the films, as I see it, has to be the *idea* of music and announce itself as such. Immensely telling, in those extraordinary last moments of *That Obscure*

*Object of Desire*, is the allusion to *Tristan and Isolde*—but that is precisely what it was, an allusion to the *idea* of Wagner's opera.

HOW EXCELLENT, though, Hanns Eisler's book is! He sees it as a basic fallacy in traditional movie-music (a fallacy with confused recollections of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* idea) that it should reinforce or imitate the action on the screen; whereas, as he rightly holds, it should, if it is to have any integrity, set itself up in opposition to what is on the screen. He goes on to attack the concept of mood-music, and, extending from that, the whole idea of “mood” as an artistic concept. (He should have thrown in “atmosphere”, an equally unprofitable term.) “It is hardly an exaggeration”, he says, “to state that the concept of mood is altogether unsuitable to the motion picture as well as to advanced music. It is no accident that pictures supposed to express mood usually resemble photographed landscapes or genre paintings, and strike one as spurious and stilted. And one cannot imagine Schönberg or Stravinsky stooping to compose genre music.”

Warming to his task, Eisler says sweepingly of traditional movie-music that what it really is is *advertising*. (We must remember that he is writing thirty years ago, so that his remarks outwardly “date” a little.)

It [movie-music] points with unswerving agreement to everything that happens on the screen, and creates the illusion that the effect that is to be achieved by the whole picture has already been achieved. . . . The whole form language of current cinema music derives from advertising. The *motif* is the slogan; the instrumentation, the standardised picturesque; the accompaniments to animated cartoons are advertising jokes; and sometimes it is as though the music replaced the names of the commercial articles that the motion pictures do not yet dare mention directly.

I will quote another remark by Hanns Eisler, which sets one's mind running in a different direction.

It is hardly accidental that the early motion pictures did not resort to the seemingly most natural device of accompanying the pictures by dialogues of concealed actors, as is done in the Punch and Judy shows, but always resorted to music, although in the old horror or slapstick pictures it had hardly any relation to the plots.

I have always been intrigued by the way that 19th-century novelists, for instance Hardy and Conrad, improvise film-techniques and seem to be summoning the cinema into being. But it is only

recently I realised that Diderot *nearly* invented the talkies, in his *Salon* of 1765. And the point over which he went astray was the one referred to by Eisler. Well, not the only point. But, if not as an invention, then as an allegory, the passage pleases me greatly. Diderot tells his friend Grimm that he is not able to describe the star-attraction of this year's *salon*, Fragonard's *The High Priest Coréus Immolates Himself To Save Callirhoé*, because it was no longer on show by the time he arrived. He will thus have to fill up his article by recounting a dream he had after a morning at the exhibition and an evening spent reading Plato.

It seemed that I was enclosed in the place known as Plato's cave. It was a long and dark cavern. I was sitting in the midst of a crowd of men, women and children. We all had our feet and hands in chains and our head so firmly secured by wooden clamps that it was impossible to turn it. But the thing which surprised me was that the majority of my prison-mates were drinking, laughing and singing, without appearing in the least troubled by their chains, and you would have said, so far as appearances went, that it was their natural situation in life and they had no desire for anything different. It even seemed to me that people looked rather hostilely at those who tried to free their feet or hands or head or help others to do so; that they called them evil names; that they shrunk away from them, as if they had an infectious disease; and that, when any mishap occurred in the cave, they would be the first to be blamed. Installed in the way that I have explained to you, we all had our backs turned to the entrance of this habitation, and were only able to look at its far end, which was hung with an immense canvas or curtain.

Behind us, there were kings, ministers, priests, doctors, apostles, prophets, theologians, politicians, rogues, charlatans, makers of illusions, and the whole troupe of merchants of hopes and fears. Each had a collection of little coloured and transparent images, of the kind suitable to their own condition; and these images were so well constructed, so well painted, so numerous and so varied, that there was all that was needed to represent every scene of life, comic, tragic, or burlesque.

These charlatans, I then perceived, placed as they were between us and the entrance to the cave, had hanging behind them a great lamp, in the light of which they exposed their images; and the shadows of these, passing over our heads and increasing in size as they travelled, were cast upon the great screen at the end of the cavern, forming whole scenes—scenes so natural, so true to life that we took them for

real. Sometimes they made us laugh, till we split our sides; sometimes they made us weep salt tears—a fact which will seem less strange to you when I say that behind the screen other subordinate rogues, in the pay of the former ones, supplied these shadows with the voices, the accents, the speech appropriate to their roles.

Despite the enchantment of this illusion, there were some among us in the crowd who were suspicious of it, and from time to time shook their chains and grew even more eager to escape their clamps and turn their heads; but immediately one or other of the charlatans behind us began to exclaim, in a voice of thunder: "No turning the head! . . . Woe to him who shakes his chain! . . . Respect the clamps! . . ." I will tell you another time what happened to those who ignored these warnings, what risks they ran, what persecutions they had to suffer. I leave that for the day when we are discussing philosophy. . . .

THE SCREEN, so Diderot continues, seemed at first filled merely with disordered scenes and action: men weeping, laughing or gnawing their knuckles; drownings, hangings and apotheoses. But after a time a meaning and a story emerged. It began with a gripping scene of maenadic riot. A tender love-scene followed. And next, one was in a vast and splendid temple, at a scene of solemn sacrifice. ("But my friend, do you realise", exclaims Grimm, "that at the rate you are going, a single one of your dreams would furnish a whole gallery?") The film continues to unreel, until (as you may have predicted) it freezes into a "still" which, so Grimm informs Diderot with due awe, exactly corresponds to Fragonard's painting. And at this point the allegory resolves back into art-criticism. For Diderot's excursion into cinema and concoction of a (somewhat Griffiths-type) film-script is meant, among other things, as a judgment on this particular painting. (The picture is now in the Louvre.) Grimm, in fact, has thought the painting ever so slightly Hollywoodish. In the imaginary dialogue, he tells Diderot:

In the cave, all that you were witnessing was *simulacra* of human beings; and Fragonard himself, had you seen his painting, would have presented you with no more than such *simulacra*. It was a fine dream you dreamed; it is a fine dream that he has painted. But whenever one loses sight of it for a moment, one feels afraid his canvas will have rolled up and disappeared as yours did, and its sublime and touching phantoms will have dissolved like those of the night. . . .

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## CONFERENCE

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### Letter from Germany

# Arguing about Hitler

By Karl-Heinz Janssen



HERE WE ARE over thirty years on—the *Reich* in ruins, the East German homelands lost, Prussia wiped out, the old society and its values destroyed, the outlines of the new one not yet firm, the world resounding with the rattle of arms, hearts full of unspoken fear, facing nuclear catastrophe, inflation, unemployment, terrorists—

and above it all, over and over again: *Hitler, Hitler, Hitler*. One can hardly bear to listen to it any longer.

But no, the funeral work is not yet finished. His evil spirit is still at work in various forms—in the sub-culture of pornography, in the sensationalism of the media where he is camouflaged under a cloak of documentation and nostalgia, in the vandalism of gravestones and the brawling of a handful of neo-Nazi hooligans. In autumn 1977 it emerged, even more menacing and sinister, in a flood of hysterical letters from German newspaper-readers, and in the anti-Semitic pranks of juvenile Army officers and anti-Jewish jokes from schoolboys. So Hitler is not yet exorcised. See the recent argument about Minister-President Filbinger (which led to his resignation) and the argument about “tradition” in the *Bundeswehr*—whose Inspector-General, at last and far too late, criticised the doings of one old ex-General (Rudel) as subversive of society, but at the same time praised another old ex-General (Molders) because he had been a brave soldier—as if both had not faithfully served the mass-murderer.

THIS SAID, LET ME TURN to the recent debate in Aschaffenburg on “Controversies of Contemporary History”, and to the German première of Hans Jürgen Syberberg’s film on Hitler, which film critics had previously to go to Paris to see. Assembled round a table were a number of

“Hitler experts” of international repute, scholars as well as authors, although some of them had been at odds with each other, either overtly or covertly, for years and would have preferred to avoid any confrontation. Joachim Fest, for instance, who has written a biography and produced a film on Hitler, evidently thought it more useful to go to Japan rather than meet Professor Werner Maser from Speyer. Martin Broszat, Director of the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (Institute of Contemporary History) in Munich, was listed on the programme but excused himself at the last moment simply because of his reservations about Maser—surely a shining example of misconceived scholarly virtue. The organisers and audience could at least comfort themselves that Dr Eberhard Jäckel, the Stuttgart historian, and Professor J. P. Stern, the “*Germanist*” from London University, had not been frightened off, although they could have made the appearance of another of the participants in the debate an excuse—the British writer, David Irving, who turned up trumpeting his offer of £1,000 to anyone who could show him evidence of “a written order by Hitler for the murder of ‘European’ Jews.”

On medical advice Dr Robert Kempner, the former Nuremberg prosecutor and now an old man, stayed away. Owing to his possible presence the *Rathaus* and the *Schlosstheater* had had to be surrounded by heavily armed police, and all briefcases were searched at the entrance—a windfall, as it happened, for the Prague team of TV camera-men. Right-wing extremists had made horrific murder threats against Kempner; and then, of course, there were the by-now obligatory bomb threats against Syberberg’s film.

Right-wing extremists were among the audience for the public debate on the Sunday; and they even asked questions, with unusual politeness. Not to be overlooked were those old-fashioned high-collared gentlemen of the old school and those broad-shouldered bull-necked stolid ones whose riveted attention and expressive gestures suggested that they had once served the “great man” on whom the panel was sitting in judgment. Even Karl Wolff, the former SS-General (Chief-of-Staff to Himmler and liaison officer at the *Führer’s* headquarters) was there, still a formidable figure, and accompanied by a pretty young wife. He had been persuaded to come by David Irving who, on his own and without the knowledge of the organisers, had invited a good dozen of such “crown witnesses.” They proved not to be of much help to him.

THE AUDIENCE SEEMED to enjoy the argument. It illustrated perfectly both the high level but also