

Film

Shirley Hamburg

1967

James Dickey, in his delightful book of essays *The Suspect in Poetry*, distinguishes four main ways of reacting to poems which are worth repeating as they may be applicable to film.

In ascending order of importance they are 1) "This probably isn't so, and even if it were I could-not care less," 2) "This may be true enough as far as it goes, but well ... so what? 3) "This is true or at least convincing, and therefore I respond to it differently than I do to poems in the first two categories, and 4) "This is true with a kind of truth at which I could never have arrived by myself, but its truth is better than the one I had believed."

I am fond of these general distinctions because they presuppose at least two traditional, life-giving notions about art which, amidst current hippy tastes, have been regrettably de-emphasized. One is that art aspires to truth and the other is that one has some real response to art, some passionate and private feeling, that there be something in certain works of art that speak directly to people as they believe God would.

Dickey's first two categories are important because they are what we always feel about what is bad in art. In 3) is what we like well enough to call "good" in reviews and to which we may return occasionally, and in 4) is that which we continue to call great and would hope perhaps to die remembering.

Most artists aspire to reside in 3) upon which many a solid reputation has been founded. This is by no means as easy of an attainment as I may make it seem. Even those whom we call "major" catch only a few glimpses of the world which Dickey has designated in 4). Needless to say, the achievement of even a small but steadily ardent flame is immensely difficult and requires, as well as a great deal of luck, a lifelong attention to those means by which one might best hope to feed it.

I mention the above in the way of a lamentation as it concerns movies of a serious intent. That is, I have seen very few movies that have spoken to me deeply and honestly as a human being in the world. I have seen very few movies that have spoken to me as intensely as works of good literature do. Of those movies that care about truth—metaphysical and physical—there is too often a decided lack of subtlety and depth so much so that I begin to wonder if this kind of care is basically alien to the medium of film.

For me, most "serious" movies fall solidly into Dickey's first two categories. I can think of no movie that I have seen, except perhaps Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, that I would include in Dickey's fourth grouping.

Of course, discussion of motion pictures on this level is grossly overlooking the whole area of cinematics, of the "movieness" of movies. Indeed, there are many cinematically brilliant movies, but to me it is catastrophic that few, if none of them, have much to say about anything but technique. What I lament is the absence of the great story, in movies.

From the beginning of film history, there were painters and sculptors who claimed that cinema's true future resided in artifice, construction. It lay not in figurative narration or story-telling of any kind (either in a relatively realistic or in a surrealist vein) but in abstraction. Thus, Theo Van Doesburg in his essay of 1929, "Film as Pure Form," envisages film as the vehicle of "optical poetry," "dynamic light architecture," "the creation of a moving ornament." Films will realize "Bach's dream of finding an optical equivalent for the temporal structure of a musical composition." Today, many filmmakers—notably, Robert Breer—continue to pursue this conception of film, and who is to

say it is not cinematic? My question is, what truth can film of this sort claim concerning the human situation? Abstractly, it tells us much, for it signals the breakdown of a purposeful, goal-oriented art in which the normal syntax of language, the delineation of human motivation, the explication of causal relations among sequential events of a narrative had been combined.

It is to the naive and primitive enjoyment of sensations and things for their own sake that film purists seek to return.

Indeed, certain aspects of film are very conducive to evoking sensation. But I must remind those who believe in this train of thought that art justifies itself when we, the audience, forget that our feelings have been deliberately evoked.

It seems to be a perennial quest to seek for the definitive art form. Schopenhauer, as van Doesburg, suggested that all art aspires to the condition of music. I believe that much of today's cinema is being transformed into just that, by de-emphasizing its references to reality or the human condition and constructing film purely upon the metrical correspondence of images.

From the beginning, particularly in the films of Lumiere (1895) we have witnessed the camera as a "recording instrument," as an all-seeing eye which innately could not lie. Paradoxically, though it may never cease to behold reality, film does lie when it, time after time, falls short of a deeply penetrating human statement.

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Fifth Estate #23, February 1-15, 1967

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