

THE FUTURE OF CINEMA

by Alexandre Astruc
translated by Adrian Martin

The only chance any art has of reaching maturity lies in the extent to which it can become a *form of expression*. The problem of cinema's future (we discuss it a lot at present) is completely wrapped up in this question: will the cinema manage to become the means of expressing absolutely any human thought — or not? Or, to put it another way: will it be possible to one day say on film what others have said, for centuries, on painted canvases or in the pages of novels?

That is a far cry from the current situation of our art. To grasp the full significance of this question, we must obliterate a great deal from our minds: the fact that cinema is still, today, merely a spectacle and that, apart from some marvellous exceptions, its greatest successes only ever happen on the levels of entertainment and anecdote. The great names of painting or literature do not belong only to *writers* or *painters*, i.e., those artisans or technicians able to place a certain mode of address in the service of a particular sensibility; they belong, above all, to those minds who could inscribe in their works what we can call a *metaphysics*, belonging just as much to the history of the mind as to a history of forms. Michelangelo was not only a painter adept at painting bodies in torment, and Balzac not solely a builder of intrigues, once he had learned his craft from Walter Scott. The art of the West has never been just an art of ideas; its painters are lyric poets just as its philosophers, too, are poets. Pascal is a philosopher and Racine a playwright, but they say the same thing: that man is nothing without grace. Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, but the cry also belonged, at the close of 19th century, to Balzac the novelist and Debussy the composer; that very same cry, of a universe torn apart by its essential movement, sneaks inside the icy rhetoric of Mallarmé, as well as Paul Cézanne's apples.

Let's get back to cinema. Here's the paradox: the art of film is currently the art of saying nothing. What it does manage to say, it says despite itself, to the extent that it shuts up. It's no coincidence, to be sure, that cinema started as the art of silence. This art was born gagged, and it had to be taught how to speak, but it never gave a blessed thought to opening its mouth. This silence is definitely revealing: but only from the viewpoint of psychoanalysis or sociology, the domain of which—whatever one's opinion of German aesthetics—does not coincide with that of art history. American comedy belongs to the 20th century, but in just the same way that the popular novel is linked to the 19th: it signifies the era, but does not create it. To put it another way: the 19th century is Stendhal and Rimbaud, not Eugène Sue. I realise that, in sociological terms, Sue might be more interesting than Balzac. But Sue is completely defined by his era (he wrote, every day, by taking down the dictation of what the era expected from him), while Mallarmé and his little pieces of paper defined the era by expressing something essential.

The true authors of films are their producers. There are no Collected Works of Alfred Hitchcock or William Wyler; only those of David Selznick and Darryl Zanuck. Scripted for mediocre sensibilities, it is fundamental that they reflect only temperaments that are nothing out of the ordinary. However, the domain of sensibility is clearly not the same as the domain of art; at best, there are moments (such as the Romantic periods) when they coincide. Of course, Beethoven is “easier to take” than Bach, because Beethoven shares a common denominator with Romanticism. In cinema, the essential question for an author is precisely how to dole out this common denominator: that's why all subjects are exactly the same. Imagine Mallarmé having to disguise himself as Pierre-Jean de Béranger⁰¹ in order to reassure his public.

In cinema, it seems, such disguise is more and more necessary. Note well the fact that, once upon a time, this question was never even posed. Why? Because, for the first 50 years of its history, the domain of cinema precisely coincided with the reigning sensibility of its time. The themes of silent cinema, for example, are post-war themes (escape, exoticism, bars, jazz, childishness, cops, etc). Cinema has benefitted, up until now, from a state of innocence: that's why there have been so few true *cineastes maudits*, cursed filmmakers — Jean Vigo maybe, or today Erich von Stroheim — whereas in painting and poetry... And, likewise, so few strangled, totally misunderstood films. In order for cinema to have its “Manet Affair” or its “Baudelaire Scandal,” we had to wait for *La Règle du jeu* (Jean Renoir, 1939), whose audience smashed up the seats, *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (Robert Bresson, 1945), or *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1942). These works shocked not because they were in themselves shocking, but because they had forgotten to wear their disguise costumes.

Renoir, in his creative excitement, as he mowed down rabbits in the clearing of *La Règle du jeu*, did not realise he had let his “spectacular entrepreneur” mask slip. He forgot to “make cinema,” and instead spoke of what was close to his heart. We anticipated *La Grande Illusion* (1937) as something that might belong to the “worthy film” category; but it immediately struck us as something maybe like the *Liaisons dangereuses* of our time, offering only distant memories of what used to be called “cinema.” It was the same story with *Partie de Campagne* (1936), which sat in a box for ten years before being projected. That's not cinema; it's an uninterrupted unreeling of celluloid on which something has been caught, impressed — blowing in the wind, like the rifled pages of a book. Film is no longer a spectacle; it has become a form of expression.

And that's why it needs to disguise itself: because we have reached the point where cinema is able to say everything.

Not only *show* it all, but express it all. The tiny patch of ground that we had allowed it, midway between boulevard theater, the popular novel, and reportage, is now exhausted: we cannot kickstart one hundred more poetic documentaries on Paris, surveys of current events, or American comedies. What's left to say? Everything. Cinema has had its chroniclers and its photographers, now it awaits its Stendhal, its Shakespeare, its Pascal, its Paul Valéry, or its Proust. Yet that's why we must still carry a mask, because Stendhal is allowed to hang around for a hundred years, but us...

Lately, cinema has been experiencing a fundamental crisis. Something has died: the spectacle-film, a visual narration lasting 90 minutes, divided into 20 sequences and around 600 shots. The cinema which is busy being born will resemble a book far more than a spectacle; its language will be that of the *essay*—poetic, dramatic, and dialectical all at once. We really have to convince ourselves that the current conditions governing the exploitation of cinematic vision are not truly definitive. There is no reason to believe that cinema will always be a spectacle.

We cannot yet properly imagine what television will be like, but there is a good chance it will contribute to the creation of a new cinema addressed, above all, to our intelligence. This is why the idea of a “Descartes of cinema” is, in itself, not so paradoxical, after all.⁰² If it seems so today, that's only because no distributor would be insane enough to publicly exhibit a film which is, on the cinematic plane, the equivalent to Pascal's *Pensées* or Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*. But Valéry has an audience, and it's large enough that a TV program could be devoted to him several hours a week.

The future of cinema is completely bound up in its developmental possibilities as a language. The documentary age, when the camera was set up on a street corner to record the minor happiness of its image-cargo, is well and truly over. Now we must speak, and speak in order to say

something. Little by little, film replaces paper or canvas as the privileged material where the trace of individual obsessions are inscribed, where they unfold. The filmmaker will come to say “I” just like the novelist or poet, and sign, in his fever, swaying cathedrals of celluloid, just as Van Gogh could express himself while sitting in a chair poised on kitchen tiles. Works will be valuable only to the degree that they offer an inner landscape. We ask the cinema of tomorrow to be the seismograph of our hearts, the wayward pendulum inscribing on film the tender dialectic of our most cherished ideas.

We know the core of the problem is right there. The cinema only has a future if the camera can manage to replace the pen: that’s why I assert that its language is neither fiction nor reportage, but the essay. Once again, it must tear itself away from the dictatorship of photography, and the faithful representation of reality. And finally, it must become a path to the abstract.

The development of 16 millimeter today, and of television tomorrow, are going to greatly enhance the possibilities for cinema expression. Step by step, we will reach a state obliterating the clean demarcation line between amateur and professional cinema. It is strongly advisable to imagine that the current crisis of cinema — its commercial crisis — will lead to the emergence of those marginal works made in extraordinary conditions and on unexpected subjects, works whose creation would have been unthinkable during a “normal” period. At the extreme, if the cost of filmmaking continues to drop, we can imagine a situation when all the studios will close, while streets and private apartments become the battleground for amateurs writing their confessions with a 16mm Paillard camera in their parents’s dining rooms.

I’m hardly exaggerating. An era in cinema history is in the process of dying. The already long tradition of spectacle-cinema which, for example in France, runs from Jacques de Baroncelli to the heights of

Marcel Carné by way of Jacques Feyder, in which the art of film amounts only to dramatic staging and the photographic illustration of a narrative, is today giving up its final fruits. We cannot watch *la Char treuse de Parme* (Christian-Jaque, 1947), for instance, without feeling, beyond even any matter of quality, a strange sensation of attending a spectacle from another age, where nothing corresponds to our ideas, our preoccupations, our beliefs.

This art, which is hardly even a technique, limits itself to animated photography: none of the problems intrinsic to cinema are raised or resolved at the highest level; and just where we expect something that could be the equivalent, in filmic language, of Stendhal’s style, we find only a rhetoric of camera movements that, in the best cases, are justified only in light of the story itself, i.e., to accompany characters or uncover panoramas. Such movements never serve to introduce into cinema the equivalent of literary or pictorial style, i.e., that *gap*, that imperceptible rift between the work and its author—the means by which the author takes up a position vis-à-vis the work. We can say—to summarize a cluster of ideas now familiar to a new generation of critics, aestheticians, and filmmakers—that technique is still, at the moment, only a means of very precisely narrating a *mise en scène* ... which is the exact opposite to what technique becomes in our dreams, an incredibly precise language of camera movements and expansive shots shaped to correspond to the times and modes of words, constituting a syntax and thus a metaphysics.

To put it another way, *découpage technique* or “shot breakdown” will become the means of expression for a conception of the world. Formal problems will be of an ontological order. Where Dos Passos used a simple past tense and Flaubert a past imperfect — because these modes corresponded to their respective conceptions of time—the filmmaker will take recourse to the arrangement of elements in the frame, use (or not) a shot in depth, mobile framings or a tracking-back. In cinema, every technical choice relates to a

conception of the world, and it is precisely in this choice of technique that the entire art of cinema lies.

Such is true of every artistic form: the more evolved it gets, the more individualized and meaningful it becomes. This is because, as André Malraux has well shown in his *Imaginary Museum*, the greatest rigour and most genuine authenticity in the domain of inspiration correspond to the highest specificity in technique.⁰³ Painting becomes more meaningful at the moment that it overcomes everything in it which is not painting. Cézanne said more than Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonnier⁰⁴ because his art was less figurative, and it is precisely to the extent that it becomes more formal that it also becomes more meaningful. Likewise, it isn't by chance that the only specific technique in French cinema—Jean Renoir's technique—cannot be associated with any school, and that it belongs to an author whose works carry the largest amount of what we have no words for, thus leading us to that point of appealing to a "vision of the world." There is technique here only because there is something to reveal.

I well know that nothing is more suspect in the cinematic domain than to talk of technique. A phenomenon analogous to that which Jean Paulhan has denounced in the literary world under the name of *terror* is noticeable here, deriving from an obsession with innocence and a romantic, naïve belief in a sort of primacy of intuition over means of expression.⁰⁵ But the truth is clear: it is in those directors whose technique is most monstrously clumsy that such bad faith is most evident; this tendency generally disappears when they have managed to master technique. The ease of Renoir, the virtuosity with which he resolves the most abstract problems, are, in him, the sign of a pure soul. Technique does not exist *in* his work, because it no longer exists *for* his work—I mean, as a problem or obstacle. From that point, it's possible for Renoir to transform technique into a means of expression. If we analyze his films shot by shot, we perceive, for instance, that his *découpage* is carried out

'in depth'. All the characters's entries are performed from either under the camera or in the deep background of the frame — never simply from the right or left, as in the two-dimensional technique of Carné or Christian-Jaque. Because Renoir works within space, his camera movements do not divide the scene up in terms of width and height; they turn it around. That's why there is an abundance of tracking-in shots, reframings through turning movements.

And a comparison is in order here, between the uses of tracking shots in Renoir and in Carné — a comparison which throws particular light on that famous analytic, descriptive, French style of which we are, it seems, so proud. Carné only ever uses movement to narrate and delineate; he follows, analyzes, draws forward, from frame to frame, the thread of the story that screenwriter Jacques Prévert has already constructed. But Renoir penetrates, enters, moves through his universe on a victor's chariot. He runs, frolics, rolls about in the mud, sets himself up like some old African king in his empire. Seizing in his frames the characters that were previously only in his head, he is not content to merely analyze them: rather, he *creates* them. He lets the universe speak by covering it in depth; he directs with a snowpiercer, crushing the extras against the sides of his camera, getting right up close to Sylvia Bataille as she rolls in the grass, or (on the contrary) hanging back nonchalantly on a street corner, hurling a blanket over the enormous snout of the camera, letting the scraps fall where they may, uncorking the big booze bottle, and chucking a napkin around his throat. Framing in Renoir is a perpetual re-creation. The sheen that results is truly this mirror in which a world is made to appear; already no longer the type of mirror that allows us to amble down Stendhal's road, but a world veritably *born* in the mirror, with the camera mounted atop a big motorcar, and us not really knowing what is about to appear on the roadside in this reflection: peasants, soldiers, nannies, or bus drivers—we just don't know, we're hurtling, always in motion, and all of it,

ultimately, feels as if it has emerged from the stomach of this Big Daddy Renoir, who one day laid out his bottles so as to participate more fully in his own, small, personal universe.⁰⁶

Please forgive this sudden burst of enthusiasm for Renoir. A serious magazine article should maintain, from start to end, the same, sober tone. My text, which began in speculative mode, has ended up in fragrant lyricism, shaking the tambourines, firing machine-guns from the page corners, bringing in the entire dictionary of synonyms regarding the act of digestion, and successively discharging an unruly bunch of crude approximations upon this trellis of printed lines. But that's because, in this new cinema which is in the process of being born, our Big Daddy Renoir is something of a prophet. He's the precursor, misunderstood, the monolith, the inspired one. Alongside Bresson who is the consciousness of this new cinema, Welles its fireworks, and Roberto Rossellini its cunning, Renoir is the first in a gallery of film auteurs, camera-men, carving out in a single frame, from the matter of nature, their obsessions—as far removed from documentary realism as from theater, true writers of cinema, *filmmers*,⁰⁷ sculptors in glycerine, rhetoricians of celluloid, eyes fixed on the prize beyond their camera, stealing the faces of their stars, and pointillistically sketching the lines of their dreams. No mere hacks, of course, these film authors mix up the totality of the world's objects and creatures so as to divert them from any natural order and oblige them to become the reference points of the makers's own, figurative universes. Ahead of their time, *cinéastes maudits* whose works slide off the image-rink amid the angry silence of Saturday night crowds, they manage to make films for just a few people, those viewers who have escaped from the general merriment, who have passed somehow, for some unknown reason, right through the celluloid wall of current production.

At once directors, screenwriters, production designers, make-up artists—that's how it has to be—maybe also music com-

posers and, of course, actors as well: in their hands, the cinema once again becomes the work of a single person, a strip unfolding the rigorous dialectic of a succession of images whose theme gets lost and is confused with a perpetual transformation of forms and actions that are no longer *illustration*, but creation itself. Four of five films of today and of yesterday thus prefigure the future era of cinema, and these are the films we have learned by heart, running them back and forth through the Moviola so as to grasp their secret. That's why I find the following anecdote so revealing: this tale of a boy who didn't at all like *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* when it was projected on a Saturday afternoon in a theater on the Champs-Élysées—but who was astonished, completely fascinated by its slow unfolding, once it was unveiled for him, and only him, on a tiny screen, like something to be *read*, no longer just *seen*; only then could he discover this extraordinary work in its true light.⁰⁸

So this is where we are, what we await, and what we believe: a camera in the right trouser pocket, recording on an image-sound track the wanderings, the slow or frenetic unfolding of our imaginary universe, confession-cinema, essay, revelation, message, psychoanalysis, obsession, the machine that can read the words and images of our inner landscape, the totality of things, objects, creatures, stones, cities, gestures, and cries of the universe brought to the status of material, the art where we paint with agitated faces and write with the guttural sounds of butchered seals; the pen which pumps out directly, as part of the same universe, the most formidable vocabulary that any artist has ever had at his fingertips, the human reality which stages the ballets of our imagination on the stage of the universe, the crushed rocks reconfigured according to another order, making us like God since we are remaking, in our own image, the entirety of creation; the *caméra-stylo* or camera-pen, this art in which the entire universe is our material. So you, Holy Guardians of Realism, do you really think that we are going to limit ourselves, in

this situation, to rendering a faithful reflection or an imprint, when all you can offer us here is the sacrifice of mankind's dream of building, from faces and sighs, the cathedrals of our imagination?⁰⁹

There's a time for modesty, but also a time for excess. Abel Gance, mocked by a generation of derisive critics: we offer to rehabilitate your good name. Cinema today needs extreme ambitions, waywardness, craziness, idiot dreams, hypertrophy of the brain, wilful pride, exploding skulls, icy debauchery — just as much as it needs consciousness or reasoned choices. And so let's have done with the contemplation of our great forebears, and those bums calmly arranged on the moleskin seats of film clubs, our night schools. Realise that something fundamental is in the process of coming into being: an art is slowly tak-

ing possession of those domains that, until now, were reserved for other forms of expression, in order to become the most total, most exhaustive resource ever offered to mankind. The future of cinema, from this day forward, is embroiled in the future of art itself. It is, for the 20th century, this unique, privileged form, destined to replace all those that preceded it, and beyond which there will be no other, possible expression any time soon.

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01— Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780-1857) was a very popular French poet and songwriter.

02— Astruc is here alluding to his own discussion in his earlier essay of 1948, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo," of the "Descartes of today." See *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, edited by Peter Graham and Ginette Vincendeau (London: British Film Institute, 2009), p. 33.

03— André Malraux's concept of the "imaginary museum" (often referred to in English as

the "museum without walls") was first proposed in his *The Voices of Silence* (Princeton University Press, 1978, first published in English in 1953, and in French in 1947), then elaborated in his three-volume series *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* ("the imaginary museum of world sculpture") between 1952 and 1954. The strong pictorial and design element of this book series wielded a strong influence over Jean-Luc Godard's TV series *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998).

04— Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonnier (1815-1891) was a French Classicist painter and sculptor famed for his depiction of military scenes.

05— See Jean Paulhan, trans. Michael Syrotinski, *The Flowers of Tarbes, or Terror in Literature* (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

06— Normally, references to "Père Renoir" (whatever the language) are to Jean's father, the painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir. In this context, however, Astruc clearly intends the filmmaker

to be seen, in several senses, as a "Daddy."

07— Coincidentally, and probably without reference to Astruc's formulation here, Jonas Mekas has always defined himself as "not a filmmaker, but a filmer." As well, *Le Filmeur* (2005) is the title of a "personal diary" video/film work by Alain Cavalier.

08— We can assume that Astruc is speaking autobiographically here, about first seeing Bresson's film as a teenager, and later studying it on the "tiny screen" of a Moviola editing machine.

09— Although the name of André Bazin is mentioned nowhere in Astruc's articles of 1948, this dismissal of the idea of cinematic realism as a "faithful reflection or imprint" of the world is probably intended as an allusive rejoinder to his writings. See Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (Montreal: Caboose, 2009).

10— Abel Gance (1889-1981), director of many remarkable and innovative films, is best remembered today for his epic *Napoléon* (1927).