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Introduction

At the beginning of Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Tout va bien* (1972), a voice announces: "I want to make a film." Another voice responds: "That costs money." And for many minutes the screen is filled with the image of a checkbook as, one after the other, checks are signed and torn off: makeup, sets, bit players, editing, electricians, sound, the communal apparatus of filmmaking enumerated by cost, deglamorized, and placed in a material context. It is a clear announcement of the state and the problem of contemporary film. Films cost money. And there is a second part to the equation. Films cost money; the people who spend the money want to see it back, with a profit.

The results of this equation are becoming too clear. In cinema world wide those films that do not promise large returns remain unmade or unseen. In the past, particularly in America, the great studio system provided such a large turnover for such a large audience that there was some room for exploration, for the occasional "non-commercial," work. Now every film must stand on its own in the circuit of exchange. It must make money. But European cinema never had quite the kind of studio system that existed in America, which was in fact something unique in history—the mass production of narratives; an assembly line for products of the imagination; art integrated with and often subdued by commerce. America had (and has still) the world for its market, while most European filmmakers have, with rare exceptions, only their own countries. Therefore, the art/commerce tension that existed throughout the history of American movie-making—with commerce now subordinating art—was never as extreme in other countries. The difference must not be exaggerated; there was—and certainly now is—no absolute freedom in filmmaking outside America, just as there neither was nor is absolute tyranny within it. In fact much European filmmaking involves the production of "quota quickies," sex comedies and the like made fast and cheap to satisfy government demand for a certain amount of indigenous product before the more profitable American films

can be exhibited. Outside Europe, India and Japan have had entertainment factories almost on the scale of Hollywood.

However, because most countries cannot compete with Hollywood, other opportunities arise for their filmmakers. Instead of trying to compete they have the opportunity to make films quite unlike the standard American product. This opportunity is often supported by the fact that in Europe and elsewhere there is a greater respect for film as an intellectual, imaginative activity, a greater willingness on the part of a producer to allow the filmmaker to work on his or her own, to write, direct, and even edit a film, to release it in the form the filmmaker desires. In recent years, this respect has been demonstrated through state support (particularly through television) for new filmmakers, or for established ones who cannot find commercial distribution. Certainly state support brings with it the problems of state control; but overriding this is the fact that it permits films to get made that otherwise could not. The rebirth of German cinema came about through the patronage of the German government and its television subsidiaries. British cinema is promising to show some signs of life through the support of Regional Arts Councils and the British Film Institute Film Production Board. In past years a variety of films from many countries—the late works of Roberto Rossellini; Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem* (1970); the Taviani brothers' *Padre padrone* (1977); Ermanno Olmi's *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978); Peter Watkins' *Edvard Munch* (1976); Eric Rohmer's *Perceval* (1978), to name only a few—have owed their existence to the support of state-run television.

Even before television and the state stepped in, there were independent producers—such as Georges de Beauregard, who supported Godard and others of the New Wave in the sixties—willing to risk small gains on little-known filmmakers who would make unusual films. Throughout the history of European film, its makers found funding for experimental work and integrated their work with the rest of the imaginative work of the culture. In the teens and twenties, for example, the avant-garde played an active role in film, giving it, through the works of such as Abel Gance, Walter Ruttmann, Fernand Léger, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali, Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Jean Renoir, Jean Epstein, intellectual respectability. In fact most of the formal advances made in cinema originated in Europe and Russia. D. W. Griffith established the basic forms of film narrative that became the norm world wide; most of the experiments performed upon this structure, the challenges to it, the questions raised about it, came from abroad. And when they came, they were often absorbed back into the mother lode of American film. An entire history could be written about the influences of European styles and their originators on American film, a history that, depending on one's perspective, would show Hollywood as either enriching itself or perpetually homogenizing world cinema.

Thus, while European and American cinema both function on an economic base which determines what can and cannot be made, this base

has been wider outside America, more ready to support financing on something other than a profit basis, thereby enabling films to be made that question or defy cinematic conventions. But in fact no direct split between filmmaking in America and elsewhere exists. There is rather an interplay in which the dominant style (or styles) of American movies are always present to be denied, expanded upon, embraced, and rejected, only to be embraced again. The presence of American cinema is a constant, and there is no filmmaker I know of even the most revolutionary, who hates American film. Intellectual arguments are marshaled against it; the emotions always respond to it. It is an attitude I share, and it colors the arguments in this book. I have set up American cinema as a model, often an invidious one, always an overgeneralized one, in order to examine its relationship to the work of individuals in Europe and in Latin America and their reactions to it.

Melodrama, for example, is a narrative form that I often contrast to the modernist endeavor. Melodrama demands a great emotional response from its audience, an identification with the central characters of a film (whose personal problems are foregrounded without being linked to a defined social context that may determine them), and insists that conventional attitudes and gestures be accepted as unique components of a character's psychology. Melodrama is a form of assurance and security; as a structuring device in American film and its European derivatives, it all but guarantees that what is experienced in one film will not be very different from what has been experienced in most others. Just such forms of repetition, emotional safety, and reinforcement are what the modernists oppose with forms of question and surprise. But without melodrama, the modernists would not have a form to react against or, in some cases, incorporate. Despite my affection and admiration for American film (at least through the mid-seventies), I sometimes portray it as a kind of monolith that various figures have done battle with and look at it with something of the attitude of the filmmakers who were trying to deal with it.

What gives the American tradition the appearance of a monolith is the structure of repetition that I just noted. Since the early teens, when it began organizing itself to reach the widest possible audience, American film began to adopt a number of conventions in content and form that it has repeated, albeit with many variations, to the present day, always proclaiming that these conventions fulfilled audience desires. But in fact popular film does not so much fulfill or reflect the desires of its audience as create them through a complicated ideological process in which cultural and social attitudes are enhanced, given form, and reinforced in a circuit of exchange between the producers and consumers of cultural artifacts. The decades-long attitude of American film toward the role of women, the bliss of domesticity, the pleasures of poverty, the ability of the individual hero to effect changes in his world, American film's persistent attempts to reinforce the social and political status quo—all developed not so much out of what

people believed but out of what filmmakers thought was believed Their job was, and for the most part remains, to perpetuate conventions and not challenge them. Film became part of the ideological structure, feeding the audience images that were assumed to represent their beliefs and concerns. Audiences gave the images passive assent, and the images are repeated into what seems to be a cultural infinity.

So too with the forms those images took. The development of conventional patterns of composing and cutting images to create the chronologically continuous, spatially coherent, suspenseful, but finally resolved series of events that is the structure of most commercial narrative cinema did not just happen. These forms are no more the natural constituents of the filmmaking process than are the conventions of content. They had to be learned by both filmmakers and their audiences. Once learned (by the early thirties) they became standardized—with minor variations, and major individual exceptions—throughout the West. Once standardized, they were assumed to be the norm. And once that assumption was made, it was difficult to break out of. But breaks were always occurring, and they began very early. Erich von Stroheim, who started as D. W. Griffith's assistant, soon began making his own films, which directly challenged the rustic simplicity and Victorian melodrama of his predecessor. Sergei Eisenstein studied Griffith's films and turned what he learned on its head, changing the ameliorative, the melodramatic, and the romantic into the revolutionary. The German expressionists defied the conventions of "realism" developing in American cinema, turning the image into an artifice of madness. The French avant-garde in the twenties and early thirties continued the process of response to the conventions; and, with the appearance of *Citizen Kane* in 1941 and the development of *film noir* in the mid-forties, Hollywood created its own internal subversion of the dominant forms. But it was not until the end of World War II that a national cinema emerged to create a concerted alternative to the American style.

Italian neorealism was a loose collective movement whose aim was to change the form and function of commercial cinema. As a movement it lasted less than ten years, but its legacy offered a range of possibilities for challenge: new approaches to image-making, to cutting, to narrative structure, to audience response. The challenge was picked up by a diverse school of cine-modernists in the sixties. In Western and Eastern Europe and in parts of Latin America a cinema developed that in its questioning of conventions and its imaginative manipulation of form was in every way equal to the other arts in complexity and in the richness of its confrontation with the world. This movement climaxed with the May 1968 events in France and the great politicization of culture that occurred throughout Europe in the succeeding months. In the mid-seventies the movement began to wane, and a combination of the loss of creative energies and the reassertion of a profit-seeking market returned much commercial cinema to the old, and by this time somewhat discredited, forms. West Germany

countered the decline, and through the system of government subsidies supported the work of some impressive new talent.

But if modernist filmmaking declined in the seventies, film criticism became revitalized. The fuse for the explosion of cinema in the sixties had been set by the criticism of André Bazin and his followers (Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rivette, Rohmer) in the fifties. After 1968, film criticism began to revise the ideas of Bazin and inquire into the ways film interacts with its audience and the culture that contains both. Using the tools of semiology, of structuralism and Lacanian psychology, and most important, of ideological analysis, the new criticism, which originated in France as it had in the fifties, regarded film as a formal, cultural, political artifact, built out of a complex of conventions, ways of seeing, ways of interpreting what is seen. By conflating the ideas of Marx and Freud, of Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Jacques Lacan, and Louis Althusser, critics such as Christian Metz and the writers for the newly politicized *Cahiers du cinema* in Paris and *Screen* in England revised the *auteur* theory—the notion that the director is the main creative force of a film, fusing together its various parts. They regarded the work as the locus of many conflicting forces—financial, technical, generic, ideological—a place of contradictions and irresolution. They studied film through the phenomenon of narrative, discovering how and why stories are told cinematically, how and why we understand the telling. Finally, they investigated and revised the notion of realism, perhaps the oldest aesthetic of film and the one most tenaciously clung to.

Film criticism, in other words, began to catch up with what European filmmakers themselves had been doing in their work, redefining the notion of film as a reflection of reality, investigating more exciting and usable ideas that would enable the medium to create its own reality, its own way of speaking to and about the world. And this is an essential part of the complex phenomenon of modernism, the discovery by artist and critic that art is not a "natural" phenomenon or a container of great thoughts and universal values perceived and communicated by individual genius. It is rather a cultural artifact, speaking a specific language that is arbitrary and manipulable, able to articulate very specific formal and thematic concerns.

This book traces these discoveries. Although it concentrates on the period from the neorealists on, digressions along the way will indicate how past movements and figures imposed upon and challenged the dominant modes of filmmaking. Within this progress another kind of response is examined, that of the viewer, the one who by perceiving the film completes it. That is, I will be questioning how such films are meant to be perceived, what role the viewer is asked to take in response to images and narrative. For another mark of modernism is its denial of traditional audience passivity: its demand that the viewer engage the work on an intellectual level, that the "work" of art be shared. This notion moves film away from its traditional status as entertainment, or perhaps redefines that status,

offering entertainment as a participatory act. In any case it is responsible for the lack of commercial popularity of the films in question. That is a sad fact, because the majority of these works are accessible to any one who cares to confront them; very few of the filmmakers discussed here despise their audience or deliberately set out to confound them. Quite the contrary. Their films are invitations to thought and feeling, a denial of the obvious, an affirmation of possibilities. Defying the obvious, they defy convention while drawing from it, standing outside of it, requesting the audience to join them. This study is an attempt at a joining, an examination of convention and response, of cinema used as a probe and the viewer as a co-worker in the field of meaning. It is a study in aesthetic history, with a nod toward economics and an emphasis on influences and changes, on restlessness and a demand that cinema speak with its own voice.

Obviously a book covering such a wide field requires some restrictions and choices to make it manageable. I want to balance individual figures and their films with movements and ideas, the history of film with the works that make that history. I offer no complete overviews of any one filmmaker's work (in many cases these already exist), and figures will often reappear throughout the book in different contexts. The choices of figures and films are based on those works that are representative of movements and upon familiarity. This is a ticklish problem, for the discussion needs to be balanced between films that will be familiar to many readers, films that have already been discussed widely in print, and films that are important even though they may be largely unknown. Availability is the single greatest problem in the study of film in general and of contemporary European film in particular, and I have tried to limit this study to films which, even though they may not have been exhibited commercially, are at least available through non-theatrical distribution. Unhappily, because of these problems, no one will find all their favorite films included here, and some may take issue with what has been included and excluded. For example, much has already been written about the New Wave filmmakers, and Godard in particular, yet they are included because they are pivotal to my argument. Godard is the guiding force of all the experimentation in narrative cinema since the early sixties; to avoid him would have voided the project. Besides, I consider Godard the most exciting filmmaker in contemporary cinema.

Other choices of inclusion or omission are based on other factors. In discussing recent Eastern European cinema, I have chosen to concentrate on Hungary rather than Poland. Filmmaking in both countries is going well (or was in Poland at least until December 1981), but at the time of writing Hungarian films were more readily available for screening, and the works and place of Miklós Jancsó fit the direction of the book better than the somewhat more widely known films of Poland's Andrzej Wajda. Such choices reveal an unavoidable subjectivity. I give, for example, only summary treatment to the films of Ingmar Bergman, who many consider

a major figure in the development of contemporary cinema. I do not. In fact I see his films standing in opposition to the movements central to this study. But Bergman has endured with a respectable audience that regards his work as the epitome of serious filmmaking, and I have no desire to attack that audience. Bergman will serve as a useful foil in the arguments that follow, a contrast to the filmmaking committed to formal, cultural, and political inquiry that I find more exciting and more revealing of the possibilities of the cinematic imagination.

For the sake of space and coherence, I do not speak much about Japanese cinema. Fortunately there exist two major critical works on the subject, Joan Mellen's *The Waves at Genji's Door* and Noël Burch's *To a Distant Observer.* Burch's book, which discusses in detail the development of a Japanese cinematic grammar, the ways those filmmakers structure their stories in comparison to American methods of filmic storytelling, is a particular influence on the methods I use here. There are other omissions (I regret, for example, that I have not sufficiently covered the new feminist filmmakers, particularly those now working in Germany), but rather than write a survey, I have chosen to trace some movements of the cinematic imagination through many countries over a period of some three decades.

Many countries indeed. This study deals with *foreign* films. Like most viewers foreign to the films, I must depend upon subtitles, which are, at their very best, rough approximations of what the characters are saying, and at their worst distortions. The dialogue, however, is at least approximated. Other material, like inserts of book pages, signs, posters, and extraneous verbal information from, for example, a television or radio, usually goes untranslated. This environmental material enriches the films of Godard, indeed is often central to them, and may be missed by subtitler and foreign audience. Much of the resonance of Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978) is lost to a non-German audience because the continuous news broadcasts that punctuate the film and the significance of the soccer game broadcast that ends it go unsubtitled and unexplained. Such gaps, if unfilled, must at least be recognized.

This problem sometimes extends even to the titles of films. In most instances I have used the title by which a film is best known in the United States, occasionally putting the original title in parentheses when it is significantly different. Sometimes further explanations are needed. Godard's *Sauve qui peut (La Vie)* (1980) is called, after the idiomatic meaning of its first phrase, *Every Man for Himself,* which is not only sexist but almost the same as Werner Herzog's 1974 film *Every Man for Himself and God Against All* (which is itself also called *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser).* Thus I have decided to use Godard's French title throughout. As far as dialogue is concerned, I have tried, where possible, to quote from the English translations of published screenplays. These often differ greatly from the subtitles in the film itself; but unless the change is major, I have trusted the translator rather than the subtitles. Otherwise, I have worked on faith and with the knowledge I have

of foreign languages that occasionally permits recognition of a gross error in the subtitles. The problem becomes less acute in light of the fact that it is the image and the arrangement of images that make up a film's narrative in which I am most interested. The complexities offered by these elements more than make up for some subtleties lost by the subtitles.

One other aspect of "foreignness" is of particular concern to an American writing for an American audience. While the last section of the book is devoted to political film, the social-political nature of European and Latin American cinema is discussed throughout. The majority of the films I examine contain an implicit or explicit political discourse of a kind notably absent from American film and from American culture in general, where art and politics are artificially separated. In form and content these films address themselves to the individuals place in society, to economic and social relationships, to class. Class consciousness is strong in most countries, where terms like "working class" and "bourgeois" have important political, cultural, and economic meanings. Furthermore there is a greater acceptance of left-wing political ideas in European culture and its cinema (and of course in the cinema of Cuba and Eastern Europe) than in the United States, and many important films since the war have been made either by left-wing intellectuals in Western Europe or revolutionary artists in the socialist countries. One important element of the neorealist movement, for example, is that it politicized cinema, not for a particular party, but for a particular point of view, for the purpose of bringing an audience into closer proximity to a particular social and economic group. Most of the important cinema that followed, while not always concerned with the same class as the neo-realists, continued their concern with the political potentials of the image. It is impossible to understand these films without understanding these concerns and articulating them.

Finally, a word must be said about a troubling aspect of critical writing on film. A film critic—at least at the time of the original composition of this book—did not share the literary critic's luxury of having a text always at hand for constant reference and to check quotations for accuracy. A great number of films were viewed and reviewed for this study—and then were gone, back to their distributors. Visual memory is untrustworthy; only notes provide the detailed information for analysis. There is a constant threat of small errors creeping in and remaining undiscovered. And as far as visual quotation is concerned, stills give only a rough approximation, and sometimes none at all.

Given the fact that the kind of filmmaking discussed here is no longer practiced to any great degree, and when practiced is rarely seen outside its own country, this book could be a lament, an act of nostalgia. I would like to believe, however, that imaginative filmmaking is not finished, but only in a recessive period. Therefore, instead of lamenting, this book will celebrate the past and future of engaged, progressive filmmaking, a communal act in which filmmaker and audience are involved in inquiry and speculation, in

a desire, variously expressed, not for repetition, convention, exploitation, or the tedious reinforcement of the way we think we are, but for insight and change. Like the films of Godard—indeed, like the films of most of the people discussed in the following pages—this book is a celebration of cinema.