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Notes on Cinema and the Romantic World-View

Cover Page Footnote

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Notes on Cinema and the Romantic World-View

An examination of the cinema's relationship to romanticism demonstrates very well the problematical business of periodizing an art movement and showing its relationship to a specific political/historical moment. The cinema did not exist (not even the "Ur-cinema" associated with the work of Muybridge, Fox-Talbot, and others) during the fifty-odd years when English, French and German Romanticism made their most significant gestures (roughly the period 1798-1850). Yet it is fair to say that the international cinema from its inception has embodied the controlling spirit and tense dialectic of Romanticism; while much has been written on the influence of those modernist movements whose notions of art and of "genius" owe a great deal to Romanticism and which influenced the cinema enormously (I refer to Dada, Surrealism, Expressionism, Futurism, and so on) it is extraordinary that relatively little has been said about the connections of film to the sensibility that arose with the emergence of industrialism and the bourgeoisie in the first half of the last century.

It is reasonable to assert in any mapping of cinema's history and epistemology that the form embodies perfectly the utopian aspiration which found a specific fruition in the bourgeois culture symbolized by Romanticism. There is a dialectic which has immediate relevance here: the early experiments of the Lumière brothers and the films of George Méliès represent cinema's depiction, at its outset, of the informing duality of Romanticism. The Lumière brothers, entrepreneurial figures *par excellence*, represented not only the spirit of industrial capital, but also the lingering Enlightenment interest in sense data and observable aspects of nature which were part also of Romanticism's rejection of universal norms, including norms of knowledge. The most famous of the brief Lumière films (e.g., *Train Arriving at a Station*, *Baby's Breakfast*, *Snowball Fight*) depict very well the concern for an end to "isms" in favor of watching and measuring nature. Méliès, on the other hand, with his interest in the fantastic (*A Trip to the Moon*, *Conquest of the North Pole*) reveals Romanticism's interest in a higher truth (Spirit, Idea, Ego) which can be captured

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only in the shadow image of the ideal space of the imagination.¹ What the Lumières and Méliès share is a utopian consciousness reified with the revolutions of the late eighteenth century, but traceable to the *Architettura* of Vitruvius and more particularly to the interest in the “ideal position” of Renaissance perspectivism found in the work of Sebastian Serlio, Palladio, and Da Vinci.

In Renaissance and Neoclassical stagecraft, the spot in the theatre occupied by the king, allowing for a “real” and “full” perspective on the created scene, was a first step in the creation of a “truthful” and yet ideal space which would find a culmination in the cinema.² The Enlightenment interest in Bentham’s panopticonism represented a tendency in the realm of political economy to continue the Renaissance fixation with the idealized, centered subject in a post-Copernican world which obviously denied this centrality. Bentham’s Panopticon, a circular prison with a tall central tower allowing the jailer to see all the prisoners all of the time (without the jailer himself being seen) was not far removed from the whole sense of privilege given to vision (and to vision as emblem of power) with the creation of an ideal space in stagecraft: the Romantic destruction of the classical unities of time, place, and action; the emphasis on the proscenium frame and the vanishing point; and the inflections gradually given to perspective itself were a prelude to the experiments of early cinema.

If cinema’s impulses are quite synonymous with those of Romanticism, they must also be seen as of a piece with Romanticism’s principal form — the *fantastique*. In fact, the common assertion that cinema as an art form is a dream of a science-fictioner has a specific ontological basis.³ The all-seeing eye of Captain Nemo’s submarine in Jules Verne’s novel and the construction of H.G. Wells’s Time Traveler as a kind of century-hopping Baudelairean *flâneur* represent the industrial revolution’s faith that the rush of technology would give the human subject total purview over the natural and manufactured world. The cinema would reify this conceit with an “updating” of a variety of utopian impulses dating from Plato’s cave to the writings of Augustine and More to the notions of controlling time and space associated with the rise of industry and its extrapolative literature. Cinema’s utopianism was never of one mind, of course, ideologically; the medium quickly became circumscribed by the demands of finance, something which the Lumière/Méliès dichotomy

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also demonstrates very well. Méliès' emphasis on the primacy of creative genius (a centerpoint of Romanticism) has as its underside not only the megalomania which would be the controlling tone of the film industry in the U.S., Britain, and Europe, but the collapse of the utopian vision under the very solipsism which inspired it. Other tendencies and contradictions emerged which can be approached best by a (necessarily tentative) typological strategy:

Melodrama as Overarching Form

The Romantic interest in local color and characteristics over universal norms gave rise to sub-genres which would address the tastes and sensibilities of the emerging bourgeoisie. One form, melodrama, emerged in a fully-developed if hyperbolic manifestation in the early silent cinema, which for a long while could not part company with the declamatory acting of the nineteenth-century stage. An abiding interest in domestic melodrama would sustain the *kitsch* depiction of postwar American suburbia in the cinema of Douglas Sirk and others.

The "Fractured" Romanticism of Expressionism, the Horror Film, and Film Noir

The Expressionist movement, that distorted, out-of-joint rendering of the Romantic image of nature and culture, saturated the cinema of Weimar Germany (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Metropolis*, *Nosferatu*) with its post-World War I, pre-Third Reich foreboding which would in time find its way into American genres with the rise of immigrant directors like Fritz Lang and Robert Siodmark.⁴ The horror films produced by Universal Studios in the 1930s (e.g., *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*) delineated the grotesquerie of the Gothic tradition via the exaggerated stagecraft of Expressionism. Expressionism, a distinctly German movement, saw itself in explicit opposition to Romanticism's frequently optimistic view of the impact of technology on nature, and of the subject's place within the industrial revolution. (The emphasis on the "monster" in these films is a typically Expressionist gesture, both the monster as "other" and the protagonist as alienated monstrosity. The resurgence of the horror film in the British cinema of the 1950s, with the valorizing of a Dr. Frankenstein or the depiction of Dracula as debauched *roué*, returned the genre to

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its Romantic origins.) The crime film and particularly the chiaroscuro *film noir* represented the German immigrant director's sense of the urban world as hellscape, dark Satanic mill writ large in the cinematic image. Adjacent to the influence of the post-Romanticism of Expressionism is the tendency toward hyperbole and excess associated with the fin-de-siècle stage picture of Von Sternberg (*Blonde Venus*, *Scarlet Empress*) and the Stroheim of *The Wedding March* and *Queen Kelly*.

The Heroic Landscape

The most important site in cinema for the manifestation of the Romantic idealization of nature is the Western, and for specific ideological reasons not dissimilar to the peculiar conjunction of nature and technology in the Romantic literature of England and America. The notion, well-charted by Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx, of the American frontier representing a majestic (if at times hostile) Eden, conquered by the will to power manifest in the machine, as important to the optimism and imperialist enterprise of the postwar Western. The arrogance of the Romantic premises sustaining the Western would be caricatured in full-blown operatic form by directors such as Sergio Leone (*Once Upon a Time in the West*) as the optimism necessary to the Western's depiction of the American civilizing process played itself out.

The Power of Adaptation

Around mid-century the international cinema evidenced a strong interest in the literary canon of American and English Romantic literature through numerous adaptations of novels and short stories, often in a bowdlerized form that exaggerated sentiment, heroics, or domestic virtues, all for the basic project of presenting a relatively seamless ideological picture just before and after World War II.⁵ The adaptations of works by the Brontës, Melville, Austen, Poe, Mary Shelley, Hardy, Dickens, Conrad and others seem, in retrospect, a form of *hommage* to a dead cultural past as well as a means of utilizing a canon for specific moral and political lessons. The adaptations of the plays of Tennessee Williams appear to be the only site where Romanticism's adversarial tendencies to dominant culture are reasonably intact.

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The Apotheosis of the Subject

Perhaps the most apparent Romantic trope in cinema, the emphasis on the centrality of the subject, was perfectly in keeping with the Hollywood star system (the creation of films around charismatic leading actors and actresses) and with the individualist ethic basic to American narrative and the traditional American world-view. This centrality remains in place even as ideological codes change: John Wayne on horseback silhouetted against an evening sky suggests the same ineffable presence as Marlon Brando or Montgomery Clift, actors sensitive to the power of the camera who used their faces and bodies as artifice suggesting the tortured *angoisse* essential to the Byronic hero. The British cinema has representative examples, the most compelling of which is David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, wherein Peter O'Toole's T.E. Lawrence is an effete, supremely arrogant yet impenetrable icon of the last fractured moments of British empire. The cult of the Outsider⁶ begun with Shelley and Byron found a new dimension in the mid-twentieth-century's existentialist climate: where the alienation of Bogart and Garfield, of Brando and Dean did not prevail, the traditional authority of the charismatic male, destined to effectuate historical change (Charlton Heston as Moses, Ben Hur, *et al*; Henry Fonda as Abraham Lincoln and Wyatt Earp; John Wayne in any of his roles) returned to hold the center.

The dualisms informing Romanticism (e.g., body vs. spirit, nature vs. culture) continue to inform cinema even at the moment of its intellectual bankruptcy in postmodernism. As film and video technology continue to advance the utopianism of the earliest Romantic impulses, the cultural climate in which this technology is produced — circumscribed with a vengeance by industry and a new, ascendant bourgeois culture — invite the subject's solipsism and inversion. Just as Romantic art attempted constantly to recoup truth in the self, cinema's own utopian space destroys the theatrical experience (an outcome of the technology itself with the rise of cable television and the VCR) and the social itself.

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Notes

¹See Annette Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration," in Gregory Battock, ed., *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1967), p. 66.

²See, for example, Phyllis Hartnoll, *A Concise History of the Cinema* (New York: Abrams, 1965), and Lily Bess Campbell, *Scenes and Machines on the English Stage during the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1923).

³Annette Michelson, "Bodies in Space: Film as 'Carnal Knowledge,'" *Artforum*, February 1969, p. 80. See also P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975).

⁴See Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969).

⁵See, for example, Michael Klein and Gillian Parker, ed., *The English Novel and the Movies* (New York: Ungar, 1981).

⁶A significant work here is Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (New York: Delta Books, 1964).