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Theatre to Cinema

Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film

© Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, 2016

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MOLLY'S BOOK

Preface



In 1993, the major focus of Le Giornate del cinema muto, the silent film festival in Pordenone, was the year 1913. Seeing a program of films made in a particular year rather than a selection from a national cinema or the work of a particular director confirmed a more general intuition that we had from viewing many films of the 1910s over the years. There is a qualitative change in filmmaking in Europe and America in that year. One Pordenone regular commented that she found films before 1913 good in context — an impressive achievement for 1910, an advanced film for 1911 — but that starting in 1913 she found films that were just good.

We would account for the changes which occur in this period as a function of a complex set of conditions, involving both the mode of production of films during the transition to features, and the available models for the structure and style of the new, longer film. First, the transition from a variety program of one-reel films to features which could be individually advertised encouraged the production of culturally ambitious and potentially prestigious projects, and led to a corresponding increase in film budgets. This occurred first in Europe, where exhibitors could negotiate for films individually, allowing them to program a mix of films of varying lengths, and only later in the U.S., where many exhibitors were locked into accepting the weekly or twice-weekly program of one- and two-reel films distributed as a block by a national distributor.

Filmmakers appealed to a variety of cultural forms in constructing the early feature, including the novel, the magazine serial, and the stage. The theatre, in particular, had already influenced even

ambitious one-reel films like those of Film d'Art, acted by members of the Comédie Française, or the many theatrical adaptations of the Vitagraph Company. But as films became longer, the relatively more complex plots found in plays and novels made them even more important as models. According to still unpublished research by Michael Quinn, theatrical adaptations accounted for between 50 and 60 per cent of Paramount's output of features between 1913 and 1915, and the company estimated that later in the decade they still accounted for about 25 per cent of the total yearly output.

Of course in this period the theatre itself encompassed a wide variety of narrative modes, acting styles and uses of *mise-en-scène*. Nonetheless, critics as diverse as A. Nicholas Vardac, Peter Brooks, Martin Meisel, and Michael Booth have suggested that the popular nineteenth-century stage was intimately concerned with the metaphor of the stage picture, to the point of conceiving of plays as a series of pictorially representable moments. Meisel has suggested that this way of thinking extended well beyond the theatre, and had important ramifications both for painting, and for the tradition of novel illustration. From the other direction, Michael Fried has used a notion of the theatrical to illuminate the history of painting in the same years. We focus upon the theatrical tradition discussed by Vardac, Meisel and others to explain the development of film style in the 1910s not just because stage influence can be traced in certain films which are adaptations of stage plays, but also, as we will try to indicate, because the theatre served as one of the nodal points for conceptualizing “the pictorial”

and hence provided a more general guide for cinematic *mise-en-scène*.

In exploring the notion of pictorial effect we hope to redress what we take to be an over-emphasis on the development of editing technique in the history of early film, an emphasis that has worked to focus attention on filmmaking in the U.S. at the expense of Europe and, in the American context, on particular directors and studios, e.g., D.W. Griffith at Biograph, at the expense of others, e.g., Vitagraph, where developments in staging and acting played a more important part.

We would also like to distinguish this study from work which aims to use early film as a means of documenting theatre history. Stephen Johnson neatly sums up the questions that historians looking at early films as evidence of theatrical performances must pose: “To what extent was the original theatrical production altered for film recording? To what extent did the limitations of the camera alter or distort the theatrical performance?” We do not seek to clear away these “alterations and distortions” in order to recover a theatrical performance in a more or less pristine state. The technical requirements of the cinema necessarily transformed staging and acting techniques. As film historians, we are interested in tracing out what the process of transformation entailed and how it gave rise to something new.

Finally, it should be noted that while we do aim to make a contribution to the history of filmmaking in the 1910s, and while we do address issues of national context in terms of our comparisons of European and American filmmaking traditions,

we are not here concerned with the immediate and proximate conditions of theatrical performance in the sense that, for example, Jim Davis is in his studies of the Britannia, Hoxton, or David Mayer is when he writes on Irving's productions of *The Bells*. We are interested in a more abstract conception of the theatrical and the pictorial, and how it impinged on filmmaking. Moreover, one of our working assumptions is that this taste for the pictorial largely crossed most social boundaries (with some protestations from the critics), and thus we do not deal directly with the differences between working-class and upper-class theatre, nor with how class, gender and ethnic divisions affected the audience for the early feature. There are larger implications for these important questions in our work, particularly where the emergence of modern conceptions of "high" and "low" culture are concerned, but we hope to demonstrate that a close attention to questions of technique will reveal much that an immediate concentration on social context would overlook.

This book has been many years in the making, so our list of acknowledgments is correspondingly long.

First, for providing research funding, time (including leave) and facilities, we have to thank the University of Kent at Canterbury, England, and the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. We were also beneficiaries of grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

The films which form our most important source material were nearly all preserved by archives which are members of the Fédération Internationale des Archives de Film, to whose activity all film scholars are incalculably indebted. Although the films we discuss have been preserved by a much broader range of these archives, here we would like especially to thank those we visited in the course of our research: the Cinémathèque française, Paris

and Fort de Saint-Cyr, and especially Dominique Païni and Claudine Kaufmann; the Cinémathèque Royale, Brussels, and especially Gabrielle Claes and Sabine Lenk; George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, and especially Paolo Cherchi Usai and Jan-Christopher Horak; the Motion Pictures, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, and especially David Francis, Patrick Loughney and Paul Spehr; the National Film and Television Archive, London, and especially Elaine Bowers; the Nederlands Film-museum, Amsterdam and Overveen, and especially Frank van der Maden; and the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, Wisconsin, and especially Maxine Fleckner-Ducey.

As well as archival viewings we have also seen some of the same films, and many others, in film theatres and at film festivals. Details of *mise-en-scène* and gesture are often only visible on a large screen, and books like ours would be immeasurably the poorer if programmers abandoned screening the often little known films from the period we are concerned with. Special thanks are owed to the annual Giornate del Cinema Muto at Pordenone, Italy, and Livio Jacob and Lorenzo Codelli; to the Mary Pickford Theatre at the Library of Congress, Washington; to the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and to the National Film Theatre, London, and especially the late John Gillett.

For paper materials, we are particularly indebted to the library of the University of Kent at Canterbury, and especially R. Stephen Holland (who helped us not only as curator of special collections but also as an expert in our field); the Memorial Library of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, especially the Inter-Library Loan department, the Kohler Art Library (special thanks to William Bunce), the Microform Library (special thanks to Ed Duesterhof), the Mills Music Library (special thanks to Gerry Laudati), and the department of Special Collections; the library and archives of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin; the library of

the Information Division of the British Film Institute, London (special thanks to Gillian Hartnoll); the Theatre Museum, London; the British Library, London and Colindale; the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Performing Arts Center, New York Public Library; the Museum of the City of New York (special thanks to Marty Jacobs); Special Collections of the library of the University of California, Los Angeles; and the library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

For the illustrations to this book we have to thank the photographic department of the library of the University of Kent at Canterbury, and especially Jim Styles; the University of Wisconsin Extension Photographic Media Center, and especially Jerry Erdmann; the Wisconsin Cartographic Laboratory and Onno Brouwer; and the University of Wisconsin–Madison Department of Information Technology Media Laboratory. Permission to reproduce Figure 2.5 was kindly granted by the Museum of the City of New York; Figure 3.1, from the Iveagh bequest, is reproduced by permission of English Heritage; Figure 4.25 is reproduced by permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Figures 4.71 and 4.72 by permission of the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden, and the Victoria & Albert Museum. Figure 4.77 is from the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, and is reproduced with the permission of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

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A NOTE ON THE 2016 VERSION OF *THEATRE TO CINEMA*

What follows is not a revised edition of *Theatre to Cinema*. This is not because we think the book was perfect as it was, or because our ideas have not changed in the intervening eighteen years, but because tinkering with the text would lead to such

extensive revisions and additions that it would be easier to start again from scratch. Therefore the version presented here is identical to that published by Oxford University Press in 1997, with the following exceptions: we have corrected a few minor factual errors, slips of the pen, and misprints; spelling and punctuation have been Americanized; a few more available editions of works we refer to have been added to the notes and bibliography; and notes and bibliography have been revised to conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Note that two of the film archives we refer to have changed their names since 1997, but this version retains the former names: the National Film and Television Archive, London, has become the British Film Institute National Archive, and the Netherlands Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, has become the Eye Film Institute, Netherlands. We have re-edited the illustrations from the original Kodak PhotoCD scans, that is, those scans have been rotated to horizontal, cropped to the frame lines, their levels have been adjusted, and they have been resized (this re-editing was done in the GIMP). The stills from *Ma l'amor mio non muore!*, which in the 1997 version were taken from the Museum of Modern Art Circulating Library's 16mm print,

have been rephotographed from the Milan Cineteca's restored 35mm print.

In addition to those people and institutions recognized in the original acknowledgments, we should like to thank: Oxford University Press, Oxford, England, for returning the copyright of the book to us; the various institutions referred to above as granting us permission to reproduce certain illustrations for extending that permission to this version; the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections Center for agreeing to host it, and providing the infrastructure to make it accessible (special thanks to Peter Gorman, Melissa Mclimans, and Catherine Phan); Mike Mashon of the Library of Congress, Motion Pictures, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, for help with prints of the 1914 World Film version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; Burne Photo Imaging, and especially Barry Burne, for processing the new frame stills; Kaitlyn Fyfe and Jason Quist of the Department of Communication Arts Media Center, University of Wisconsin–Madison, for other assistance with the illustrations; and Jane Tenenbaum for designing and typesetting the book.

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Technical Note

There are many examples in this book of detailed description of films, and the reader may need some guide to the conventions we have used in these descriptions. This will be especially necessary if the reader is more familiar with writing on theatre than on film, but some of our conventions may also be unfamiliar to film historians. This is because much film description is adapted to films made later than most of the ones we consider, and in a tradition that accepts the shot as the natural unit for the analysis of films. As we explain in the first part of this book, we are skeptical of the validity of this assumption for films of the period we are primarily concerned with, the 1910s. This is to say not that we do not divide our descriptions up into shots (defined as units of film which purport to have been filmed continuously from one camera position or a continuously moving camera position and are divided from their predecessors and successors by a cut, dissolve or fade), but that we do not take the shot as a syntagmatic unit to which can be attributed a set of paradigmatic values — shot scale, length, presence or absence of camera movement, etc. Hence, with few exceptions, we have not isolated such paradigmatic information, but, if it is mentioned at all, embedded it in the body of the description. For example, to call a shot a “long shot,” a term whose reference is the framing of a human body, it has to be clear which character visible it is a shot of; but many of the long scenes in films of the 1910s have several significant characters in them at different depths and hence difference scales, and the characters often move during the shot from one such scale to another.

It is in an attempt to capture a different register of the visual properties of a film than the shot, what

we will be calling their “pictorial” register, that we have devoted so much space and effort to descriptions. Some of our descriptions concern sections of the action which are only part of the shot. Others describe the action over a number of shots without specifying how many of them there are and their precise sequence. When we do lay out a sequence of shots in detail, we number them in sequence (including any titles in that sequence). When we have been able to prepare a complete shot breakdown of the film, the first number in our description will be the number of the shot in the film, or more rarely we will start with the number of the shot in some smaller sub-unit, which we will define. Otherwise we will simply start the described sequence with shot 1. The one important exception is the 1914 film version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where we have used the numbering in the script deposited at the Copyright Office, for reasons explained in Chapter 4 (which means that, in this case, titles are numbered in a separate sequence from shots).

In describing a shot, we divide the space laterally into left, center and right, axially into front or foreground, midground, and rear or background. We have followed film conventions and used left and right from the point of view of the spectator, not that of the actor facing the audience; i.e., our convention is the opposite of that of most theatrical play scripts. We have maintained this convention in our descriptions of stage settings, but have left citations from play scripts as we found them. On the rare occasions when we have needed to use stage conventions, we say “stage left” and “stage right,” to make the distinction clear. We have avoided other lateral terms like “prompt” and “opposite to prompt” and “*côté cour*” and “*côté jardin*.” Note,

however, that “Borelli’s left hand” means her anatomical left hand, so, if she is facing camera, it is to the right of her from the viewpoint of the audience. Finally, if a series of items of furniture or characters are listed without directional indications, the earlier named will be to the left of the later.

As already mentioned, shot-scale terms are relative to a human body, and are always linked explicitly or implicitly to the relation to the frame of a character. Obviously, such terms are points on a continuous grade, and are more important in relation to the scale of other characters or the same character in other shots than they are absolutely. Our terms are as follows: “very long shot” means that the character is dwarfed in his or her surroundings; “long shot” that the character is framed from head to toe; “medium long shot” that he or she is framed from the knees up; “medium shot,” from the waist up; “medium close-up,” the head and shoulders alone; “close-up,” the face alone; “big close-up,” less than the whole face. “Inserts” are close shots of other parts of the body (hands or feet) or objects such that the relevant object occupies most of the frame. Camera movements are described as “pans,” where the camera rotates on a vertical axis (i.e., from left to right, or vice versa), “tilts,” where the axis of rotation is horizontal (up or down), and “tracks,” where the camera moves bodily. “Reframe” is used to mean any small movement (usually a pan) that maintains a significant character or moving object in a favorable position in the frame.

In the plans of the set that accompany some of our descriptions, the camera position is at the bottom of the plan, unless otherwise indicated by arrows.

