



**Review: [Untitled]**

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*The Cubist Cinema* by Standish D. Lawder  
Anthony Reveaux

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cinema would have been the logical solution and given this series of essays far greater coherence.

Joan Mellen's essay on "Fictional Documentary" is introduced by E. Bradford Burns with the statement that it "applies perfectly to the young filmmakers who emerged in Latin America during the 1960s." (p. 47, my italics). The film-makers used by Mellen to develop her ideas (Costa-Gavras, Godard, Pontecorvo, Montaldo, Losey) do not lack contacts with Latin American fictional documentaries, but there are equally important differences. The European films mentioned are mostly made with respectable budgets and obtain regular distribution at home and, in many cases, abroad. The Latin Americans, on the other hand, in most instances work with shoestring budgets and sometimes fail to obtain adequate exposure in the directors' own country. The reasons are to be found both in the reluctance of a U.S.-controlled commercial establishment to allow them suitable distribution and in local censorship. Even when these difficulties are overcome, distribution on a Latin American scale is practically impossible for the same reasons.

On another level, the Latin Americans tend to be more (or differently) engaged in a political sense. They are committed to a struggle in which film is but one facet, one more means to a revolutionary end, and they face hazards unknown to the Europeans—such as exile, the present fate of film-makers like Sanjines, Rocha, Ruiz, Littin, and others.

Of course the above only applies to one type of Latin American film and does not cover the industrial output of Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. Such films are ignored in Burns's book, just as they are usually neglected in the syllabi of U.S. courses on Latin American cinema. Yet they are indispensable for a global view and a great deal can be gleaned from them on a socio-historical level. The "fictional documentaries" not only gain in stature when compared with industrial production, but the latter is also indispensable for the study of cultural dependency, a major problem in Latin America.

Another void in the book is its limited view of Cuban films. This is serious, for Cuba is the only Latin American country that has been able to develop its films without being subject to the strictures that prevail on the rest of the continent.

Shorcomings like these are largely due to the unavailability of the films in the U.S. On the other hand, Burns's bibliography is excellent. This book should perhaps be considered as a modest beginning and one can only hope that, in due time, a more comprehensive study of Latin American cinema will follow.

—HANS EHRMANN

## THE CUBIST CINEMA

By Standish D. Lawder. New York: New York University Press (Anthology Film Archives, Series 1), 1975. \$11.75, paper.

The avant-garde film of the twenties was a unique fusion of painting, poetry, theater, and thought which burst forth in spontaneous creation without visible precedent, pursued by visionaries who were attracted and driven to the kinetic promise of the motion picture when their twentieth-century imaginations could no longer be contained within the easel or remain quiescent upon the page. Experimental cinema is now seeing its third generation in the young men and women who today are setting out to specifically and directly become film-makers. Some of them will even become film artists. In that half-century which is the *corpus maximus* of film's brief blink of history, the seventies find us once again in the art gallery and the museum as structuralist and conceptual film resonates with theory and practice shared with the other visual arts. It is only appropriate that we now re-examine the elusive, contradictory roots of the European avant-garde which opened up independent directions in film.

With *The Cubist Cinema* we are afforded a holistic overview which reveals the organic, hybrid vigor which characterized the dynamic interrelationships between film and modern art crystallizing in the pioneering work of Richter, Egging, Ruttman and Léger. Lawder posits Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* as the epicenter and summa of the movement. The stated goal of this book, to focus on interaction and synthesis rather than strict art history or cinema study, is satisfactorily realized. The author has consciously designed the structure and rhetoric of the work to be equally accessible from art and film points-of-origin as well as from other areas of interest. In the first chapter, "Modern Painters Discover the Cinema," the formative shaping of film as art, science, and industry are outlined in an informed and evocative manner which permits us to share their worldview. Unlike so many histories of the cinema where those coalescent years from 1895 to 1916 are seen as but the doormat to the picture palace, here we can sense cinema as did Shaw and Cocteau: a new avenue characterized more by its possibilities than by its limits. In the eclecticism of early exhibition, the trick films of Méliès and Porter and the popular scientific shorts which included extreme slow-motion and microcinematography were often viewed by these artists, on a screen yet undisciplined by the compression and depth of the narrative proscenium.

The shared stimulus between film and art is discussed with letters and articles by Pablo Picasso, Georg Lukacs,

Arnold Schönberg and Wassily Kandinsky revealing the anticipatory excitement with which they discussed their projects and plans for films which, though unrealized, give testimony to their visions of the "seventh art." The relatively unknown works by Léopold Survage are integrated into this milieu, as his sequence-designs for an abstract film to have been titled *Le Rythme Coloré* (1913) are brought to light. Had the war not intervened, his screen concept could have presaged Walter Ruttmann's *Opus I* (1921) as the first abstract animated film. Music as a parallel path of abstraction had already been subsumed by such painters as Kandinsky and the De-launays as well as within the overt analogy of Survage's work, and even years before the sound film the early film artists saw music's articulation of form in time as a more meaningful model for their concepts than narrative dramatic continuities.

Both the Futurist and the Cubist painters were fascinated by film. The Futurists like Balla, Marinetti, and Bragaglia seized upon the experiential sensation of movement and irresistible change. But, as Michael Kirby points out in his *Futurist Performance* (New York: Dutton, 1971) cinema somehow never became central to that movement, and nothing remains to us now of the two known Futurist films *Vita Futuristica* and *Il Perfido Incanto* (1916) but powder burns and a ghostly after-image. Lawder asks the primal question, "Are there Cubist films? To what extent did the Cubists use the medium to release the implied movement of their paintings into an actual passage through space and time?" (p. 21). Though the author does not choose to begin with Cézanne, he demonstrates how the Cubists were intensely concerned with vision over object. Fragmentation, simultaneity, the juxtaposition of different aspects of scale and view: all were forces in Cubist painting which first found cinematic expression in the abstract films of collaborators Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling, and of Walter Ruttmann, as "... the avant-garde film movement followed a course similar to modern painting in the twenties, that is, from a rigorously geometric and abstract style, as in De Stijl or the Bauhaus aesthetic, to the hallucinatory content of Surrealism in the late twenties." (p. 35). A reasonably fair and balanced account of Richter and Eggeling is given, their similarities and differences and then the divergence to personal styles as their unique transpositions from drawn forms to kinetic movement were so painfully achieved. In Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony* (1921-23) the emphasis was the articulation of line as objectively analyzed movement, and Richter's *Rhythm 21* (1921) the rhythmic counterpoint of planes and implied spatial volumes within the configuration of the frame. Their work brought to screen surface the viability of abstract film and the urgent need to continue.

In two chapters, one which centers around Abel Gance

and then another focussing on Marcel L'Herbier, are found richly woven accounts of the aesthetic cross-pollination and intellectual chain-reaction which is really the central theme of *The Cubist Cinema*. The poet Blaise Cendrars was a friend and war-comrade of Fernand Léger, and his attraction to film as evidenced in his written work found a kinetic outlet through his close association with Abel Gance, the herculean director whose films such as *Napoléon* (1926-27) were so well-known by Jean Vigo and others of that later, newer wave. Cendrars was responsible for the memorable montage sequences in *La Roue* (1922-23) which delivered explosive multiplicities of vision combining men, machines, and motion and which influenced Léger as to the validity of film's artistic potential.

*L'Inhumaine* (1924), directed by Marcel L'Herbier, with its intriguing, complex and deliberately modern settings by painter Léger, architect Robert Mallet-Stevens, and director Alberto Cavalcanti, gave Léger the opportunity to experiment with Cubist imagery, pre-stylized for recording on film. This chapter goes on to relate its stylization with the heady precedents of German Expressionism and other contemporary experiments in science-fiction art of the twenties: Friedrich Kiesler's decor for Karel Capek's stage play *R. U. R.*, and Otto Hunte's vast designs for Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926). With Lawder's usual technical perception, he describes various advanced image-making devices which were so indicative of tropisms in visual thought of the time.

The pivotal work and enduring manifesto of Cubist cinema is Fernand Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) and justly occupies the major focus of this book. As an art student, school projectionist, and as a teacher, this reviewer has seen *Ballet Mécanique* at least fifty times . . . yet with each re-viewing, it yields yet more subtle facets and conjunctions of vision. Lawder comments early on of that perennial albatross of film scholarship, the difficulty of "reading the text," and here answers that need with a detailed shot analysis and a series of 300 key frame enlargements. The film's complexity demands it, and its relatively short running time of 15 minutes and 12 seconds permits it. We are thus able to continually refer to the "text" as the formal analysis of the film breaks down the continuity into an introduction, seven parts (Prismatic Fracturing, Exercises in Rhythm, Titles and Numerals, etc.) and then an epilogue discussing elements and relationships.

When composer George Antheil announced that he was seeking a motion picture to accompany his new musical piece to be called "Ballet Mécanique" it was the young American cameraman Dudley Murphy who, encouraged by Ezra Pound, agreed to film it provided that Léger would collaborate. While the film is Léger's vision, Murphy had a strong contributory influence, perhaps

not unlike that of Gregg Toland to Orson Welles, as Murphy introduced the painter to the prismatic lenses which so entranced him, and was skilled in editing where Léger had yet no experience. *Ballet Mécanique* is an explosive, complex barrage of visual contradictions and surprises, in which there are only one or two transitions which fall within the realm of "normal" cutting. Total montage without a single dissolve, it is a Cubist prolegomenon of disorientation, multiple viewpoints, and kinestasis. In addition to the shot analyses and frame enlargements in the appendix, the book strengthens its thesis by the inclusion of analogous illustrations of paintings and graphic, such as Léger's *The City* (1919) which contained the perceptual seeds of *Ballet Mécanique*. Time and time again we are shown some of the most direct correspondences between painting and film we might care to imagine. Examinations of the work of Germaine Dulac such as *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (1928) and Richter's later *Film Study* (1926) are seen as some of the more notable films of the growing avant-garde influenced by *Ballet Mécanique*, which the poet Soupault so aptly described as a "terrible and magnificent flag of life" while Dada and Surrealism went on to lay siege to the screen in the late twenties.

There are many areas and artists that Lawder could have discussed in much further detail, such as Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, but he seems to have achieved that which he set out to do. Rather than a broad, sweeping history of the avant-garde, the concentration here is on the synaptic interrelationships between the minds and hands that built it, and the vortex of life-forces which created and sustained it. The major faults of the book fall within that realm of the papyrus substrate of publishing practice to which every author, to a degree, falls victim. In terms of overall scholarly production values, the composition and proof-reading of the text might well have been polished off at the *San Francisco Chronicle* on a New Year's Eve. Some of the most interesting reading resides in the notes, which illuminate many dramas in avant-garde art and life. The page-numbering of the notes section is quite askew, as the book's production layout included the intervening appendix as if it had numbered pages of text, so that upon first referring back to the main body of the text for references from some of the notes, it seemed as though a Cubist joke were being played where we were being led on to words that did not exist. A quick renumbering by the reader can solve that crisis, but the price in paper of over eleven dollars discourages its full distribution among scholars and students that it deserves, and which was so contrary to the author's intentions. Nor were the pages of the shot analyses bound facing the corresponding frame enlargements within the appendix.

Even since 1968, which was the approximate cut-off date of Lawder's personal research, there have been too few scholarly works which document the early avant-garde. Louise O'Konor's *Viking Eggeling 1880-1925 Artist and Film-maker Life and Work* (Stockholm Studies in History of Art, 1971) researches Eggeling with the thoroughness of an Egyptologist, and William Moritz's *The Films of Oskar Fischinger* (Film Culture No. 58-59-60, 1974) carefully integrates and analyses the career of that Prometheus of the abstract film. *The Cubist Cinema* presents a much-needed point-of-view in film and art history and furthers the "legitimacy" of their interface at a time when perhaps we are just beginning to understand the confluence of the visual arts which, Cubist-style, we have prismatically diffracted into seven or eight different "arts."

—ANTHONY REVEAUX

### JOHN FORD

By Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington. New York: Da Capo, 1975. \$4.95.

After a somewhat alarmingly lachrymose (but perhaps suitably Irish) opening chapter by McBride on Ford's funeral and last days, this volume settles down into a sensitive, intelligent, and not idolatrous study of an artist who, it is clear, will be continually issued in Revised Editions by every generation of critics. McBride and Wilmington are not put off by Ford's sentimentality or racism; in their eyes his art triumphs unmitigatedly over his historical circumstances, as they see his characters triumphing, however ironically in some cases, in their stories; even Ethan and Scar, in *The Searchers*, "have sacrificed themselves to make civilization possible. . . . It is the story of America." But the analysis is closer and more subtle than such occasional dithyrambs might indicate. Nobody has yet dealt with *Liberty Valence* in as complex and convincing terms as do McBride and Wilmington, for instance; and though they are weak on *The Searchers* (where what Lindsay Anderson so cautiously called "neurosis" appeared in a Ford character for the first time), they handle many difficult films, like Ford's abominable favorite *The Sun Shines Bright*, with aplomb. The best book yet written on the master, and particularly valuable for its way of teasing out complexities where only thumping oversimplification had seemed to be. The old curmudgeon might even have liked this book well enough to vouchsafe some wisecrack about it.