Film Fables

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Prologue
A Thwarted Fable

Cinema, by and large, doesn't do justice to the story. And "dramatic action" here is a mistake. The drama we're watching is already half-resolved and unfolding on the curative slope to the crisis. The real tragedy is in suspense. It looms over all the faces; it is in the curtain and in the door-latch. Each drop of ink can make it blossom at the tip of the pen. It dissolves itself in the glass of water. At every moment, the entire room is saturated with the drama. The cigar burns on the lip of the ashtray like a threat. The dust of betrayal. Poisonous arabesques stretch across the rug and the arm of the seat trembles. For now, suffering is in surfusion. Expectation. We can't see a thing yet, but the tragic crystal that will turn out to be at the center of the plot has fallen down somewhere. Its wave advances. Concentric circles. It keeps on expanding, from relay to relay. Seconds.

The telephone rings. All is lost.

Is whether they get married in the end really all you want to know? Look, really, THERE IS NO film that ends badly, and the audience enters into happiness at the hour appointed on the program.

Cinema is true. A story is a lie.[1]

In these lines, Jean Epstein lays bare the problem posed by the very notion of a film fable. Written in 1921 by a young man of twenty-four, they welcome, under the title *Bonjour cinéma*, the artistic revolution he believes cinema is bringing about. Jean Epstein sums up this revolution with remarkable brevity, in terms that seem to invalidate the very argument of this book: cinema is to the art of telling stories [*l'art des histoires*] what truth is to lying. Cinema discards the infantile expectation for the end of the tale, with its marriage and numerous children. But, more importantly, it discards the "fable" in the Aristotelian sense: the arrangement of necessary and verisimilar actions that lead the characters from fortune to misfortune, or vice versa, through the careful construction of the intrigue [*noeud*] and denouement. The tragic poem, indeed the very idea of artistic expression,

had always been defined by just such a logic of ordered actions. And along comes this young man to tell us that this logic is illogical. Life is not about stories, about actions oriented towards an end, but about situations open in every direction. Life has nothing to do with dramatic progression, but is instead a long and continuous movement made up of an infinity of micro-movements. This truth about life has finally found an art capable of doing it justice, an art in which the intelligence that creates the reversals of fortune and the dramatic conflicts is subject to another intelligence, the intelligence of the machine that wants nothing, that does not construct any stories, but simply records the infinity of movements that gives rise to a drama a hundred times more intense than all dramatic reversals of fortune. At the origin of the cinema, there is a "scrupulously honest" artist that does not cheat, that cannot cheat, because all it does is record. We mustn't confuse this recording with the identical reproduction of things in which Baudelaire had discerned the negation of artistic invention. Cinematographic automatism settles the quarrel between art and technique by changing the very status of the "real." It does not reproduce things as they offer themselves to the gaze. It records them as the human eye cannot see them, as they come into being, in a state of waves and vibrations, before they can be qualified as intelligible objects, people, or events due to their descriptive and narrative properties.

This is why the art of moving images can overthrow the old Aristotelian hierarchy that privileged *muthos*—the coherence of the plot—and devalued *opsis*—the spectacle's sensible effect. It isn't that the art of moving images is an art of the visible that managed to annex, thanks to movement, the capacity for narrative, or that it is a technique of visibility that replaces the art of imitating visible forms. It is just that the art of moving images provides access to an inner truth of the sensible that settles the quarrels for priority among the arts and among the senses because it settles, first and foremost, the great quarrel between thought and sensibility. Cinema revokes the old mimetic order because it resolves the question of *mimesis* at its root—the Platonic denunciation of images, the opposition between sensible copy and intelligible model. The matter seen and transcribed by the mechanic eye, says Epstein, is equivalent to mind: a sensible immaterial matter composed of waves and corpuscles that abolishes all opposition between deceitful appearance and substantial reality. The eye and hand that struggled to reproduce the spectacle of the world, as well as the play that explored the most secret reaches of the soul, belong to the old art because they belong to the old science. In the writing of movement with light, fictional matter and sensible matter coincide: the darkness of betrayal, the

poison of crimes, and the anguish of melodrama come into contact with the
suspension of specks of dust, the smoke of a cigar and the arabesques of a
rug. And this same writing reduces all of this to the intimate movements of
an immaterial matter. That is the new drama to have found its artist in the
cinema. Thoughts and things, exterior and interior, are captured in the same
texture, in which the sensible and the intelligible remain undistinguished.
Thought impresses itself on the brow of the spectator in "bursts of
amperes," while love on the screen "contains what no love had contained till
now: its fair share of ultra-violet."[2]

Admittedly, this is a way of looking at things that belongs to another time
than our own, but there are many ways to measure the distance. One such
way is nostalgia. It notes that, outside the faithful fortress of experimental
cinema, the reality of cinema long ago relinquished the beautiful hope of
becoming a writing with light that confronted the fables and characters of
other ages with the intimate presence of things. The young art of cinema
did more than just restore ties with the old art of telling stories: it became
that art's most faithful champion. Cinema wasn't content just to use its
visual power and experimental means to illustrate old stories of conflicting
interests and romantic ordeals, it went further and put those at the service
of restoring the entire representative order that literature, painting, and the
theater had so deeply damaged. It reinstated plots and typical characters,
expressive codes and the old motivations of pathos, and even the strict
division of genres. Nostalgia indicts cinema's involution, which it attributes
to two phenomena: the breakthrough of the talkies [*la coupure du parlant*],
which dealt a severe blow to the attempts to create a language of images; the
Hollywood industry, which reduced directors to the role of illustrators of
scripts based, for commercial reasons, on the standardization of plots and
on the audience's identification with the characters.

At the other end of nostalgia is condescension. It tells us that if that dream
is remote today, as it no doubt is, it is simply because it had never amounted
to more than an inconsistent utopia. It just happened to synchronize with
the great utopia of the times—with the aesthetic, scientific, and political
dream of a new world where all material and historical burdens would find
themselves dissolved in a reign of luminous energy. From the 1890s to
the 1920s, this para-scientific utopia of matter dissolving itself in energy
inspired both the symbolist reveries of the immaterial poem and the Soviet
project of building a new social world. Under the guise of defining an art
through its technical apparatus, Jean Epstein would have given us nothing
more than his own particular version of the great ode to energy that his

epoch sung and illustrated in myriad ways: in symbolist manifestoes à la
Canudo and in futurist manifestoes à la Marinetti; in the simultaneist poems
of Appolinaire and Cendrars to the glory of neon lighting and wireless
communication, and in Khlebnikov's poems of transmental language; in the
dynamism of dances à la Severini and in the dynamism of chromatic circles
à la Delaunay; in Vertov's kino-eye, in Appia's stage lighting and designs, and
in Loïe Fuller's luminous dances... Epstein wrote his poem about thought
captured in bursts of amperes and love endowed with its fair share of ultra-
violet under the spell of this utopia of a new electric world. He welcomed
an art that no longer exists, for the simple reason that it never did. It is not
our art, but it was not Epstein's either. It was not what filled the movie-
theaters of his day, nor was it the art he himself made, in which he, too, told
stories of ill-starred lovers and other old-fashioned heartbreaks. He hailed
an art that existed only in his head, an art that was just an idea in people's
heads.

It is by no means certain that condescension instructs us better than
nostalgia. After all, what is this simple reality of the cinematographic art that
condescension refers us to? How is this link between a technical apparatus
for the production of visible images and a manner of telling stories forged?
There is no shortage of theoreticians who have attempted to ground the
art of moving images on the solid base of the means specific to it. But
the means specific to yesterday's analogical machine and to today's digital
machine have shown themselves equally suitable for filming both love stories
and abstract dances and forms. It is only in the name of an idea of art that
we can establish the relationship between a technical apparatus and this or
that type of fable. *Cinema*, like *painting* and *literature*, is not just the name of an
art whose processes can be deduced from the specificity of its material and
technical apparatuses. Like painting and literature, cinema is the name of
an art whose meaning cuts across the borders between the arts. Perhaps, in
order to understand it, we should take another look at the lines from *Bonjour
cinéma* and at the idea of art implied in them. Epstein pits the "real tragedy,"
that is, the "tragedy in suspense," against the old "dramatic action." Now,
this notion of the tragedy in suspense is not reducible to the idea of the
automatic machine inscribing the intimate face of things onto celluloid. It is
something else altogether that Epstein identifies with the peculiar power of
mechanical automatism: an active dialectic in which one tragedy takes form
at the expense of another—the threat of the cigar, the dust of betrayal, or
the poisonous power of the rug at the expense of the traditional narrative
and expressive arrangements of expectation, violence, and fear. Epstein's

text, in other words, undertakes a work of de-figuration. He composes one film with the elements of another. He is not describing an experimental film—real or imaginary—made expressly to attest to the power of cinema. We learn later that he has extracted this film from another film, from a melodrama by Thomas Harper Ince entitled *The Honour of His House*, with Sessue Hayakawa, a fetish-actor of the period, in the lead role. Epstein extracts the theoretical and poetical fable that describes the original power of the cinema from the body of another fable, from which he erased the traditional narrative aspect in order to create another dramaturgy, another system of expectations, actions, and states of being.

The cinema-unity thus undergoes an exemplary split. Jean Epstein welcomes an art that restores the duality of life and fictions, of art and science, of the sensible and the intelligible, to their original unity. And yet, Epstein only arrives at this pure essence of the cinema by extracting a work of "pure" cinema from the filmed melodrama. This particular penchant for making a fable with another is not a fad of the period, but a constitutive fact of the cinema as experience, art, and idea of art. It is also a fact that puts cinema in a contradictory continuity with a whole regime of art. From Jean Epstein to today, making a film on the body of another is exactly what the three main figures spawned by the cinema have been doing all along—directors, who "film" scripts they themselves have nothing to do with, the audience, for whom cinema is a potpourri of mixed memories, and critics and cinephiles, who extract a work of pure plastic forms from the body of a commercial fiction. The same is true of those two encyclopedic works that attempt to sum up the power of cinema: Deleuze's *Cinema 1* and 2, and Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, in eight episodes. These two works constitute an ontology of the cinema argued for with bits and pieces gleaned from the entire *corpus* of the cinematographic art. Godard offers as evidence for his theory of the image-icon the pure plastic shots he extracts from the functional images Hitchcock had used to convey the enigmas and affects of his fables. Deleuze builds his ontology on the claim that cinematographic images are two things in one: they are the things themselves, the intimate events of universal becoming, and they are the operations of an art that restores to the events of the world the power they had been deprived of by the opaque screen of the human brain. Deleuze's dramaturgy of ontological restitution, like Epstein's or Godard's dramaturgy of origin, depends on the same process of extracting from the details in the fiction. For Deleuze, Jeff's broken leg in *Rear Window* and Scottie's vertigo in *Vertigo* are embodiments of the "rupture of the sensory-motor schema" through which the time-image

splits itself off from the movement-image. Deleuze and Godard both repeat Jean Epstein's dramaturgy, they both extract, after the fact, the original essence of the cinematographic art from the plots the art of cinema shares with the old art of telling stories [*l'art des histoires*]. Cinema's enthusiastic pioneer, its disenchanted historiographer, its sophisticated philosopher, and its amateur theoreticians all share this dramaturgy because it is consubstantial with cinema as an art and an object of thought. The fable that tells the truth of cinema is extracted from the stories narrated on its screens.

The substitution operated by Jean Epstein's analysis is not the work of youthful illusion. He presents a fable of the cinema that is consubstantial with the art of the cinematograph, though it was not a fable born with the cinema. The dramaturgy Jean Epstein grafted onto the cinematographic machine has come down to us because it is as much a dramaturgy of art in general as of the cinema in particular, because it belongs more to the aesthetic *moment* of cinema than to the distinctiveness of its technical means. Cinema as an artistic idea predated the cinema as a technical means and distinctive art. The opposition between the "tragedy in suspense" that reveals the intimate texture of things and the conventions of "dramatic action" was instrumental in pitting the young art of cinema against the outdated art of the theater. And yet, cinema inherited this opposition from the theater, where it was first played out in the time of Maeterlinck and Gordon Craig, Appia and Meyerhold. These playwrights and stage directors had already countered Aristotle's arrangement of incidents with the intimate suspense of the world. They were also the ones who taught the cinema to extract the tragedy in suspense from the body of old plots. It is quite tempting, in fact, to see Jean Epstein's "tragedy in suspense" as deriving from the "motionless tragedy" that, thirty years earlier, Maeterlinck had thought of extracting from Shakespeare's stories of love and violence: "The mysterious chant of the Infinite, the ominous silence of the souls and of God, the murmur of Eternity on the horizon, the destiny or fatality we are conscious of within us, though by what tokens none can tell—do not all these underlie King Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet? And would it not be possible, by some interchanging of the roles, to bring them nearer to us, and send the actors further off? ... I have grown to believe that an old man, seated in his armchair, waiting patiently, with his lamp beside him; giving unconscious ear to all the eternal laws that reign about his house, interpreting, without comprehending, the silence of doors and windows and the quivering voice of the light, submitting with bent head to the presence of his soul and his destiny—an old man, who conceives not that all the powers of this

world, like so many heedful servants, are mingling and keeping vigil in his room … or that every star in heaven and every fiber of the soul are directly concerned in the movement of an eyelid that closes, or a thought that springs to birth—I have grown to believe that he, motionless as he is, does yet live in reality a deeper, more human and more universal life than the lover who strangles his mistress, the captain who conquers in battle, or 'the husband who avenges his honor.'"[3]

The automatic eye of the camera so celebrated in *Bonjour cinéma* does no more than the poet of the "motionless life" dreamed up by Maeterlinck. Even the crystal metaphor Gilles Deleuze borrows from Jean Epstein is already there in the theoretician of symbolist drama: "Let but the chemist pour a few mysterious drops into a vessel that seems to contain the purest water, and at once masses of crystals will rise to the surface, thus revealing to us all that lay in abeyance there where nothing was visible before to our incomplete eyes."[4] Maeterlinck adds that this new poem about the sudden appearance of fabulous crystals in a liquid in suspension needs a new actor, a being that is not human, but closer in kind to the wax figures of a museum, and not the traditional actor with his old-fashioned feelings and means of expression. This android has enjoyed a not undistinguished life in the theater, from Edward Gordon Craig's Übermarionettes to Tadeusz Kantor's Theater of Death. The being of celluloid, whose "dead" chemical materiality jars with the actor's living gestures, is certainly one of its possible incarnations. Maeterlinck's description of the character who sits motionless beside his lamp conjures up for us a cinematographic shot; film directors, whether narrative or contemplative in temperament, have given this motionless character a great number of diverse incarnations.

But we are not so concerned here with the specific nature of the debt the film fable owes to symbolist poetics. It is not influence, or the fact of belonging to a particular lexical or conceptual universe, that leads Jean Epstein to work by extracting one fable from the body of another in Maeterlinck's wake and before Deleuze and Godard. The logic of a whole regime of art is implicated in the process. The work of de-figuration undertaken by Epstein was already being practiced by those nineteenth century art critics—Goncourt and others—who extracted from Rubens' religious scenes, Rembrandt's bourgeois ones, and Chardin's still-lives the same dramaturgy of the painterly gesture and the adventures of pictorial matter being brought to the foreground while relegating to the background the painting's figurative content. The Schlegel brothers were already proposing this Romantic fragmentation, this process of picking apart old poems only to turn those parts into the

seeds for new poems, in the texts they published in the *Athenäum* at the beginning of that century. The whole logic of the aesthetic regime of art finds its footing at this time.[5] This logic rejects the representative model of constructed incidents and expressive codes appropriate to the subjects and situations in favor of an originary power of art initially distributed between two extremes: a pure creative activity thenceforward thought to be without rules or models, and the pure passivity of the expressive power inscribed on the very surface of things, independently of every desire to signify or create. It confronts the old principle of form fashioning matter with the identity, at the core of this new regime, between the pure power of the idea and the radical impotence of sensible presence and of the mute writing of things. But this union of contraries, where the work required by the artistic idea and the originary power coincide, is the result of the long work of de-figuration that in the new work contradicts the expectations borne by the subject matter or the story, or that reviews, rereads, and rearranges the elements of old works. This process undoes the arrangements of fiction and of representational painting, and draws our attention instead to the painterly gesture and the adventures of matter lurking beneath the subject of figuration, to the glimmer of the epiphany and the splendor of pure reasonless being glowing just beneath the conflict of wills of the play or novel. It hollows out or exacerbates the gestures of expressive bodies, slows down or speeds up narrative progression, suspends or saturates meanings. The art of the aesthetic age wants to identify its unconditioned power with its contrary: the passivity of reasonless being, the specks of elementary particles, and the originary upsurge of things. Flaubert dreamed of writing a book without subject or matter, a book that would be held together by nothing more than its "style," though he himself realized that the only way to achieve this sovereign style, the pure expression of his artistic will, was to create its opposite: a book stripped of every trace of the writer's intervention and composed instead of the indifferent swirl of specks of dust and of the passivity of things with neither will nor meaning. This splendor of the insignificant had to be realized in the infinitesimal gap opened up at the heart of representative logic: in stories about individuals who help or thwart one another in the pursuit of their goals, these goals being, incidentally, of the most commonplace sort: seducing a woman, attaining a social position, earning money... The work of style was to affect the passivity of the empty gaze of reasonless things in its exposition of everyday actions, and it would only succeed in its task if it itself became passive, invisible, if it painstakingly effaced the difference between itself and the ordinary prose of the world.

Such is the art of the aesthetic age. It is an art that comes afterwards and undoes the links of representative art, either by thwarting the logic of arranged incidents through the becoming-passive of writing, or by re-figuring old poems and paintings. This work presupposes all past art to be available and open to being reread, reviewed, repainted or rewritten at will. It presupposes also that anything and everything in the world is available to art. Banal objects, a flake peeling from a wall, an illustration from an ad campaign, are all available to art in their double resource: as hieroglyphs ciphering an age of the world, a society, a history, and, inversely, as pure presences, as naked realities brought to light by the new-found splendor of the insignificant. The properties of this regime of art—identity of active and passive, elevation of everything to the dignity of art, work of de-figuration that extracts the tragedy in suspense from the dramatic action—are the properties Jean Epstein attributes to cinema. Cinema, in the double power of the conscious eye of the director and the unconscious eye of the camera, is the perfect embodiment of Schelling's and Hegel's argument that the identity of conscious and unconscious is the very principle of art. It is easy, then, to see how one may be tempted to conclude, with Epstein and others, that cinema is the dream come true of this regime of art. After all, it really does seem that Flaubert framed his micro-narrations like "film shots": Emma at the window absorbed in her contemplation of the bean props knocked down by the wind; Charles leaning out of another window and gazing distractedly at the laziness of the summer evening, at the skeins of cotton drying in the air and at the dirty water of an industrial river. Cinema seems to accomplish naturally the writing of *opsis* that reverses Aristotle's privileging of *muthos*. The conclusion, however, is false, for the very simple reason that cinema, being by nature what the arts of the aesthetic age had to strive to be, invariably reverts their movement. Flaubert's frames are the work of a way of writing that contradicts narrative plausibility and expectation by reaching for the dreamlike stasis of paintings. Painters and novelists had to work to make themselves the instruments of their becoming-passive; the mechanical apparatus, conversely, suppresses the active work involved in this becoming-passive. The camera cannot be made passive because it is passive already, because it is of necessity at the service of the intelligence that manipulates it. The camera-eye Dziga Vertov uses at the beginning of *Man with a Movie Camera* to explore the unknown face of things seems at first to illustrate Jean Epstein's claim. Just then, a cameraman enters the frame and installs the tripod of a second camera on top of the first, the instrument of a will that has prior access to the discoveries of the first and is free to

arrange them into bits of celluloid appropriate for every use. The fact is that the mechanic eye lends itself to everything: to the tragedy in suspense, to the work of Soviet Kinoks, and not least to the illustration of old-fashioned stories of interest, heartbreak, and death. Those who can do everything are usually doomed to servitude. And indeed it turns out that the "passivity" of the machine that supposedly crowns the program of the aesthetic regime of art lends itself just as well to the work of restoring the old representative power of active form arranging passive matter that a century of painting and literature had struggled to subvert. At the end of the day, the whole logic of representative art finds itself restored, piece by piece, by this machine. And the artist who rules over the passive machine with a sovereign hand is, more than any other artist, doomed to transform his mastery into servitude, to put his art at the service of companies whose business is to control and cash in on the collective imaginary. In the age of Joyce and Virginia Woolf, of Malevich and Schönberg, cinema arrives as if expressly designed to thwart a simple teleology of artistic modernity, to counter art's aesthetic autonomy with its old submission to the representative regime.

We must not map this process of thwarting onto the opposition between the principles of art and those of a popular entertainment subject to the industrialization of leisure and the pleasures of the masses. The art of the aesthetic age abolishes all of these borders because it makes art of everything. The novel of the aesthetic age grew to maturity with the serial; its poetry beat to the rhythm of the masses; its painting adorned guinguettes and music halls. In Epstein's day, the new art of directing films drew inspiration from acrobatic feats and athletic performances. It was also in his day that one started seeing scraps of consumer goods hanging from picture rails or illustrating poems. There is no doubt that very early on pressure from the industry turned film directors into "craftsmen" who had to struggle to impress their logo on scenarios they were more often than not obliged to illustrate with actors not of their choosing. And yet, a basic law of the aesthetic regime of art is to come afterwards, to graft one's art onto a preexisting art and render its operations almost indiscernible from the prose of everyday stories and images. The film industry, in a sense, is only the most radical form of this law. It is true that today we seem more than willing to rehabilitate a cinema of craftsmen in the face of the impasses of an "auteur politics" whose culmination seems to be the aestheticism of publicity campaigns. Nobody needs to be prompted to reiterate Hegel's diagnosis that the work of the artist who does only what he wants succeeds in showing no more than the image of the artist in general. All we add today is that this

image is bound in the end to be confused with the image of a name brand on a product.[6] If the art of cinema accepts to come after producers and scriptwriters and to illustrate the program they provide—which it invariably thwarts with its own logic—it isn't just because of the pressure the harsh laws of the market exert on it. It is also, and more importantly, because of an indecisiveness at the heart of its artistic nature. Cinema literalizes a secular idea of art in the same stroke that it actualizes the refutation of that idea: it is both the art of the afterwards that emerges from the Romantic de-figuration of stories, and the art that returns the work of de-figuration to classical imitation. Hence the paradoxical nature of the continuity between cinema and the aesthetic revolution that made it possible. Even though the basic technical equipment of the cinema secures the identity of active and passive that is the principle of that revolution, the fact remains that cinema can only be faithful to it if it gives another turn of the screw to its secular dialectics. The art of cinema has been constrained, empirically, to affirm its art against the tasks assigned to it by the industry. But the visible process by which it thwarts these tasks only hides a more intimate process: to thwart its servitude, cinema must first thwart its mastery. It must use its artistic procedures to construct dramaturgies that thwart its natural powers. There is no straight line running from cinema's technical nature to its artistic vocation. The film fable is a thwarted fable.

We must then call into question the idea of a continuity between the technical nature of the machine of vision and the forms of the cinematographic art. Filmmakers and theoreticians have been quick to suggest that the art of cinema attained its perfection there where its fables and forms succeeded in expressing the essence of the cinematographic medium. A few exemplary figures and propositions punctuate the history of this identification of form and fable: the burlesque automaton—whether Chaplinesque or Keatonian—that fascinated the generation of Delluc, Epstein, and Eisenstein before resurfacing at the core of André Bazin's film theory and inspiring systematizations being worked out today;[7] the gaze cast by Rossellini's camera at "non-manipulated things"; Bresson's theory and practice of the "model," which pits the truth of cinematographic automatism against the artifice of theatrical expression. It would be easy to show, however, that none of these dramaturgies properly belong to the cinema. Better yet, it would be easy to show that if they belong to cinema at all, it is because they put a thwarting logic in motion. There are some brilliant pages in Bazin where he tries to demonstrate that Charlie's mime is the incarnation of cinematographic being, of the form silver nitrate prints

on strips of celluloid.[8] But the burlesque automaton was an aesthetically constituted figure, a hero of the pure spectacle that flew in the face of traditional psychology, long before the advent of cinema. We might also add that its role in the cinema wasn't to be the embodiment of the technical automaton, but to make itself the instrument that derailed every fable, the equivalent, in the art of moving images, to the becoming-passive characteristic of the prose of the modern novel. The burlesque body is constantly shuttling between total impotence and absolute power, its actions and reactions are always overshooting or falling short of the mark. The best example here is the Keatonian hero, divided as he is between a look that spells defeat from the outset and a movement that nothing can stop. The Keatonian hero is always looking on as things slip right through his fingers, and he is also a moving body [*le mobile*] whose forward thrust knows no resistance, as in that scene in *Sherlock Junior* where he clears, in a straight line, all the obstacles in his way while sitting on the handlebars of a motorcycle whose driver had fallen off at the beginning of the course. The burlesque body cuts the links between cause and effect, action and reaction, because it throws the elements of the moving image into contradiction. This is why, throughout cinema's history, the burlesque body has been the preferred dramaturgic machine for transforming one fable into another. Today, we have Kitano using the mechanics of burlesque to turn the logic of the action film on its head. With acceleration, he turns the violent confrontation of wills into a pure mechanics of action and reaction divested of all expressivity; he then dissolves these automatic movements in pure contemplation by subjecting them to the inverse principle of distension, of a growing gap between action and reaction. The policemen at the end of *Hana-bi* have become pure spectators observing the suicide of their old colleague, perceptible only as a sound resonating in the indifference of sand and waves. Burlesque automatism drives the logic of the fable to what we might call, with Deleuze, pure optical and sound situations. But these "pure" situations are not the rediscovered essence of the image: they are the result of those operations whereby the cinematographic art thwarts its own powers.

At the risk of parting ways with Bazin and Deleuze, I would say that Rossellini's dramaturgy proves the same point: all of these "pure" situations result from a set of specific operations. Bazin argues that Rossellini, in the great fables of wandering he brings to the screen, realizes the fundamental vocation of the automatic machine to follow, ever so patiently, the minute signs that allow a glimpse into the spiritual secret of beings. Deleuze sees Rossellini as the director *par excellence* of the pure optical and sound

situations that reflect the realities besetting Europe in the aftermath of the war, a time when individuals who had lost all their bearings were forced to confront situations they had no answers for. But the situations of narrative rarefaction Rossellini dramatizes on the screen are not situations indicative of the "impossibility to react," or of the inability to bear intolerable spectacles or coordinate gaze and action. They are experimental situations that Rossellini uses to superimpose onto the normal movement of narrative continuity another movement directed by a fable of *vocation*. In *Rome, Open City*, Pina tears herself free from a line of soldiers who clearly should have been able to restrain her and dashes after the truck driving away her fiancé. Originating in the mode of the burlesque movement only to end in a mortal fall, Pina's dash after the truck at once exceeds the visible of the narrative situation and of the expression of love. Similarly, the jump into the void that brings Edmund's wanderings to a close in *Germany Year Zero* exceeds every (non)reaction to Germany's material and moral ruin in 1945. These movements are not oriented towards a fictional end, nor have they been disoriented by an intolerable situation: they've been deflected by the imposition of another movement. Rossellini has transferred a dramaturgy of the call from the religious to the artistic level. That is what drives his characters from one mode of movement and gravitation to another mode, where they cannot but free-fall. Even if Rossellini achieves in that movement the coincidence of a fictional and a plastic dramaturgy, this unity of form and content is not the realized essence of the cinematographic medium, producing a "non-manipulated" vision of things; it is instead the product of a dramaturgy where the character's extreme liberty coincides with his or her absolute subjection to a command. The logic of the "rupture of the sensory-motor schema" is a dialectic of impotence and excessive power.

We reencounter this same dialectic in Bresson's "cinematography." Bresson had thought to sum it up with his well-known couple: the "passive" model who mechanically reproduces the gestures and intonations dictated by the director, and the director—painter—editor who uses the screen as if it were the blank canvas whereon to assemble the "pieces of nature" offered up by the model. Still, we need a more complex dramaturgy than this one to separate the art of the cinematographer from the stories he tells. A Bresson film is always the *mise-en-scène* of a trap and a hunt. The poacher (*Mouchette*), the rogue (*Au hasard, Balthazar*), the rejected lover (*Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne*), the jealous husband (*A Gentle Woman*), the thief and the chief of police (*Pickpocket*), all set their traps and wait for their victims to get caught. The film fable realizes its artistic essence by thwarting the scenarios concocted by these

volitional agents. It's a mistake, however, to think that visual fragmentation and the passivity of the model do in fact thwart those scenarios, since what they actually do is erase the line between the hunter awaiting his prey and the director trying to surprise the truth of the "model." There must be, in other words, a counter-logic that opposes the visible complicity between these two hunters. What protects the prey from the hunter and the film fable from the story illustrated in Bresson is, first of all, a fleeing movement, a fall into the void. The door that slams shut as somebody opens a window and the flowing silk scarf in *A Gentle Woman*, or the girl who rolls down the slope time and again to the edge of the pond where she'll drown herself in *Mouchette*, mark the counter-movement, initial or final, by which the preys elude their hunters. The beauty of these scenes comes from how the visible contradicts narrative meaning: the veil gently suspended by the wind hides the fall of a suiciding body, the child playing at rolling down the slope both fulfills and denies the suicide of a teenager. That the authors thwarted by these scenes that Bresson himself added to the storyline are not obscure scriptwriters but Dostoevsky and Bernanos highlights all the more the counter-movement that keeps cinema from every simple effectuation of its visual essence. The role Bresson assigns to the voice in his films is the other part of this counter-effect logic. Far from being just the expression of the truth wrenched from the model, the so-called "white" voices of Bresson's films are, more radically, how cinema accomplishes the project of literature by inverting it. Literature, to thwart the arrangement of incidents and the conflict of wills, let itself be infiltrated by the great passivity of the visible. The addition of image to literature amounted to a subtraction of sense. Cinema, for its part, can only appropriate this power by reversing the game and hollowing out the visible with the word. That is the function of these "white voices" that melt together all the different intonations required by the classical expression of the characters. Paradoxically, it is this sound invention, and not the framing of the painter and the montage of the editor, that defines the art of the model representative of a "pure cinema." The counterpart of the image that cuts the literary narrative is this voice that simultaneously lends body to the image and subtracts from it. It is like a thwarted narrative voice in literature [*une parole littéraire contredite*]: neutrality of the narrative voice attributed to bodies it has disowned and that distort it in turn. Ironically, the voice that defines Bresson's cinematographic art was first imagined in the theater as the voice of the "third character," the Unknown or the Inhuman, Maeterlinck thought inhabited Ibsen's dialogues.

All these great figures of a pure cinema whose fables and forms would easily be deducible from its essence do no more than offer up the best examples of the film fable, split and thwarted: *mise-en-scène* of a *mise-en-scène*, counter-movement that affects the arrangement of incidents and shots, automatism separating image from movement, voice hollowing out the visible. Cinema can only make the games it plays with its own means intelligible to itself through the games of exchange and inversion it plays with the literary fable, the plastic form, and the theatrical voice. The texts gathered here attest to the multiplicity of these games, with no pretensions, of course, to exhausting the field of possibilities of the art of cinema. Some of the chapters show the paradoxes of the film fable at their most radical. This is the case, for instance, with Eisenstein's efforts to create a cinema that opposes the fables of old with its capacity to translate an idea—in his case, that of communism—directly into signs-images that convey new affects. It is also the case with Murnau's transposition of Molière's *Tartuffe* to the silent screen. Eisenstein's project governs *The General Line*, where he identifies the demonstration of the new art with the political opposition of the new and mechanized world of the kolkhozes to the old world of the peasants. But to bring it off, Eisenstein has to line the opposition with a more secret aesthetic complicity between the Dionysian figures of the new art and the trances and superstitions of old. Murnau manages his transposition of *Tartuffe* into silent film by transforming Molière's schemer into a shadow, and his conquest operation into the conflict of visibilities conducted by Elmire to dissipate the shadow haunting her husband. But then, it is the very power of the cinematographic shadow that Murnau must lay to rest in order to unmask the impostor. A more discrete thwarting of the text it brings to the screen can be found in Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night*, where Ray imbues the visual fragmentation with the poetic powers of metonymy in order to undo the perceptive continuum created by the "stream of consciousness" that the novelist in the 1930s had used, inversely, to capture the sensory character of the moving image. Even the most classical of cinematographic forms, the ones most faithful to the representative tradition of carefully arranged incidents, clearly defined characters, and neatly composed images, are affected by this gap, evidence enough that the film fable belongs to the aesthetic regime of art. Anthony Mann's Westerns are a good example. There can be no doubt that Mann's Westerns are model representatives of that most coded of cinematographic genres, or that they obey all the fictional needs dictated by a narrative and popular cinema. And yet they too

are inhabited by an essential gap. The meticulous precision that connects the hero's perceptions and gestures cuts his actions off from all those things—the stability of ethical values, and the frenzy of desires and dreams that transgress them—that normally give meaning to the action. Ironically, it is the perfection of the "sensory-motor schema" of action and reaction that causes problems for these tales of quarrels with desire and the law by substituting them with the confrontation between two perceptive spaces. A constant principle of what is known as *mise-en-scène* in the cinema is to supplement—and thwart—narrative continuity and the rationality of the goals by not aligning two visibilities, or two relationships of the visible to movement, either by means of visual reframings, or by means of the aberrant movements imposed by a character who simultaneously aligns himself with the scenario of the pursuit of goals and perverts it.

We should not be surprised to find here two other classical incarnations of this figure, namely the child (*Moonfleet*) and the psychopath (*M, While the City Sleeps*). The child in the cinema oscillates between two roles, traditionally playing either the victim of a violent world or the mischievous observer of a world that takes itself too seriously. In *Moonfleet*, Fritz Lang confronts these banal and representative figures with the aesthetic figure of the child director, who is determined to impose his own script and to mount the visual refutation of the narrative game of intrigues and the visual game of appearances that normally conspire to pigeonhole the child into the role of naïve victim. The obstinacy that exceeds every rational pursuit of goals is likewise the trait by which the psychopath, in the cinema, upsets the scenarios of the trap where the criminal is at once hunter and prey. In its aberration, this obstinacy mirrors the equality of action and passion where cinema metaphorizes itself. The murderer in *M* escapes visually because the automatism of his movements dovetails into the double trap set by the police and the mob that will in the end get the better of him. Unlike his pursuers, who trace circles on maps and post detectives on street corners, the murderer doesn't pursue a rational goal, he could not do something other than what he does. When he meets a child's gaze reflected in a shop window, he must pass from the insouciance of the anonymous *flâneur* to the automatism of the hunter, just as he must regain the image of a contented observer an instant later, as he stands side by side with another little girl. The shot of the murderer and his next victim looking happily at the window display of a toy shop belongs to the same counter-effect logic as the flowing scarf in *A Gentle Woman*, the rolls down the slope of *Mouchette*, the rectilinear trajectory of *Sherlock Junior*, the meticulous and indifferent gestures of James Stewart

in Mann's Westerns, and the mythological elation of the bull's wedding in *The General Line.*

This same logic abolishes the borders between document and fiction, between the politically committed work and the pure work. The plastic extravagance of Eisenstein's communist film is part and parcel of the same dream that produced the indifferent "shot" of Emma Bovary gazing out of her window, and this indifference sometimes rubs off on the images of the politically committed documentary. This is the case in that moment of *Listen to Britain* when Humphrey Jennings' camera, positioned into the light, shows two characters in silhouette peacefully watching the sun set over the waves before a change of angle reveals their function and identity: they are two coastguards scanning the horizon for signs of the enemy. *Listen to Britain* is a limit example of the counter-effect characteristic of the film fable. Although meant to rally support for England's war efforts in 1941, the film never shows a country at war and mobilized militarily for its defense. Jennings only shows the soldiers during their moments of leisure: in a train compartment singing a song about distant lands, in a dance or concert hall, at a village procession. His camera slides seamlessly from one furtive image to another: a man at his window at night, holding a light with one hand and drawing the curtains with the other, a school courtyard where children dance in a circle, the two men watching the setting sun. The paradoxical political choice of showing a country at peace in order to win support for its war efforts succeeds because Jennings makes exemplary use of the paradox inherent to the film fable. The peaceful moments that make up the film—a face and light glimpsed behind a window, two men chatting as they watch the sunset, a song in a train, a dance contest—are nothing other than the moments of suspension that punctuate fiction films and that invest the constructed verisimilitude of the action and the story with the naked truth, the meaningless truth of life. The fable tends to intersperse these moments of suspension/moments of the real with action sequences. Jennings, by thus isolating them in this strange "documentary," highlights just how ambivalent this play of exchanges, between the verisimilar action characteristic of representative art and the life without reason emblematic of aesthetic art, really is.[9] The ordinary, the zero-degree of cinematographic fiction is for these two to complement one another, in order to provide a sort of double testimony to the logic of the action and the effect of the real. The artistic work of the fable, conversely, is to vary the values, to increase or diminish the gap, to invert the roles. The privilege of the so-called documentary film is that it is not obliged to create the *feeling* of the real, and this allows it to treat the real as a problem

and to experiment more freely with the variable games of action and life, significance and insignificance. If this play is at its zero-degree in Jennings' documentary, it takes on an altogether different complexity when Chris Marker composes *The Last Bolshevik* by interlacing images from the post-Soviet present with various types of "documents": images of the imperial family in 1913 and those of a Stalin lookalike "helping" tractor drivers in their difficulties; the buried film-reports Alexander Medvekin shot from his film-train, the comedies he directed and which got brushed under the carpet, and the films he was obliged to make of the huge pageants put on by Stalinist athletes; the accounts gathered from interviews, the massacre on the Odessa steps of *Battleship Potemkin*, and Simpleton's lamentation on the stage of the Bolshoi Theater. Marker, by putting all of these in dialogue in the six "letters" to Alexander Medvekin that make up the film, can deploy better than all illustrators of made up stories the polyvalence of images and signs, the potential difference between values of expression—between the image that speaks and the one that silences, between the speech that conjures up an image and the one that is simply enigmatic—that make up, in contrast to the episodes of before, the new forms of fiction of the aesthetic age.

Documentary fiction invents new intrigues with historical documents, and thus it touches hands with the film fable that joins and disjoins—in the relationship between story and character, shot and sequence—the powers of the visible, of speech, and of movement. When Marker replays, under the shadow cast by the color images of restored Orthodox pomp, the "doctored" images of the massacre on the Odessa steps and images from Stalinist propaganda films, his work resonates with Godard's, who filmed, in the Pop age, the Maoist theatricalization of Marxism and, in the "Post-Modern" age, the fragments of the intermingled history of the cinema and the century. Marker also touches hands with Fritz Lang, who replays the same story of the chase for a psychopathic killer at two different ages of the visible: the first in *M*, where maps and magnifying glasses, inventories and drag-nets trap the murderer and prosecute him in a theatrical court; the second in *While the City Sleeps*, where all these accessories have disappeared and been replaced by a machine of vision, the television that places Mobley "face to face" with the murderer and transforms an imaginary capture into a weapon for a real capture. The TV monitor isn't the instrument of "mass consumption" that spells out the death of the great art. It is, more profoundly and also more ironically, the machine of vision that suppresses the mimetic gap and that thus realizes, in its own way, the new art's panaesthetic project of immediate sensible presence. This new machine doesn't annul the power of cinema,

but its "impotence." It annuls the process of thwarting that has always animated its fables. The task of the director is then to invert, once again, the game where television "realizes" cinema. A longstanding lamentation in contemporary thought wants us to bear witness to the programmed death of images at the hands of the machine for information and advertisement. I have opted for the opposite perspective and have tried to show that the art and thought of images have always been nourished by all that thwarts them.

NOTES

1. Jean Epstein, *Bonjour cinéma*, in *Écrits sur le cinéma* (Paris: Seghers, 1974) 86. A previous translation of this text, by Tom Milne, originally published in *Afterimage* 10 (Autumn 1981) 9–16, can be found in Richard Abel, ed. *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthropology, 1907–1939*, volume I: 1907–1929 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 242.

2. Epstein, *Bonjour cinéma* (Paris: Seghers, 1974) 91. Abel, *French Film Theory*, vol. I, 244.

3. Maurice Maeterlinck, "The Tragical in Daily Life," in *The Treasure of the Humble*, trans. Alfred Sutro (London: George Allen, 1897) 98–9; 105–6.

4. Maeterlinck, "The Tragical in Daily Life," 110.

5. For a more elaborate discussion, please see my *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabe Rockhill (London: Continuum Books, 2004), and *L'Inconscient esthéthique* (Paris: Galilée, 2001).

6. Serge Daney has worked out the most rigorous form of this dialectic of art and commerce. See especially his: *L'Exercice a été profitable, monsieur* (Paris: P.O.L., 1993) and *La Maison cinéma et le monde* (Paris: P.O.L., 2001). I discuss these in my: "Celui qui vient après. Les antinomies de la pensée critique," *Trafic* 37 (2001) 142–50.

7. Cf. Thérèse Giraud, *Cinéma et technologie* (Paris: PUF, 2001), which argues for the opposite thesis to the one I argue for here.

8. André Bazin, "The Myth of Monsieur Verdoux," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) 104. "Before any 'character' ... there exists a person called Charlie. He

is a black-and-white form printed on the silver nitrate of film." Bazin's analysis does not limit itself to the onto-technological identification of the Chaplinesque character with cinematographic being, though that is one of its major concerns, hence his opposition to the "ideology" of *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator*. Both these films, Bazin argues, destroy Charlie's "ontological" nature because they make Charlie Chaplin's hand and thought too visible.

9. For a more detailed analysis of this film, please see: Jacques Rancière, "L'Inoubliable," in *Arrêt sur histoire*, eds. Jean-Louis Comolli and Jacques Rancière (Paris: Éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997) 47–70.