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## Film As Poetry

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As the lyric poem is the direct manifestation through words of feelings and thoughts, with the expressive possibilities of plot, motion, music, dialogue, and image all muted in themselves, and only serving this pure expression; this is precisely the film lyric's function, through its own available idiom. It may have story elements, as in Weinberg's *Autumn Fire*; or none at all, as in Brakhage's *The Dead*. It may consist entirely of pictorial images, as Deren's *At Land*. Or it may utilize music: borrowed, as in Harrington's *On the Edge* (from Ives); or specially composed, as in Eisenstein's *Romance Sentimentale* (by Alexandrov). It may include dialogue, as in Weiss's *The Mirage*; or narration, as in *Les Mistons*; which may be a poem itself, as in *Looney Tom, the Happy Lover*, that delight of James Broughton to which Lorca's phrase "erotic allelujah" so happily applies.

The devices used do not in themselves make the film a lyric. The effect they create does. The above film-poems differ in the techniques they employ, but all have in common the goal of direct communication of sensibilities and visions.

Similar expression may be found in film other than the genuine poem. In such cases, the communication lacks the directness, the intimacy, the personal quality characteristic of the lyric. This is the result of the presence of another stronger formal element, through which the poetic is only filtered.

A good example of this is in Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. When Joan is about to be tortured to confess, we are given her impressions, of the atmosphere in the dungeon, the ominous judges assembled, the torturer, the instruments. We receive the strongest visual effects of how her chained feet feel; the lurching horror of her walk into the torture chamber; her giddiness as she faints, in a montage of horrible racks, spikes, and wheels, which loom menacingly and spin sickeningly. Yet though we are made to feel these emotions keenly, the quality of film-poem is not there. The expression is not for its own sake, so much as a complement to the narrative progression, the action which always remains dominant. It constitutes a heightening of the situation, more than a pure expression of fear or despair.

Moreover, and even more crucial, we are strongly aware that these are *Joan's* peculiar feelings, and not necessarily those of the filmmaker, or our own. The chains are on *her* feet. We see her in a very specific situation; and cannot accept her feelings as pure, but only as a function of her particular misfortune. This, of course, is related to the point that narrative considerations necessarily condition the emotional expression. But it extends this into the point that it is not just a matter of the story distracting from or diluting the poetry; that when the torture instruments whirl around, we sense that they are doing so in the particular mind of the girl Joan; and that even under the same conditions, someone else might react differently, might scream or weep or rage instead of fainting.

This qualification does not exist in the real film-poem, where the expression is absolute and universal, whether we accept it or not. If we reject such expression, we do so because we cannot feel it is valid for *ourselves*, or effectively communicates the *filmmaker's* vision. But if we reject the expression in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, it will be because we cannot feel her passion as valid for *her*, though of course our acceptance of it depends upon our partially sharing it.

This is true even of the more symbolic and lyrical scene of Joan's burning, where we see with her the powerful executioner, the uneasy judges, flowers upon the earth, a mother suckling her child, birds which take flight as the flames are lit; all forcefully intercut to show us her impressions, reflecting her fear and her regret for lost life. But again, they are not wholly ours, we have no real claim to them; nor does the artist himself. They belong to a specific character in a specific situation.

The same may be said of parts of *The 400 Blows*, notably when the boy, who has been caught returning the stolen typewriter, is being taken to the police station. We see through his eyes, through the rear of the paddy wagon, the night streets passing by; a vision of the things of life being relentlessly lost. But this poignant passage depends for its full impact upon the specific circumstances; and while poetically charged narrative, cannot be considered film-poem.

Film-poem must be primarily developed in terms of personal, "abstract" expression; and only secondarily to that may narrative, or any other formal effect, be introduced.

An excellent example of film poetry which occurs within another formal context, and even incorporates actual characters, is the flashback episode toward the start of Bergman's *The Naked Night*. In this, one of the greatest passages in all film, we are presented with an apocalyptic vision, in which a clown and his bear-trainer wife become transfigured into symbolic creatures of poetry.

The film opens with two men riding atop a horse-driven coach in a nineteenth century travelling circus. To pass the early morning time, they talk of the scandalous incident that occurred several years before, involving the clown Frost and his wife Alma. A blackout leads to the flashback.

Soldiers are training near a seashore. The only sound is the pulse of drums, occasional booming of cannon, and some cheap, "gay", somewhat discordant military music. No

voices are heard in this scene. The light is hot but not bright, an oppressive glow.

Alma saunters over toward the men, dressed in gaudy striped clothes. They leer at her. She passes a hat into which they throw some coins. She does a cancan for them, flinging her skirts above her drawers. An officer strokes his moustache. Cannons are shown shooting phallically. Alma starts removing her clothes. The moustached officer sends off a boy, who runs back to the circus tents, and appears to inform Frost of his wife's misbehavior. Frost, with "comic" bewilderment, part of his clown makeup still on, follows the messenger.

When he reaches the shore, he sees Alma in the water, naked, frolicking with several soldiers. Sitting on rocks along the beach and observing is the rest of the platoon. Frost calls to Alma. The boy hides her clothing. She finally hears, and becoming ashamed, starts to come ashore. But she cannot leave the water as she is. Apart from her nudity, the rocks are too sharp for her feet.

The music stops. The cannon cease. Silence. Only the drum beats, a single stroke from time to time, accenting the visual rhythms.

Frost peels off his outer garments, and enters the water, grotesque now in long underwear. He carries Alma out, she clinging to his neck, his arms about her bottom, her nakedness partly hidden by his body. We see his feet bleeding from the stones.

He carries her off the beach. He staggers with her up a slope. The soldiers follow, gazing with savage amusement. Other people gather round the spectacle. We see Alma's agonized, shamed face; and Frost's, suffering from the degradation of his wife and himself, and his wounds and physical strain. His clown's make-up looks like gashes on his face. We see his bloody feet. Intercut with all this is the glaring sky, linking the human images in painfully slow dissolves. Frost falls, Alma urges him up again, and he resumes his journey and his burden. Drumbeats intensify the silence. The crowd still watches the

stumbling Frost, as he finally manages to get back to the circus grounds, where he collapses. He and his wife are helped inside by their comrades. One of the circus people looks up at the sky and mops his brow. We see the harsh heavens. A blackout ends the episode.

Thus actual characters in a narrative situation take on mythical significance. They are absolutely charged with the vision of the filmmaker; and the episode loses all literal meaning, transfigured into a parable in religious terms of the suffering entailed by human love. Both man and woman undergo the stripping of Christ, and a mutual ascent of Calvary, amid the jeering crowds; the man bearing not a wooden cross, but one of flesh & his woman.

All elements here exist for the sake of the direct impact of the artist's vision. The effect of the narrative as such, or the rhythm of cutting as such, is completely absorbed in the poetry. We are primarily held by emotion as such, involved with the sheer passion. Indeed, the whole movie develops these symbols in different contexts and characters; and is arguably itself an extended, though less pure, film-poem.

We may gather from the above that when the film-poem utilizes "real" characters and situations, it must transform them to symbols of the filmmaker's thoughts and feelings. If they retain more than a shadow of their identities, they will live too much on their own, too much as narrative, "realism", etc., and too little as sheer lyric expressions. For this reason the examples from *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *The 400 Blows* are not film-poetry; nor are they intended as such. A total transformation of forms and materials into mere manifestations of the artist's state of mind is what is required.

Before we consider the implications this necessity has had in terms of significant schools of film-poetry, we should in preparation glance at certain definite parallels between word devices associated with poetry and visual ones which have been used in film.

The metaphor may be found in the funeral procession in *Earth* where, in keeping with the tone of harmony between man and nature running through the film, a branch lightly passes over the face of the dead Vassily as his bier is carried by a tree. The effect of this image is: "The branch is a hand caressing the dead youth". Again, in Stan Vanderbeek's *Science Friction*, a satire on modern "progress," the ending goes thus: the "world" is shown floating in space (a small model of the earth spotlit in darkness); a hand enters the picture, picks up the world, and removes it; next we see a hot skillet; the hand comes in holding the world, and taps it on the skillet; another hand comes in, and with the first, it pulls apart the "earth's" shell; and out comes the white and yolk of an egg, sunny side up, into the pan for frying. The effect of this sight is: "The whole world has been reduced to just an (unrespected, fragile, small, and dissected) egg."

The simile is utilized in *Greed*, where during the wedding of Trina and McTeague a funeral procession is seen in the background through the window. The effect: "The wedding is like a funeral". Again, *Un Chien Andalou* begins with Luis Buñel stropping a razor; a thin sliver of cloud passes across the moon; Buñel takes the razor and passes it across the eye of a young woman, which spills out over her cheek. The effect (aside from shock): "A cloud moving across the moon is like a razor blade across an eye".

We have already encountered the symbol in *The Naked Night*, but two more instances will further clarify this. First we have the direct symbol, as in Pudovkin's silent *The End of St. Petersburg*, where during a wartime period of civilian food shortage, in the midst of bread lines and riots, we see a crying child. The camera moves right up to his face so that his gaping mouth fills the entire screen. The child's mouth thus becomes symbolic of the hunger, the agony inflicted upon the innocent by war. His unheard cry loses its particularity, and is universal.

A more complex symbol, which might be called a figure of sight, occurs in *Ivan the*

*Terrible*. The Tsar, embroiled in domestic intrigues, beset by foreign perils, in his struggles to strengthen Russia, is sitting alone, brooding. On the table beside him is a large globe of the world, which he has just used in explaining his plans to his ministers. Now he sits and contemplates it. We are shown a long shot of this, and we see the shadows of Ivan and the globe projected enormous upon the wall behind. He takes it in his hands and turns it; and the huge shadows are carbon copies of the action. Then we see the shadows alone.

Thus the original symbol of Ivan in the flesh holding the solid globe, which already meant "He has the world in his hands," is further intensified by its abstraction and generalization in the great shadow-image: "The spirit of Ivan turns the spirit of the world." Eisenstein does not rest here, though; he works the figure for all it is worth, develops it even like a conceit. For now Ivan (and his shadow) slumps down, his head upon the table; while the globe (and its shadow) rises in relative position. And this means, "His efforts to master the world have tired him"; and, "Ivan is bowed down beneath the weight of the world"; for, in the shadow-image, "He has the whole world" literally "on his shoulders."

The above are some possibilities in film for achieving the precise effects of poetry. But these very devices have been shunned by certain artists whose work is intended precisely and emphatically as film-poetry. They profess to create "nonliterary," "nonsymbolic," "pure" film-poems.

For this to be possible, the film would have to be created either in terms of raw perception, impressionism; or of direct, unmediated (by conscious thought, which implies concepts, words) expression, free association, surrealism. The first approach represents in literary terms the "automatic writing" treatment of the external, "objective" world; the second, of the internal, "subjective" world. The two, as we shall see, may be combined, but need not.

An early, rudimentary, and very famous example of internal impressionism, and a constructed (not free) association, occurs in Pudovkin's *Mother*. Here the young imprisoned revolutionary receives a note informing him of plans for imminent escape. His emotions on reading this are conveyed to us by a close-up of his smiling mouth, and then a rapid succession of shots blending into each other: a laughing child, water sparkling in the sun, etc., all meant to render the prisoner's surge of joy. The attempt here is to find direct visual equivalents for an internal state; thereby to suggest exactly the same feeling to the spectator. The fact that the images are detached entirely from the situation, and even the character; but rather, represent universally valid associations of joy, applied to a specific circumstance; makes this a fair sample of fragmentary film-poem. It only lasts a few seconds, but contains possibilities to be explored much further in later (post-1925) films.

A movie made a few years after, "H<sub>2</sub>O", formally exemplifies the external impressionistic treatment; yet is not essentially a film-poem. It consists of nothing but water, as it forms innumerable designs and textures, in various places, at various speeds, and in various types of light. These treatments of the physical world serve no vision or emotional expression; but exist for their plastic values alone, as graphic art-film, and not film-poem.

The appeals of sheer physical existence have been expressed with more passion, indeed poetically, in Renoir's *A Day in the Country* and *Picnic in the Grass*. In both pictures erotic pursuits in the countryside are climaxed by full-fledged impressionistic hymns to the glory of nature; in the language of quivering leaves, rushing and shimmering water, grasses swept by the wind, droplets of water sparkling on leaves, insects clinging to flowers . . .

The extended nonliterary film-poem wrought of internal materials is well, even classically



represented by the surrealistic *Un Chien Andalou*. Although the opening scene, as described before, contains what is formally a simile, it is only incidentally so, and is in the first place a mere free association, with no intentional meaning or form; and the rest of the film is completely irrational, its "structure" just that of hallucination. A girl cowers in the corner of a room; while toward her struggles a man, pulling a rope to which are attached two pianos with dead bloody donkeys on them, and then two clergymen, watermelons, etc. . . . A man is shot in a room, he starts to fall; he continues falling in a peaceful country side, his hands sliding down the body of a nude woman . . .

The difficulty with such procedure is that when we are presented with impressions of the raw external world, as in *Picnic in the Grass*, we can accept these for what they are, totally respond to their immediate effect, for they have a universal, instinctively appreciated value; but such is not the case with direct impressions of the raw internal world. The trouble is not so much that people's reactions to a piece like *Un Chien Andalou* have been so various; but that they have felt the need to explain it at all. Buñel has insisted there is no rational explanation for his images. But then, we have our own dreams at night. So why should we go to the movies for something just like them, unordered, meaningless? Art implies purposeful choice; and appeals entirely to the subconscious level of the mind can never be accepted as such. The phenomena recorded are themselves subjective, and their direct expression leaves them still subject to meaningful interpretation; which is not true of Renoir's water or plants. Indeed, such interpretation is precisely what Buñel intends to leave up to the spectator; or rather means to obviate altogether. He does succeed in making the audience's experience comparably subjective to that of himself, the creator of the dream. But he fails insofar as he could accept his own subconscious emanations as internal "facts" to be recorded; whereas the spectator, presented with their projection, must consider them as art. Since the viewer cannot accept these images as Buñel does, as raw internal "fact," a conceptual

explanation is forced upon him, if not of the images themselves, then of their *raison d'être*. And such an explanation implies words, a "literary," "symbolic" translation of the film by the spectator. Thus the pure nonconceptual quality which *Un Chien Andalou* in itself has, necessarily evokes "literary" thoughts in the viewer.

The experience provided by the film is in any case far from invalid; but, as stated above, it is called in question as art; needing as it does completion by the spectator himself. Buñel did say that his movie was not intended as "art." But *since* surrealistic or free associational film as such cannot succeed as complete art, the problem is posed as to whether the "nonliterary," "pure" film-poem can succeed in terms other than those of external impressionism.

A beginning in that direction has already been seen in *Mother*, where an internal state is objectified through generally accepted external equivalents. This hints at a compromise, or rather synthesis, between external and internal impressionism, which has been attempted more fully in the recent movement of artists who very specifically claim to create "film-poems," absolutely "non-literary" and "non-symbolic"; most notably Stan Brakhage.

In the late work of Brakhage we find direct expression of inner, and non-conceptualised states. He has in fact created a filmic equivalent of "automatic writing." The materials out of which these states are expressed, however, are not the dream-constructs of *Un Chien Andalou*, but rather the physical world of *Picnic in the Grass*. Out of photographed "reality," in all the fullness of its texture, Brakhage creates his inner world.

The external world is transfigured by the inner; the internal world is objectified by the outer. Physical "reality" is not shown for its own sake, so much as for that of the subjective emotion associated with it; nevertheless, it is shown. The imagery is not arbitrary, for it not only expresses feelings, it is the "real" basis and stimulus for them.

*Anticipation of the Night* is as irrational in its combinations of images, as subjective, as is *Un Chien Andalou*. But these images are "real": water playing over grass; the night lights of a highway passing by; a rose in the sun; a merry-go-round at night. Such images of ephemeral life are all blended by a feverishly moving camera into an uneasy phantasmagoria which culminates in the shadow of a man who has hanged himself. Images of the physical world are not used as meaningful symbols, but for their direct emotional impact. These images are sometimes obscured, unidentifiable at first — to stress their expressive value above their actual existence; but that existence too is shown.

In perhaps the most intense sequence of the film, the camera moves in uneasy jerks and brooding sweeps back and forth over a sleeping baby, wrapped in a long white sheet; which shots are intercut with varied ones of a horse, the blue highway lights, forest trees, a white bear, and a great white bird which spreads and flaps its wings. All these evoke purely emotional responses, requiring no verbalization in order to comprehend them. The bird and bear may be the infant's dreams, but could just as well be accepted in the same way as the carousels and highways, as "real," and having the same uninterpreted, uninterpretable impact as Renoir's trees and flowers. Yet at the same time, they are not used to express their own beauty, as are the things of *Picnic in the Grass*; but are treated so as to suggest another, subjective, plane of experience. And again, they are not the fantastic figments of a psyche, as Buñel's, the very existence of which demands some justification.

This style is (perhaps unfortunately) purified further in its "nonliterary" qualities in Brakhage's *The Dead*. No longer are there sequences susceptible of interpretation as actual incidents. *The Dead* has no plot, no situation, no time, no actual space. All images exist only as emotional expression, completely transmuted into such. The camera moves constantly over the tombstones in a graveyard, mostly in superimposition, often

overexposed; with which are interpolated shots of the living, people by the water (a fountain or lake in the cemetery"), These materials are combined and recombined, repeated in various ways, shown at different speeds, backward, upside down, with different gestures by the camera < vertical, horizontal, curvilinear, even rocking the stones like a cradle; the shots being treated more as musical phrases than as subject matter.\* Indeed, they are frequently hardly recognizable. Thus the "symbolic" or "literary" is entirely obviated.

Neither Brakhage film perhaps works entirely; but it is not my aim here to criticise shortcomings in any terms other than those of basic form. Thus the blurring of effects produced by the whirling camera in *Anticipation of the Night*, and the nebulous (though properly "spiritual") quality of the superimpositions, out-of-focuses, and overexposures of *The Dead* will not be discussed at this point; nor will the lack of adequate cadence in the interminable flow of Brakhage image in both films, nor a certain formal monotony. For the fundamental principles of film-poem are fully followed in these works, and whatever errors of execution there are do not constitute denials of that form.

\*The motion itself is never rhythmically stressed to the point where it overcomes the emotional communication, making the visceral feeling of movement dominant, and thus creating dance-film.

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