

Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 8, 1978, 398-405.

Movies Seen Many Times *

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* A discussion of three books: Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed; Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. New York: Viking Press, 1971, pp. xv + 174; George W. Linden, *Reflections on the Screen*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1971, pp. ix + 297, \$12.50; Paul Weiss, *Cinematics*. Carbondale, IL. Southern Illinois University Press, 1975, pp. xii + 227, \$10.25.

I

Consider such light musical pieces as Schumann's and Debussy's *Arabesques*, Schumann's *Traumerie*, Debussy's *Petite Suite*, Tchaikowsky's *Andante Cantabile*, and so on. They all strike their new listener very forcefully; indeed, if you can find music lovers who have not heard one of these you can easily move them to tears by a good performance. Yet they wear out, some with the first hearing, some with the tenth. To be really both immediately very impressive and very durable, like Debussy's *Fetes* and Mozart's standard music, is every artist's dream, yet many serious composers prefer the durable over the immediately impressive, and take comfort in the fact that Bach's monumental works, *The Art of Fugue*, *The Musical Offering*, the *Goldberg Variations*, and the *Mass in B Minor*, take a lot of sustained effort from their audience, as do most of Beethoven's later compositions, except for his ninth symphony and similar bits.

It is not that very heavy music cannot serve as background music, and not that difficult music is the same as heavy music; rather, heavy music serves as background music on suitable occasions and difficult music serves as background music only for those who are very very well versed in music. Jules Dassin used Bach and Picasso for the background of a passage in his *Never on a Sunday*, but only to make a point: the lady of easy virtue was trying to become an intellectual in a rather heavy-handed manner for a while.

Is this true of every art form? I wonder. I do have the impression that poetry is usually durable. This is not true of a poem of Walter De La Mare, or even of his poetry as a whole. It is meant to strike you hard the very first time and perhaps it does, I cannot say. Perhaps light verse can reach heights that it cannot maintain, though *Eugene Onegin* suggests to me that this is not so; the height of poetry can only rise. Indeed, I tend to present this as the criterion, the definition if you will, of poetry. If you can read endlessly a short story of Tolstoy, or the balcony scene of his *War and Peace*, you call them poetry; and so you do with a memorable, re-readable passage from endless, tedious, tiresome, un-re-readable, barely remembered, very closely watched, highly detailed described moment in Proust.

How many movies can you see three times? Which ones? Are they poetic? Do you find that it is the poetry in them that makes them durable? If so, what is this poetry and why are novels and movies more devoid of them than poems and songs and symphonies?

We are now in the world of dreams. Let us stay in it a while longer. Why does the memory of 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' help us transform into the world of dream, or a still from *The Wizard of Oz*, when we cannot stand the thought of watching it with the kids again next Christmas on TV? Why can kids watch it repeatedly but not adults? What is the chemistry of the stuff that gets us into the world of dreams and keeps us there? Are

dreams the same as reveries? Surely there is both poetry and reverie in Mercutio's *Ode to Queen Mab*, in Berlioz's music to that queen of dreams; but the poetry of *Hamlet*, whether 'To be or not to be', or 'Alas poor Yorick, I knew him well' is a different matter altogether, wouldn't you say? Reveries require little audience participation, little concentration and active imagination; it can be induced on the willing victims - they have to give their consent - by series of names of film stars and brilliant movies, by talk of the soft dawn and the murmuring of the surf and the delicate flower, or by talk of the rugged mountain and the massive rock and the determined climber; for more forceful poetry we have to open the gates for the audience's active imagination; we must engage sympathetic attempts to empathize with the man who dwells on the soft sea shore and loves his peaceful existence, yet chooses to climb the rugged terrain. The mere challenge is kid's stuff; the problematic situation of those who do not welcome a challenge, yet somehow are moved by the challenge despite themselves, may be a matter for psychological contemplation, or for sociological analysis, for a historical study, perhaps for pure philosophy. Artists who employ and re-employ this theme do not really offer analyses, they offer involvement of audiences through acts of story telling, of presenting catchy puzzles that they solve while using the solutions as bait for bigger puzzles. The puzzles are neither here nor there: they serve to elicit from audiences imaginative acts of participation, and these acts sway hither and thither, direct and redirect, and the art objects are the emerging patterns of such feelings, not the feelings, the words, the pictures, the sound-patterns. But the more important the story, the tune, the bait for involvement, the less durable the art.

And so we have low involvement and high involvement, and low level of durability and high level of durability, where the high level of durability is of low level involvement, or of increasing level of involvement. Works that grow on you increase your level of involvement; others either come strong from the start, or wear off.

Movies usually wear off because they are, first and foremost, stories. The story line of a very durable movie is thin to begin with, and gets quickly thinner. When it does this with ease, like in *Pather Panchali* and *Tokyo Nights* and *Los Olvidados*, it is a real pleasure to watch and watch and watch. Otherwise the story line gets in the way, as in Chaplin classics, not to mention *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

Check this with the facts about kids. Kids like stories; they think about Cinderella while they dream about her, and they want to see her many more times than adults do. Have you seen a good Cinderella movie? Whatever your taste, whether a Marilyn Monroe Cinderella, *Sabrina*, *Mahogany*, *It Happened One Night* (a he-Cinderella), *Klute* (a thriller-Cinderella), or even *David and Bathsheba*, if you could stomach it first time - no matter how enjoyable it was, I doubt that you could watch it again; yet kids will watch Disney's version a few times and love it better and better until they have had enough.

And so, briefly, as long as movies are stories, the better the story, the harder they are to re-watch (and even then we look for other qualities in them when we re-watch them), and the more poetry and the less story, the more durability. But how many movies succeed to get reality out of the way and replace it with suggestion so as to become poetic? How many movies are dream-like? No, not dream-like in the sense that Cinderella is obviously a daydream, or in the sense that Fred Astair and Ginger Rogers are dream people. Rather, in the way the classic dream in *Los Olvidados* is a dream; in the sense that *Caligari* fails so miserably yet *Metropolis* at high moments succeeds; in the sense

that *Pather Panchali* and *Tokyo Nights* are dreams all the way and *Gold Rush* at classic moments and *Yellow Submarine* when it worships Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.

The problem is real for all love poets and for all photographers. We have to use material for our art, but we use it as means and want our audiences to transcend them, which is not an easy task. This is why durability is a test - but only a test - of quality: familiarity helps materials recede into background, and then we can concentrate on observing what is left.

II

I have three recent books on the philosophy of the cinema before me; and just as three people are a crowd, three books are a literature. I do not know what to do with this literature, it seems so glib. Cavell's book is astonishing in its glibness. It says, to begin with, that it will discuss movies not as they really are but as the author remembers them. Though I do not quite know what a movie is, and though movie experiences, as all experiences, may count even when erroneous - at times particularly when they are erroneous, e.g. in the theory of illusions - I find it puzzling that authors can be so cavalier as not to wish to check and eliminate some of their errors. Suppose my review should be not of this book as it really is but of it as I remember it - regardless of whether my memory serves me well or not. And suppose Professor Cavell wishes to reply to my review. He can refer to my review as he remembers it and to his work as he remembers it and to his report in the book of a given movie as he now remembers the movie. This will lead to a fast proliferation and growth, but the growth will be cancerous, not healthy, not progressive, not enlightening.

Writing about movies captures the glamour of the movies, the excitement of a moment of an intriguing twist of the plot, of an aesthetic experience. Are these useful or parasitic? *The Man Who Shot Liberty Vallance* is a terrific movie. It has a simple idea that unfolds in the evolution of the plot, and a great deal of the engagement and evolution, intrigue and excitement of the movie is the unfolding of the idea as a plot. It takes no more than the intelligence of an average movie-goer, as mildly exercised as while watching a movie, to capture all this. Yet Professor Cavell finds it fit to tell us of this idea. I do not complain: a reader who has not seen the movie has the pleasure of reading a quasi-review of the plot, and a reader who has seen it has the pleasure of remembering a happy moment of artistic or quasi-artistic pleasure. Nor can I say that the telling of the idea plays no role in Professor Cavell's book. I only report that when I read it, it struck me as serving no purpose and as parasitic: the Professor could go on reporting a few more plot ideas. Indeed, just as there are compilations of Shakespeare plots (Lamb), Plato cribs (Shorey), opera plots (Kobbe), or story and novel plots, so we may have, like TV movie guides, plot outlines of one-hundred great movies. But what has this to do with the philosophy of the cinema?

Professor Cavell does have some philosophical, or quasi- or pseudo-philosophical discussions. Do we see Gable on the screen? A picture of him? An image? Who cares.

My experience with Paul Weiss's *Cinematics* is also confounding. It is written more carefully, but is, thereby, more puzzling. The book is unreviewable. Its metaphysics is of this order:

Anger is mental and bodily at once. A purely "mental anger" is a bitter thought, a state of resentment and animosity, a judgment which is ad verse, disowning, antagonistic. A purely

“physical” anger is a turbulence erupting in a destructive act. To have the one is to have thoughts governed by what they do not contain; to have the other is to have the body uncontrolled, crudely and violently displayed. Not so evidently, but as surely, every other emotion – fear, hope, terror, resentment, pity, love, repugnance, joy – has mental and physical sides. This, Descartes (who is most responsible for the radical separation between mind and body which characterizes so much of modern thought) not only knew but underscored. An unfortunate insistence on what is clear and distinct, though, led him to conceive of a pun: mind and a pure body. He thought of them as being equally real, but possessed of radically different natures. As a consequence, the answer with which he in fact began, that mind and body are not separated but are connected emotionally, he abandoned for the sake of acknowledging two abstractions, taken to be realities. Neither he, nor any of his followers, could ever bring these back together again. [pp. 131-32.]

Its cinematics is ill-informed and ill-digested. The juiciest are the refutations written by friends who had read the manuscript. These are interspersed in the text *without* any feedback. At times they are evidently invalid. For example, the author says that in cinema greetings can reveal both parties in a close up; but not when Bernadette greets the holy virgin, says the smart commentator. And commentators too are not well prepared and why should they be. The chapter on performers versus actors refers to non-acting of immense varieties, from the King to Mastroianni, and I would off-hand write a better chapter. The author mixes up this matter with the case of directors who keep the script secret from actors, who are like conductors who first conduct the whole symphony not at any of the many rehearsals but on the first night. These are two very different matters, and I am appalled at the distance the author has from acting studios not to know that the very smallest fragment of a movie can be either acted or non-acted. One commentator shows how remote he is from the cutting room. Incidentally, can one see the two releases of *Isadora*, the first a big flop and the second successful; or do I fall prey to another P. R. myth? How much of seeing a movie is preconditioned by the press release? Will the press release still be effective when we see an oldie in the art house or on the late show? Do we try to capture old glamour then? or do we aim then at the poetry?

I do not know why Professor Weiss, and as we shall see later, others, consider scripts of the essence of so much of the movie world. There are feature movies that are both fiction and scriptless, aren't there? I remember reading that some new wave directors had their scripts in their heads only; but are there exploratory ones working towards the script? Will *Casablanca* or Brando's *Mutiny on the Bounty* qualify perhaps as a scriptless movie? Is *Hallelujah the Hills* such, or am I misled by its amateurism? If there are, then the whole framework of Weiss and his commentators is refuted. But even then the refutation is marginal and all they observe is the difference between a one artist job and many artists' job - be the job a script or a score or a piece of sculpture, not to mention a gem of a fourteen short line sonnet, or the proverbial cathedral or the movie. This is why Weiss says scripts are unreadable and commentators say readable scripts are no movies. Big deal! How can I review such poor stuff? Are breathtaking blueprints of cathedrals not cathedrals? Of course, they are only pieces of paper, but the dream is what makes the eye that glances at a piece of paper transcend it and fix its gaze on a most monumental piece of stone from the quarry of the mind.

Even this most obvious characteristic of cinema - the hackneyed cathedral quality it has - is not exploited even in trivial matters. It is Erwin Panowsky who is quoted on p. 70 to describe the difference between play and movie by the unique image of a movie production - a uniqueness that does not fade with multiple production of a single script

or even a single novel or a story line. Weiss opposes Panowsky by saying that just as Othello or Nora can leave the stage and enter our daily discourses, so can and do Ben Hur and Caligari. This is typical of all the discussions in the book: they are constantly off center and fuse issues deliberately or sloppily or both. What does the cocktail chatter have to do with the uniqueness of a work of art? At times everyone runs contrary to main theme, e.g. on p. 93 Weiss says movies are director-made and the commentator says no, producer-made, and ends p. 94 by admitting 'this is all very messy'. I think Jarvie dealt with all this much better and much more tentatively.

I flipped through the book and found many passing remarks that were inane, so many that require pages of clarifying, discussing, correlating. Weiss says, for example, 'Good theatre directors let actors come out all by themselves'. True only for some, certainly not for all; certainly ambiguous for Stanislavski and all his followers to date who do want you to come out and they insist on it, but in their own very Stanislavskian way and to confirm their Stanislavskian philosophy of life and all else. And what is true of the theatre is doubly true of the cinema with this and that sort of way of directing movies, not to mention well-filmed plays and opera and ballet on the one hand, and documentaries, trailers, newsreels, lectures, even stills of children and of weddings, etc., on the other. It is all too much to handle and too low-level to merit handling.

Linden's book is doubtlessly the most carefully conceived, executed, and produced volume on the philosophy of the movies that has ever come my way. Yet it has too many defects to count as a first. It suffers, in particular, from the defect common to the whole literature on the topic, excess glitter. For example, every thoughtful person with a minimal knowledge of movie affairs knows that there exist good, bad and indifferent movies made of good, bad and indifferent (1) novels, (2) plays, (3) short stories, or even (4) poems of varying quality. Lists of examples of these $3 \cdot 3 \cdot 4 = 24$ categories glitter but distract. It may sound smart to mention at least an excellent movie based on a very poor poem and a poor one based on an excellent one. But it is not; it is more problematic to mention an example than not, because whereas readers may supply their own examples in the unlikely event that they need them, they may contest any author's example as based on poor judgment. This sidetracks debates.

Judgmental variance is a perennial aggravation in aesthetics; when one reads David Hume's examples of uncontested artistic excellence, one can gasp. Linden takes *Battleship Potemkin* as an uncontested example of excellence, and I am willing to concede this point without extensive examination: my *a priori* impression is the same. Yet the judgment is plainly false. The movie consists of five episodes; one of them is hardly related to the others, namely, the steps episode. And all who sing the praise of the movie have that episode in mind, and almost all stills from that movie are from it. Movie history would be different without it. And, indeed, there are some excellent shots in it; yet Eisenstein's monumentalism finally wins over his artistic taste even in that episode and so I think it is not even Eisenstein's best: his best is a movie, or rather a piece of a movie, that can sustain his heavy-handed monumentalism, such as the ice battle scene in *Alexander Nevsky*, whose closing scenes are shameful.

Readers familiar with movie hagiography may be incensed by the previous paragraph. And it is the artistic judgment in it, not the aesthetics, that might annoy them. Aesthetic theory is supposed to offer criteria to enhance some judgments and overturn others. This is true of ethical theory too, and even of physical theory. But physical theory operates on

a surprisingly uniform field of judgment, and when it sways judgment one way or another, the sway is fairly clear cut and it reaches consensus within a relatively short time. In ethics the consensus is much less across the board, since, clearly enough, in certain cases individualist and collectivist standards clash in a manner that leads holders of the two criteria to different judgments; and there are quite a few efforts to find alternative criteria as well. Yet this situation is superior to that of aesthetics where criteria never impose on their holders the rejection of a favored piece of art. I am reminded here of a celebrated music critic of the *New Yorker* who for decades repeatedly insisted that with no tonality and tonal harmonies - of the doh-me-soh type - there is no music; and though he was flexible enough to see tonality in any shadow of tonality, he simply had to condemn so much twentieth-century music, not only all Schoenberg past opus five or so, but also most Stravinsky. And then he heard Penderecki and just loved him. It is not music, he said, it is sheer theatre.

I mention this case because perhaps it is a case of foul play. If so, then I must reverse judgment and say it is seldom the case, not never, that an artistic judgment overturns an aesthetic criterion.

In the case of movies the possibility of finding such cases of overthrow are even harder, because the cinema is less like pure music and more like incidental music, ballet music, dance music, and the like. That is to say, if Penderecki's piece were not concert hall music but functional, then certainly the example I have cited could not count as foul play. And, indeed, one may have very strict criteria of, and expectations from, a movie one would call excellent, and enjoy tremendously a movie that does not begin to answer them. One may demand that art be gripping and enjoy a light political satire for extraneous reasons, or simply enjoy a piece of trash as mere diversion. Even the literary critic of the most exquisite taste may enjoy a cheap dime novel or a cheap thriller for relaxation or out of sheer private sentimental reasons. I will not trust the judgment of a movie-goer who cannot easily perceive the artistic difference between the better and the worse James Bond movies, while considering them all trash.

A major dispute in the present volume is on the topology of the seventh art: is it more akin to the novel or the drama? I find the discussions largely incomprehensible and totally out of place: certainly some movies are excellent in their very success as imitation drama, others as substitutes for the classic adventure novel, others still But I fall for glamour myself here. I apologize.

Yet I cannot dismiss Linden's book. His chapters do present movies as dramas, as novels, as social commentaries. And there always are movies that fit one category better than another, just as we have the psychological and the political etc. novel, play, etc. The author, however, seems to me to be seeking the right sort, the true essence of the movie. He is here a follower of the phenomenological school; and on this point I am skeptical. I thus disqualify myself from commentary on the major point of the book. The major point is that movies relate the inner world and the outer world and thus present man to himself as a being-in-the-world. Without the mystique (or the hyphens) I understand, agree, and deem it not very relevant to movies. With the mystique (or the hyphens) I deem it comprehensible only to the elect who dig phenomenology.

Generally, is there a specific philosophy of a specific art form? There is an aesthetic, but what is the philosophy of music as opposed to that of the plastic arts? Is the philosophy of poetry so distinct from the philosophy of the theatre? No doubt, every medium has its

peculiarities, social, psychological, technical; even black on white drawings radically differ from white on black, just as prose poetry, is poetry and light verse is prose. Or maybe not; but the question of classification matters less than the fact that those who want to master the medium of drawing white on black have to learn more than merely the technique of drawing black on white; and the same goes for writing light verse.

I think the aesthetic experience is one. I may be in error, I but I hold, for a change, the established view. And it follows, then, that there are many routes to the aesthetic peak. The philosophy of the aesthetic experience is traditional. Do we need to add to it the philosophy of any specific art form? I say we do not.

Philosophy can come to aid in quite a different way and that is by setting standards and agenda. For example, I would recommend, to start with, all possible austerity measures; try not to glitter, try to use minimum examples and only the least known or least contested. Also, I recommend that the theory of the art form - not the philosophy of it - center on some major problems, and that concerned writers suggest their agenda and explain them. There are standard questions now of agenda in the theory of the visual arts; more so in architectural theory. The theory of music centers on the questions of tonality and dissonance: does a piece of music have to be dissonant-consonant based, or must we consider a piece of serial music as having for harmony only consonants? And does music need melody? The New Novel tradition attempted novels without plots; were they successful?

These days the debate rages, who makes the movie, the author or the director? I find the debate incomprehensible. On the superficial level, we have poor movies based on scripts by excellent writers and vice versa. Moreover, we have both excellent and poor scripts based on either excellent or poor plays, novels, and short stories. On the profound level, I do not know the rules of the debate. On the whole, I feel, fixing the rules, trying to keep discussions on the superficial level, trying to keep the discussion technical but not esoteric, all these may help create movie theory on the level of the theory of music, of the visual arts, or of the novel. Not that these are satisfactory, but they are already somewhat developed. Not so movie theory. Theory, of course, relates to aesthetics. But other fields enviably include lists of those extant items that the diverse aesthetics schools take for the time being as not under dispute.

Let me conclude with what there is or seems to be. There is a semblance of a literature, but after rejecting the incomprehensible and the vague, next to nothing remains that calls for attention. Apart from phenomenological esotericism. the major problem seems to be the question of whether the art of the cinema is in fact a special art that calls for specific philosophic considerations? The reason why this question is more imposing regarding the seventh art than its predecessors is the impressive fact that the fascination of movies for the first and second generation movie-goers is much much stronger than the fascination of any other art. This reads, I think, passive audience engagement in movies is much easier to achieve than in other arts, and this, to repeat, makes movies that are artless much more acceptable than poems that are artless, for example. But this is a mere technicality, not anything so specific as to require a specific philosophy. Listening to a novel, one may argue, is more engaging than reading it, and so we can more easily listen to a poor story than read it - depending on how able the reader is, too - and so we can re-listen and re-read only the ones that more actively excite the imagination. The questions specific to movies, music, and paintings are all either non-specific, or specific

and technical. Yet one can generalize the idea of a total experience and ask whether a multi-media experience is better or worse than a specific art form. Is a movie, for example, a better movie if it is also a musical experience? *Citizen Kane* has atrocious music; *Rashomon* and *Tokyo Nights* have excellent sound tracks of poor music; *The Golden Coach* that plays Vivaldi and *Les Amants* that play Brahms somewhat violate the idea of a sound track, and so does the cheap piano music sound track that educational TV adds to its screening of silent movies. The use of music in *Pather Panchali* and in *Never on a Sunday* is imaginative and in *Bicycle Thieves* it is avant-garde and ahead of much of Stockhausen's acknowledged avant-garde music. The fact that the avant-garde music of both *Bicycle Thieves* and *Red Desert* does so well is of supreme aesthetic interest, as the fact that avant-garde opera and ballet do better than avant-garde concert halls. Similar things may, but need not, hold for paintings. Why were *Caligari* and the Odessa steps scene of *Potemkin* so influential yet flops? Why were *Carnival in Flanders*, *Lust for Life*, and *The Marquise of O* - - - so successful?

Is a multimedia experience more of the same? Is it a new total immersion that invites more, not the usual less, audience participation? How far can it go? Can it include actual sexual erotic experiences as the New Theatre has once suggested, for example? I do not know. I do not think this question is specific to the cinema. Nevertheless, it was the movie-world, as our authors call it, that has pushed us nearer to the question, and happenings and similar experiments were essays in answering it; abortive as they surely were, they surely also have aroused curiosity, at times (Expo '67, British pavilion) even have deserved admiration. Perhaps here we have a new aesthetic problem-situation and new problems toward which movies contributed much (think of Huxley's *Brave New World*, its smellies and feelies). They seem to be engaging our authors and their readers.