interest at this stage. The film theorists to be considered in the next chapter, André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, are very different from each other, but they share a common aim that is contrary to that of Eisenstein: to think about film in ways that explore its links to reality.

CHAPTER TWO

Touching the Real: Bazin and Kracauer

Like Sergei Eisenstein, André Bazin (1918–58) was a prolific and enormously influential theorist of cinema whose contributions to film theory were first made in the course of topical essays and articles rather than in theoretical treatises. Although not a film-maker himself, Bazin was a friend and father-figure to a number of young critics who found a platform in the journal that he co-founded in 1951, Cahiers du Cinéma, and who went on to become key directors of the French New Wave in film: Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, François Truffaut. The next chapter of this History will consider the contribution of Cahiers to film theory in the 1950s; this chapter focuses first on the work of Bazin himself, and his attempt to outline ‘the ontological foundations of the art of cinema’, or, ‘in less philosophical terms, cinema as an art of reality’. Ontology is the study of the nature of being, and Bazin’s concern is: how does film relate to the nature of being, and what is the being of a film? The two-volume series of his selected essays and articles, What is Cinema? (1958, 1959), begins with an essay called ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’ (originally published 1945) and locates photography in a much longer history and psychology of the plastic arts. It is worth exploring this here in order to grasp Bazin’s idea of cinema more fully.

Bazin posits a fundamental psychological need of human beings: to defend themselves against time. He suggests that the plastic arts emerged as a form of magic intended to provide this defence; his example is the ancient Egyptian mummy: ‘To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life.’ The mummy was the first kind of Egyptian statue. As art and civilisation evolved, the plastic arts and magic parted company – ‘Louis XIV did not have himself embalmed. He was content to survive in his portrait by Le Brun’ – but the need for a defence against time, and the use of art for this purpose, remained, though translated into more
rational terms: ‘No one believes any longer in the ontological identity of model and image, but all are agreed that the image helps us to remember the subject and to preserve him from a second spiritual death.’ In a more sophisticated development, it was no longer a question of the survival of a particular individual through an artistic representation, but ‘of a larger concept, the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny’—in other words, not subject to the ravages of time.

Prior to the fifteenth century, however, painting in general had maintained a balance between realism and symbolism. But the invention of perspective allowed the artist to create a stronger impression of reality by producing an illusion of three-dimensional space. From that point, Western painting was ‘torn between two ambitions: one, primarily aesthetic, namely the expression of spiritual reality wherein the symbol transcended its model; the other, purely psychological, namely the duplication of the world outside’. Little by little, this need of illusion spread across the plastic arts.

The debate about realism in art is based on this ‘confusion between the aesthetic and the psychological; between true realism, the need that is to give significant expression to the world both concretely and [in] its essence, and the pseudorealism of a deception aimed at fooling the eye (or for that matter the mind)’. It is the invention, first of photography, then of cinema, that frees the plastic arts from their obsession with producing likenesses. ‘Painting was forced ... to offer us illusion and this illusion was reckoned sufficient unto art. Photography and the cinema on the other hand are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism.’ They do so because they eliminate the subjective trace that inevitably lingers in a painting, and the consequent suspicion that this trace casts on the veracity of a painting, no matter how realistic it may seem. A photograph, however, is objective:

Originality in photography as distinct from originality in painting lies in the essentially objective character of photography ... For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. The personality of the photographer enters into the proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed and by way of the purpose he has in mind. Although the final result may reflect something of his personality, this does not play the same role as is played by that of the painter. All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence. Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty.

This production by automatic means has radically affected our psychology of the image. The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually represented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.

A very faithful drawing may actually tell us more about the model but despite the promptings of our critical intelligence it will never have the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith.

Thus still photography is the culmination of a process that began with the mummy of ancient Egypt. More effectively than the mummy, the photograph embalms the fleeting phenomena of time. But, like the mummy, it remains limited by stasis: it fixes an appearance but it cannot make that appearance move. This is where cinema takes over:

- Cinema is objectivity in time. The film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber. The film delivers baroque art from its convulsive catalepsy. Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were.

Cinema thus shares the defining ontological quality of photography—its essential objectivity—and extends it into the temporal dimension. Film is more, however, than animated photography: it is also a language; and in ‘The Evolution of the Language of Cinema’ (1950–5), Bazin aims to define this language. He once again takes a historical approach, though this time he stays within a specific period of the development of cinema:

- I will distinguish, in the cinema between 1920 and 1940, between two broad and opposing trends: those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality. By ‘image’ I here
mean, very broadly speaking, everything that the representation on
the screen adds to the object there represented. This is a complex
inheritance but it can be reduced essentially to two categories: those
that relate to the plastics of the image and those that relate to the
resources of montage, which, after all, is simply the ordering of
images in time.

Under the heading ‘plastics’ must be included the style of the sets,
of the make-up, and, up to a point, even of the performance, to which
we naturally add the lighting and, finally, the framing of the shot
which gives us its composition. As regards montage, derived initially
as we all know from the masterpieces of Griffith, we have the state-
ment of Malraux in his Esquisse d’une psychologie du cinéma [Outline
of a psychology of cinema] (1946)⁹ that it was montage that gave birth to
film as an art, setting it apart from mere animated photography, in
short, creating a language.

The use of montage can be ‘invisible’ and this was generally the
case in the prewar classics of the American screen. Scenes were broken
down just for one purpose, namely, to analyze an episode according
to the material or dramatic logic of the scene. It is this logic which
conceals the fact of the analysis, the mind of the spectator quite
naturally accepting the viewpoints of the director which are justified
by the geography of the action or the shifting emphasis of dramatic
interest.

But the neutral quality of this ‘invisible’ editing fails to make use
of the full potential of montage. On the other hand these potential-
ities are clearly evident from the three processes generally known as
parallel montage, accelerated montage, montage by attraction. In
creating parallel montage, Griffith succeeded in conveying a sense of
the simultaneity of two actions taking place at a geographical distance
by means of alternating shots from each. In La Roue (The Wheel,
1922) Abel Gance (1889–1981) created the illusion of the steadily
increasing speed of a locomotive without actually using any images of
speed (indeed the wheel could have been turning on one spot) simply
by a multiplicity of shots of ever-decreasing length.

Finally there is ‘montage by attraction’, the creation of S.M.
Eisenstein [see pp. 45–6 of this Critical History], and not so easily
described as the others, but which may be roughly defined as the
reinforcing of the meaning of one image by association with another
image not necessarily part of the same episode – for example the fire-
works display in The General Line following the image of the bull. In

this extreme form, montage by attraction was rarely used even by its
creator but one may consider as very near to it in principle the more
commonly used ellipsis, comparison, or metaphor, examples of which
are the throwing of stockings onto a chair at the foot of a bed, or the
milk overflowing in the Quai des orfèvres (1947) of Henri-Georges
Clouzot (1907–77). There are of course a variety of possible com-
binations of these three processes.

Whatever these may be, one can say that they share that trait in
common which constitutes the very definition of montage, namely,
the creation of a sense of meaning not proper to the images them-
selves but derived exclusively from their juxtaposition. The well-
known experiment of Kuleshov with the shot of Mozhukhin in which
a smile was seen to change its significance according to the image
that preceded it, sums up perfectly the properties of montage.

Montage as used by Kuleshov, Eisenstein, or Gance did not give
us the event; it alluded to it. Undoubtedly they derived at least the
greater part of the constituent elements from the reality they were
describing but the final significance of the film was found to reside in
the ordering of these elements much more than in their objective
content.

The matter under recital, whatever the realism of the individual
image, is born essentially from these relationships – Mozhukhin plus
dead child equal pity – that is to say an abstract result, none of the
concrete elements of which are to be found in the premises; maiden
plus apple trees in bloom equal hope. The combinations are infinite.
But the only thing they have in common is the fact that they suggest
an idea by means of a metaphor or by an association of ideas. Thus
between the scenario properly so-called, the ultimate object of the
recital, and the image pure and simple, there is a relay station, a sort
of aesthetic ‘transformer’. The meaning is not in the image, it is in
the shadow of the image projected by montage on to the field of
consciousness of the spectator.

Let us sum up. Through the contents of the image and the
resources of montage, the cinema has at its disposal a whole arsenal of
means whereby to impose its interpretation of an event on the spec-
tator. By the end of the silent film [era] we can consider this arsenal
to have been full. On the one side the Soviet cinema carried to its
ultimate consequences the theory and practice of montage while the
German school did every kind of violence to the plastics of the image
by way of sets and lighting. Other cinemas count too besides the
Russian and German, but whether in France or Sweden or the United States, it does not appear that the language of cinema was at a loss for ways of saying what it wanted to say. If the art of cinema can make only a subordinated and supplementary role with the additional baron's realism, the silent film was an art on its own, a counterpoint to the visual reality, a silence that filled much in comparison with the fictional realism. Thus far, we have put forward the view that expressionism of montage and image constitute the essence of cinema. And it is precisely on this very basis of expressionism that directors from silent days, such as Erich von Stroheim (1885-1957), Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (1888-1933), and Robert Flaherty (1884-1951), cast a doubt. In their films, montage plays no part, unless it be the negative and inessential elimination of reality superabundance. The camera cannot see everything at once, it makes sure not to lose any part of what it chooses to see. What matters is Flaherty's continuing discovery of the relation between montage and the natural actuality, the actual length of the hunting period. Murnau, however, confines himself to showing the actual setting, or to the setting of the hunt, the very substance of the image in some object, or object. Thus, in this film episode, more than a montage by attraction, Murnau is interested not so much in time as in the reality of the dramatic space. More than a montage by decay, Murnau's presentation of the plastics. Of his image is impressionistic. But this would be too simple a view. The composition of his image is impressionistic: but this would be too simple a view. It adds nothing to the reality, it does not deform it; it forces it to reveal its structural depth, it brings out the preceding relations which become constituent of the drama. For example, in film (1931), the arrival of a ship from the sea gives an immediate sense of reality at work on the uncompromising realism of a film whose settings are completely natural. But it is the settings and the tricks of montage. In his films reality lays itself bare like a spectator confessing the relentless examination of the common
crime and gangster film (Scarface (1932), I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932), The Informer (1935)); (5) Psychological and social dramas (Back Street (1932), Jezebel (1938)); (6) Horror or fantasy films (Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1931), The Invisible Man (1933), Frankenstein (1931)); (7) The western (Stagecoach (1939)). During that time the French cinema undoubtedly ranked next. Its superiority was gradually manifested by way of a trend towards what might be roughly called stark somber realism, or poetic reason, in which four names stand out: Jacques Feyder (1885–1948, born Jacques Frédérix), Jean Renoir (1894–1979), Marcel Carné (1909–96), and Julien Duvivier (1896–1967). ... American and French production sufficiently clearly indicate that the sound film, prior to World War II, had reached a well-balanced stage of maturity.

First as to content. Major varieties with clearly defined rules capable of pleasing a worldwide public, as well as a cultured elite, provided it was not inherently hostile to the cinema.

Secondly as to form: well-defined styles of photography and editing perfectly adapted to their subject-matter; a complete harmony of image and sound. In seeing again today such films as Jezebel by William Wyler (1902–81), Stagecoach by John Ford (1895–1973, born Sean Aloysius O’Fenney), or Le jour se lève (Daybreak, 1939) by Marcel Carné, one has the feeling that in them an art has found its perfect balance, its ideal form of expression, and reciprocally one admires them for dramatic and moral themes to which the cinema, while it may not have created them, has given a grandeur, an artistic effectiveness, that they would not otherwise have had. In short, here are all the characteristics of the ripeness of a classical art.11 □

Bazin moves on to consider the evolution of cinematic cutting since the emergence of the sound film, to develop his attack on montage, and to identify the use of deep focus – in which all the elements of a shot are in sharp focus, thus giving a sense of depth – as ‘a dialectical step forward’,13 indeed a ‘revolution’ in the language of cinema:13

In 1938 there was an almost universal standard pattern of editing. If, somewhat conventionally, we call the kind of silent films based on the plastic of the image and the artifices of montage, ‘expressionist’ or ‘symbolistic’, we can describe the new form of storytelling [as] ‘analytic’ and ‘dramatic’. Let us suppose, by way of reviewing one of the elements of the experiment of Kuleshov, that we have a table covered with food and a hungry tramp. One can imagine that in 1936 it would have been edited as follows:

1. Full shot of the actor and the table.
2. Camera moves forward into a close-up of a face expressing a mixture of amazement and longing.
4. Back to full shot of person who starts slowly towards the camera.
5. Camera pulls slowly back to a three-quarter shot of the actor seizing a chicken wing.

Whatever variants one could think of for this scene, they would all have certain points in common:

1. The verisimilitude of space in which the position of the actor is always determined, even when a close-up eliminates the décor.
2. The purpose and the effects of the cutting are exclusively dramatic or psychological.

In other words, if the scene were played on a stage and seen from a seat in the orchestra, it would have the same meaning, the episode would continue to exist objectively. The changes of point of view provided by the camera would add nothing. They would present the reality a little more forcefully, first by allowing a better view and then by putting the emphasis where it belongs.

It is true that the stage director like the film director has at his disposal a margin within which he is free to vary the interpretation of the action but it is only a margin and allows for no modification of the inner logic of the event. Now, by way of contrast, let us take the montage of the stone lions in Potemkin [see p. 55 above]. By skilful juxtaposition a group of sculptured lions [is] made to look like a single lion getting to its feet, a symbol of the aroused masses. This clever device would be unthinkable in any film after 1932. As late as 1936 Fritz Lang (1890–1976), in Fury, followed a series of shots of women dancing the can-can with shots of chuckling chickens in a farmyard. This relic of associative montage came as a shock even at the time, and today seems entirely out of keeping with the rest of the film. However decisive the art of Marcel Carné, for example, in our estimate of the respective values of Quai des Brumes (1938; aka Port of Shadows in USA) or of Le jour se lève his editing remains on the level.
of the reality he is analyzing. There is only one proper way of looking at it. That is why we are witnessing the almost complete disappearance of optical effects such as superimpositions, and even, especially in the United States, of the close-up, the too violent impact of which make the audience conscious of the cutting. In the typical American comedy the director returns as often as he can to a shot of the characters from the knees up, which is said to be best suited to catch the spontaneous attention of the viewer – the natural point of balance of his mental adjustment.

Actually this use of montage originated with the silent movies. This is more or less the part it plays in Griffith's films, for example in Broken Blossoms (1919), because with Intolerance (1916) he had already introduced that synthetic concept of montage which the Soviet cinema was to carry to its ultimate conclusion and which is to be found again, although less exclusively, at the end of the silent era. It is understandable, as a matter of fact, that the sound image, far less flexible than the visual image, would carry montage in the direction of realism, increasingly eliminating both plastic impressionism and the symbolic relation between images.

Thus around 1938 films were edited, almost without exception, according to the same principle. The story was unfolded in a series of set-ups numbering as a rule about 600. The characteristic procedure was by shot-reverse-shot, that is to say, in a dialogue scene, the camera followed the order of the text, alternating the character shown with each speech.

It was this fashion of editing, so admirably suitable for the best films made between 1930 and 1939, that was challenged by the shot in depth introduced by Orson Welles (1915–85) and William Wyler. Citizen Kane (1941) can never be too highly praised. Thanks to the depth of field, whole scenes are covered in one take, the camera remaining motionless. Dramatic effects for which we had formerly relied on montage were created out of the movements of the actors within a fixed framework. Of course Welles did not invent the in-depth shot any more than Griffith invented the close-up. All the pioneers used it and for a very good reason. Soft focus only appeared with the montage. It was not only a technical must consequent upon the use of images in juxtaposition, it was a logical consequence of montage, its plastic equivalent. If at a given moment in the action the director, as in the scene imagined above, goes to a close-up of a bowl of fruit, it follows naturally that he also isolates it in space through the focusing of the lens. The soft focus of the background confirms therefore the effect of montage, that is to say, while it is of the essence of the storytelling, it is only an accessory of the style of the photography. Jean Renoir had already clearly understood this, as we see from a statement of his made in 1938 just after he had made La Bête Humaine (1938; aka The Human Beast, Júdas Was a Woman) and La Grande Illusion (1937) and just prior to La Règle du Jeu (1939; aka The Rules of the Game): 'The more I learn about my trade the more I incline to direction in depth relative to the screen. The better it works, the less I use the kind of set-up that shows two actors facing the camera, like two well-behaved subjects posing for a still portrait.'

The truth of the matter is, that if you are looking for the precursor of Orson Welles, it is not Louis Lumière (1864–1948) or Ferdinand Zecca (1864–1947), but rather Jean Renoir. In his films, the search after composition in depth is, in effect, a partial replacement of montage by frequent panning shots and entrances. It is based on a respect for the continuity of dramatic space and, of course, [for] its duration.

To anybody with eyes in his head, it is quite evident that the sequence of shots used by Welles in The Magnificent Ambersons (1942) is in no sense the purely passive recording of an action shot within the same framing. On the contrary, his refusal to break up the action, to analyze the dramatic field in time, is a positive action the results of which are far superior to anything that could be achieved by the classical 'cut'.

All you need to do is compare two frame shots in depth, one from 1910, the other from a film by Wyler or Welles, to understand just by looking at the image, even apart from the context of the film, how different their functions are. The framing in the 1910 film is intended, to all intents and purposes, as a substitute for the missing fourth wall of the theatrical stage, or[,] at least in exterior shots, for the best vantage point to view the action, whereas in the second case the setting, the lighting, and the camera angles give an entirely different reading. Between them, director and cameraman have converted the screen into a dramatic checkerboard, planned down to the last detail. The clearest if not the most original examples of this are to be found in The Little Foxes (1941) where the mise-en-scène takes on the severity of a working drawing [mise-en-scène literally means 'putting in the scene'. As David A. Cook points out, it includes 'the action, lighting, décor, and other elements within the shot itself, as opposed to the effects created by cutting. Realists [such as Bazin] generally prefer the
process of mise-en-scène to the more manipulative techniques of montage.\[10\]. Welles’s pictures are more difficult to analyze because of his fondness for the over-baroque. Objects and characters are related in such a fashion that it is impossible for the spectator to miss the significance of the scene. To get the same results by way of montage would have necessitated a detailed succession of shots.

What we are saying then is that the sequence of shots ‘in depth’ of the contemporary director does not exclude the use of montage – how could he [exclude it], without reverting to a primitive babbling – he makes it an integral part of his ‘plastic’. The storytelling of Welles and Wyler is no less explicit than John Ford’s but theirs has the advantage over his that it does not sacrifice the specific effects that can be derived from unity of image in space and time. Whether an episode is analyzed bit by bit or presented in its physical entirety cannot surely remain a matter of indifference, at least in a work with some pretensions to style. It would obviously be absurd to deny that montage has added considerably to the progress of film language, but this has happened at the cost of other values, no less definitely cinematic.

This is why depth of field is not just a stock in trade of the cameraman like the use of a series of filters or of such-and-such a style of lighting, it is a capital gain in the field of direction – a dialectical step forward in the history of film language.

Nor is it just a formal step forward. Well used, shooting in depth is not just a more economical, a simpler, and at the same time a more subtle way of getting the most out of a scene. In addition to affecting the structure of film language, it also affects the relationships of the minds of the spectators to the image, and in consequence it influences the interpretation of the spectacle.

It would lie outside the scope of this article to analyze the psychological modalities of these relations, as also their aesthetic consequences, but it might be enough here to note, in general terms:

1. That depth of focus brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality. Therefore it is correct to say that, independently of the contents of the image, its structure is more realistic.

2. That it implies, consequently, both a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress. While analytical montage only calls for him to follow his guide, to let his attention follow along smoothly with that of the director who will choose what he should see, here he is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice. It is from his attention and his will that the meaning of the image in part derives.

3. From the two preceding propositions, which belong to the realm of psychology, there follows a third which may be described as metaphysical. In analyzing reality, montage presupposes of its very nature the unity of meaning of the dramatic event. Some other form of analysis is undoubtedly possible but then it would be another film. In short, montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression. Kuleshov’s experiment proves this [ad] absurdum [to the point of absurdity] in giving on each occasion a precise meaning to the expression on a face, the ambiguity of which alone makes the three successively exclusive expressions possible.

On the other hand, depth of focus reintroduced ambiguity into the structure of the image if not of necessity – Wyler’s films are never ambiguous – at least as a possibility. Hence it is no exaggeration to say that Citizen Kane is unthinkable shot in any other way but in depth. The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the film is built into the very design of the image.

It is not that Welles denies himself any recourse whatsoever to the expressionistic procedures of montage, but just that their use from time to time in between sequences of shots in depth gives them a new meaning. Formerly montage was the very stuff of cinema, the texture of the scenario. In Citizen Kane a series of superimpositions is contrasted with a scene presented in a single take, constituting another and deliberately abstract mode of storytelling. Accelerated montage played tricks with time and space while that of Welles, on the other hand, is not trying to deceive us; it offers us a contrast, condensing time, and hence is the equivalent for example of the French imperfect [a verbal form expressing a continuous but incomplete past action, for example ‘he was watching a film’], or repeated past actions, for example ‘he used to watch films’ or the English frequentative tense [a verbal form expressing frequent repetition or intensity of action, for instance ‘chatter’, ‘dribble’ and ‘twinkle’ (OED)]. Like accelerated montage and montage of attractions these superimpositions, which the talking film had not used for ten years, rediscovered a possible use related to temporal realism in a film without montage.
If we have dwelt at some length on Ossian Welles (1941) marks more than the beginning of a new period and also because his case is the most spectacular and, by virtue of his very excesses, the most significant.

Yet Citizen Kane is part of a general movement, of a vast stirring of the earth's core. The decade from 1940 to 1950 marks a decisive step forward in the development of the language of film. If we have come to understand since 1930 to have lost sight of the trend of silent film in America, Robert Flaherty and Dreyer, it is for a purpose. It is not that this trend seems to us to have been anticipated by the talking film. On the contrary, we believe that it represented an essential part of the rich vein of the so-called silent film, precisely because it was not aesthetically tied to montage but in fact the realization of a natural development. The use of sound was a fact that the talking film between 1930 and 1940 was not to permit everyone known, nor did it lose its mainspring, the desire to create pieces that would permit the unity of the film and the nature of montage to be preserved without disturbing the unity of the film. The desire for objectivity, the desire to make visible the world hidden to them.

It is not a question of thereby belittling the films of 1930 to 1940, the films in which the realism of the time played no part. Dependence on logic for its effects, like vaudeville and plays on words, entirely conventional in its moral and sociological content, American comedy had everything to gain in strict line-by-line progression, from the rhythmic resources of classical editing.

Undoubtedly, it is primarily with the Stroheim—Murnau trend—almost totally eclipsed by 1935 to 1940—that the cinema has more or less consciously linked up once more over the last ten years. But it has no intention of limiting itself simply to keeping this trend alive. It stresses the secret of the regeneration of realism in storytelling and the development, in which the film is no longer than the novel, the representation of a director such as Alfred Hitchcock (1939–1945) who is just one type of figure, among others, who has evoked what the director wanted to say in the editing of silent film. In the silent days, montage was the very essence of Hitchcock's style. In other words, the editing of silent film was always in the forefront of the plastic composition of the director's work. Today we can say that less the director writes in time, the more the director's work is in time, the more it is founded on the idea of manipulation reality and of modifying it from within. The film-maker is no longer the competitor of the painter and the playwright, he is, after all, the equal of the novelist.
image, opens up the potential of the image for ambiguity, and allows the
director more flexibility. For Bazin, realism – a realism located first of all
in the still photograph and released into motion by the cinema of the
deep-focus shot – is not constricting but enabling.

Like Bazin, the German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966)
also bases his argument for realism in film on an ontology of the still
photograph. Kracauer, a prolific cultural journalist for the Frankfurter
Zeitung in the 1920s and 30s, had left Germany in 1933 and settled
in the USA, producing, in 1947, a classic history of German film, From
Caligari to Hitler. In 1960, his Theory of Film appeared, a massive
synthesis of the ideas about cinema that he had been developing since the
1920s. Stressing the power that photography has to convey material
reality, Theory of Film offers, by Kracauer’s own account, ‘a material
aesthetics, not a formal one’.18

- My book ... rests upon the assumption that film is essentially an
extension of photography and therefore shares with this medium a
marked affinity for the visible world around us. Films come into their
own when they record and reveal physical reality.19 □

Kracauer suggests that there is a particular sort of physical reality that
film alone can render:

- [Physical reality] includes many phenomena which would hardly be
perceived were it not for the motion picture camera’s ability to catch
them on the wing. And since any medium is partial to the things it is
uniquely equipped to render, the cinema is conceivably animated by
a desire to picture transient material life, life at its most ephemeral.
Street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions
are its very meat. Significantly, the contemporaries of Lumière praise
his films – the first ever to be made – for showing ‘the ripple of the
leaves stirred by the wind’.20 □

For Kracauer, it is cinema’s capacity to capture physical reality that is the
foundation of its artistic credentials. He affirms that ‘films may claim
aesthetic validity if they build from their basic properties; like photo-
graphs, that is, they must record and reveal physical reality’.21 But he
perceives a problem with such a claim: the widely-held view that films
attain to the level of art to the extent to which they escape the constraints
of physical reality, the extent to which they ‘organize the raw material
to which they resort into some self-sufficient composition instead of
accepting it as an element in its own right’. Such a view means that
‘artistic qualities must be attributed precisely to films which neglect the
medium’s recording obligations in an attempt to rival achievements in
the fields of the fine arts, the theater, or literature’, and ‘tends to obscure
the aesthetic value of films which are really true to the medium’.22 The
concept of art as the organisation of reality into self-sufficient composi-
tions ‘does not, and cannot, cover truly “cinematic” films – films, that is,
which incorporate aspects of physical reality with a view to making us
experience them. And yet it is they, not the films reminiscent of trad-
tional art works, which are valid aesthetically. If film is an art at all, it
certainly should not be confused with the established arts ... [E]ven the
most creative film maker is much less independent of nature in the raw
than the painter or poet; [the film-maker’s] creativity manifests itself in
letting nature in and penetrating it.’23

The function of film is to let nature in and penetrate it. If this depen-
dence on nature is constricting in one way, preventing the film from
escaping into the self-sufficient autonomy of the traditional work of art,
in another sense it opens an enormous prospect: the ‘hunting ground of
the motion picture camera is in principle unlimited; it is the external
world expanding in all directions’. Despite this potential, however, there
are ‘certain subjects within that world which may be termed “cinematic”
because they seem to exert a peculiar attraction on the medium. It is as
if the medium were predestined (and eager) to exhibit them.’24

Kracauer divides these ‘cinematic subjects’ into two categories: record-
ing functions and revealing functions. The recording functions of
film encompass movement and inanimate objects. Only film can record
all kinds of movements, and there are three kinds of movement that are
especially cinematic: the chase, a ‘complex of interrelated movements’
that ‘is motion at its extreme, one might almost say, motion as such’,25
dancing, not the staged sort, but of the sort that seems to emerge from,
or move into, the flow of real-life events; and what Kracauer calls
‘nascent motion’,26 in which movement is contrasted with motionless-
ness, for example by suddenly freezing the frame and then restarting it.

The other recording function of film is its capacity to focus on inan-
imate objects and make them bearers of significance. ‘In using its free-
dom to bring the inanimate to the fore and make it a carrier of action,
film only protests its peculiar requirement to explore all of physical exis-
tence, human or nonhuman.’27 The inanimate can almost become an
actor in the drama:
From the malicious escalators, the unruly Murphy beds, and the mad automobiles in silent comedy to the cruiser Potemkin, the oil derrick in *Louisiana Story* (1948) and the dilapidated kitchen in *Umberto D* (1952), a long procession of unforgettable objects has passed across the screen – objects which stand out as protagonists and all but overshadow the rest of the cast [A ‘Murphy bed’ is a name given to various types of folding bed developed from an original design by the American manufacturer William Lawrence Murphy (1876–1959)].

... Or remember the powerful presence of environmental influences in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940); the part played by nocturnal Coney Island in *Little Fugitive* (1953); the interaction between the marshland and the guerrilla fighters in the last episode of *Paisà* (1946).28 □

The two recording functions of cinema, then, are the rendering of movement and of the inanimate. The revealing functions of cinema are three in number: ‘things normally unseen’; ‘phenomena overwhelming consciousness’; and ‘special modes of reality’. Things normally unseen – the ‘many material phenomena which elude observation under normal circumstances’29 – fall into three groups. The first group encompasses both the very small, that cannot be seen by the naked eye, and the very large; in cinema, the close-up makes the very small visually accessible to the audience, and a combination of shots of varying distances can convey the very big: vast vistas of landscape and cityscape, and also that new and disturbing large-scale phenomenon that emerged in the nineteenth century – the mass, the agglomeration of people, that the traditional arts cannot take in. The new medium of photography can ‘portray crowds as the accidental agglomerations they are’, but ‘only film, the fulfilment of photography in a sense, [is] equal to the task of capturing them in motion’.30

Kracauer’s second group of ‘things normally unseen’ consists of the transient. Firstly, these are fleeting impressions like the shadow of a cloud or a leaf borne off by the wind, which are visible to the naked eye but which film is particularly able to capture. ‘The motion picture camera seems to be partial to the least permanent components of our environment.’ Secondly, there are those processes so fleeting that neither the naked eye nor the movie camera could capture them without the aid of two cinematic techniques: ‘accelerated-motion, which condenses extremely slow and, hence, unobservable developments, such as the growth of plants, and slow-motion, which expands movements too fast to be registered’,31 like racing legs. Kracauer sees slow-motion shots as the equivalent in time to close-ups; ‘they are, so to speak, temporal close-ups achieving in time what the close-up proper is achieving in space’.32

The third and final group of ‘things normally unseen’ posited by Kracauer are those concealed by the blind spots of the mind produced by habit and prejudice. This third group can itself be further subdivided into three: unconventional complexes, refuse, and the familiar. The term ‘complex’ is used by Kracauer in a visual sense, to denote the relationships between the parts of a visual perception, and the figure–ground relationship:

... Imagine a man in a room: accustomed as we are to visualize the human figure as a whole, it would take us an enormous effort to perceive instead of the whole man a pictorial unit consisting, say, of his right shoulder and arm, fragments of furniture and a section of the wall. But this is exactly what photography and, more powerfully, film may make us see. The motion picture camera has a way of disintegrating familiar objects and bringing to the fore – often just in moving about – previously invisible interrelationships between parts of them. These newly arising complexes lurk behind the things known and cut across their easily identifiable contexts. *Jazz Dance* (1954), for instance, abounds with shots of ensembles built from human torsos, clothes, scattered legs and what not – shapes which are almost anonymous. In rendering physical existence, film tends to reveal configurations of semi-abstract phenomena.33 □

As well as revealing unconventional complexes, film can also reveal refuse: ‘Most people turn their backs on garbage cans, the dirt underfoot, the waste they leave behind. Films have no such inhibitions; on the contrary, what we ordinarily prefer to ignore proves attractive to them precisely because of this common neglect.’34

The third subdivision of things that are concealed by the blind spots of the mind are familiar things, things that we take for granted. ‘Intimate faces, streets we walk day by day, the house we live in – all these things are part of us like our skin, and because we know them by heart we do not know them with the eye.’ Kracauer does not use the Russian Formalist term ‘defamiliarisation’, which was discussed in relation to Balazs in chapter one of this Critical History (see pp. 34–5); but his view of the way in which films ‘alienate our environment in exposing it’35 is very close to defamiliarisation. Unusual camera angles play a significant role in making the familiar strange. Such alienation can also operate retrospectively,
making the audience aware of the oddness of an environment they once
took for granted:

■ The confrontation with objects which are familiar to us for having
been part and parcel of our early life is particularly stirring. Hence
the peculiar, often traumatic effect of films resuscitating that period.
It need not be the period of our own childhood, for in the child real
experiences mingle indiscriminately with imagined ones based on
picture books and grandmother tales. Such retrospects as The Golden
Twenties, 50 Years Before Your Eyes, and Paris 1900 – documentaries
of 1950 assembled from authentic newsreels, contemporary feature
films, and photographs – explore patterns of custom and fashion
which we once accepted unquestioningly. Now that they resume life
on the screen, the spectator cannot help laughing at the ridiculous
hats, overstuffed rooms, and obtrusive gestures impressed upon him
by the veracious camera. As he laughs at them, however, he is bound
to realize, shudderingly, that he has been spirited away into the
lumber room of his private self. He himself has dwelt, without know-
ing it, in those interiors; he himself has blindly adopted conventions
which now seem naïve or cramped to him. In a flash the camera
exposes the paraphernalia of our former existence, stripping them
of the significance which originally transfigured them so that they
changed from things in their own right into invisible conduits.39 □

Reinforcing his view that film is fundamentally concerned with the cap-
ture of physical reality, Kracauer draws a contrast between paintings and
film images. The latter can strip the significance from ‘the paraphernalia
of our former existence’ because of ‘their emphatic concern with raw
material not yet consumed’:

■ The thrill of these old films is that they bring us face to face with the
inchoate [unformed], cocoon-like world whence we come – all the
objects, or rather sediments of objects, that were our companions in
a pupa state. The most familiar, that which continues to condition
our involuntary reactions and spontaneous impulses, is thus made to
appear as the most alien.37 □

Things normally unseen, encompassing the big and the small, the tran-
sient, and those unconventional visual complexes, refuse items and
familiar things to which we are normally blind, form one category of the
revealing function of film. The second category is ‘phenomena over-
whelming consciousness’ such as ‘[e]lemental catastrophes, the atrocities
of war, acts of violence and terror, sexual debauchery, and death’, all of
which ‘call forth excitement and agonies bound to thwart detached
observation’. All are ‘manifestations of crude nature, human or other-
wise’, that ‘fall into the area of physical reality’ and thus belong among
the cinematic subjects; moreover, ‘[o]nly the camera is able to represent
them without distortion’. Indeed, film ‘has always shown a predilection
for events of this type’.38

This might seem to confirm a common criticism of cinema: that it
panders to the desire for cheap sensation. While Kracauer does not deny
that the cinema provides the kind of sensational spectacles that, in his
view, people have always craved – in the gladiatorial combats of ancient
Rome, for example – he contends that ‘the cinema does not simply imitate
and continue [such spectacles] but adds something new and moment-
ous: it insists on making visible what is commonly drowned in inner
agitation … … […] the cinema … aims at transforming the agitated witness
into a conscious observer. Nothing could be more legitimate than its lack
of inhibitions in picturing spectacles which upset the mind.’39 Cinematic
sensation is not numbing; on the contrary, it makes us more aware of the
forces of reality and the drives of human and inanimate nature.

The third category of the revealing function of film is what Kracauer
calls ‘special modes of reality’, that is, ‘physical reality as it appears to
individuals in extreme states of mind’. Such states of mind may be pro-
duced by ‘phenomena overwhelming consciousness’, by ‘mental distur-
bances’, or by ‘any other external or internal causes’. Film reveals such
‘special modes of reality’ by presenting the images that a person or per-
sons in an extreme state of mind will form of a particular physical event
or phenomenon: such images ‘are distorted from the viewpoint of a
detached observer’ and ‘differ from each other according to the varying
states of mind in which they originate’.40 Kracauer gives an example
from Eisenstein of film’s capacity to reveal a special mode of reality – the
presentation of reality distorted by an extreme state of mind:

■ In [an episode from] his October … Eisenstein composes a physical
universe reflecting exultation … At the beginning of the October
Revolution, worker delegates succeed in bringing a contingent of
Cossacks over to their side … the two groups boisterously fraternize
in a state of euphoria. The ensuing dance scene is represented in the
form of an accelerated montage sequence which pictures the world as
experienced by the overjoyed. In their great joy, dancers and onlookers who constantly mingle cannot help perceiving incoherent pieces of their immediate environment in motion. It is a whirling agglomerate of fragments that surrounds them. And Eisenstein captures this jumble to perfection by having follow each other – in a succession which becomes ever faster with the growing ecstasy – shots of Cossack boots executing the krakowiak [a whirling, stamping folk dance, the name of which derives from Krakow (Cracow), a city and region in southern Poland], worker legs dancing through a puddle, clapping hands, and faces inordinately broadened by laughter. 61

For Kracauer, then, film can record and reveal reality in a range of important ways, and it is only in doing so – in ‘concentrating on actual physical existence’ 62 – that it conforms to the cinematic approach.

Kracauer identifies four affinities shared by photography and film, and each of the four is an aspect of the relationship to physical reality of the two media. Both film and photography have the ‘ability to reproduce, indiscriminately, all kinds of visible data’, but film ‘gravitates towards un Gerr stagings: the artificiality of stagings or compositions runs counter to the medium’s declared preference for nature in the raw’. 63 Staging is not wholly ruled out, however: it is ‘aesthetically legitimate to the extent that it evokes the illusion of actuality’. In other words, staging is artistically acceptable to the extent that it conceals its staginess. But while ‘anything stagy is uncinematic if it passes over the basic properties of the medium’, 64 there are at least two categories in which ‘the uncinematic effect of staginess is mitigated’. One category comprises ‘all the films which, from The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (1919) to the Japanese Gate of Hell (1953), are palpably patterned on paintings’. 65 While these have a clearly artificial, ‘stagy’ quality, they exhibit that interplay between stillness and movement that links them with one of the subjects of the recording functions of cinema that Kracauer has earlier identified: ‘nascent motion’ (see p. 77 above). In films patterned on paintings, the stasis of painting turns into movement, but the painted image, like the freeze-frame, remains as a memory and possibility, creating a sense of motion and stillness side-by-side.

The second case in which staginess may be mitigated is when the ‘technical execution [of a film] testifies to a sense of the medium’. 66 Kracauer gives Laurence Olivier’s Hamlet (1948) as an example: in that film, the continually moving camera shows a sense of the cinema medium despite the staginess of the sets, although this creates a disjunction between the cinematic and ‘stagy’ aspects of the production.

A second affinity that film and still photography share is for the fortuitous, for what happens by chance. Accident replaces destiny: this contingency is the basis of slapstick film comedy. The close relationship that chance has with film and photography is especially evident in their predilection for public spaces where unexpected patterns and events can always arise:

- The affinity of film for haphazard contingencies is most strikingly demonstrated by its unwavering susceptibility to the ‘street’ – a term designed to cover not only the street, particularly the city street, in the literal sense, but also its various extensions, such as railway stations, dance and assembly halls, bars, hotel lobbies, airports, etc. If the medium’s descent from, and kinship with, photography needed additional confirmation, this very specific preference, common to both of them, would supply it ... [T]he street ... is ... a region where the accidental prevails over the providential, and happenings in the nature of unexpected incidents are all but the rule. 67

To the fortuitous and the unstaged, Kracauer adds a third affinity of film and photography – for endlessness. In principle, there is no point at which the still or movie camera’s coverage need terminate: ‘it is as if [film] were animated by the chimereal desire to establish the continuum of physical existence’. 68 Of course this desire is chimerial, that is, it can never be realised practically. It is thus necessary for a film-maker to employ technical devices like the fade-in, the fade-out and the lap-dissolve ‘to mark the necessary breaks in the representation of the continuum and/or smoothly to connect different sections of it’. 69

Kracauer identifies five ‘routes of passage’ through the continuum of physical reality. The first route of passage is that films may appear to ‘cover vast expanses of physical reality’, as in travelogues or feature films that involve travel and give the audience the sense of being transported to distant places; films can also suggest such expanses – demonstrate the ‘solidarity of the universe’ – ‘by showing phenomena in different places successively in a time sequence’, as in chases, ‘by creating the impression that these phenomena offer themselves to view at one and the same moment’. In the latter case, editing can enable the audience ‘to witness widely scattered events [as if they were taking place] simultaneously so that [it] gets the feeling of being omnipresent’. 70

A second route of passage that a film may take through the continuum of physical reality is to ‘follow the chain of causes and effects
responsible for some event”. Such an emphasis on cause-and-effect may seem to contradict the predilection of film for the fortuitous that Kracauer has earlier discussed; he maintains, however, that the two go well together: the fortuitous can function as a cause and assume its place in the chain. He gives an example:

- D.W. Griffith insists on detailing, in his last-minute-rescue episodes, all the factors which obstruct or facilitate the rescuers’ heroic enterprise. Collisions and interventions, trains missed or jumped, horses on highways and legs negotiating [ice] floes – everything that contributes, in one sense or another, toward the final result is exposed to scrutiny.52

As well as following the unfolding of the cause-and-effect chain in a forward direction, films may also seek to reconstruct it retrospectively, starting from the final result and trying to represent what led up to it, as in Citizen Kane or Rashomon (1950). Neither Kane nor Rashomon produces a definitive chain of cause-and-effect that accounts for the result with which it begins; both films provide a number of possible versions of such a chain, but none is conclusive. In this way, Kracauer suggests, they try to ‘impress upon us the inexhaustibility of the causal continuum’. They suggest ‘causal endlessness’, as the first route of passage suggested ‘geographical ... endlessness’.53

There is a third route of passage that a film can follow through the continuum of physical existence: it can ‘caress one single object long enough to make us imagine its unlimited aspects’.54 Kracauer gives an example from the film The Titan: The Story of Michelangelo (1939; American release, 1950), directed by Curt Oertel (1890–1960):

- Under constantly changing light conditions the camera repeatedly pans or travels at close range over the limbs and the torso of some statue, deriving from the identical original an abundance of two-dimensional patterns. No matter to what extent these patterns still bear on the statue they explore, they are cinematic in as much as they tend to immerse us in the infinity of shapes that lie dormant in any given one.55

This route is rarely used, however, as it provides less possibility of dramatic action than the geographical or causal routes.

A film may take a fourth route through the continuum of physical reality by evoking ‘the innumerable experiences which an individual is likely to undergo in a single crucial moment of his life’.56 Like many instances of causal relationships, this route involves material reality but is not confined to it. The example that Kracauer gives is one that has already been cited in chapter one of this Critical History (p. 58) – Eisenstein’s ‘montage lists’ for an interior monologue, in his planned film adaptation of An American Tragedy, that would convey the agitation of Clyde Barrow’s mind as he gets ready to drown his pregnant girlfriend. Kracauer remarks:

- The monologue, as Eisenstein outlined it, clearly exceeds the framework of the story, however generous the allowance made for it; it even exceeds Clyde’s own being; what it tends to convey instead is the endless series of circumstances and sensations which close in on Clyde at this particular moment ... ... The true material ... is not merely life in the dimension of articulate meanings but life underneath – a texture of impressions and expressions which reaches deep into physical existence.57

It can be seen how Eisenstein’s ‘montage lists’, as reinterpreted by Kracauer, exemplify the latter’s fourth pathway through physical reality, a pathway that entails evoking ‘the innumerable experiences which an individual is likely to undergo in a single crucial moment of his life’. But it should be observed that Kracauer’s example is from notes for a film that was never made, and that he gives no other example of this route of passage. He does not say, however, that it is rarely used, as he does of the third route (‘caressing’ an object). It would be an interesting exercise to try to think of actual films that would exemplify this fourth route.

The fifth and final track through the continuum of physical reality is by means of the representation of ‘an indefinite number of material phenomena – e.g. waves, machine parts, trees, and what not – in such a way that their forms, movements, and light values jell into comprehensible rhythmical patterns’58 – as in the avant-garde work of Germaine Dulac (1882–1942) that aspired to a pure cinema in which films were visual equivalents of musical compositions.

These five routes of passage constitute the ways in which film represents the endlessness of physical reality. To the affinities that film and photography have for endlessness and the unstaged, Kracauer then adds and elaborates on a third affinity: for the indeterminate. ‘Natural objects ... are surrounded with a fringe of meanings liable to touch off various
moods, emotions, runs of inarticulate thoughts; in other words, they have a theoretically unlimited number of psychological and mental correspondences.' The converse is also the case: it is 'not only ... objects which function as stimuli; psychological events also form nuclei, and of course they on their part have physical correspondences'. Kraus tells all of these correspondences 'psychophysical correspondences', comprising 'all these more or less fluid interrelations between the physical world and the psychological dimension in the broadest sense of the word — a dimension which borders on that physical universe and is still intimately connected with it'.

The indeterminacy of natural objects — their capacity 'to touch off ... a theoretically unlimited number of psychological and mental correspondences' — poses a problem for the film-maker, at least in terms of Kracauer's ontology of film. On the one hand, the film-maker wants 'to exhibit and penetrate physical reality for its own sake and thus to retain the multiple meanings of shots, their capacity to release their psychological correspondences; on the other hand, he wants 'to advance the action [of the film] by assigning to each shot a meaning relevant to the plot'. Kraus acknowledges that these 'two obligations ... seem to be difficult to reconcile', but nonetheless affirms 'a basic editing principle: any film narrative should be edited in such a manner that it does not simply confine itself to implementing the intrigue but also turns away from it toward the objects represented so that they may appear in their suggestive indeterminacy'.

After indeterminacy, which is the fourth affinity shared by film and photography, Kraus moves to a fifth affinity that only film can have, since still photography cannot convey life in motion. This affinity is for 'the “flow of life”', which Kraus defines as 'the stream of material situations and happenings with all that they intimate in terms of emotions, values, thoughts'. This might sound rather like the 'stream of consciousness' as defined by the psychologist William James (1842–1910) and applied by literary criticism to some of the work of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941); but Kraus gives priority in his phrasing to 'material situations' rather than 'consciousness' ('emotions, values, thoughts'), and, in accordance with his ontology of film, he goes on to suggest that 'the flow of life is predominantly a material rather than a mental continuum, even though, by definition, it extends into the mental dimension'.

As the street epitomised the affinity of the film for the fortuitous, so it demonstrates the affinity of film for the flow of life:

The street in the extended sense of the word is not only the arena of fleeting impressions and chance encounters but a place where the flow of life is bound to assert itself ... [In] the city street with its evermoving anonymous crowds[,] the kaleidoscopic sights mingle with unidentified shapes and fragmentary visual complexes and cancel each other out, thereby preventing the onlooker from following up any of the innumerable suggestions they offer. What appears to him are not so much sharp-contoured individuals engaged in this or that definable pursuit as loose throngs of sketchy, completely indeterminate figures. Each has a story, yet the story is not given. Instead an incessant flow of possibilities and near-intangible meanings appears ... life eternally dissolv[es] the patterns which it is about to form.

The stage may seem at the opposite pole to the street and to the flow of life that it epitomises. Moreover, Kraus has identified the affinity for the unstaged as the first of the inherent affinities that film and photography share. But, as he acknowledges, 'stage interludes' occur in many kinds of film and are especially evident in the musical. Do these interludes depart from the medium of film? Not necessarily: Kraus contends that '[s]tage interludes within otherwise realistic films assume a cinematic function to the extent that they throw into relief the flow of life from which they detach themselves'. Although 'the stagy [is] normally against the grain of the medium', it 'assumes a positive aesthetic function if it is made to enhance the unstaged'.

Film's five inherent affinities are for the unstaged, the fortuitous, endlessness, the indeterminate, and the flow of life — all elements of the physical reality in which we are immersed. But what of those films that explore other fields, especially those of history and fantasy? Surely historical dramas betray their 'inevitable staginess' and lead themselves off from 'the space-time continuum of the living' into a finite capsule, and thus fail to respect two of the five fundamental affinities of cinema, for the unstaged and for endlessness.

The historical film may try to mitigate its staginess and finiteness by 'shift[ing] the emphasis from history proper to camera-reality', 'imbing history with camera-life'; it can include episodes which, allowing for differences in costume, 'almost look like camera penetrations of present-day reality (which in part they are ...)'. A relatively recent example would be the battle scenes in Kenneth Branagh's version of Shakespeare's Henry V (1989), especially when compared to those in Laurence Olivier's Henry V (1944). Olivier's battle scenes, mainly in
medium and long shot, are deliberately theatrical and stylised, punctuated by the astounding visual and aural effect of the flight of arrows loosed by the English archers at Agincourt; the scenes in the Branagh film employ close-ups and a graphic realism in their portrayals of combat, violence and death that make the viewer feel almost as if s/he were watching a news broadcast, complete with a slow-motion replay, from the battlefield. The opposite approach to ‘imbuing history with camera-life’ is to aim to portray ‘the modes of being peculiar to some historical era’, for instance in Carl Dreyer’s *Day of Wrath* (1943), which seeks to create a sense of a comparatively static medieval cosmos through its painterly composition of scenes; it can thus be cinematic insofar as it suggests nascent movement and attains a cinematic effect of authenticity.

What of fantasy? By ‘fantasy’, Kracauer means ‘all predominantly visual experiences, avowedly imagined or believed to be true in fact, which belong to worlds beyond camera-reality proper – the supernatural, visions of any kind, poetic imagery, hallucinations, dreams, etc.’. In contrast to history, fantasy may emerge in the present and mingle with immediate physical reality; but it is still not the same as that physical reality which, according to Kracauer, it is the peculiar property of the cinema to render. In assessing how far screen fantasy is true to the fundamental property of cinema, Kracauer identifies two issues: a ‘technical’ issue, about whether ‘fantasy is established ... in a stagy manner; with the aid of specifically cinematic devices; or in the material of physical reality itself’; and a ‘relational’ issue, about ‘the relations of fantasy to physical reality’ within specific films. The interplay of these two aspects determines the degree to which screen fantasies are cinematic or otherwise.

On the ‘technical’ level, ‘stagy’ fantasy, constructed by such elements as ‘bizarre settings, contrived accessories, unusual make-up’, may have two kinds of relationships with physical reality in films. It may claim ‘the same aesthetic legitimacy as actuality’, and imply that ‘nature has no title to preferential treatment’; or it may be assigned a lesser role than camera-reality by being treated as a stage interlude or sent up. Given Kracauer’s basic premise that film’s primary characteristic is its capacity to capture and convey physical reality, it is the latter relationship, which subordinates stagy fantasy to the physical, that is truer to the nature of film as a medium. Fantasy that, on a ‘technical’ level, is established by cinematic devices – negatives, one-turn-one-picture techniques, multiple exposures, superimpositions, distorting mirrors – can also have two kinds of relationships, one of equality or even implicit superiority, and one of subordination, in which fantasy functions to highlight material life.

The third ‘technical’ way in which fantasy may be established in film is by implying it through a rendering of physical reality. As an example of this approach, Kracauer quotes a statement made by the director Carl Dreyer, when working on his film *Vampyr* (1932):

- Imagine that we are sitting in an ordinary room. Suddenly we are told that there is a corpse behind the door. In an instant the room we are sitting in is completely altered; everything in it has taken on another look; the light, the atmosphere have changed, though they are physically the same. This is because we have changed, and the objects are as we conceive them.

Fantasies of this kind grow more remote from camera-reality the more they move away from the physical world and use images of that world to corroborate fantasy. ‘The more they pretend to otherworldliness, the less will their underlying intention be in keeping with their truth to camera-reality.’ Films whose plots ‘take the existence of the supernatural more or less for granted’ suffer in ‘cinematic quality’ because ‘they picture data for a purpose reducing the data’s significance’.

Kracauer gives *Vampyr* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), directed by Jean Epstein (1897–1953), as examples:

- Instead of being free to get immersed in the images of the tree trunks, the mists, and the toads, the spectator must from the outset conceive of them as tokens of the supernatural. The task, imposed upon these realistic images, of making the unreal seem real, gives them actually the appearance of something unreal.

Kracauer then turns to the function of the actor within cinema. Once again, his key criterion is fidelity to a cinematic medium primarily characterised in terms of its affinity to physical and quotidian reality.

- The film actor’s performance ... is true to the [cinematic] medium only if it does not assume the airs of a self-sufficient achievement but impresses us as an incident – one of many possible incidents – of his character’s unstaged material existence. Only then is the life he renders truly cinematic. The cinema ... is not exclusively human. Its subject matter is the infinite flux of visible phenomena – those
ever-changing patterns of physical existence whose flow may include human manifestations but need not climax in them.

In consequence, the film actor is not necessarily the hub of the narrative, the carrier of all its meanings. Cinematic action is always likely to pass through regions which, should they contain human beings at all, yet involve them only in an accessory, unspecified way.77

Kracauer then turns from the actor to the issue of sound. Given his emphasis on ‘camera-reality’, the reality conveyed in pictures that move, it is not surprising that he maintains that sound must be subordinate to the visual image:

- For sound films to be true to the basic aesthetic principle, their significant communications must originate with their pictures78... ... All the successful attempts at an integration of the spoken word ... play down dialogue with a view to reinstating the visuals ....... [T]he [cinematic] medium calls for verbal statements which grow out of the flow of pictorial communications instead of determining their course.79

The ‘reality character’ of cinema is also crucial to Kracauer’s analysis of the film spectator. Film works first of all on the body: ‘film images affect primarily the spectator’s senses, engaging him physiologically before he is in a position to respond intellectually’. Kracauer enumerates three key aspects of cinema that contribute to its capacity to engage the body and displace the intellect: ‘film records physical reality for its own sake’; ‘in keeping with its recording obligations, film renders the world in motion’; and ‘film not only records physical reality but reveals otherwise hidden provinces of it’.80 These three key elements of cinema encourage ‘organic tensions, nameless excitements’ in the spectator, and dislodge the ego from its controlling role: ‘the self as the mainspring of thoughts and decisions relinquishes its power of control’.81 Kracauer comes up with two major comparisons for the spectator whose self has lost control in this way: the first is the ‘hypnotized person’,82 in whom the screen has induced a ‘trance-like condition’; and the second is the dreamer, perhaps in the ‘stage between waking and sleeping which favours hypnagogic fantasies’.83

Kracauer develops the comparison between the film spectator and the dreamer by exploring the elements of film that ‘may be sufficiently dream-like to launch the audience into reveries and perhaps even influence their course’. He first discusses the ‘manufactured dreams’ proffered by popular films: ‘To the extent that films are mass entertainment they are bound to cater for the alleged desires and daydreams of the public at large.’84 It is interesting to note that Kracauer slides here from suggesting that the film spectator may be in a state akin to that on the edge of sleep in which hypnagogic images occur, to seeing him/her as a daydreamer. But the daydreams offered by films are based only on assumptions and inferences about what the film public wants: ‘Each popular film conforms to popular wants; yet in conforming to them it inevitably does away with their inherent ambiguity... Through their very definiteness films thus define the nature of the inarticulate from which they emerge.’85 The dreamlike elements of popular films designed to satisfy supposed mass daydreams do away with ambiguity and thus, in a sense, constrict cinema’s potential to set its spectators dreaming. Moreover, such films provide daydreams more on the level of ‘intrigue’ than of image.

But there is another way in which films can resemble dreams – and in defining this, Kracauer is able to bring his definition of the film spectator as a dreamer into line with his emphasis on cinema’s capacity to capture physical reality. Film is most dreamlike, he suggests, not when it presents clearly signalled dream sequences in which reality is distorted, but when it focuses on physical, everyday reality. He gives the example of the ‘documentary shots of Harlem houses and streets’ in The Quiet One (1949), a film by Sidney Meyer (1906–69).86

- Women are standing, all but motionless, in house doors, and nondescript characters are seen loitering about. Along with the dingy facades, they might as well be products of our imagination, as kindled by the narrative. To be sure, this is an intended effect, but it is brought about by a clear-cut recording of stark reality. Perhaps films look most like dreams when they overwhelm us with the crude and unnegotiated presence of natural objects – as if the camera had just now extricated them from the womb of physical existence and as if the umbilical cord between image and actuality had not yet been severed. There is something in the abrupt immediacy and shocking veracity of such pictures that justifies their identification as dream images.87

Kracauer’s determination to assimilate dreamlike elements in film to his
fundamental definition of cinema seems strained here. It exemplifies a dubious kind of thinking in which an apparent opposite is turned into a likeness, a potential contradiction into a confirmation.

Kracauer suggests that there are two directions of dreaming. One is ‘toward the object’:

- Released from the control of consciousness, the spectator cannot help feeling attracted by the phenomena in front of him. They beckon him to come nearer. They arouse, as Lucien Sève puts it, disquiet rather than certainty in the spectator and thus prompt him to embark on an inquiry into the being of the objects they record, an inquiry which does not aim at explaining them but tries to elucidate their secrets. So he drifts toward and into the objects … Yet the spectator cannot hope to apprehend, however incompletely, the being of any object that draws him into its orbit unless he meanders, dreamingly, through the maze of its multiple meanings and psychological correspondences. Material existence, as it manifests itself in film, launches the moviegoer into unending pursuits … Does the spectator ever succeed in exhausting the objects he contemplates? There is no end to his wanderings. Sometimes, though, it may seem to him that, after having probed a thousand possibilities, he is listening, with all his senses strained, to a confused murmur. Images begin to sound, and the sounds are again images. When this indeterminate murmur – the murmur of existence – reaches him, he may be nearest to the unattainable goal.

This direction of dreaming brings the spectator closer to the reality of objects and indeed of existence, in a more generalised sense, in itself. The other direction of dreaming is driven by ‘psychological influences’:

- Once the spectator’s organized self has surrendered, his subconscious or unconscious experiences, apprehensions and hopes tend to come out and take over. Owing to their indeterminacy, film shots are particularly fit to function as an ignition spark. Any such shot may touch off chain reactions in the moviegoer – a flight of associations which no longer revolve around their original source but arise from his agitated inner environment. This movement leads the spectator away from the given image into subjective reveries; the image itself recedes after it has mobilized his previously repressed fears or induced him to revel in a prospective wish-fulfilment.

The two directions of dreaming, towards the object and into the mind, may seem opposites but are inseparably interrelated in practice:

- Trance-like immersion in a shot or a succession of shots may at any moment yield to daydreaming which increasingly disengages itself from the imagery occasioning it. Whenever this happens, the dream- ing spectator, who originally concentrated on the psychological correspondences of an image striking his imagination more or less imperceptibly, moves on from them to notions beyond the orbit of that image – notions so remote from what the image itself implies that there would be no meaning in still counting them among its correspondences proper. Conversely, because of his continued exposure to the radiations from the screen, the absentee dreamer can be expected again and again to succumb to the spell of the images he left behind and to persevere in their exploration. He is wavering between self-absorption and self-abandonment.

Together the two intertwined dream processes constitute a veritable stream of consciousness whose contents – cataracts of indistinct fantasies and inchoate thoughts – still bear the imprint of the bodily sensations from which they issue. This stream of consciousness in a measure parallels the ‘flow of life’, one of the main concerns of the medium. Consequently, films featuring that flow are most likely to initiate both movements of dreaming.

Kracauer moves on to consider the question of the gratifications that film offers – and, given his basic premise, it is not surprising that he finds the primary gratification that it provides to be in terms of its reality charac- ter: ‘there is a widespread hunger for “life” and … film is uniquely equipped to satisfy it’. Film is less a substitute for reality than a means of providing the reality that is lacking in ‘the real world’ itself:

- The inveterate moviegoer seems to suffer from alienation, from loneliness [but] he does not feel he is being suppressed or rejected by society. Rather, he traces his suffering to an isolation due not only to his lack of sufficient and satisfactory human relationships but to his being out of touch with the breathing world about him, that stream of things and events which, were it flowing through him, would render his existence more exciting and significant. He misses ‘life’. And he is attracted by the cinema because it gives him the illusion of vicariously partaking of life in its fullness.
CINEMAS OF THE MIND

Cinema vicariously reconnects the isolated film spectator with life, and also gratifies a desire for child-like omnipotence in an increasingly complicated and confusing world:

- The world has grown so complex, politically and otherwise, that it can no longer be simplified. Any effect seems separated from its manifold possible causes; any attempt at a synthesis, a unifying image, falls short. Hence a widespread feeling of impotence in the face of influences become uncontrollable for eluding definition. No doubt many among us suffer, consciously or not, from being exposed, helplessly, to these influences. So we look for compensations. And film, it appears, is apt to afford temporary relief. In the cinema 'one grasps all of it'.

From his analysis of the film spectator, Kracauer goes on to consider film types, which he divides into two broad categories: story film and non-story film. He investigates the hypothesis that 'story telling runs counter to the cinematic approach'; if this is true, non-story film, which includes most experimental films and all varieties of the film of fact, should come closer to the cinematic approach than story film. But this is not quite the case; Kracauer sums up his conclusions about the two kinds of non-story film in this way:

- (1) The experimental film gravitates toward achievements which ... shun story telling but do so with little regard for the affinities of the medium. They omit camera-reality. Whether abstract compositions or projections of dream life, they are not so much films as an extension of contemporary painting or of literary designs. They abolish the story principle only to enthrone instead the art principle. Perhaps Art gains by this 'coup d'état.' The cinema does not, or, if it does, only by indirectness.
- (2) The film of fact in the form of the film on [visual] art is likewise a problematic hybrid as long as it is patterned on the experimental film. But [films on art] may well acquire a cinematic quality if they assume the character of regular documentaries, with the works of art being embedded in real-life processes.
- (3) There remains documentary itself, the main genre of the film of fact ... all such documentaries as show concern for the visible world live up to the spirit of the medium. They channel their messages through the given natural material instead of using the visuals merely as a padding. Moreover, relieved from the burden of advancing an intrigue, they are free to explore the continuum of physical existence. The suppression of the story enables the camera to follow, without constraint, a course of its own and record otherwise inaccessible phenomena.

This might seem to make the documentary the ideal film type, the type that is closest to the fundamental characteristics of the cinematic medium. But there is a drawback: '[c]onfined ... to the rendering of our environment', the documentary 'misses those aspects of potentially visible reality which only personal involvement is apt to summon. Their appearance is inseparable from human drama, as conveyed by an intrigue. The suppression of the story ... not only benefits documentary but puts it at a disadvantage also.' The result is that, '[p]aradoxically, the desire for story telling develops within a genre which repudiates the story as an uncinematic element'. 'On the one hand, the documentary maker eliminates the intrigue so as to be able to open his lens on the world; on the other, he feels urged to re-introduce dramatic action in the very same interest.' Thus the 'demand for the story ... re-emerges within the womb of the non-story film'. Kracauer is led to conclude that the hypothesis that 'story telling runs counter to the cinematic approach' is 'too broad to cover all the relevant cases'. A more qualified and discriminating proposition is that 'there are different types of stories, some of which, in keeping with that hypothesis, resist cinematic treatment, while others do prove responsive to it'.

The theatrical story is the type of story that perhaps most resists cinematic treatment. There are several reasons for this. 'The theatrical story limits the appropriate use of a medium which does not differentiate between humans and inanimate objects... [T]he theatrical play is composed of units which represent a crude abbreviation of camera-life... in cinematic terms, the theatrical story proceeds by way of "long shots"... From a cinematic perspective, the patterns of meaning that the theatrical story offers 'give the impression of being prearranged because they assert themselves independently of the flow of visuals; instead of seeming to grow out of it ... they ... determine the direction of that flow, if flow it still is'. In contrast to a 'truly cinematic story, the theatrical intrigue is detachable from the medium [of cinema]... the imagery conveying it illustrates rather than releases its meanings'. In a theatrical film, 'each image, instead of being established as a fragment of reality which may yield multiple meanings, must assume a meaning derived from contexts alien to the medium – contexts which gravitate
toward an ideological center. Kracauer concludes that the 'theatrical story stems from formative aspirations which conflict irrevocably with the realistic tendency. Consequently, all attempts to adjust it to the cinema by extending its range into regions where the camera is at home result at best in some compromise of a sort.

Film and the novel are closer than film and the stage. 'In general, the differences between the formal properties of film and novel are only differences in degrees. But the crucial differences lie in the worlds that they embrace. Both feature the flow or stream of life'; but while life, 'as captured by the camera, is predominantly a material continuum', the 'world of the novel is primarily a mental continuum' that 'often includes components which elude the grasp of the cinema because they have no physical correspondences to speak of ... there is nothing in camera-reality that would refer to them'. Therefore '[a]ny attempt to convert the mental continuum of the novel into camera-life appears to be hopelessly doomed'. Due to this key difference, the novel 'is not a cinematic literary form'. In fact, Kracauer concludes, there 'are no genuinely cinematic literary forms'.

The film may tell a story, but it cannot tell it in the ways that a novel or short story or stage play may, and it is constantly threatened with distraction by the pressure of camera-reality:

- The true film artist may be imagined as a man who sets out to tell a story but, in shooting it, is so overwhelmed by his innate desire to cover all of physical reality — and also by a feeling that he must cover it in order to tell the story, any story, in cinematic terms — that he ventures ever deeper into the jungle of material phenomena in which he risks becoming irretrievably lost if he does not, by virtue of great efforts, get back to the highways he has left.

In terms of content, Kracauer suggests that 'the screen attracts certain types of content, while being unresponsive to others'. 'Uncinematic content' is content which cannot primarily be made known except by non-visual means. Two types of uncinematic content are especially clear: conceptual reasoning and the tragic. Conceptual reasoning cannot be properly represented pictorially, while tragedy works to cut out or claim for symbolic purposes all that seems contingent or superfluous. In these respects, tragedy is opposed to 'the camera's ingrained desire for indefinite rambling' and tragedy's 'appropriation or ... elimination of the accidental is most certainly against the grain of the cinema'.

Kracauer then turns to kinds of content — motifs, as he calls them — that are cinematic because 'they are identical with, or grow out of, one or another property of film'. One of these is unique — the flow of life, which is 'the most general of all possible motifs', and which differs from the other cinematic motifs 'in that it is not only a motif' but 'corresponds to a basic affinity of film. In a manner of speaking it is an emanation of the medium itself'. Other examples of cinematic motifs include sleuthing and the David-Goliath theme. Sleuthing entails close scrutiny of the material world, an openness to the accidental, a concern for the cause-and-effect continuum of physical reality, and a chase in one form or another. The David-Goliath theme is an enactment of the triumph of the small and supposedly weak over the large and supposedly strong, and finds its cinematic correlative in the close-up that turns the tiny into the huge.

In a deeply-felt epilogue to his exhaustive study, Kracauer poses what he calls 'the most central [issue] of all: what is the good of film experience?'. Kracauer sees the situation of humankind in the mid-twentieth century as characterised by two main features: the collapse of traditional structures of belief and an increased abstractness that estranges us from concrete reality. Traditional structures of belief cannot be re-established; but, released from their bonds into fragmentation, we can recover concrete reality by means of film:

- Film renders visible what we did not, or perhaps even could not, see before its advent. It effectively assists us in discovering the material world with its psychophysical correspondences. We literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavoring to experience it through the camera. And we are free to experience it because we are fragmentized. The cinema can be defined as a medium particularly equipped to promote the redemption of physical reality. Its imagery permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life.

To perform its redemptive function properly, however, film must resist the siren call of art. In its traditional modes such as painting, literature and the theatre, art does not really represent nature, but transforms it into a component of a supposedly autonomous work that expresses the intentions of its creator: 'the artist would cease to be one if he incorporated life in the raw, as rendered by the camera'. Conversely, the film-maker
ceases to be one if he seeks to transform life in the raw into an element of an artistic whole. 'The intrusion of Art into film thwarts the cinema's intrinsic possibilities.' Moreover, it promotes an idea of wholeness that the breakdown of traditional beliefs has rendered untenable. 'Art in film is reactionary because it symbolizes wholeness and thus pretends to the continued existence of beliefs which "cover" physical reality in both senses of the word.' Truly cinematic film rejects this false holism but affirms an underlying continuity in its attention to reality and contingency:

- The small random moments which concern things common to you and me and the rest of mankind ... constitute the dimension of everyday life, this matrix of all other modes of reality. It is a very substantial dimension. If you disregard for a moment articulate beliefs, ideological objectives, special undertakings, and the like, there still remain the sorrows and satisfactions, discords and feas, wants and pursuits, which mark the ordinary business of living. Products of habit and microscopic interaction, they form a resilient texture which changes slowly and survives wars, epidemics, earthquakes, and revolutions. Films tend to explore this texture of everyday life, whose composition varies according to place, people, and time. So they help us not only to appreciate our given material environment but to extend it in all directions. They virtually make the world our home.

Film’s capacity to explore the texture of everyday life does not mean that it evades the monstrous. On the contrary, it can enable us to encounter it and survive. In ancient Greek legend, Perseus was able to avoid the direct force of the petrifying gaze of the Medusa, and behead her, by looking at her reflection in a shield that the goddess Athena had given him; Kracauer suggests, in a striking image, that the 'film screen is Athena's polished shield':

- The mirror reflections of horror ... beckon the spectator to take them in and thus incorporate into his memory the real face of things too dreadful to be beheld in reality. In experiencing ... the litter of tortured human bodies in the films made of the Nazi concentration camps, we redeem horror from its invisibility behind the veils of panic and imagination. And this experience is liberating in as much as it removes a most powerful taboo. Perhaps Perseus' greatest achievement was not to cut off Medusa's head but to overcome his fears and look at its reflection in the shield. And was it not precisely this feat which permitted him to behead the monster?

Film thus provides reflections that enable the spectator to grapple with disturbing truths. It can also 'confront visible material reality with our notions of it' in a confirmatory or contradictory way. Confirmatory confrontations tend to be propagandist, deploying reality to reinforce rather than to authenticate an idea — to make the spectator believe rather than see. Contradictory confrontations that challenge our notions of the physical world are much more interesting for Kracauer; they range from the comic scene in a silent film by Charlie Chaplin (1889–1977), The Immigrant (1917), in which a ship's passenger apparently being sensick is revealed, by a change of camera angle, to be fishing, to the dark scene in his Monsieur Verdoux (1947), in which an idyllic long shot of a landscape turns into a close-up of an imminant murder.

While these moments of reality 'are meaningful in their own right', film spectators 'do not confine [them]selves to absorbing them but feel stimulated to weave what they are telling us into contexts that bear on the whole of [their] existence'. The moments of reality prompt ideological and metaphysical propositions. But films that are true to the cinematic medium do not start with such propositions and then illustrate them by means of images of the material world; rather, 'they set out to explore physical data and, taking their cue from them, work their way up to some problem or belief. The cinema is materialistically minded; it proceeds from "below" to "above" ... Guided by film ... we approach, if at all, ideas no longer on highways leading through the void but on paths that wind through the thicket of things.'

Citing Erich Auerbach's claim, in his magisterial study of the representation of reality in Western literature, Mimesis (1946), that the goal of 'a common life of mankind on earth ... begins to be visible', Kracauer finally suggests that 'the task of rendering visible mankind on its way toward this goal is reserved for the photographic media; they alone are in a position to record the material aspects of common daily life in many places'. It is a large claim; and to exemplify it, Kracauer first selects, not a film, but a photographic exhibition, Edward Steichen's The Family of Man. By 1960, this was not the happiest of choices; for the exhibition had already suffered a razor attack from the French literary and cultural critic Roland Barthes, who had argued in an article included in his Mythologies (1957) that it exemplified the mystifying processes of bourgeois culture in its elision of the economic, social and cultural differences
between the people that it represented. Barthes’s essay was a harbinger of the powerful post-structuralist and deconstructionist attack on representation that would gather force in the later 1960s and the 1970s, leaving Kracauer’s *Theory of Film*, for all its richness and fascination, looking a little obsolete. At the start of the twenty-first century, it may seem even more obsolete insofar as Kracauer, like Bazin, founds his argument on the reality of the photographic image: such a basis surely dissolves with the shift from chemical to digital photography, in which still and moving images can be manipulated and generated independently of real-life referents.

While the importance of this shift is undeniable – it is part of the more general move from an analogue to a digital culture identified in the Introduction to this Critical History – it should not be exaggerated: the digital cannot wholly float free of the real. But the digital challenge to Kracauer, like the post-structuralist one, lay in the future. Even while he had been preparing *Theory of Film*, however, another theoretical approach had emerged that moved the emphasis from cinema’s relationship with reality to its relationship with the *auteur*-directors who, it was claimed, stamped their distinctive styles on the films that they made.

The next chapter of this History focuses on the birth of the *auteur* in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**The Birth of the *Auteur: Cahiers du Cinéma***

There are certain moments in modern cultural and intellectual history when journals become especially important: the *Spectator* of Addison and Steele in eighteenth-century England, the great magazines of the mid-Victorian era such as the *Cornhill* and the *Fortnightly Review*, *Scrutiny* in 1930s Britain, *Partisan Review* in mid-twentieth-century America. In the history of film theory, *Cahiers du Cinéma* – literally meaning ‘Cinema Exercise (or Note) books’ – has acquired a legendary importance, not only as a theoretical journal but also, as the previous chapter observed, because it provided the launching pad for critics who were later to become famous film directors of the French New Wave, especially Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut. Founded in 1951 by André Bazin and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze (1920–89), *Cahiers* was the midwife, in the 1950s, of the ‘politique des auteurs’; the ‘policy of authors’ that the American film critic Andrew Sarris dubbed ‘auteur theory’.

As Jim Hillier has pointed out, ideas about the *auteur* did not originate with *Cahiers*; they can be found in earlier magazines such as the *Revue du Cinéma*, the Communist-sponsored *Écran Français*, and the Catholic journal *Esprit*, and also in a near-contemporary of *Cahiers*, the journal *Positif*, founded in 1952. But *Cahiers* gave these ideas their strongest focus. The promotion of the idea of the director as an *auteur* – an artist who, like the author of a novel, stamps his distinctive vision and style on his works – went along with the elevation of Hollywood cinema as a form that demanded to be taken seriously, since its major products could be seen as the work of such *auteurs*. Jacques Rivette (born 1928) sums up these ideas in the title of an article first published in *Cahiers* no. 23 in May 1953, ‘The Genius of Howard Hawks’ – Hawks, a Hollywood director, is firmly endowed with genius. Like the literary critic F.R. Leavis (1895–1978), Rivette, in his opening paragraph, makes an ostensive appeal