



# THE HORSE WHO DRANK THE SKY

Film Experience Beyond Narrative and Theory

*Murray Pomerance*





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DRANK THE SKY



*Film Experience Beyond  
Narrative and Theory*

MURRAY POMERANCE

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*To Leslie Mitchner*

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*Le résultat obtenu,—et ceci au point de bouleverser  
complètement les sens de l'Humanité. Il devient tout  
à fait impossible de distinguer le modèle de la copie.*

*[The result is to confuse completely the senses of  
human beings, to render the copy and the original  
indistinguishable.]*

Villiers de l'Isle Adam, *L'Ève future*



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Toronto-Los Angeles-Paris, August 2007







# OVERTURE

Late in June of 1982, in a mumbling crowd, and daydreaming about the stars, I followed two nine- or ten-year-old boys out of a screening of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. As we hit the cold light of day and turned onto the sidewalk outside the theater, one said to the other, rather drily, I thought, “Good directing.” “Yeah,” said his friend, “and excellent cinematography.” For the “Wow!” I waited, but it never came. Now, it is easy to imagine these two as recent Ph.D.s in cinema studies, still, perhaps—I hope not!—holding back that “Wow!”

It seems necessary to take a new look at the act of watching motion pictures in our society, so very much has it become stylized as one or the other of two different extremes: as frivolous and unreflected “entertainment” or as sanctimonious scholarship. What we see onscreen could come, not to enlighten and inform, or to entertain, but to move us. “We go to the movies instead of moving,” Tom Wingfield muses in Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*, and sadly, for many viewers—both those who are obsessed with Nic Cage’s or Orlando Bloom’s or Halle Berry’s or Angelina Jolie’s dating history and those who need to link everything they see with Lacan or Žižek or Baudrillard or Mulvey—the idea of being affected by a movie, or the idea of stopping long enough to consider the way one has been affected, seems out of the question if not entirely valueless. But Tom was wrong, I think. In going to the movies we *are* moving—certainly we are being moved—and it is pleasant and illuminating to think about how this can be the case and what it can mean for us that it is. Film can move one to write a book; that much is certain.

This particular book, very like a film, should introduce itself by its action, rather than relying on its author’s alien voice to do the task. So it is that I have no plan here to warn the reader about what these pages will say, or prepare some charming pathway in which educated eyes may carefully tread. Again as with film, let the ongoing unfolding afford what it will. The vulnerability we

cherish as we open ourselves unforewarned to the flickering screen, like the silence that brings us to delight in music, that jettisoning of our knowledge and our past in which we are willing to engage when we encounter art, quite as though to save ourselves from being consumed by the flames of our knowledge, becomes a property that divides and manifests itself as experience, wonder, allure, intensity, fearsomeness, beauty, truth. Read on, if you would.

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Here is how the great aesthetician Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) described the studios, in the Berlin suburb of Neubabelsberg, of Universum-Film AG, founded in 1917 and until 1945 the dominant force in German filmmaking:

It is a desert within an oasis. The natural things outside—trees made out of wood, lakes with water, villas that are inhabitable—have no place within its confines. But the world does reappear there—indeed, the entire macrocosm seems to be gathered in this new version of Noah’s ark. But the things that rendezvous here do not belong to reality. They are copies and distortions that have been ripped out of time and jumbled together. They stand motionless, full of meaning from the front, while from the rear they are just empty nothingness. A bad dream about objects that has been forced into the corporeal realm. (*Ornament* 281)

How often critical theory of cinema adopts this perspective, even unthinkingly, fostering creation of, and attention to, that familiar schism between make-believe and actuality, between fact and nothingness! Something true and evocative lies in hiding behind something fragile and superficial. For example, sucrose, much-polished Doris Day, she who sang and sang “Que Sera, Sera,” reveals in her autobiography that (in real life) her son (Terry Melcher) had turned down Charles Manson (he who murdered Sharon Tate) for a recording contract, and was now himself a target: “By setting all this down in a book,” suggests Dennis Bingham, drawing our attention to the hollowness of her screen persona, “Day meant to fry the eyes of those who would tie her to the railroad track of her virginal reputation” (7). Yet what a captivating railroad track it is, offered by that onscreen purity and sweet voice. As interesting as Bingham’s critique is, as provocative as hollowness is, could one not look at Cézanne’s oranges as well and complain or notice that they cannot be juiced; or listen to the eighteenth variation in Rachmaninoff’s Paganini Rhapsody and argue cogently that when it beats approximately seventy-two times a minute, the heart really does not make melodies like this (a melody that pianist Jon Kimura Parker, about to perform it for Valentine’s Day, 2007, called the “most beautiful . . . of all time” [“Studio Sparks,” CBC-FM, 13 February 2007])? In all such approaches, what things are is taken to be much more important, much more valuable, than what they appear to be: appearance itself is denigrated. In

Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), a man slinks through the dark wet streets looking out of the corner of his eye lest he be caught as a murderer, even though we never see him commit a murder, even though we cannot know how he knows himself as a killer; how inconvenient it is, we might think, with some sanctimonious sarcasm, and how distracting from what is truly serious that murderers in our real world—that is apparently so far away from the image world—are not to be found slouching and creeping through the shadows with the ineffable staginess of Peter Lorre.

William James wrote in his *Principles of Psychology* that an object of our love seems to us to have a heightened reality. And W. G. Sebald suggests that the “personification of an ideal” might be “overshadowed by mortality from the start” (201). The lover watches his beloved's every move as though it were choreographed by Martha Graham (or Pat Birch, or Michael Kidd), elevates every trivial gesture into beautiful significance, attributes meaning to each nonchalance, harmony to every syllable, grace and poise to those lovely features lit by the sun or the moon or by nothing at all. What if we attempt to understand film as lovers rather than as critics? (It is perhaps too much to ask that nine-year-olds watching *E.T.* should have been lovers of film, but is it too much to expect that they should not be critics?) And what if, quite willingly entranced, we disdain to give ourselves up wholly to the mere transports of rapture but instead also attempt to penetrate, to establish connections, to work out the formulae, to derive an understanding of how it is that we can be touched the way we are touched? Must we always take one extreme position or another: looking at a love object, be only swept away; or, looking at cinema with intelligence, adopt the posture of that jaded outsider who knows very well what reality is? (“Human kind,” wrote T. S. Eliot, “cannot bear very much reality.”)

When I am watching a film, I am engaged with it. Nothing else has existence for me in the way or to the degree that film has existence, at such times, and indeed film, when I am watching it, swells and becomes a universe, is the world. In Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (2003), some young Parisians attending screenings at the Cinémathèque française in 1968 (Louis Garrel, Eva Green) try to sit very close to the screen so that they can catch the visions before anyone else does: that is what I mean. Later, in a café or in my study, I read what some writer says about these fleeting images and am caught in a strange utopia between the screen world as I remember it and the textual stratagems through which this writer reflects upon that world, to me. Such a profound gap, such an emptiness, such a nowhere stretches between the film and text! And even when the text is gloriously illustrated with photographs, I can see almost always that what is in the photographs has not managed to voyage into the critique, that the critique has held itself nobly away from trucking with the highlights and shadows, the curvatures, the planes of focus, the lines, the textures of luminosity—not to say the color, if there is color—in the photographs.



Film swells and becomes a universe when we are watching it. Sitting very close to the screen to catch the visions before anyone else does are Eva Green (l.) and Louis Garrel (c.) in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (Recorded Picture Company/Twentieth Century Fox, 2003). Digital frame enlargement.

I must remind myself—as, morosely, I do again and again—that we live in a prosaic society, where laws are inscriptions, fictions are sentences, truths are enunciations made into prose; and thought is inexorably verbal. Can a picture not be a thought? Of course it can. To express one's thought one might use a camera, not a pen. One might show what one sees and understands.

It is as a writer that I mention this, someone who does use if not a pen then a word processor, and whose habit it is to make thought stretch through paragraphs and shape itself using words. (Tom Gunning said once that if there was a difference between his approach to cinema and mine, it was because “you think of yourself more as a writer, while I think of myself as a historian. My point of course was not the divergence of these two but their convergence, but also the manner in which they can provide a completion of each other.”) Oddly, in the way that a writer uses them there are very few words in cinema—perhaps even no words at all; no linguistic symbols with underlying meanings or referents, connectable in linear series to expostulate and elongate a principle. Sounds, yes. Melodies, yes. Pictures of some world and, sometimes, even of signposts containing words inside that world—but then the signs are pictures. The cinema is neither pre-linguistic nor pre-verbal, but it is pre-scriptural. It takes us to a time before we knew how to write with ink, when we wrote with our eyes.

In the moment that we experience it, cinema is pre-grammatical, specifically in the sense that grammar is the organizing principle of scripture even though there is a “grammar” of images. For the purposes of analysis, exchange,

and reference—all of these being beyond experience—it is convenient, perhaps, to think of a film in terms of scenes, sequences, and shots—the elements of “film grammar”—an approach that does consistently show the merit of revealing the constructive principles of film by foregrounding them. Just in the way that Kracauer observed of Neubabelsberg, every object of view is in this sense not what it seems to be, every surface a façade, and so forth. And characters are contracted performers, screen movement is laborers’ work in a system that is highly capitalized. And the illusion of narrative continuity is produced through a grammatical system in which certain types of shots are edited together in conventional ways; indeed, the assembly of a film using principles that run against these conventions can sometimes be seen to produce a work that is poetic or revolutionary—Jean-Luc Godard’s *À Bout de souffle* (1960). But at the moment when we are caught up in our actual gaze at the screen—with our disbelief suspended, as it were—none of this matters, or seems evident, or is visible. From any analysis that concentrates solely on the grammar of film, any analysis that focuses on linking this grammar to political or social circumstances or to historical development, any analysis that highlights above everything authorial style or allegorical tropes, something is inevitably missing.

And that is the experience of actually watching the film. In that experience, what is onscreen is magnified and intensified, and the viewer comprehends not by assimilating grammar but by neglecting it, not by detecting social, psychological, or historical principles but by temporarily surrendering the capacity to do so in favor of an engagement, what Erving Goffman calls an “onlooking,” that makes it possible for the film to have an effect (*Frame Analysis* 124–55). When we walk out of the theater after seeing a film, we may rationalize and then either reify or dispense with the story, the style, the composition, the politics, the historical relation of this to other films; but some trace still lingers to plague us with pleasure or remorse. The fashion in recent years has been to evacuate this pleasure and this remorse, to focus instead upon the structural armature that subtends and supports the screen action. We have, therefore, devoted ourselves to dismantling the image and have forgotten, it would seem, the charged effect an image in its wholeness has when we see it in the dark. We have looked to the image as a linguistic utterance that can and must be deconstructed in a semiological fervor. Once, many years ago, in a magazine I freely admit I have entirely lost track of, I saw a photograph showing a suburban house and its green, green, green front lawn. Someone had taken one of the fetish objects of this household—the television!—and had carefully, even devotedly, taken it apart piece by piece, until there were thousands of morsels large and small; and had laid all the pieces carefully upon the grass. In a way, this is what scholarship and popular criticism, however well intentioned, have been doing with cinema. Lest it should

affect us, we use an instrumental technique to determine how it operates. As in that horrible, chilling moment in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, we shoot first.

Engaged with film, however, wrapped up in watching it, we find it built not of shots but of moments. The moment, subjectively bounded, perhaps, and yet always evident and always located in the precise play of the screen, is what rouses our emotion and memory. It may be coextensive with a shot, or occupy only part of a shot, or occupy several shots, contiguous or noncontiguous. The moment, inevitably, is what we remember and retain, what we possess of the screen and incorporate into ourselves and our worlds.

Here are two exemplary cinematic moments that take on newness and a kind of brilliance when seen in light of one another:

In Irving Rapper's much-admired film *Now, Voyager* (1942), Bette Davis plays Charlotte Vale, a plain-looking spinster heiress to a Boston fortune, at first constrained and continually reproved by her harridan mother (Gladys Cooper) and then put under the gentle psychiatric care of Dr. Jaquith (Claude Rains), who encourages her to take a cruise, which she does. She suddenly transforms herself into a stunning and cultivated fashion plate (assuming the name Camille Beauchamp) and meets handsome, winning Jerry Durrance (Paul Henreid), who falls in love with her but cannot consummate this love because he is trapped in a lonely marriage. Every cell has its ray of light, however. Jerry's daughter Tina (Janis Wilson), being shy, plain-looking as Charlotte ever was, and neurotic, has come under the spell of Dr. Jaquith, at whose retreat the now recovering Charlotte one day encounters her. The two become friends, and Charlotte, incognito, devotes herself to the loving task of bringing Tina out of her shell—her only way of being close to Jerry. One night, Charlotte is awakened by the sound of crying. She steps into the adjoining room where she finds Tina in tears. Tactfully, she comforts the little girl, holding her until she falls asleep. Then, as the bedside alarm clock shows that hours have passed, we see her lying with Tina asleep, and hear in voiceover the thought in her head: "This is Jerry's child in my arms. This is Jerry's child clinging to me." Tina is stretched horizontally across the screen at bottom, her head resting upon her arm at left. Behind her, and a little above, Charlotte mimics her position, so that Charlotte's head, almost touching Tina's, might be a ghostly double (with more light on it, and with a gleam of purpose in the eyes as beneath her cheek the girl peacefully sleeps).

In Jim Jarmusch's eccentric and beautiful *Dead Man* (1995), a young man named William Blake (Johnny Depp), having traveled westward from Cleveland in the late nineteenth century to find work, becomes embroiled in a love triangle and is shot in the chest. He escapes into the forest, where he meets a native guide named Nobody (Gary Farmer), and for days the two men meander among the still trees, William continuing to weaken through his mortal

journey. One morning he leads his horse into a clearing where something lies dead upon the ground. Around him on all sides sound the calls of coyotes. Approaching, he sees that the object is a tiny fawn, shot in the neck. He reaches into the bullet hole and takes some blood, then rubs it on his own chest, on his forehead, on his nose and chin. Then he removes his bowler hat and slowly lies down on the ground next to the fawn, so that his head, adjacent and above the fawn's, duplicates the dead animal's stillness rather like a ghost. Under them are dead leaves. Ahead of William, not so far away, is his own end.

Aside from the facts that Charlotte and Tina are pointing to the left of the screen, and that William and the fawn are pointing to the right; and that the setting of one shot is a comfortable bedroom and of the other a forest clearing, these two shots, made more than fifty years apart by filmmakers with very different sensibilities and dramatic purposes, share an identity. Both are about a confrontation with the void, both are about the need for contact and assimilation through duplication. William will not manage to bring the fawn back from the precipice in the way that Charlotte will rescue Tina, but the bonding and commitment of self are the same. While Charlotte is linking herself to a love even more profound than she can feel for the girl, a love for the man who is the girl's father and with whom she will never be united, William is linking himself to a love for nature, for time, for the Greater Purpose of all life. Whether or not Jarmusch was aware of Rapper's shot—it is hard not to imagine that he was—the two moments resound against one another powerfully, and both are available for us to see, to glean, and to wonder about.

The cinematic moment has its own organization and architecture, may stand upon an expression of an actor's mouth (John Wayne smiling at Ed Asner in Howard Hawks's *El Dorado* [1963]), a look in the eye (Dorothy Malone malevolently egging on her brother's jealousy from a high window in Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* [1955] or Diane Baker cupidiously watching Sean Connery and 'Tippi' Hedren leave for their honeymoon in Hitchcock's *Marnie* [1964]), a tree moving in the wind in the background (as in the Lumières' *Le Repas de bébé* [1895]), the passage of a train (whistling through the station in David Lean's *Brief Encounter* [1945]), the color of an object in the corner of the screen (a view through the doorway of the Hotel de la Gloria in the final shot of Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* [1975]). It may depend for its power on a long culmination of a character's statements and considerations, a kind of enchainment of increasing probabilities and weights that plays out in a kind of sigh, as we see with the Marie Dressler performance in *Dinner at Eight* (1933) or in Raymond Massey's final acceptance of James Dean in *East of Eden* (1955); on the evocation possible when a line of action and intent is played out fully, as we see in the work of Nicholas Ray. The moment may endure, as in Charles Foster Kane's dying breath; or may be evanescent, as in the dances of Astaire and Charisse in *The Band Wagon*. While the inherent subjectivity

and personality of the received moment make it a slippery subject for rigorous analysis, nevertheless it remains the substance and flesh of our experience of watching films, the reason we wish to watch them again and again, the substrate of their melody, the envelope of their pathos and glory. And because cinema is art, it remains true that the most assiduous and earnest commitment to looking at its historical, social, psychological, compositional, authorial, and political aspects finally brings any serious viewer to a consideration of love: love of the screen, love of the cinematic image, love of the peculiar kind of light that is to be glimpsed in the dark theater coming from this magical world, that holds us fast to our fixation upon film—love of life, because just as it includes people life includes cinema. The most important thing about cinema, indeed, is that we are alive with it.

In this spirit, André Bazin wrote that critical analysis of film “can yield nothing but a crude enumeration which overlooks the essence that only taste can uncover. But try to make taste the subject of criticism! After all, an appreciation of its vulgarity or refinement presupposes love and familiarity” (“Beauty” 165).

It would be a worthwhile project to select and elaborate upon a number of stunning moments in various films, each such discursion constituting not only an extended meditation upon a feature of cinema—the impulse and continuity of characters’ action, their postures, the way they use things; the choice of a setting; the philosophy of décor; a movement of the body; a rhythm; the angle of a gaze; the utility of a prop or a supporting performance; a single line of dialogue; the imminence of death or closure; the purity of a color—but, more particularly, a devotion to some relatively tiny, catchy, decisive fragment that pinions attentiveness and shifts our understanding. I have in mind such fragments as a photograph stunningly seen, a picket fence used as a blind, a monument, the look in a woman’s eyes as she recognizes what mortality is, a dog happening to be sitting in a chair, grass that shines green in the darkness, a horse who drank the sky. I suppose that in doing this here, by bringing into discussion the actual viewing experience of the one film spectator I know intimately enough, I am in some way addressing—and I hope showing sympathy for—Stephen Prince’s lament: “It is an embarrassment that film scholars have written so much about spectatorship at a level of almost total theoretical abstraction while other disciplines have done systematic work on real viewers”:

Psychoanalytic film theory has had little to say about the complex ways viewers seek correspondences between their experience and what they see on screen. . . . Film theorists . . . have constructed spectators who exist in theory; they have taken almost no look at real viewers. We are now in the unenviable position of having constructed theories of spectatorship from which spectators are missing. (76, 77, 83)

The pages that follow originate with a certain constancy of love and intend to open out the viewer's experience into a broader understanding of film in context. As George Coulouris snarls to Cary Grant in Clifford Odets's *None But the Lonely Heart* (1944), "Go to the films if it's love you're looking for." Coulouris's character doesn't believe in this love, to be sure, but in truth, if we are to eclipse the mechanical tedium of the anatomy lesson and spring into a real consideration of film's true body, we must.

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