



Notes on cinema and its century

1. Malraux wondered if a culture based on the film library could exist in the same way as a traditional culture based on the book library. Indeed, the film library could be understood as an extension of the book library. McLuhan affirmed this categorically: "Film, both in its reel form and in its scenario or script form, is completely involved with book culture". To support this idea, McLuhan brought the experience of specialists responsible for teaching basic literacy in Africa: they attempted to use film to teach letters until they found it was necessary to teach the people the letters so that they could understand the films. With regard to literature, film was the continuation of the narrative by other means.

However, Malraux's question reaches us when the idea of the film library is starting to be history, lost among the computerised piles of infinite images which dwarf the Borgesian fantasies of the Library of Babel. Is cinema also disappearing in the wake of the film library? Can the professionals of cultural necrophilia who proclaim the death of literature also announce the death of cinema? The narrative desire which characterises the links between literature and film will survive even if the media changes. Nevertheless, there is a legitimate question. The history of the cinema is the history of a century which, through the masses, was married to cinema itself. Over these hundred years, the cinema has developed at a pace which would have taken other art forms thousands of years. The pioneers turned one of man's oldest dreams—the moving image— into reality, and the avant-gardes have scanned the frontiers of cinema until they have reached aporetic propositions. Along the way, we find all the characteristic stages of the formation, consolidation and explosion of cinematic language: epics, naturalisms, expressionisms, realisms, classicisms and their corresponding repetitions. For a hundred years, cinema has struggled to connect narrative desire with visual form. Will this history end or be prolonged with new emerging technologies? From the cinema to the digital age, will the medium change the message or prolong it? As cinema reaches its centenary, has it completed its cycle of possibilities or is it in a position to start again?

2. Alexandre Astruc used the expression "caméra-stylo" to explain film as an extension of writing. What do film and literature have in common? Narrative desire. A narrative desire which relies on a certain repetition of plot, which shapes the themes that Borges grouped into four typical stories: destiny, return, search and sacrifice, all of them sprinkled with the passions of the spirit and bringing love to the fore. Four stories which, according to the poet, we will continue to tell and transform during the time left to us. The flirting between literature and film, which have so often inspired one another, should not prevent us from seeing the vast distance which separates them. Because, as far as others are concerned, the things film and literature have in common can be extended to all the arts: the discovery of the necessary (Robert Bresson) and the tendency to formalise (Susan Sontag).

3. In his interview book with François Truffaut, Hitchcock said that the most difficult and, at the same time, most important thing in film is knowing when to say "No". The most brilliant sequence must be sacrificed if the general equilibrium of the film demands it. And, at times, the passion for an image is so strong that it is difficult to resist temptation. This is not a piece of advice for beginners. It is almost a moral pronouncement. It confirms that in film, as in every art form, exuberance can only emerge from rigour.



4. An art of the masses. This is one of the novel aspects of cinema and one of the factors which place it in full harmony with its century. Although the cinema may have generated the corresponding sect of experts and initiates, it is made to reach a wider radius. Among the best films in history, those made with major box-office takings in mind are more abundant, rather than those which appeal to the chosen few. The work of art, the film—as with literature from the printing press—carries the problem of indefinite reproduction within it. It is an art to be reproduced indefinitely. An art resulting from a complex production process which dilutes literature's own subjectivity, to give it an industrial-type corporativity. An art involving a lot of people and in which, as Julien Gracq has noted, “there isn't a single element, either visual or auditory, or even rhythmic, which the film-maker controls first-hand, in the same way the writer controls the word or the musician the notes”. Producer, scriptwriter, scenographer, photographer, it is a long list, until we come to the director. Sometimes the work of art is the result of happy coincidences, at others, it emerges in spite of the obstacles which build up. In any case, a film is a “manufactured object” (Gracq) like so many which fill the shop windows of the twentieth century. It offers “the most magical of consumer merchandise: fantasy” (McLuhan).