

# RED VELVET SEAT

Women's Writings on  
the First Fifty Years of Cinema

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VERSO

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place and concluding it in another. Thus the integrity of human movement was used to relate unrelated places, and this concept was even further developed in the dance film which followed. *A Study in Choreography for Camera* was made by Talley Beatty as dancer, and by me as director and photographer. I had felt that in most dance films the restiveness of the camera—with its closeups, its views from the wings, etcetera—served merely to destroy choreographic patterns which had been carefully conceived for a theatre stage space and a fixed-front audience. In this film, on the other hand, cinematographic space—the entire world—becomes itself an active element of the dance rather than an area in which the dance takes place. And the dancer shares, with the camera and cutting, a collaborative responsibility for the movements themselves. This results in a film dance which could not be performed except on film.

I am now engaged in a new film, as yet untitled, which is the most elaborate of my productions.<sup>6</sup> In order to be able to concentrate creatively on the direction of the film, I have had most of the acting done by friends. It is only in the increased number of actors and in such physical details, however, that this film is more elaborate. What still inspires me most is the capacity of cinema to create new, magic realities by the most simple means, with a mixture of imagination and ingenuity in about equal parts.

For example, to achieve on film the sense of an endless, frustrating flight of stairs, the great Hollywood studios would probably spend hundreds on the building of a set. You, however, can do it for just the price of the film required to photograph any ordinary stairway three times—the first angle shows all but the top landing, the second angle shows the flight without any landings included, and the third angle shows the flight with the top landing. If the actor climbs the visible portion of the stairs three times at a consistent rhythm, you will succeed in having created a stairway three times as long as the real one. By such exercise of ingenuity, using even the most modest camera and equipment, you can create whole worlds for just the cost of the film.

For more than anything else, cinema consists of the eye for magic—that which perceives and reveals the marvelous in whatsoever it looks upon.

[*Mademoiselle* (New York), January 1946, pp. 181, 260-65.]

### The Movies and Reality (1926)<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf

People say that the savage no longer exists in us, that we are at the fag-end of civilization, that everything has been said already, and that it is too late to be ambitious. But these philosophers have presumably forgotten the movies. They have never seen the savages of the twentieth century watching the pictures. They have never sat themselves in front of the screen and thought how, for all the clothes

on their backs and the carpets at their feet, no great distance separates them from those bright-eyed, naked men who knocked two bars of iron together and heard in that clangor a foretaste of the music of Mozart.

The bars in this case, of course, are so highly wrought and so covered over with accretions of alien matter that it is extremely difficult to hear anything distinctly. All is hubble-bubble, swarm and chaos. We are peering over the edge of a cauldron in which fragments of all shapes and savors seem to simmer; now and again some vast form heaves itself up, and seems about to haul itself out of chaos. Yet, at first sight, the art of the cinema seems simple, even stupid. There is the King shaking hands with a football team; there is Sir Thomas Lipton's yacht; there is Jack Horner winning the Grand National. The eye licks it all up instantaneously, and the brain, agreeably titillated, settles down to watch things happening without bestirring itself to think. For the ordinary eye, the English unaesthetic eye, is a simple mechanism, which takes care that the body does not fall down coal-holes, provides the brain with toys and sweetmeats to keep it quiet, and can be trusted to go on behaving like a competent nursemaid until the brain comes to the conclusion that it is time to wake up. What is its surprise, then, to be roused suddenly in the midst of its agreeable somnolence and asked for help? The eye is in difficulties. The eye wants help. The eye says to the brain, "Something is happening which I do not in the least understand. You are needed." Together they look at the King, the boat, the horse, and the brain sees at once that they have taken on a quality which does not belong to the simple photograph of real life. They have become not more beautiful, in the sense in which pictures are beautiful, but shall we call it (our vocabulary is miserably insufficient) more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life? We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence. The horse will not knock us down. The King will not grasp our hands. The wave will not wet our feet. From this point of vantage, as we watch the antics of our kind, we have time to feel pity and amusement, to generalize, to endow one man with the attributes of the race. Watching the boat sail and the wave break, we have time to open our minds wide to beauty and register on top of it the queer sensation—this beauty will continue, and this beauty will flourish whether we behold it or not. Further, all this happened ten years ago, we are told. We are beholding a world which has gone beneath the waves. Brides are emerging from the Abbey—they are now mothers; ushers are ardent—they are now silent; mothers are tearful; guests are joyful; this has been won and that has been lost, and it is over and done with. The War sprung its chasm at the feet of all this innocence and ignorance, but it was thus that we danced and pirouetted, toiled and desired, thus that the sun shone and the clouds scudded up to the very end.

But the picture-makers seem dissatisfied with such obvious sources of interest as the passage of time and the suggestiveness of reality. They despise the flight of gulls, ships on the Thames, the Prince of Wales, the Mile End Road, Piccadilly Circus. They want to be improving, altering, making an art of their own—naturally, for so much seems to be within their scope. So many arts seemed to stand by ready

to offer their help. For example, there was literature. All the famous novels of the world, with their well-known characters, and their famous scenes, only asked, it seemed, to be put on the films. What could be easier and simpler? The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to this moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results are disastrous to both. The alliance is unnatural. Eye and brain are torn asunder ruthlessly as they try vainly to work in couples. The eye says: "Here is Anna Karenina." A voluptuous lady in black velvet wearing pearls comes before us. But the brain says: "That is no more Anna Karenina than it is Queen Victoria." For the brain knows Anna almost entirely by the inside of her mind—her charm, her passion, her despair. All the emphasis is laid by the cinema upon her teeth, her pearls, and her velvet. Then "Anna falls in love with Vronsky"—that is to say, the lady in black velvet falls into the arms of a gentleman in uniform, and they kiss with enormous succulence, great deliberation, and infinite gesticulation on a sofa in an extremely well appointed library, while a gardener incidentally mows the lawn. So we lurch and lumber through the most famous novels of the world. So we spell them out in words of one syllable written, too, in the scrawl of an illiterate schoolboy. A kiss is love. A broken cup is jealousy. A grin is happiness. Death is a hearse. None of these things has the least connection with the novel that Tolstoy wrote, and it is only when we give up trying to connect the pictures with the book that we guess from some accidental scene—like the gardener mowing the lawn—what the cinema might do if it were left to its own devices.

But what, then, are its devices? If it ceased to be a parasite, how would it walk erect? At present it is only from hints that one can frame any conjecture. For instance, at a performance of *Dr Caligari* the other day, a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen. It swelled to an immense size, quivered, bulged, and sank back again into nonentity. For a moment it seemed to embody some monstrous, diseased imagination of the lunatic's brain. For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words. The monstrous, quivering tadpole seemed to be fear itself, and not the statement, "I am afraid." In fact, the shadow was accidental, and the effect unintentional. But if a shadow at a certain moment can suggest so much more than the actual gestures and words of men and women in a state of fear, it seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression. Terror has, besides its ordinary forms, the shape of a tadpole; it burgeons, bulges, quivers, disappears. Anger is not merely rant and rhetoric, red faces and clenched fists. It is perhaps a black line wriggling upon a white sheet. Anna and Vronsky need no longer scowl and grimace. They have at their command—but what? Is there, we ask, some secret language which we feel and see, but never speak, and, if so, could this be made visible to the eye? Is there any characteristic which thought possesses that can be rendered visible without the help of words? It has speed and slowness; dartlike directness and vaporous circumlocution. But it has also, especially in moments of emotion, the picture-making power, the need to lift its burden to another bearer; to let an image run side by side along with it. The

likeness of the thought more available, than most complex ideas and turning, until we are not to be cast in suggestions of which the simplest image: presents us with its and the softness of which is itself the visible is accessible to words.

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likeness of the thought is, for some reason, more beautiful, more comprehensible, more available, than the thought itself. As everybody knows, in Shakespeare the most complex ideas form chains of images through which we mount, changing and turning, until we reach the light of day. But, obviously, the images of a poet are not to be cast in bronze, or traced by pencil. They are compact of a thousand suggestions of which the visual is only the most obvious or the uppermost. Even the simplest image: "My love's like a red, red rose, that's newly sprung in June," presents us with impressions of moisture and warmth and the glow of crimson and the softness of petals inextricably mixed and strung upon the lilt of a rhythm which is itself the voice of the passion and hesitation of the lover. All this, which is accessible to words, and to words alone, the cinema must avoid.

Yet if so much of our thinking and feeling is connected with seeing, some residue of visual emotion which is of no use either to painter or to poet may still await the cinema. That such symbols will be quite unlike the real objects which we see before us seems highly probable. Something abstract, something which moves with controlled and conscious art, something which calls for the very slightest help from words or music to make itself intelligible, yet justly uses them subserviently—of such movements and abstractions the films may, in time to come, be composed. Then, indeed, when some new symbol for expressing thought is found, the film-maker has enormous riches at his command. The exactitude of reality and its surprising power of suggestion are to be had for the asking. Annas and Vronskys—there they are in the flesh. If into this reality he could breathe emotion, could animate the perfect form with thought, then his booty could be hauled in hand over hand. Then, as smoke pours from Vesuvius, we should be able to see thought in its wildness, in its beauty, in its oddity, pouring from men with their elbows on a table; from women with their little handbags slipping to the floor. We should see these emotions mingling together and affecting each other.

We should see violent changes of emotion produced by their collision. The most fantastic contrasts could be flashed before us with a speed which the writer can only toil after in vain; the dream architecture of arches and battlements, of cascades falling and fountains rising, which sometimes visits us in sleep or shapes itself in half-darkened rooms, could be realized before our waking eyes. No fantasy could be too far-fetched or insubstantial. The past could be unrolled, distances annihilated, and the gulfs which dislocate novels (when, for instance, Tolstoy has to pass from Levin to Anna and in so doing jars his story and wrenches and arrests our sympathies) could, by the sameness of the background, by the repetition of some scene, be smoothed away.

How all this is to be attempted, much less achieved, no one at the moment can tell us. We get intimations only in the chaos of the streets, perhaps, when some momentary assembly of color, sound, movement suggests that here is a scene waiting a new art to be transfixed. And sometimes at the cinema in the midst of its immense dexterity and enormous technical proficiency, the curtain parts and we behold, far off, some unknown and unexpected beauty. But it is for a moment only. For a strange thing has happened—while all the other arts were born naked,

this, the youngest, has been born fully clothed. It can say everything before it has anything to say. It is as if the savage tribe, instead of finding two bars of iron to play with, had found, scattering the seashore, fiddles, flutes, saxophones, trumpets, grand pianos by Erard and Bechstein, and had begun with incredible energy, but without knowing a note of music, to hammer and thump upon them all at the same time.

[*The New Republic* (New York), 4 August 1926, pp. 308-10.]

### Movies (1913)<sup>1</sup>

Lou Andreas-Salomé

The discussion on the evening of February 19, was devoted to Dr. Weiss's lecture on rhyme and refrain which Freud praised rather half-heartedly and about which he had not much else to say.<sup>2</sup> The next-to-last lecture on Saturday, February 22, was omitted on account of the exhibition of photographs of the latest Roman excavations. Tausk and his boys and I indulged in a more-or-less kindred pleasure at the Urania Theater.<sup>3</sup> The movies really play a role of no small significance for us and this is not the first time I have thought about this fact. A few purely psychological considerations deserve to be added to the many things that might be said in vindication of this Cinderella of aesthetic criticism. One has to do with the fact that only the technique of the film permits the rapid sequence of pictures which approximates our own imaginative faculty; it might even be said to imitate its erratic ways. Part of the weariness to which we finally succumb in seeing works of art performed in the theater results not on account of the effort nobly expended in artistic enjoyment, but because we tire of making allowances for the clumsy way in which the illusion of movement is represented on the stage. Spared this effort in the movies we are free to bestow the mass of our uninhibited devotion to the illusion. The second consideration has to do with the fact that even though the most superficial pleasure is involved, we are presented with an extraordinarily abundant variety of forms, pictures, and impressions. Only the film is in itself able to provide some faint trace of artistic experience for both the workman in the stultifying monotony of his daily work and the intellectual worker bound to his vocational or mental treadmill. Still the two thoughts make us ponder whether this consideration for our mental state might not mean the future of the film in the theater, the little golden slipper for the Cinderella of art. Here in Vienna it was Tausk who took me to the movies despite work, weariness, and lack of time. Often we can spare only a half hour, and I always have to laugh at this activity in which we indulge.

[From *The Freud Journal of Lou Andreas-Salomé* (London: Quartet Books, 1987), 100-101, excerpted.]

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