

CINEMA AND LANGUAGE

This study does not claim to be an exhaustive critique of the contemporary cinema, whose abundance and diversity defies any attempt to unify it. It has no other purpose than to clarify the underlying meanings of certain productions which are typical of the medium (as for example, *L'Avventura* by Antonioni and *A bout de souffle* by Jean-Luc Godard), and to show that the "learned" cinema, that is, the cinema conscious of the ends pursued and the means employed, cannot but fail when it undertakes to introduce new connections between the sign and the sense.

In a certain way, the aesthetic problem raised by the cinema resembles that raised by poetry. Poetry is language, and as such, the sensible sign makes us forget that it is sensible, that is, that it is sound, to refer us to the thing it signifies, which is not a thing but a sense. But on the other hand, poetic language is and must remain sensible if it is not to miss its aesthetic aim. The sound cannot altogether become sense. If it was purely sensible, the sign in poetry would become music. Reduced to its meaning,

Translated by H. Kaal.

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it would cease to be poetic and become prosaic, prose being the expressive language proper. The cinema finds itself confronted with the same dilemma: If the image were a simple sign, it should vanish at the very moment of its appearance to refer us to its linguistic meaning. But it cannot do this, first, because it is not sound but image, and then, because (and in this it differs from the novel) it cannot cease to be one of the fine arts; for it depends, as a matter of fact, on technical progress, which calls for stylistic transformations of cinematographic imagery.

But inasmuch as poetry is language, that is, inasmuch as it employs linguistic signs, it does not leave the universe of discourse, even if the sensible sound refers us to the sense. The sensible aspect of the linguistic sign does not refer us to what is foreign to it, or at least not foreign in a different way from that in which there is a foreign element in prose, which resides in the radical difference in nature between a sign which is only a sign (and not a symbol), and the sense by which the mind immediately replaces the sign. When, on the contrary, a sensible image refers us to a discursive sense, it refers to something that is foreign and external to it, since as a representative visual object it carries a sense within the sensible that it is in itself, but refers nonetheless to another meaning in the universe of discursive meanings. In fact, the sound as a purely sensible thing is not in itself expressive; it is only "impressive." If it refers us to one or more discursive meanings, these meanings could only be evoked or equivocated, and could not come from the outside to join the internal meaning of the sound. Whereas the image, since it is an image, doubles its representative sense, that is, its proper expressiveness by a second meaning—a second expressiveness which is that of language proper.

We do not mean by this to allude to the "talking" of the pictures, which presents no special problem. In fact, this language which is language proper (and can without difficulty if not without disagreement be replaced by subtitles, or even, in silent films, by gestures) and presents the proper problem of language as such, does not have to be examined for its own sake. But above all, this discourse which, in the traditional cinema, could play an explicative role (since it can communicate to the spectator all the subjective and intersubjective feelings and the like of the

characters) and a technical role (since it cuts out or down the role that falls to gestures as mute expressions of sentiment) is assuming in the contemporary cinema a role which will be seen to be quite different.

That poetry and prose are made of the same stuff does not imply that the end of poetry is the communication of conceptual meanings. It claims, on the contrary, to be *suggesting* sensible meanings (in the double sense of sensations or impressions and of sentiments). Now it is the sound that is sensible; the sentiment depends on the sense. Thus if poetry suggest sensations or impressions, it can do so only through the sensible sound in which the sensuousness of poetry resides. But it can suggest sentiments only through the sense which is not sensible and to which the sound refers us. If poetry remains what it is, that is, if it suggests instead of communicating, it is precisely by this ceaseless give-and-take of the sensuous and the affective, as a result of which the affect becomes sensation in and through the sound while the sensuous becomes meaningful in and through the sense. Which saves poetry from the double peril of vanishing by losing itself in the pure sensuousness of the sensible, or in pure but discursive meaning. This mixture is the essence of poetry. When it is successful, it avoids the double hazard of expressiveness and impressiveness.

But the cinema cannot find a place in this happy, though rare, mixture. For it is impossible to mix without confusion two heterogeneous things: the image and the discourse. The movement which has been deliberately neglected up to now seems to solve the problem of the connection between cinema and language, not by an alliance between word and image which does not, as we have seen, essentially alter the connection, and which, as we shall see, assumes a new role in the contemporary cinema, but by the possibilities it opens to the image of transforming itself into narrative and hence of superseding language in its narrative and descriptive function. More can be said: In this role, the cinema succeeds better than language; it merely takes back what is its own, since narrative and descriptive language has only been an imperfect translation of the universe of sights and movements given to visual perception. It is clear that the cinematographic

image can represent the visually perceived more adequately than descriptive language. One can hardly deny that literary descriptions and even narrations are often boring. And not only does the image make us *see*, by appealing to the same sense (sight) which had originally taken in the perceptual show (which, even though it is not *only* a show, since perception is and remains assuredly a common act of sentient and sensed, is nevertheless *also* a show), but the image also, when set in motion in the film, allows us to convert the pure show into true perception, by the possibility of introducing a point of view, with its partiality, which the narrative disguises. Before the narrative could become relative, it would in fact have to appear against the background of an objective narrative. Now when a narrative thus seeks to become objective to make its own relativity appear, it falls back very neatly into the visual universe, where it can only move with difficulty. That certain exceptional objective novels have succeeded, only proves this point in the most striking way: Their objectivity amounts to finding in the perceived universe the meanings that have been refused to the perceiving and speaking subject. The latter is reduced to his vision and to sorting out the various visual appearances imposed on him by the objects by checking some appearances against the others. Thus the universe of meanings is reduced to percepts. And as it is clear that it is only in changing his place by the voluntary motion of his body that he can change the aspect of the object, the subject who is the source of "objective" appearances is also the source of the relativity of his points of view. But this subject who is reduced to his body becomes himself a point of view, since as a material object he is capable of presenting diverse aspects to another corporeal subject endowed with the same power of motion. In order to become relative, the discursive narrative can certainly use another method beside having recourse to an impossible objective narrative. It could (and this is done) interfere with other narratives bearing on the same subject. But to begin with, this is impossible *in* an instant: The "synthesis" of perceptions is only possible in time. Besides, either it would not be the same things that were said (the words themselves would have to change), and it would not be the same narrative from a different point of view, but a different narrative, or else it would be the same narrative in

different words. But since semantic articulations have a sense, this would amount to saying other things in other words. In short, it is always the lack of an absolute objective reference which will keep the narrative from becoming relative, and the narrative can save its relativity only by appealing to the presupposition of the objectivity of the object. As if the subject, distrustful of himself and hopeful of attaining a relative point of view, stepped down from his privileged position for the benefit of the object which he supposed to be permanent.

The cinema spontaneously resolves this difficulty. Duration and the reciprocal relations of speed, which are impossible in the narrative, form part of the very movement of the image. The image in motion allows the spatial and the temporal to intertwine. In and through the image in motion, the object is effectively displaced and produces, without words, its perceptual appearances. There is no need whatsoever for the fiction of a permanent object and variable subjects, nor for the converse fiction of different objects and a single constant subject, since when the object is present as it were in person, and not across the narrative of a subject, its transformations are at once and at the same time significant of the double relativity of subjects and objects: among themselves, and of the ones in relation to the others. What the narrative expresses awkwardly by the "then," the "now," the "before," etc., the image produces immediately, because it is capable as much of sudden juxtapositions and mutations as of the slow transformations that generate otherness.

Thus if the cinema confined itself to a narrative and descriptive role, that is, if it could rest content with telling a personal or interpersonal story, as its visual character would seem to demand which, as we have seen, lends itself perfectly to this genre of "narrative," it would present no special problem: It would amount to giving back to the subject matter of the narrative what language had taken away from it while adding to it what properly pertains to language, namely, the expression of subjective meanings; an addition by the way which the image in motion is also capable of making, in part at least: in the imperfect form of mimicry.

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But this is not the aim of the new cinema. Quite to the contrary, by paying back in kind, the cinema seeks to dispossess language, in turn, of what properly belongs to *it*. The image in motion tries in turn to become language and to usurp the place of language proper. Film critics, for once, have appropriated this term once and for all, and there is no longer any question of anything but the "language of the cinema."

One of the peculiarities of the contemporary cinema is that almost nothing happens—nothing, to be exact, which could become the subject of a narrative. This does not mean that the images are given for themselves or for their intrinsic aesthetic value, although this end is present among the ends directors have in view. The images are given for their sense, and as their sense. And this sense, even though it is not conceptual, belongs to the universe of discourse. Like poetry, the cinema does not *state* the sense in images. This is reserved for the talking of the talking pictures or to the subtitles of silent or foreign films. But in a non-narrative film, such talking and such subtitles are not designed to state the sense. Quite to the contrary, and here we find what we were looking for: Language proper, far from being explicative of what the image is in itself, has the function of veiling and disguising the proper sense of the image which it finds impossible to state, of serving it on occasion by enhancing its value by contrast, or only of drowning, tempering or denaturing it. We must not see in this method (for it is one) an uncalled-for and unmotivated ill-will on the part of the director. If he wants the cinema to be a language, he cannot combine it with another, explicative, language which would expose the pretensions of the cinema to be one. The roles must therefore be reversed: The image clarifies, and language muddles the meanings. And the word "clarify" must be taken in its literal sense and not metaphorically. "Clarify" does not here mean "explain" or "explicate," but "cast a certain light (or a certain shadow) which by and in itself has a sense." The whole of this sense is in the image, which does not refer us to any verbal translation whatsoever. Such an image is language proper, which is to say that it does not translate, so as to make accessible, a real thing, whether external or internal, which existed before it did. It produces the sense in producing itself as an indissoluble unit

of sense and sign. Thus the word proper comes to veil the sense of the image, not because its support or opposition is important to the image, but precisely because it is inessential. The qualitative poverty and quantitative paucity of the dialogue in a good many contemporary films is not necessarily to be attributed to the stupidity of the director or the mediocrity of the characters and plots, but to a deliberate effort to downgrade the sense of the word and upgrade the sense of the image, to dispossess the former to enrich the latter, and, by heaping discredit on language proper, to accredit the belief in a language of images. This is thus a two-phased operation: On the one hand, it disparages language by proclaiming its failure to express meaning, and on the other hand, uses language in the capacity of a sign; for in the absence of the meaning from the word proper, the very inessentialness of the word is also designed to send the mind in search of a sense elsewhere—a sense which is not stated, but (because it cannot be stated) suggested by the image, or better, which *is* the image in and by itself.

Now it appears that this enterprise vacillates between two opposite extremes, without being able, by its very nature, to choose the one or the other. As to the one, and as was said elsewhere¹ as far as the contemporary novel was concerned, the cinema wants to be objective. This is to say that it tries to get at what is human by way of things, and at what is internal by way of the external. The things that are to confer a meaning on what is human are objects, landscapes, even “objective” facts and events. The animation of things is counterbalanced by the inertia of man, and the counterpart to the glorification of things is the failure of man. All attention is given to the thing; and since human motives are inscrutable because they are not things and because they have to be inferred or guessed at, human situations and acts appear denuded in their objective purposelessness; and finally, man himself, placed into the world of inert silent things, becomes a thing among things and reflects back onto them their own reflection which is that of an object in a mirror. The image by its very

¹ D. Dreyfus, “Vraies et fausses énigmes,” *Mercure*, Oct. 1957, and “L’Ascétisme dans le roman contemporain,” *Esprit*, July-Aug. 1958.

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nature lends itself to this transubstantiation. This is why it is preferred to the word; discourse is the last refuge of subjectivity because things are silent. And discourse is then used to darken or to veil the meanings that are properly human, and which could escape, in spite of the words, from the images, or better, which could escape (because he is human) from the director. But if worst came to worst, the subject could shrink to a single look: Just as a word makes sense of the subject, so that look would make the world a sight for the subject. But this is still too much: The universe of things is not given as a spectacle, since the percept presupposes a perceiver. To carry the enterprise to its completion, things must be made to give themselves and to have meaning in and for themselves. Thus the image is given with all the opacity of the thing, and held against the light, does not allow us to see anything. A lonely and deserted island does not mean human solitude and incomprehension; it is that solitude. A small pile of clothes in the middle of a half-dark room does not mean a carnal embrace; it is that very embrace. There is nothing beyond the image: The solitude becomes a thing, and the deserted island is not deserted because man has left it momentarily, but because he is eternally absent.

But this aim of objectivity is no sooner envisaged than rebutted and opposed by another aim. The cinema wants to have meaning: It wants to *say* something and say it in images and not discursively. Thus discourse remains inessential. But the image tries to transcend itself as an image to mean something foreign to it, namely, the internal life which it repudiates when it aims at objectivity. This interior is that of human motives, intentions, thoughts, feelings, impressions and desires; it is clear that the cinema cannot *say* these without negating itself. It must assure at all cost that language proper remains meaningless in both senses of the term, and retains no virtue of its own and no significatory privileges. But since the task is now to express by the image a subjectivity which is no longer of the order of things, nor of the simple movement of things set in motion, and cannot therefore pass as such into the image, the image is now pressed to transcend itself without changing its nature, towards a linguistic or discursive sense; for if there is a subject, there must be a way of saying it.

From this point on, the cinema will strive for the impossible synthesis of the immanent and the transcendent, of the internal with the external, of the objective with the subjective, and of impression and expression. The image must express without saying, which is to say that it must express by the impression it produces. The sense must be at once immanent and transcendent, both inside and out: Immanent, since it must be the image itself and it alone which has the meaning. Transcendent, because what it means is no part of the opaque and inert universe (even though it be in motion) of images and of objects of visual perception, but beyond these, in the universe of human discourse. Extreme objectivism thus falls back onto extreme subjectivism; and a whole system of correlations and analogies comes to be established, which allows one to read or to decipher in things and in their images, as in a mirror, the traces of human meanings: The empty landscape and the train that disappears on the horizon, become symbols. They lead us back to the romantic "landscape of a state of mind" which complicates, but does not appreciably defer, the task of introducing the products of human intention. Man gives a sense to things and to their images. While the image passes into the inessential, the essential becomes the inner life which the image suggests without being able or willing to say it. A little while ago, the image took up all the space, facing us in all the opacity of its immanence. At this moment, it effaces itself before the sense and makes itself transparent for it so as to make appear through itself the filigrane of discursive meanings. The foreign nature of the sense pushes the image into subjectivism; it becomes a symbol and not a sign, because the image cannot be made to vanish entirely, to become a mere nothing and to be forgotten, before the sense towards which it reaches out: Images are taken both for themselves and for what they mean. The art of the cinema becomes a symbolic art and can recover its objectivity only by inventing symbols that are generally understood, or by borrowing symbols that are already current, from mythology and psychoanalysis.

If expressionism amounts to making an image represent, that is, express, something other than itself, and if impressionism amounts to reducing an image to the impression it produces, then the cinema is faced here with a conflict which is very old, but

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ever-present in all the arts proper. In this case, the conflict is not only intensified but also somewhat changed in sense, insofar as the cinema, more than any other form of art, finds it altogether impossible to restrict itself to a pure and simple imagery, devoid of any discursive elements. Whichever road the cinema may take, it always finds itself pulled irresistibly in the opposite direction. On the one road, it errs by default: The image suggests or evokes, because it cannot say. Hence its equivocal nature and its inferior status in comparison with language proper. On the other road, it errs by excess: Since the image can suggest and evoke, it will seem that it can also say much more, or much more fully or much better, than the word. Hence its alleged superiority in comparison with language proper. But it ceases to be equivocal only to become overcharged: It can say everything.

This seems to be the dilemma in which the contemporary cinema finds itself, and which endangers its immanence or meaning. The sacrifice of one of the horns to the other cannot solve the dilemma, as long as the contemporary cinema, like the novel, refuses to become straightforward entertainment, while it does not allow itself to take its obligations to the serious historical and social situation seriously. For either the cinema recognizes its own deficiencies and transcends itself towards a sense which is foreign to it and transcends it in turn, or else it remains self-sufficient imagery which, incapable of inducing belief in its own fictions, falls inevitably back into fantasy. But neither of these attitudes is preferable to the other, and besides, they come to the same: When the cinema aims at a sense which eludes it, it is no less firmly convinced that such a transcendence is possible, which is to say that the image in its role as a sign is very much superior to the linguistic sign. Since the image is, moreover, unwilling (and unable, by its nature) to become a sign, it adds to its expressive or signficatory value an impressive or aesthetic value, which is itself signficatory, but only of itself. When the cinema remains self-sufficient, it appropriates both the sense and the sign. As a sensible thing, the image preserves its aesthetic value, and through it, its proper meaning. But the image also presents itself as an intermediary between the aesthetic meaning, or impression, and the discursive meaning, or expression, since in the image the sensible is completely identified with the sense, and impression

with expression. If it takes the former road, the cinema borrows its meaning from language, but transfigures it in the image. If it takes the latter road, it creates its own meaning, but even though it has it, this meaning can never be made to feel at home in inert things, and thus the cinema, in this latter case, does no more than borrow secretly what, in the former case, it borrowed openly.