Conclusion

We have argued that much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatre was characterized by a situational and pictorial approach to narrative. That is, rather than considering plot in an Aristotelian way as a matter of a chain of cause and effect (his “beginning, middle, and end”), playwrights, stage managers, directors, actors, audiences, and even critics (despite the latter’s genuflections to classical dramaturgy) treated it as a way of producing and resolving situations, momentary states embodying in extreme form the causal tensions that drive the story. Such situations were the moments that painters and sculptors took as appropriate for the representation of significant action in an atemporal medium. In a temporal medium like drama, conversely, they arrested the forward motion the better to underline its significance. Far from being pictures that asserted their sovereign autonomy from the spectator, like Fried’s absorptive paintings, they are insistent in their address to a spectator. However, the stage picture’s appeal to spectatoral complicity should not be seen simply as an ideological reinforcement, a Barthesian mythological connotation, but rather as a means to structure the performance, to give it a rhythm and to orchestrate its high and low points.

This pictorialism ran through all aspects of theatrical practice in this period. We have considered three of these aspects, two of them broad domains — acting and staging — the third a specific device — the tableau. In acting, the picture affected both the way the actor presented the immediate situation and feelings of his or her character to an audience, and the way the ensemble of actors created a series of group pictures and moved from one to another, directing the audience’s attention to the key characters in the scene at each moment, and orchestrating their attitudes with appropriate accompanying attitudes from the subordinate figures. In staging, pictorialism dominated the settings — separate scenes were, in France, called “tableaux” — but also more transient effects like the relationship between the actors and the sets and scenic transformations. The tableau as a special device most directly transported to the stage certain characteristics of painting — the fixity, and the distribution of contrasting elements across the field of vision that demands the duration of that fixity for the whole to be read.

Although the early cinema took over many features of the live stage quite literally — notably the pictorial idea of the stage setting, actors’ attitudes, and occasional tableaux — the brevity of most early films made it neither necessary nor possible to resort to the devices of the developed pictorial stage. The stories remained too simple to involve the peripeteia that give rise to complex situations; actors did not have time to use attitudes in a way to punctuate and modulate the performance of a scene (when they had the expertise and the skill, which they often did not); tableaux could not be held for long enough for any but the most stereotyped situations to be conveyed in them. Moreover, the development of cinematic devices in the first fifteen years of moving pictures — the adoption of a close camera position, creating a playing area quite unlike the theatrical stage, the deployment of deep staging within that area, and the development of devices such as intertitles and assemblage of scenes to tell relatively complex stories without dialogue — moved the cinema away from a simple reproduction of stage practices.

With the rise of the feature film in the 1910s, films became much more like plays in the kind of narratives they related — indeed, many, perhaps most of them were adaptations of stage plays, ancient and modern. In this new, longer form, the pictorial theatre again became a model, but the established practices of filmmaking were not simply abandoned for a photographic record of stage performances. Nevertheless, pictorialism flourished, in modified forms.

Despite claims for a new acting style specific to the new medium, film acting remained reliant on attitudes. While acting and the film star (the diva and her male counterparts) became increasingly important in the 1910s both for the film industry and as a structural component of film narrative, the greater length of the film gave the actor more room for virtuoso display — simply carrying out the necessary actions, as many of the “actors” of the earliest films had done, was no longer sufficient. The appropriate deployment of attitudes became central to film acting. In Europe, filmmakers held down cutting rates to allow this virtuoso display to unfold in continuity. In America, faster editing did not leave space for lengthy reiteration of poses, and framings that isolated individual characters diminished the need for attitudinal ensemble to direct the spectators’
attention to the narratively significant characters and their actions. To that extent, pictorial acting lost some of its structuring functions, but the expressive means at the actor’s disposal remained the traditional attitudes.

Scene- and act-end tableaux, too, lost their structuring function in films, insofar as the principal divisions of films, reels, were increasingly shown continuously, without any break equivalent to a curtain. Even where breaks between reels persisted, and at the ends of movies, audiences were always reluctant to applaud actors who were not present to acknowledge the applause, and films adopted (from literary narratives rather than the theatre) epilogues to handle the ends of sections and whole films. Within scenes, tableaux in the strict sense of arbitrary freezes at significant moments were also rare; with sufficient motivation, most notably by surprise or the threat of violence, they were still seen, but were usually much briefer than they had been in the theatre. The tableau persisted, however, in various transformations: notably, in a tendency even in highly edited sequences to use an inclusive framing at the climax, and in the multiplication of cinematic devices, often devices of editing, to ensure that the high point that had been represented by the tableau in the theatre received an equivalent elaboration in the film, despite the absence of a long-held freezing of all actors in attitudes.

Finally, the idea that a scene was a “stage,” and a stage defined pictorially, was not immediately abandoned for the notion of an analytic montage in which a chain of isolated fragments was synthesized by the audience into a diegetic world never seen as a whole. Rather, the inclusive long shot prevailed as the principal framing of a scene, and most closer shots were axial cut-ins to a detail locatable by reference to the broader framing. As noted above, climaxes tended to return to the broad framing to include all the counterposed elements within a single picture. The visual pyramid carved out by the lens, all of whose parts were equally visible to all members of the audience, gave rise to a new kind of pictorial composition, one in many ways closer to that of flat perspective paintings than was possible for the live theatre, forced to push almost all significant elements to a front plane to ensure their visibility. On the other hand, the cinema screen remained small in comparison with the stage, and the spectacular pictorial elements of both popular and respectable nineteenth-century theatre were replaced, not by simply filming spectacular reality, which tended to produce derisorily miniaturized reality, which tended to produce derisorily miniaturized versions of that reality, but by the deployment of the other significant kind of editing in use in this period, the alternation, to create a spectacular impression without ever showing a truly spectacular scene.

A brief comparison between these conclusions and other accounts both of the relations between cinema and theatre, and of the early history of cinema in general, is in order here.

First, it should be obvious that we reject the view that the history of the cinema is one of a steady emancipation from theatrical models. Early filmmakers had other models (still photography, lantern slides, cartoons, vaudeville acts, short stories, novels), and gave the theatrical ones short shrift if they proved inconvenient. Film lighting, for example, always owed more to still photography and painting than it did to theatrical lighting. On the other hand, when those models became appropriate, as they did with the development of longer films after 1910, theatrical models came back with a force that overwhelmed all of the others except perhaps the literary ones. Far from being a restriction on the development of the cinema, in the 1910s the theatre became a storehouse of devices for the cinema, and has remained so (though, of course, the traffic is not so one-way as it was in the 1910s).

Second, our differences from those like Vardac who see nineteenth-century popular theatre as “protocinematic,” as attempting to be cinematic without the appropriate technology, are more subtle. We share with them a conviction that there are major continuities between the theatre and the cinema, at any rate after 1910. However, rather than seeing the theatre as striving to be cinematic, to be what the cinema was, as it were, automatically, we believe that the cinema strove to be theatrical, or to assimilate a particular theatrical tradition, that of pictorialism, a tradition to which neither medium is obviously more appropriate, although each made specific demands that mean that pictorialism in theatre and in cinema are not the same.

Third, we are reluctant to concede the priority many accounts give to the development of film editing as the “spine” of film history. This is linked to the first conception listed above, as editing is usually also seen as a feature differentiating cinema from theatre. An editing-centered approach also tends to privilege the American cinema, as most editing innovations started in the U.S. and were only slowly adopted in Europe, if at all, in the 1910s. However, the ways the cinema of this decade assimilated features of theatrical pictorialism have complex relations to film editing. In Europe, pictorialism in acting probably delayed the increase in cutting rates, whereas in the U.S. it found an accommodation with rapid editing: spectacular settings, too, both demanded inclusive shots, and called for editing effects to supply the lack of theatrical scale.

A fourth issue is the persistent attempts (from 1910 to the present) to link the cinema en bloc with the modernist movement in the other arts. The high valuation put on the absorptive, anti-theatrical picture is a case in point. In proposing it, Michael Fried is not so much characterizing eighteenth-century French painting or even eighteenth-century French art criticism, as he is offering a prehistory of a certain conception of modernist painting, one where the painting is concerned solely with itself, and does not solicit the spectator. His account of
Diderot’s views enables him ingeniously to distinguish this conception of modern painting from one based on the notion of non-representationalism as such — both by finding a perfectly representational art that can be located in the tradition, and by finding an argument to damn those kinds of abstract art (most notably certain of the New York minimalists painters and sculptors) that seem palpably to address a spectator, as “theatrical.” And when Svetlana Alpers champions the “Northern” tradition of Flemish and Dutch painting against the orthodox attribution of centrality to the Italians, and borrows a title of György Lukács’s (“Narrate or Describe?”) for an essay which, unlike Lukács, puts the descriptive above the narrative or historical, she, like Fried, is polemically adopting a modernist stance while, again like Fried, freeing it from an exclusive bent towards non-representationalism. Much of the attraction of Fried’s and Alpers’s positions to film historians lies in the way they make possible an assimilation of film to modernism. A pictorial cinema in our sense, on the contrary, has roots in the kinds of painting and theatre that the modernist movement set itself against.

There is an alternative to Fried’s “high” modernism in the writings of Walter Benjamin. When Benjamin appealed to the exclamation “Tableau!” he did so to compare the opportunities for that exclamation with the scenes in Brecht’s epic theatre. This use of picture seems much closer to ours, and Benjamin goes on to indicate that what these pictures show is the Zustand in which the characters caught in them are suddenly frozen, and Zustand can be translated “situation” (indeed, Benjamin uses the word “Situation” in an early draft for the essay in this context). Moreover, Benjamin hints at a kind of popular, anti-classical tradition behind these aspects of Brecht’s theatre. This “low” modernism seems more appropriate to characterize the range of theatrical devices we have described as pictorial. However, we would stress that pictorialism in this sense was not simply a “low” or vulgar form. While a taste for spectacle and a situation-based dramaturgy could certainly be found in the melodramas that dominated the working-class theatre in London or New York, we have argued that the film has a more serious role to play in the respectable theatrical productions of a Belasco or an Irving. Given its broad appeal, and given the tradition of academic painting and of illustration on which spectacular theatre draws, it seems more appropriate to characterize it as “middlebrow” rather than assimilating it to either Benjamin’s “low” or Fried’s “high” modernism. There is nothing particularly “modern” about the pictorial tradition, unless the modern can be dated back to the eighteenth century, a definition that would dilute the notion of modernism to mean no more than “contemporaneous with capitalism.” By the same token, the cinema of the 1910s should not be seen as a “modern” phenomenon in any but the most banal sense that it was produced in the twentieth century.

Our last point we regard as an unresolved issue. It is generally accepted that, before about 1907, that is, before the rise of specialized venues for the showing of films almost exclusively, and appropriate structures of production and distribution of films for such venues, films were very different from what they became in the cinema with which we are familiar, which, despite important changes, has been held to remain remarkably similar from around 1917 to the present. Currently, the most common way of formulating this is to contrast a “cinema of attractions” in the early period with a “classical narrative cinema” in the later, with the intervening decade one of transition between the two. To some extent, our account cuts across this distinction. We regard the cinema of attractions as essentially an institutional matter of a type of exhibition, appropriate to both narrative and non-narrative films, and would emphasize the brevity of the films appropriate to these types of exhibition as the crucial feature. We link the influence of pictorial theatre to the rise of the feature film, and the problems of handling narrative in a much longer format. We do not see the theatrical picture as in some sense inimical to narrative but rather as one of its modes.

However, most characterizations of the narrative cinema that emerged after 1917 seem remote from pictorialism. For example, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson’s “classical Hollywood cinema” is founded on an Aristotelian plot with the causes centered on the principal characters — essentially a protagonist sets him- or herself a goal the struggle for which, against external obstacles or the efforts of antagonists, takes the story from its beginning to its end, whether that end is the achievement of the goal or some other resolution, happy or unhappy. As we have pointed out, situations can be established in other ways than by setting obstacles to characters’ achievement of their goals, so, although both a situational and a causal account can be given of many narratives, causal consistency is less important in a situational dramaturgy, while effective situations are less important for one that is “Aristotelian” in this sense. Effective situations certainly remained crucial to “classical Hollywood cinema”; does the undoubtedly widespread demand for causal consistency and character-centeredness found in manuals and the cinematic trade press in the classical period represent a shift away from pictorialism, or is it a further instance of the discrepancy between intellectuals’ commentary (obliged to bow to classical dramaturgy) and actual film-making practice? Similarly, Christian Metz argues that in classical narrative cinema the absence of the actors when the spectator views the film abolishes the exhibitionism that constitutes the live stage picture as theatrical rather than absorptive in Fried’s sense. Is this argument incorrect, or is there a shift between the films of the 1910s we have been discussing and those of the classical cinema? Finally, Jean-Louis Baudry,
Raymond Bellour and Noël Burch have all made the highly edited style of classical films, and in particular the devices of shot-reverse-shot, and matching of eyelines and movement, central to their account of those films and the cinematic institution that produced them. If we are right, and editing does not play such a part in the films of the 1910s, are the films of the next decades essentially different? These questions are beyond the scope of this book, but insofar as we have made our case for the 1910s, they need an answer.
Appendix

Plot Summary of Uncle Tom’s Cabin

This summary follows the original novel, and the reader should be warned that the play and film versions discussed in Part Two often more or less deviate from it:

Uncle Tom lives with his wife Chloe and children in Kentucky where he is one of the most valued field slaves of the planter George Shelby. Shelby is unable to redeem a note that has fallen into the hands of the slave trader Haley, who forces him to sell Tom and little Harry, the son of Eliza Harris, Mrs. Shelby’s maid. Eliza’s husband George has already fled the nearby plantation of a harsher master, and, overhearing the plans for the sale of his son, Eliza decides to take the boy and try to join George in his flight to Canada. She warns Tom, but he decides not to resist his master’s decision. Eliza and Harry are pursued by Haley to the Ohio River, which is too iced up for a boat to get over. Cornered by Haley, Eliza crosses the river, leaping from floe to floe with Harry in her arms. She is taken in by Senator Bird and his wife, who help her contact an abolitionist rescue organization, through which she is able to join her husband and a Quaker guide on the trip North through Ohio to Lake Erie. Haley entrusts the search to a professional slave hunter, Loker, and his associate, the lawyer, Marks, and returns to the Shelby plantation. When Loker catches up with the runaways, George shoots and wounds him, and the Harrises reach Canada safely.

Tom says goodbye to his family and to Shelby’s son, who swears to redeem him when he grows up. Haley takes Tom and sets off on a steamer down the Mississippi to New Orleans to sell him. Tom meets Eva, the little daughter of Augustine St. Clare, who is returning home to New Orleans with his daugh- ter and her aunt Ophelia, a Yankee hostile to slavery. Tom rescues Eva when she falls overboard, and, at Eva’s request, St. Clare buys him. He becomes the family’s coachman. St. Clare also buys Ophelia a slave child, Topsy, to test her abolitionist sentiments. Topsy is a thief and liar, impervious to Ophelia’s moral suasion, and only corrigible by Eva’s love. Eva sickens and dies, extracting from her father the promise to free his slaves. Before he can do so, St. Clare is killed trying to prevent a duel. Tom is put up for auction with the rest of the slaves, except Topsy, who returns to Vermont with Ophelia, where she is set free.

Tom and a young girl, Emmeline, are bought by a dissolute Red River planter, Simon Legree. On his plantation, Legree tries to install Emmeline as his mistress, but she is protected by her forerunner, Cassy, whom Legree fears as a witch. Legree tries to force Tom to whip a sick slave woman, Lucy, who brings short weight of cotton to the weighing house, and has Tom beaten senseless by his overseers, Sambo and Quimbo, when he refuses. Cassy and Emmeline outwit Legree and flee the plantation. In an attempt to get him to reveal their whereabouts, Legree tortures Tom to death.

Shelby’s son arrives too late to save Tom’s life, but hears his dying words, and buries him. Cassy and Emmeline reach Canada and encounter the Harrises. It is discovered that Eliza is Cassy’s long lost daughter. As the novel ends, the Harrises are setting out for a new life in Liberia.
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