

## Theorizing Modernism

The heterogeneity of artworks and the inaccuracy of the concept make any attempt at a theory of aesthetic modernism almost hopeless.

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My primary goal in this book is to develop a notion of modern cinema in terms of stylistic history. This involves understanding modern cinema as a historically determined entity located in art-historical time and defined by a finite number of aesthetic/stylistic traits. However, I do not intend this to be a purely formalist work. I want to understand modern cinema and its various forms in its historical and philosophical contexts, which in my view are primarily responsible for the specific aesthetic forms modernism developed.

Here and in chapter 2 I will present several interconnected arguments. First, modern cinema was a historical phenomenon inspired by the art-historical context of the two avant-garde periods, the 1920s and the 1960s. Second, modern cinema was the result of art cinema's adaptation to these contexts rather than the result of the general development of film history or the "language" of cinema. Third, as a consequence of this process of adaptation, art cinema became an institutionalized cinematic practice different from commercial entertainment cinema as well as from the cinematic avant-garde. And last, another result of this process is that modern cinema took different shapes according to the various historical situations and cultural backgrounds of modernist filmmakers.

There are three terms that need distinction and clarification at the outset: *modern*, *modernist*, and *avant-garde*.<sup>1</sup> The use of these terms is so widespread

1. There is a huge literature on the history and the meaning of these terms. I list here those that were most helpful for me in this book. Hans Robert Jauss, "La 'modernité'

and varied and they are applied to so many different artistic, literary, philosophical and other more or less well-defined intellectual phenomena that we must distinguish their meanings in film history. We will see that the different uses and the historical controversies about these terms reemerge quite unchanged in film history. The clarification of these terms will lead us to various possible conceptions of cinematic modernism.

### Modern

The term "modern" has its roots in religious history, appearing for the first time around the fifth century C.E., and it was used to distinguish the Christian era from antiquity. It is only from the seventeenth century onwards that this term was used to designate certain novel tendencies in art and literature. As Hans Robert Jauss, following W. Freund, points out, "modern" was originally used in two senses. More precisely, its meaning had two important and distinct nuances.

[M]odernus comes from modo, which, at that time [in the fifth century] did not mean only "just," "momentarily," "precisely," but perhaps already "now," "at the moment" also—which meaning became perpetuated in the Latin languages. *Modernus* not only means "new" but it also means "actual."<sup>2</sup>

Modern, as meaning not only "new" but also "actual," has the power not only to signify something as yet unseen but also to supplant and supersede something. "Modern" in the sense of "new" would still allow the survival of and coexistence with the "old" along the lines of the cohabitation of different generations. But "modern" in the sense of the "actual" implies that the "old" is eliminated, that it does not exist anymore, or that it has become invalid. What is referred to as "modern" is always opposed to a past, which until the nineteenth century was commonly used to refer to antiquity.

The two opposing concepts of "antique" and "modern" were first assigned clear value judgments in the argument of "les anciens" and "les modernes"

dans la tradition littéraire," in Jauss, *Pour une esthétique de la réception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 179; Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987); Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Art and Literature* 4 (Spring 1965): 193–201; "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review* 7 (July–August 1940): 296–310; "Where Is the Avant-Garde?" in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 4: 259–265; Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avant-garde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974); and Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (New York: Verso, 1989).

2. Jauss, "La 'modernité' dans la tradition littéraire," 179.

in seventeenth-century French literature.<sup>3</sup> Both of these views held that the ideal of beauty was the same for antique and contemporary poets. While the "anciens" maintained that antiquity has most perfectly represented this ideal, the "moderns" believed that the development of human rationality must of necessity result in the continual improvement of the representation of the classical ideal:

[T]he moderns did not think that antiquity's ideal of beauty could have been different from their own. What they prided themselves on was only their ability to be more faithful to an ideal that the anciens had pursued less successfully.<sup>4</sup>

From the beginning of the opposition of antique/modern as a distinction of values we find the ideas of intellectual, technical, or cultural evolution. The early "modern" poets were convinced that artistic evolution is like technical progress whereby the ideal of aesthetic perfection is approached step by step. This resulted in a rigid opposition between the concepts of antique and modern as aesthetic values. The austerity of this opposition was softened by the late-eighteenth-century German aesthetic thinkers who inserted the category of the "classical" between the two. With the aid of the concept of the "classical," the antique ideal of beauty and the antique form of this ideal became clearly distinguished. On the one hand, "antique" as opposed to "modern" art was raised to the highest level of aesthetic perfection by Johann Winckelmann, Friedrich Schiller, Johann Goethe, and the Schlegel brothers, who considered the antique to be eternally valid as the model of true aesthetic value. On the other hand, "modern" was not simply the opposite of perfection. Modern art was not better or worse but of a different aesthetic structure, which at the same time approached the aesthetic perfection of antiquity in its own ways. "Let each one of us be Greek in his own way," said Goethe. For German aesthetic thinkers, aesthetic perfection was fully represented by antique Greek art, but they also believed that modern auteurs could reproduce it, even if in a different manner. While for *les anciens* "antique" was the only artistic model appropriate to express the ideal of beauty, to the Germans, Greek or antique was only an aesthetic ideal, and the art of the period was only one example of aesthetic perfection. Or as Jauss put it, antique art was a "comparative parallel."<sup>5</sup> For the Germans, and

3. For a historical treatise of the coupling of antique and modern as an aesthetic dichotomy, see Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*.

4. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 32.

5. Cf. H. R. Jauss, "Schlegels un Schillers Replik auf die 'Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes,'" in *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970).

a hundred years later, "modern" meant simply a different, and equally valid, way of representing the same classical ideal.

The supremacy of antique art in the realm of aesthetic values was overthrown by romanticism. Those artists rejected not only the classical form but also the classical ideal of beauty for the sake of an aesthetic ideal dictated by contemporary taste. From the late nineteenth century on, it is the "modern" that embodies the aesthetic ideal, while "classical" gradually came to mean "outmoded," "conservative," and "invalid." The cult of the "modern" in art lasted at least until the early 1970s, at which point the term and the idea of the "postmodern" surfaced and abolished the illusion that art constantly passes through aesthetic revolutions. With the advent of the postmodern, modern ceased to signify new artistic phenomena emerging after the late nineteenth century and belonging to the endless era of artistic and social revolutions. Henceforth, "modern" signified phenomena representing the era of modernity, and its strict opposition with the "classical" tended to diminish. Thus, we can speak about "classical modernity," referring to the everlasting aesthetic values of one-time subversively new works of art.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the dichotomy of classical and modern contains three different dichotomies.<sup>7</sup> One is the difference between the old and the new (according to their original historical meaning); second, it refers to the opposition between valid and invalid (whichever belongs to one and to the other value, like in the quarrel of "les Anciens et les Modernes" and within romanticism); finally, the dichotomy can be used to designate two different aesthetic models or ideals. For example, in Schiller's view, there is an organic, "natural" model, which is the antique, and an actual, intellectual, or "sentimental" model, which is the modern. Baudelaire says that the work of art has to answer to two different aesthetic ideals: it has to be both antique and modern at the same time, "modernity becomes antiquity": "Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of the art. The other half is the

6. Cf. Jürgen Habermas: "[M]odernity itself gives birth to its own classicism—we can now obviously speak of classical modern." "An Unfinished Project: Modernity," in *A postmodern dillapot* (Budapest: Századvég-Gond, 1993), 155. Here "classical" is not an opposite of "modern" but a value judgment meaning "something that endures," while "modern" simply means a value-free description of something that is new.

7. According to Calinescu, the notion of "modern" is subsumed by the category that Wellek and Warren called "period terms." In his view all period terms have "three fundamental aspects of meaning: they imply a *value judgment*, they refer to *history*, and they describe a *type*." My analysis basically fits in with Calinescu's categorization. Cf. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 87.

eternal, the immovable." For Baudelaire, the artist should express eternal values and ideals through the actual and transitory form of the world.<sup>8</sup>

### Modernism

The diffusion of the positive idea of the modern in the nineteenth century gave way to the emergence of other variations of this notion, such as "modernity," "modernism," or "modernist." All these terms have been widely used in art history and aesthetics ever since. Appearing as a term in religious history and literary criticism during the late nineteenth century,<sup>9</sup> the notion of "modernism" became widely employed in the history of literature and art following the 1940s. In art history, it was the influential American art critic Clement Greenberg who first used this term not only for a style or a specific movement but also for a whole period in art history. He included in this term all artistically valid movements and styles starting with the French painter Manet. He calls modernism "almost the whole of what is truly alive in our culture."<sup>10</sup> For Greenberg, modernism is an artistic movement capable of authentically expressing the experience of the contemporary world. While he holds that the most important values of modernism are authenticity and actuality rather than being simply new and different, he sees it as an essentially historical phenomenon embedded in the aesthetic traditions of the history of art.

[A]rt gets carried on under Modernism in the same way as before. And I cannot insist enough that Modernism has never meant anything like a break with the past. It may mean a devolution, an unraveling of anterior tradition, but it also means its continuation. Modernist art develops out of the past without gap or break, and wherever it ends up it will never stop being intelligible in terms of the continuity of art. . . . Nothing could be further from the authentic art of our time than the idea of a rupture of continuity. Art is, among many other things, continuity. Without the past of art, and without the need and compulsion to maintain past standards of excellence, such a thing as Modernist art would be impossible.<sup>11</sup>

8. Baudelaire, "La Modernité," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Robert Lafont, 1980), 797–798.

9. The first appearance of the term "modernism" dates to 1737 by Jonathan Swift (*Oxford English Dictionary*); in French, 1879 (*Petit Robert*). As a term, it originally designated a Latin American literary movement and a Roman Catholic theological trend of the late nineteenth century.

10. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting."

11. *Ibid.*

Greenberg also insists on the notion that modernism is not an everlasting aesthetic norm.

My own experience of art has forced me to accept most of the standards of taste from which abstract art has derived, but I do not maintain that they are the only valid standards through eternity. I find them simply the most valid ones at this given moment. I have no doubt that they will be replaced in the future by other standards, which will be perhaps more inclusive than any possible now. . . . The imperative comes from history, from the age in conjunction with a particular moment reached in a particular tradition of art.<sup>12</sup>

Greenberg emphasizes the historicity rather than the normative character of modern art. He does not consider modernism as superior in any way to previous periods of art history. He sees modernism as part of an organic development of the history of art, as something that fits in smoothly with earlier artistic traditions. This may be why he does not pay much attention to modernist movements that in fact wanted to break with the past radically and claim superiority over artistic traditions. Nor does he raise the question of the extent to which the traditional notion of art has changed during the hundred years of modernism. He identifies modernism globally with one general trait: aesthetic self-reflection. Modernism, says Greenberg, is nothing but the aesthetic self-criticism of art.

He is quite right when he sees in modernism the prominence of the aesthetic dimension, and at its origin, a radical separation from all other dimensions of life. Modernist art in the nineteenth century consisted of an exodus of the artist from the social and political arena, which served as an important inspiration for the abstract character of modernism. "[Modern art is not] an about-face towards a new society, but an emigration to a Bohemia which was to be art's sanctuary from capitalism."<sup>13</sup> But while Greenberg insists on the purely aesthetic nature of modern art, he disregards modernism's later developments that culminated in politically committed movements, which ultimately turned artistic self-criticism not only against traditional aesthetic reflection but against modern aesthetic isolation as well.

Movements conventionally considered avant-garde, like Soviet futurism and constructivism, Italian futurism, parts of German expressionism, and French surrealism, don't easily fit within Greenberg's notion of modernism. Yet Greenberg does not have a notion of the avant-garde distinct from modernism. For him, the avant-garde is not the elite of modernism but instead

12. Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," 296–310.

13. Ibid.

the elite of the contemporary art world in general: that is, simply the name he gives modernism.<sup>14</sup> The two aspects of Greenberg's view of modernism mentioned above are probably not independent of each other. He conceives of modernism as a period of art history, which drives him to perceive it as a homogeneous phenomenon. He even goes so far as to speak of a "period style" of modernism as a whole.<sup>15</sup>

Greenberg conceives of modernism as a transitory, historical phenomenon valued within the continuity of the traditions of the history of art. At the same time, he fails to give a comprehensive account of modern art due to his insistence on the conceptual homogeneity of modernism. This we will have to take into consideration when we define cinematic modernism. It is important to ask whether there exists a consistent concept of modernism at all when one includes politically committed movements and claims to break with the past, like in the case of futurism and Dadaism. Modernism creates new values through its dispute with the classical. Modernism does not value the new simply for being new; rather, it originated in a critical-reflexive relationship with tradition. Thus modernism simultaneously affirms and negates continuity with tradition. Although in Greenberg's conception this duality is clear, since he conceives of the reflexive character of modernism as a stylistic form, he does consider it a paradox. Thus he does not differentiate between modernism and avant-garde. Yet, it is in this distinction that the paradoxical aspect of modernism comes to the surface. In fact, for those who pay enough attention to that difference, modernism as a homogeneous concept is particularly problematic.<sup>16</sup> Suffice is to say that if we agree with Greenberg's characterization of modernism—as a period within art history of aesthetic self-criticism of the arts—we will have to be prepared to go fur-

14. Greenberg uses the term "avant-garde" in his essays as a simple synonym for modern art. Cf. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: Free Press, 1957), 98–107. See also Greenberg, "Where Is the Avant-Garde?" in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4: 259–265.

15. Clement Greenberg, "Our Period Style," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 4: 323–326.

16. For example, that is why Peter Bürger considers that a general theory of aesthetic modernism is "hopeless." The reason is the "aporia of aesthetic modernism": "Within modernity, art is continuously aimed at the conditions which make it impossible to realize. . . . this art is necessary and impossible at the same time." Peter Bürger, *La prose de la modernité* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1994), 397. And Antoine Compagnon, in his *Cinque paradoxes de la modernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), considers that the fundamental paradox of modernism is that it affirms and rejects art at the same time.

ther and make room for modern movements whose criticism extends beyond the aesthetic limits. Transgressing the aesthetic means transgressing the limits of art. Since we speak of self-criticism, our concept of modernism should be able to handle extreme cases of this self-criticism, in other words, those that go beyond the limits of art. Therefore, it will be impossible to avoid the distinction between “modernism” and “avant-garde” jeopardizing the homogeneity of our concept of aesthetic modernism.

### Avant-Garde

There are a number of theorists who thought it necessary to make a distinction between “modernism” and “avant-garde.” In general, “avant-garde” is used to designate politically conscious, antibourgeois, activist art movements:

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The most prominent students of the avant-garde tend to agree that its appearance is historically connected with the moment when some socially “alienated” artists felt the need to disrupt and completely overthrow the whole bourgeois system of values, with all its philistine pretensions to universality. So the avant-garde, seen as a spearhead of aesthetic modernism at large, is a recent reality.<sup>17</sup>

Although Calinescu distinguishes between avant-garde and other modernist movements, his distinction is not substantial. He considers the avant-garde as an extreme case, a “spearhead” of modernism. Other theorists make a more clear-cut distinction based on the avant-garde’s aggressive, utopian, future-oriented momentum. Antoine Compagnon sees in the avant-garde a “historical consciousness of the future and a will of being ahead of time,” while modernism is a “passion of the present.”<sup>18</sup> And according to Raymond Williams, “the avant-garde, aggressive from the beginning, saw itself as a breakthrough to the future: its members were not the bearers of a progress already repetitiously defined, but the militants of a creativity that would revive and liberate humanity.”<sup>19</sup>

Some interpretations of the avant-garde go so far as to oppose it to modernism. A good example of this difference can be found in Peter Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde.<sup>20</sup> In Bürger’s view, the avant-garde is an artistic

17. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 119.

18. Compagnon, *Cinque paradoxes de la modernité*, 48.

19. Williams, *Politics of Modernism*, 51.

20. Bürger, *Theorie der Avant-garde*.

movement of the twentieth century that denies the autonomous character of the work of art and affirms the reintegration of art into the realm of everyday life. As such, avant-garde radically opposes “aesthetic,” modern movements, which, by turning away from art’s social functions, fit the category of pure aesthetic self-criticism. Modernism institutionalizes art qua art. The avant-garde attacks artistic institutions on the premise that institutionalization confines art to its pure aesthetic dimension and isolates it from its social functions. This, says Bürger, signals a radical change in the notion of the work of art since art, for the avant-garde, is not an end in itself. While “aesthetic” modernism affirms art as an independent world, the avant-garde work of art is a social, political, and philosophical manifesto. When the avant-garde claims reintegration into every-day life, it is by no means reintegration into the banality of everyday life, which modernism had turned away from. Avant-garde demands everyday life to be changed, but not through aesthetic values. Artistic and social revolution should go hand in hand, and art should be another intellectual practice promoting social revolution. The elitist thrust of avant-garde art movements stems precisely from the wish of artists to become spiritual leaders—not only in the world of art but also in that everyday life they want to change by artistic means. In this sense, avant-garde movements are essentially political and antiartistic.

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This short overview will conclude with a review of some of the distinctions and dilemmas raised by the three important terms of modern art. “Modern” in the most general sense means the value of the actual or simply the new as opposed to the old or bygone (whether or not these are endowed with the value of the eternal). But sometimes it is simply used as an adjective meaning good art in some cases or bad art in other cases. Modernism designates an art-historical period characterized by the cult of the modern (actual) and certain general aesthetic features, such as abstraction or self-reflection. This raises the question as to what extent the aesthetic content of this particular period can be considered a set of homogeneous features. Finally, in the sphere of the avant-garde, the cult of the modern is driven by a revolutionary, activist thrust whereby aesthetic programs go beyond artistic creation, typically willing to blur the boundaries between art and social life. But the variety of avant-garde movements and the difference between the two major avant-garde periods, that of the 1920s and the 1960s, raise the question whether political activism or aesthetic radicalism lies closer to the essence of this concept. Defining different aspects of cinematic modernism entails tackling all these questions.

### Cinema and Modernism: The First Encounter

Accepting that the common ground in all definitions of artistic modernism is that modern art is an aesthetic reflection on and a critique of its own traditional forms, cinematic modernism is a special case when compared to other forms of modern art. During at least the first sixty years of film history, one could not reasonably speak about a cinematic tradition whatsoever. Cinema as a cultural tradition was first invented by the auteurs of the French new wave. Jean-Luc Godard says, "A contemporary writer knows that authors such as Molière or Shakespeare existed. We are the first filmmakers who know that a [D. W.] Griffith existed. At the time when [Marcel] Carné, [Louis] Delluc, and [René] Clair made their first films, there was no critical or historical tradition yet."<sup>21</sup> Obviously, the modernism of the 1920s could not be a "reflection on cinema's own artistic traditions."

In the early 1920s clear ideas emerged in film criticism about what "real" cinema should be like, and with that an intensive critique of a kind of theatrical "artistic" mass production of European films. The main factor in the emergence of early modernism during the 1920s was not a critical reaction against the narrative standards that were just becoming norms. Some theoreticians and critics of early modern cinema considered emulating even the realist, linear, and continuous narration of the American model. Far from opposing the "Hollywood norm," Delluc, a prominent figure of early French modernism, remarked in 1921 that the real film drama was created by the American cinema, and he called on the French to follow this way of filmmaking.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov criticized the "Germano-Russian" theatrical style and praised American narrative films for their dynamism, speed, and their use of close-ups.<sup>23</sup> The rise of late modernism in the 1950s witnessed the same relationship of modern European filmmakers to classical American cinema. French new wave critics of the *Cahiers du cinéma* attacked not Hollywood films or narrative in

21. In Guido Aristarco, *Filmművészet vagy álomgyár* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1970), 355.

22. Louis Delluc, "Le cinéma, art populaire" (1921), in Louis Delluc, *Le cinéma au quotidien*, *Écrits cinématographiques*, 2, pt. 2 (Paris: Cinémathèque Française-Cahiers du cinéma, 1990), 279–288.

23. Vertov writes in his manifesto, *Kino-phot* (1919, revised in 1922): "We consider the Russian-German psychological drama, charged with infantile daydreaming and memories, a stupidity. The Kinoks are grateful to the American adventure film for its dynamism, for the rapidity of changes of shots and for the close-ups . . . It is better quality, but still it has no foundation." In Georges Sadoul, *Dziga Vertov* (Paris: Éditions Champs Libres, 1971), 59.

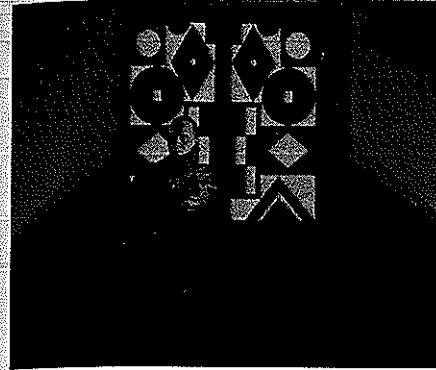


Fig. 2. A cubist setting: *L'Inhumaine* (Marcel L'Herbier, 1924).

general, but—in the words of Truffaut, "a certain tendency of French cinema." Just like some thirty years earlier, the action-centered Hollywood narrative was an important inspiration for late modern cinema, as opposed to the "dead classicism" of European bourgeois middle-class drama, which had less to do with classical narrative norms than with nineteenth-century bourgeois theater.

Early modern filmmakers critiqued not so much popular narrative cinema as the artistic utilization of cinema, which they themselves were busy modernizing. Because cinema did not have an artistic tradition proper to its medium to modernize, there were different ways to achieve this goal. One way to bring out the artistic potential of cinema was to create cinematic versions of modernist movements in fine arts, theater, and literature, or simply fit cinema in with narrative and visual forms of the national cultural heritage. In this sense, early modernism was *cinema's reflection on artistic or cultural traditions outside of the cinema*. German expressionism was the first appearance of that kind of modernism in the cinema. Expressionism tried to organically apply extracinematic artistic means to cinema. No filmmaker before expressionism thought of doing this to such an extent, and nobody conceived of cinema as an art related to artistic modernism. The importance of expressionism in this respect is that it institutionalized cinema as a medium capable of modern visual abstraction.

Again, the modernity of expressionism is not to be found in how it differs from the canonized norms of narrative cinema. In fact, as far as narrative is concerned, German expressionist films were not at all subversive, and they respected most classical rules. The extremely unrealistic character of some of their narratives was probably unusual in Hollywood terms, but they were not at all anti-Hollywood in their principles. Expressionist films were in fact the first models of some of the most popular Hollywood



genres, such as vampire and monster movies and psychothrillers. Even their unusual and extravagant visual devices turned out to be familiar to the Hollywood visual universe. On the one hand, the success of the German filmmakers who emigrated to Hollywood in the 1930s shows that their cinematic culture in fact harmonized well with the Hollywood way of thinking. On the other hand, the stylistic renewal of the American cinema by Orson Welles and film noir in the 1940s had its foundation precisely in expressionist cinematography. Later on, the formal principles of other modernist and avant-garde movements appeared in the cinema as well, such as surrealism (Fernand Léger, Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, Man Ray, and Germain Dulac), futurism (Vertov), Dadaism (Clair, Francis Picabia, Hans Richter) and cubism (Marcel L'Herbier). However, only expressionism and surrealism had a lasting impact on the development of cinema. But other experiments with modernist visual devices and sequential principles were also important to the institutionalization of cinema as a modern form of art.

Another aspect of early modernism's reflexive character was its search for the "pure" form of the cinema. While in the trend discussed above the rejection of the narrative function was not always a conscious choice, in the "pure cinema" trend of early modernism it was one of the main principles. Cinema was to be affirmed as an independent art form by isolating its tools from those of other art forms, especially literature and drama. The "absolute film" movement and other early forms of experimental cinema viewed film as a purely visual art in which literary and dramatic forms were not organic parts. This movement concentrated mainly on the technical aspects of the medium as the foundation of its aesthetic specificity. The representation and manipulation of movement, the articulation of time (rhythm), and the unusual association of images were the three main paths the "pure cinema" trend followed. By the end of the 1920s some of its representatives came to articulate this conception as an alternative to the "traditional" representation of reality. Walter Ruttmann, Jean Vigo, but above all, Dziga Vertov applied "pure cinema" aesthetics to the construction of an image of reality that would be an alternative to that of classical narrative cinema.

There is yet a third way in which modernism informed the cinema of the 1920s. This trend was the least spectacular, but its impact was the most important for the future development of cinematic modernism. This is the movement that Henri Langlois named "French impressionism." Auteurs like Germaine Dulac, Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Abel Gance, and Marcel L'Herbier are counted among its representatives. The idea of proving that cinema is a modern art form in its own right is the driving force of this

movement, but like German expressionists, French impressionists did not deny the narrative nature of cinema and did not look for cinema's "essence" in abstract visual and sequential principles. As we have seen with Delluc, the main theorist of French impressionism, they rejected above all the theatrical staging of a psychological drama and the visual illustration of a literary plot. Cinema had the potential to represent not only the external form of physical events and human actions but also the inner life and the mental processes of the characters. Impressionism realized a kind of psychological representation in which mental states and processes appeared as a visual reality—thus engendering an important trend of the modernist wave of the sixties. At the same time, they preferred the visual rhythm that followed the poetic logic of the composition to the monotony of a chronological composition. Delluc criticized Gance for not being "an inventor of rhythm and thought" and L'Herbier for being "sometimes more of a writer than a filmmaker" and for "sacrificing from time to time the splendor of the rhythm."<sup>24</sup> The prevalence of visual rhythm in the composition also contributed to the construction of a psychic reality in which external and internal sensual stimuli tended to replace physical events. In this respect, the label of "impressionism" is only partially correct, for originally it was used in art history to designate a technique of representing visual surface effects. In French "impressionist" cinema, it was only one aspect of the form and mainly used to underpin the mental character of the narrative motivation. French "impressionist" cinema was also deeply symbolic and psychological inasmuch as the representation of mental images became an alternative dimension of physical reality. It was the most synthetic phenomenon of early modern cinema. It applied extracinematic artistic effects<sup>25</sup> like German expressionism, it used abstract rhythmic and visual construction like "pure cinema," unusual associations of images like surrealism, and it remained fundamentally narrative-based. The specific character of French impressionism in the modernist movement was that it invented a different way to represent the psychological, the center of which was not the external acts of the character but his/her inner visions. In the final analysis, early modernism initiated three major techniques that were taken over by late modernism: reference to extracinematic modern art, exploration of cinema's potential for visual and rhythmic abstraction, and

24. Louis Delluc, *Écrits cinématographiques*, vol. 1, *Le cinéma et les Cinéastes*, 166–167.

25. For example, Léger's decors in L'Herbier's *L'Inhumaine* (1924), or the use of the Alhambra as a setting in *Eldorado* (1921).

the establishment of a relationship between mental and physical dimensions of characters.

Early modernism sought cinema's potential to become an art in the *modern* sense, even though the claim to be "modern" is not emphasized in its aesthetics.<sup>26</sup> As cinema approached other *modern* arts, a critique arose concerning the kind of cinema that took inspiration from premodern, classical forms of art. As a consequence of this early modernization process, a special institutional practice of making films came into being: commercial art cinema. Modernism was not the modernization of the cinema in general. In both periods it was the modernization of the artistic utilization of the cinema. Cinematic modernism is art cinema's approach to modern art.

### The Institution of the Art Film

20 An interesting testimony about which basic forms of the cinema were recognized in the twenties can be found in an anecdote from 1923 recalled by Jean Epstein.<sup>27</sup> A journalist had asked Epstein his opinion on the essential form of the cinema: the documentary, the big spectacle, the "stylized film in a cubist or expressionist taste," or the "realist film." Epstein turned down the first three options. But he could not interpret the fourth one. He said he "did not know what realism in art was." What did the journalist have in mind when talking about "realist film"?

Another example will help us clarify this. Less than a year later, an article appeared in *Le Figaro* written by a certain Robert Spa explaining the different existing forms of cinema. He talks about a certain "intermediate category" (*le moyen terme*):

Is not there a way between the most banal films and the search for an art pushed to the extreme, enchanting only mental cubists; a third way, which takes themes taken from real life, based on the similarities with life as we live it, and which is original in its conception and by the careful research for an art by the director?<sup>28</sup>

It is clear that for the public, and hence for the journalist, there existed a type of film that could not be categorized appropriately. It was a kind of dramatic social fiction (storytelling but in a realist way), which was seri-

26. Sometimes this claim also becomes explicit. Vertov writes in his "Kino-glaz" manifesto: "My life is directed to the creation of a new vision of the world. This is how I translate in a new way the world that is unknown for you." In Sadoul, *Dziga Vertov*, 82.

27. Jean Epstein, *Écrits sur le cinéma* (Paris: Séghers, 1974), 1: 199–120.

28. Cited in *La cinématographie française*, March 22, 1924, 27.

ous and looked like art—but not in the avant-garde sense. Its seriousness stemmed from its social concerns. It was narrative-based, therefore placed in the commercial circuit, but not made for the satisfaction of the widest possible audience. This type of film existed, but was not crystallized enough to be recognized by Epstein as a basic form of the cinema. Nonetheless, it is this intermediate form that will be our focus.

Can we speak of institutionalized film practices other than the commercial, the nonfictional, and the avant-garde? This question is important for us in order to understand the status of modernism within film institutions: is it a style, a movement, or an independent film practice? As we can see from Spa's question addressed to Epstein cited above, apparently avant-garde film was not the only alternative nondocumentary film practice that had emerged in the twenties. There was yet another practice that later became one of the most prominent film types in Europe—the art film—whose "intermediate form" Epstein did not recognize as an art form and that Clair rejected as pseudo-art in the early twenties.

"Modern cinema" as a concept appeared in the 1940s. The opposition between "classical" and a "modern" cinema is a genuinely postwar creation.<sup>29</sup> Filmmakers before the Second World War had the choice of making a documentary, a narrative film, or an avant-garde film; a "modern film" did not yet exist as a choice. Making a film was considered in itself a modern form of art making. The distinction between art film and entertainment film soon appeared among filmmakers and critics. Early film history abounds with statements by filmmakers, journalists, and theorists claiming that film is art or must become art. Interestingly enough, among them was Louis Feuillade, one of the great figures of the early adventure film who in 1911 called for an "innovation to save French cinematography from the influence of *Rocambole* in order to drive it towards the highest objectives."<sup>30</sup>

However these claims were not aimed at the creation of an institutionalized art cinema. When we speak of "art films" as opposed to "commercial entertainment films," we are referring not to aesthetic qualities but to certain genres, styles, narrative procedures, distribution networks, production companies, film festivals, film journals, critics, groups of audiences—in short, an institutionalized film practice. Their respective products are no

29. The notion of "classical cinema" appeared, however, at least as early as 1920. It was used in the sense of a film that by its technical perfection is capable of "producing beauty," and not as an opposition to "modernism." Cf. A. Ozouff, "Le cinéma classique," in *Film 176* (December 1920).

30. *Le cinéma d'art et d'essai* (Paris: La documentation Française, 1971).



better or worse than those of others and are not “artistic” or “entertaining” by nature. That is why the label “art film” is often a source of confusion when it is opposed to the commercial industry. Art films are “artistic” by ambition but not necessarily by quality, just as commercial entertainment films can very often be commercial failures and not entertaining at all.

The origins of the concept of the “art film” as an institutional form of cinema can be traced back to the late 1910s. In 1908 a production company was founded in France named Film d’art, and the same year saw the opening in the rue Charras in Paris of the first movie theater dedicated to the distribution of so-called art films. However, Film d’art did not manage much more than popular adaptations of successful stage dramas and had little to do with what later became, according to the French terminology, a film *d’art et essai*. Film d’art was artistic only in a very conservative sense, which led to animosity among early avant-garde filmmakers toward Film d’art. For them, Film d’art was nothing but a compromise with traditional narrative and drama, or as Epstein put it, Film d’art was “filmed theater.” They saw in it the pretension rather than the reality of being artistic. For them, film as art was the cinematic medium used according to its pure principles. Film had to be acknowledged as a form of art in a *modern* sense as well before strong institutions could be created around it. That is the reason as well for the relatively late institutionalization of the art-film industry. What is certain, however, was that the ambition to realize this appeared quite early in the cinema with attempts at some sort of institutionalization.

In 1915, American poet Vachel Lindsay published a book in which he defined “the art of the moving picture” and distinguished it from the “mere voodooism” of the film industry.<sup>31</sup> Not only does he claim that film is an art, but he also recognizes the difference between entertainment and cinema as an art institution. He asserts that art-film movie theaters should be like art galleries, a gathering place for art lovers. For this reason he thinks musical accompaniment unnecessary: “The perfect photoplay gathering-place would have no sound but the hum of the conversing audience.”<sup>32</sup>

The idea of the specialization of film exhibition was nowhere near realized at the end of the 1910s. In an article in *Le cinématographie français* in 1919, an author predicts the full specialization of theaters according to genres by 1930. He envisioned the audience going to a “comic theater,” a “lyrical theater,” or a “dramatic theater” depending on whether they wanted to laugh,

31. Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916).

32. Lindsay, *Art of the Moving Picture*, 189.

cry, or be shocked, respectively.<sup>33</sup> But in fact, in the early twenties in England specialization only meant trying to screen films whose “artistic quality” would translate into big audiences.<sup>34</sup> Hitherto specialization had been determined by genres or artistic quality, supposing that the better a film is, the bigger audience it would attract.

In 1924 another category for specialization appeared in France: “quality films” that do not attract big audiences. Jean Tedesco, the director of the theater Le vieux colombier between 1924 and 1930, realized the need for a specialized distribution system for certain films that were of high “artistic” quality but unsuitable for a large distribution, because “the distributors disdainfully refused the masterpieces with the certainty of infallible judgment.”<sup>35</sup> It was Dulac who looking back in 1932 saw in this the emergence of an intermediate category:

The specialization of exhibition—the necessity of which was first realized by Jean Tedesco—has this surprising result of letting the audience get in contact with works which it would not tolerate otherwise in other theaters, and to support as well film trends that want to be commercial, but not enough to pander to nervous ignorants.<sup>36</sup>

This is the first time that artistic quality is emphatically separated from financial success. Dulac’s comment makes a distinction not between commercial and noncommercial cinema, which was clearly present in the 1920s, but between *two kinds of commercial film practices*. He defines the art film neither as a quality nor as a genre (filmed theatrical adaptation), but as a category of film “that want to be commercial but not enough . . .,” which is the first detectable sign of the emergence of a particular type of film—the intermediate category.”

At the time the need for institutionalization was not at all evident. An anecdote about the opening of Le vieux colombier illustrates this point. Among the films on the program was Arthur Robison’s *Shadows* (1923), a

33. V. Guillome Danvers, “En dix-nuf-cent-trente,” *Le cinématographie français* 15 (1919): 9.

34. We can read in the *La cinématographie Française* in 1922 (no. 168, p. 29): “The fashion of releasing the big films in big theaters seems be established definitively. Several United Artists productions will be shown at the Empire Theater (London). However, Griffith’s *The Orphans*, which should be released within two months, will not find a place there. Another big theater was reserved for this sensational show.”

35. *Souvenirs du Vieux Colombier* (cited by B. Van Mierop, “AFCAE: Réplique à la crise du cinéma? Mémoire de fin d’études à l’IDHECm,” thesis, Paris, 1965).

36. Dulac quoted in Henri Fescourt, *Le cinéma, des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Éd. du Cygne, 1932), emphasis in the original.

film belonging to the expressionist movement but lacking excessive expressionist stylization. The audience, for whom the avant-garde was the only possible alternative to “common” movies at that time, was frustrated by this film, which they found to be not avant-garde enough. One spectator complained to Tedesco, “I came here to see the avant-garde, but in this film I haven’t found any!”<sup>37</sup>

24 Dulac’s remark—films commercial “but not enough . . .”—foreshadows a conflict that from the fifties on will characterize the relationship between art cinema and the entertainment industry. At the roots of this conflict lies the struggle of narrative art cinema for a paying audience. The non-narrative avant-garde defined itself from the outset as noncommercial and addressed to a specialized audience. The commercial “but not enough” art-film industry, however, would be in direct and never-ending institutional competition with its fully commercial counterpart. Distributors and exhibitors realized that the contradiction between the industrial character of the cinema and the artistic use of this industry could be resolved by a special institutional network that gathers and concentrates paying audiences for that specific kind of cinema. And they were convinced that there was an audience who would pay for art films—the intellectual elite. As the founders of *Le Studio des Ursulines* put it in 1926: “We want to recruit our audience from the elite of the writers, artists, and intellectuals of the Latin Quarter, an increasing number of whom refuse to attend the movie theaters because of the poor quality of some spectacles.”<sup>38</sup> Thus in the middle of the twenties we can see not simply the separation of film institutions but also the genesis of the distinction between elite and mass culture in the cinema. This distinction will be the ideological basis for the strengthening of the art-film industry.

But specialization was only the first step. It was quickly apparent—in the early 1930s—that the semicommercial narrative art-film institution could not survive without state support. In 1921, Germany adopted a law making films of “artistic or national educational value” eligible for a reduction of up to 50 percent of the normal tax on admission tickets. The first feature film to benefit from this was *Fridericus Rex* (1922) by a Hungarian director, Arzén von Cserépy.<sup>39</sup> Only in 1937 did the French minister for education and fine arts, Jean Zay, try to follow Germany in supporting “quality films” when he de-

37. In *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, 25 December 1924, 7.

38. Cited in Vincent Pinel, *Introduction au ciné-club: Histoire, théorie, pratique du ciné-club en France* (Paris: Les éditions d’ouvrières, 1964), 29.

39. Paul Monaco, *Cinema and Society: France and Germany during the Twenties* (New York: Elsevier, 1976), 47.

clared his intentions to pass a law for the financial support of French “quality-film production.” However, this project was not realized at the time. In both cases, however, artistic quality was meant to be acknowledged only within a national context. There was no intention of supporting “quality films” of other nations. While both German and French film industries were fighting for different protectionist regulations penalizing film import all through the 1920s (with very little success),<sup>40</sup> emerging art-film theaters in Paris showed German and American films as well, embracing artistic quality in film regardless of national origin. Official circles in both Germany and France recognized the importance of cinema in raising national consciousness. State support followed to burnish national prestige through film. In 1939 the National Grand Prix of the Cinema was established in France, which during the Occupation was renamed the Grand Prix of the French Art Film.

25 But it was only a matter of time until the international character of the art-film industry broke through. The first sign of this came as early as 1934, with the establishment of the annual international film festival of Venice. The idea was taken up by France in 1939 with the Cannes Film Festival, though this could not be realized because of the Second World War.<sup>41</sup> The Venice Film Festival was also eventually suspended, and both festivals started up again in 1946. In 1945 André Malraux, minister of culture, revived the idea of legislating financial support for art films, which had been state policy in Germany since 1921, only to be rejected again.

The beginning of the fifties was an important moment in the institutionalization of the art film. Besides the renewal of the Venice Film Festival in 1946, half a dozen new international film festivals were launched in Europe within four years: Cannes, Locarno, and Karlovy Vary (1946), Edinburgh (1947), and Biarritz and Berlin (1950). In 1950 the federation of the French film critics established its own art-movie theater network, beginning with the Reflet 23 theater and followed by five other theaters: Lord Byron, Studio de l’Etoile, Caumartin, Agriculteurs, and Cinéma des Champs-Élysées. At the same time in Germany, there were already fifty theaters that were incorporated in 1953 in the *Gilde Deutscher Filmkunsttheater*. In France the network of film clubs was restarted as early as 1944 by a film critic named Pierre Kast, future editor of the *Cahiers du cinéma* and French new wave di-

40. Monaco, *Cinema and Society*.

41. Originally, the Cannes Film Festival was conceived to politically counter the fascist influence prevailing at the 1938 Venice Biennale. For the history of the Cannes Film Festival, see Paul Leglise, *Histoire de la politique du cinéma français* (Paris: Pierre L’herminier Editeur, 1969–1977), 195.

rector, and an international association of film clubs was founded in 1947. Also in 1947 the preparations began for the creation of the Italian Federation of Cinema Circles (FICC), and the federation was officially constituted in 1950. According to its constitution the cinema circles were “absolutely apolitical, nonprofit associations whose main goal is the development and the spread of film culture. . . . They want to promote the development of film culture, historical studies, the technique of film art, promote the development of the cultural exchange in the domain of cinema of different nations, and encourage experimental filmmaking.”<sup>42</sup> Emphasis on the intellectual underpinnings of art cinema was not missing either. *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Cinema nuovo*, the two most important intellectual film magazines in Europe, were launched in 1951. *Positif*, another important French magazine, hit the stands in 1952. Throughout the fifties and sixties these would be the most influential forums for European art cinema.

26 In 1952 the Fédération Internationale des Auteurs de Film (International Federation of Film Authors) was founded at the Cannes Film Festival. This was the first international institution to openly describe the antagonism between art cinema and film entertainment as an institutional problem. In their statements one can feel the pride and the self-consciousness of an institutional power:

Defending their essential rights, film auteurs do not want to defend just their own destiny, but also the destiny of the cinema, which by becoming a servant would stop being an art, and would deserve only the name of an industry. Protecting their own freedom, film auteurs will protect the cinema, its original virtues, its cultural and social function, its high mission. . . . Thanks to us, the cinema is an art.<sup>43</sup>

It is worth pointing out that American film “auteurs” participated at this meeting only as “observers” not as prospective members.

In 1954 French art-film theater owners wanted to create an association but failed because of the reluctance of the French film critics’ association to give up the independence of the theaters they owned. However, when in 1955 the German national federation called for an international association of art-film theaters, the French film critics decided to offer their theaters to participate, and thus a French national association was born, which became a member of the International Confederation of Art-Film Theaters estab-

42. Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano dal 1945 agli anni ottanta* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1982), 188.

43. “Procès verbale de la Fédération Internationale de Auteurs de Films,” May 2, 3, 4 1952, p. 12, Magyar Nemzeti Filmarchivum.

lished on July 21, 1955. Two years later, at last, financial support for French art-film theaters became a reality. By the second half of the fifties, the art film in Europe was more than a theory, a prospect, or a critical category—it had become a strong institution backed by tax laws, professional associations, production and distribution networks, film festivals, and prestigious magazines.

### Modernist Art Cinema and the Avant-Garde

Is the distinction between modernism and avant-garde a valid issue in the cinema? In film historiography, there are two other labels for the type of film usually identified with the “avant-garde”: experimental and underground. Very often these tags function as collective names designating the same film practice. In general, in French terminology “experimental cinema” is used to designate noncommercial films whose main concern is not to tell a story or to represent a piece of “real life” but to concentrate on and exploit the possibilities of the formal aspects of the cinematic medium. Theoretician of cinema Jean Mitry, for example, includes in this category all films—from those of Georges Méliès to German expressionism, from Clair to Sergei Eisenstein, from Walter Ruttmann to Norman MacLaren, from Gregory Markopoulos to Godard—that display a degree of this approach regardless of genre or style, but he does not make any distinction within this category.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, in American historiography “avant-garde” is used as a general term for alternative, commercial, non-narrative film practice. The third label, “underground,” is mainly used to refer to the American avant-garde of the sixties, but no essential difference is defined between underground and avant-garde films of other periods. It is safe to say that these terms—avant-garde, experimental, and underground—have fairly similar meanings in designating a particular film practice. However, each reveals a different aspect of the same practice. Non-narrative fictional practice in the cinema is most often structurally determined (thus experimental), it is often personal and based on alternative production and distribution networks (thus underground), and it is sometimes political (thus avant-garde in the traditional sense). The avant-garde label is most justified with respect to phenomena that brutally challenge conventional aesthetic taste and can be considered as the expansion of avant-garde artistic movements, as in Dadaism and surrealism. Also, there is no doubt about Vertov’s being an avant-garde filmmaker in the political sense—while most artists of the “pure cinema” or

44. Jean Mitry, *Le cinéma expérimental. Histoire et perspectives* (Paris: Seghers, 1974).

the "absolute film" movement should be more correctly called experimental rather than avant-garde filmmakers.

It seems that Bazin defined the most relevant features of the avant-garde/experimental practice once and for all. In his view, the avant-garde in the cinema before the thirties had a fairly precise meaning:

Between 1924 and 1930, what was called avant-garde had a precise, unambiguous sense. Not complying with the requirements of commercial cinema, avant-garde was aimed only at a restricted audience, which it tried to make accept the cinematic experiences that were in more than one aspect comparable with the experiments in painting and literature of the time.<sup>45</sup>

Avant-garde is a personalized, noncommercial, non-narrative, and reductive use of the medium that, in most cases, is related to other art forms, such as painting, music, or poetry. Twenty years later, Sheldon Renan still uses the same criteria for a definition of the underground:

The underground film is a certain kind of film. It is a film conceived and made essentially by one person and is a *personal statement* by that person. It is a film that dissents radically in form, or in technique, or in content, or perhaps in all three. It is usually made for very little money, frequently under a thousand dollars, and its exhibition is outside commercial film channels. The term "underground film" belongs to the sixties, but the personal film is not a new phenomenon. It goes back almost to the beginning of film, a seventy-year tradition that has had many names, underground being only the latest. This contemporary manifestation, however, is of a greater magnitude than any before. . . . The commercial film is a medium of and for bankers, craftsmen, film crews, and audiences. The underground film is a medium of and for the individual, as explorer and as artist.<sup>46</sup>

Renan's approach concentrates more on the institutional aspect of the avant-garde. But that reflects only the changes resulted in the institutional system of the cinema by 1960. The large availability of cheap and easy-to-handle filmmaking equipment on the one hand, and the large and rigid institutionalized Hollywood production system on the other, made clear that underground opposed Hollywood first of all in the sense of being alternative filmmaking practice. As Jonas Mekas put it, "Now cinema is available not to those who possess a high organizational and group-work talent, but also to those poets who are more sensitive, but often un-communal, who pre-

45. Cited by Antoine de Baecque, *Les cahiers du cinéma: Histoire d'une revue*, vol. 1, *L'assaut du cinéma, 1951-1959* (Paris: Éditions Cahiers du cinéma, 1991), 42.

46. Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: Dutton & Co., 1967), 17-18, emphasis in the original.

fer privacy, whose powers of observation and imagination are most active in privacy."<sup>47</sup> It was not very long though, before American underground cinema created its own alternative filmmaking institutions, such as the Creative Film Society (1957), the Film-Makers' Cooperative (1962), and the Charles Theater (1959). As a cinematic practice, avant-garde/underground/experimental filmmaking is always aimed at private, self-expressive use of the cinema. It is the laboratory of the audio-visual medium, a formal experiment more or less inspired by modern painting and literature, distributed in a noncommercial circuit, for a restricted audience. That is what always aligns the avant-garde with the arts and literature. It rejects cinema as a commercial institution but affirms it as a personal form of artistic expression whereby all kinds of artistic trends and movements can find their way to the cinema.

Some approaches extend the validity of the avant-garde label beyond the noncommercial practice. As discussed above, Mitry did not restrict this category to films aimed at a small audience, which allowed him to include German expressionism, nor to films that relate to the artistic avant-garde, which allowed him to mention documentary filmmakers such as Robert Flaherty. Dominique Noguez also considers that the experimental cinema is a fundamentally and essentially formalistic enterprise, but does not refer to it as a practice.<sup>48</sup> Peter Wollen, on the other hand, claims that there are two kinds of avant-garde cinema. One is purely formalistic, the other is political.<sup>49</sup> Filmmakers like Eisenstein, Miklós Jancsó, or Godard are avant-garde filmmakers not only by virtue of their formal innovations but also by the political stances expressed in their films. Wollen tends to extend the notion of the avant-garde the same way Mitry does, basically toward modern narrative art film, but recognizes the importance of the difference between noncommercial formal experimentalism and a politically informed narrative practice.<sup>50</sup>

Clearly two important differences must be taken into account. On the one hand there is the difference between a non-narrative, noncommercial practice and a radical, mostly politically engaged narrative practice (the difference between the two avant-gardes); on the other hand there is the dif-

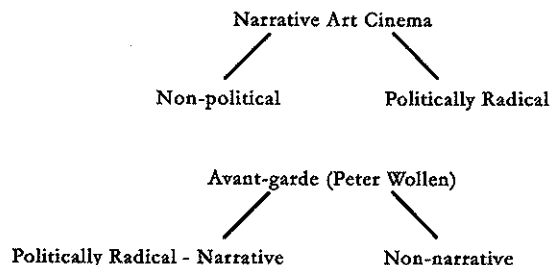
47. Jonas Mekas, "Notes on the New American Cinema," in *Film Culture* (1962): 8-9.

48. See Dominique Noguez, *Eloge du cinéma expérimentale* (Paris: Centre George Pompidou, 1979).

49. Peter Wollen in *The British Avant-Garde Film, 1926-1995*, ed. Michael O'Pray (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1996), 133-134.

50. Noted that Bazin wanted to extend the restricted category of the early avant-garde to new narrative art films.

ference between a commercial, classical narrative practice and the avant-garde (either kind). We could represent these distinctions in the following scheme:



30 Eisenstein, Godard, Jancsó, Jean-Marie Straub, and Danièle Huillet certainly do not represent a private film practice, they are not outside of the commercial film circuit, and even if they interpret narrative in a very extreme manner, narrative remains a fundamental part of their films. Wollen's claim to call them avant-garde is essentially based on their strong leftist political leanings together with their radically unconventional use of the narrative form. Political engagement as the basis of the avant-garde quality is of course not an unjustifiable claim. In art history, all distinctions (if any) between modernism and avant-garde emphasize that the latter is an extreme, radical form of the former. The distinction most art historians agree on involves the self-reflective, essentially aesthetic character of modernism and the aggressive, anti-aesthetic, political character of the avant-garde. This distinction does not hold in the film context, however; the political component there splits its avant-garde in two rather than crystallizing it in opposition to something defined as modernism. Moreover, what distinguishes the artistic avant-garde from artistic modernism is in turn not the distinctive feature of the "mainstream" cinematic avant-garde. The important difference between what is commonly called the avant-garde/experimental movements in film and the avant-garde of fine arts is that the former is not a typically political movement.

The cinematic avant-garde cannot be seen in any way as a "politically radical" continuation of an alleged "abstract cinematic modernism" that preceded it and that engendered its basic abstract forms. The emergence of abstraction in cinema was not a gradual process during which abstract forms had pushed realist forms out of the way until film arrived at a totally abstract avant-garde. Modernist narrative film and abstract avant-garde were two manifestations of the same process appearing simultaneously in 1919: German expressionism on the one hand, and the abstract studies of

Hans Richter on the other. The abstract avant-garde was a parallel phenomenon with the modernist art film all through the twenties; it had in its sight the exploration of the medium's capability of visual abstraction. This interest went beyond the mainstream (classical and modernist) film practice by entirely suppressing the narrative structure, making room for abstract compositional principles, but not out of a radical aesthetic or political motivation.

Obviously, anti-aesthetic politics is not missing entirely from classical avant-garde films. The radical avant-garde movements, Dada and surrealism, discovered the avant-garde potential of the cinema, first in 1924 when Dadaists Picabia and Clair inspired the cinema with their film *Entr'acte*. That was the first film that provoked audience animosity for its avant-garde radicalism when it was screened at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.<sup>51</sup> Larger scandals followed responding to the influence of surrealism in film,<sup>52</sup> testifying to the presence of the avant-garde's political motivation. However, these relatively late and sporadic developments of cinematic avant-garde in the twenties constituted neither its beginning nor its mainstream. The mainstream of early and later avant-garde for that matter was noted for its *private artistic* use of the cinema rather than any political use. The avant-garde in the cinema did not go against any aesthetic tradition, for *tradition was not an enemy for early avant-garde filmmakers*, simply because there was no artistic tradition in the cinema to renounce. On the contrary, tradition primarily meant aesthetic canonization, and that is what early filmmakers wished more than anything to achieve. Early avant-garde film was an initiative to make cinema accepted as a practice of full aesthetic value. In that, it even meant following some of the traditions of primitive cinema. As Clair put it, "If we want to increase the power of cinema, we have to respect the forgotten traditions, we have to return to this source."<sup>53</sup>

On the other hand, large-scale political and artistic provocation emerged in the narrative art cinema in the second half of the 1960s—that is, when the canonization of cinema as a cultural form had been achieved and already

51. Cf. René Clair, *Cinéma d'hier, cinéma d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 28.

52. The most noteworthy was the scandal on the presentation of Buñuel's *Age of Gold* in 1930. A little bit more than a month after the release of the film, in Paris in the Studio 28 cinema, on December 3, 1930, a group of extreme right-wing activist (members of the Patriotic League and the Anti-Jewish League) threw smoke bombs in the theater and damaged the screen. As right-wing press attacks continued, French censorship banned the film a week later. Adonis Kyrrou, *Le surréalisme au cinéma* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1963), 217–218.

53. René Clair, *Reflexion faite* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951).



accumulated traditions could be attacked and declared “classical” and “conservative.” Again, the non-narrative avant-garde or underground cinema was not characterized by a political agenda. As Renan put it, political activism was still “in a minority” in the underground of the sixties.<sup>54</sup> Hence the main aspect of avant-garde cinema was as yet unchanged since the twenties. The most politicized and provocative artists in late modern cinema, such as Godard, Buñuel, Dušan Makavejev, Straub, and Huillet in Europe and Russ Meyer, Paul Morrissey, and John Waters in the United States, all worked on the margins of narrative-film practice. They attacked mainstream narrative film from inside the institution of narrative art cinema. The main underground avant-garde artists of the late modernist period, such as Michael Snow, Andy Warhol, Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, and—despite their cult of homosexuality—even Jack Smith or Kenneth Anger issued no provocation whatsoever toward the institutions of mainstream cinema.

32 The distinction between an “aesthetic” modernism and an “antiaesthetic,” political avant-garde, which is so relevant in art history, seems unsuited to the cinema. Avant-garde/experimental/underground cinema is a specific cinematic practice that may or may not include a political component. It differs from classical cinema as well as from modernist art cinema precisely by virtue of the difference of its practice. Virtually all verbal proclamations of avant-garde filmmakers show a lesser or greater amount of hostility toward commercial filmmaking. It opposes not just the Hollywood-type film industry but the European art-film industry as well, since both are based on narrative fiction. The avant-garde practice opposes fictional narrative, and this opposition only seldom translates into political terms.

54. Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*, 27.

## :2:

# Theories of the Classical/Modern Distinction in the Cinema

Understanding modern cinema historically means understanding how it differs from its counterpart, nonmodern or classical narrative (art) cinema. This chapter gives an overview of the typical distinction between classical and modern cinema. This overview will suggest some basic principles to use as we begin to construct the stylistic-historical aspect of cinematic modernism.

The notion of modern cinema spread through the ranks of filmmakers, film critics, and “ordinary” film viewers since the late fifties. The use of the concept reflects the three aspects of the “classical/modern” dichotomy discussed in chapter 1: modern cinema as the new versus the old/classical; modern cinema as the actual and valid form of cinema versus invalid cinema; and modern cinema as an aesthetic variation of the classical.

We can also find various combinations of these oppositions in different approaches. In the history of film theory the combination of these aspects has crystallized in two main patterns of theorizing cinematic modernism. One depicts modernism as the result of the aesthetic and technical evolution of the cinema while the other considers it as an alternative stylistic movement appearing in different forms in certain moments of film history. In other words, the main demarcation between approaches to modern cinema separates those who treat it as an outcome of an aesthetic, stylistic, or intellectual evolution and those who see it as a specific combination of aesthetic/stylistic choices, whether or not some of these in fact come out of technical or stylistic innovations. Both views have been present simultaneously in film criticism right from the early 1950s.

Theoreticians of the first group, whom I will call “evolutionists,” contend that modern cinema represents a higher degree of development of cine-



matic form (language) and—even if they acknowledge the values of classical cinema—they consider modern film as more capable of expressing abstract ideas. It is their conviction therefore that modernism surpassed classical cinema. Theoreticians of the latter group, whom I will call “style analysts,” on the other hand hold that modernism is a stylistic and/or ideological alternative to classical filmmaking, whether they mean by classical a premodern form or a surviving standard norm. Both groups claim that modernism is a historical phenomenon, but their views diverge as to what constitutes modernism’s “modernity.” Evolutionists hold that modern cinema (the one-time new-as-opposed-to-the-classical) is always “modern,” that is, actual and valid. Style analysts propose, on the contrary, that modernism is a kind of “film practice” related to certain periods of film history, therefore it is not necessarily “modern” (i.e., new, actual) all the time. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze stands at one end of this scale. For him, modernism in cinema is not a style, nor even an artistic movement. It is the actualization of a capacity of the cinema to represent a certain way of thinking. This capacity was only virtually present in prewar cinema and became actualized only after the Second World War. The opposite stance to this kind of philosophical theorizing of modernism is represented by David Bordwell’s approach: modernism is an international stylistic movement, born as a reaction to mainstream Hollywood cinema, which prevailed in European filmmaking during the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will review the main arguments of these conceptions to provide some basis for my own historical approach.

### Style Analysts

At the turn of the 1940s-1950s, it became a widely accepted view, especially among some French critics, that a new way of filmmaking was rearing its head in America and Europe. The classical-modern dichotomy was quickly applied to demarcate these new tendencies. However, some of these critics—later to become filmmakers of the French new wave—did not think of “classical” as an outmoded, dust-covered filmmaking practice. On the contrary, their enthusiasm for American films provided them with a rather nuanced notion of classicism. They acknowledged the importance of cin-

1. And, as he puts it in his history of film written with Kristin Thompson, “in certain respects . . . [it] marks a resurgence of the modernist impulses of the 1920s. . . . In other ways, though, postwar filmmakers forged a revised modernism suitable to the sound cinema.” Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 412.

ematic traditions even in comparison to modern forms. As film critics, they did not advocate a total break with all traditional cinematic practices but looked for traditions that were worthy enough to be continued. Later on, when their own filmmaking practice turned out to be in fact rather subversive, they still declined to claim a break with old cinema as such. All they did was to single out certain tendencies and auteurs they accepted as their precursors or mentors and rejected others as outmoded. That is how Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, Roberto Rossellini, and Howard Hawks became cult figures for the French new wave. Classical and modern were not value judgments for the new wave critics. As a matter of fact, they did not consider “classical” and “modern” as necessarily opposing categories.

Eric Rohmer and Godard, the two main critics for the *Cahiers du cinéma*, theorized on the distinction between “classical” and “modern.” They supported an idea originating from Charles Baudelaire about the relativity of the distinction between classical and modern. According to Rohmer, the modern character of the cinema is its capacity to represent the physical world as it is, in its “stupid” banality. That is why cinema is the only form of art that can really render contemporary reality. And at the same time, cinema is a classic art because it can spiritualize the things it represents according to the ideal of beauty. More than that, cinema takes over the role of classical poetry:

Film possesses the pleasure of the metaphorical power, whose secret poetry has lost, and that is why the most recent art is classical poetry’s only legitimate refuge. . . . The poets are unable to accept into their metaphorical world these fabricated objects, which the modern world has made our company at every moment.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, Rohmer considers cinema as a modern art form in its entirety and thus understands cinema as modern in the sense of being a valid form of art, unlike classical poetry, which is no longer valid. However, within the realm of cinema, classical and modern do not represent two opposing camps but rather go hand in hand. Cinema as a form of representation is modern because it renders modern reality, but as an art form it has to be classical. And in this respect, according to Rohmer, cinema has not yet reached its classical era: “Classicism is not behind, but ahead.”<sup>3</sup> That is, solid aesthetic norms of the cinema are still to be established, and therefore

2. Cited by Antoine de Baecque, *Les cahiers du cinéma: Histoire d’une revue* (Paris: Diffusion, Seuil, 1991) 1: 226.

3. Eric Rohmer, “L’âge classique du cinéma,” *Combat* (15 June 1949).

classicism is not something outmoded, but—to use Baudelaire's words—the necessary “half of the art.”

Godard also speaks of the “relativity of classicism” in one of his early articles, “Défense et illustration du découpage classique.” He already makes a distinction between a classical and a modern cinema, but far from preferring modern to classical, he defends certain aspects of classical cinema against what he calls modern “anticinema” epitomized by the *Macbeth* of Orson Welles (1948) or *Diary of a Country Priest* of Robert Bresson (1950). This is all the more remarkable since from the late sixties through the mid-seventies Godard himself became the emblematic figure of a certain anticinema movement; moreover, both Welles and Bresson were auteurs celebrated by the new wave. Nevertheless, in his 1952 article Godard still emphasizes the importance of setting new rules for the classical time-space articulation (découpage), which in his opinion was far from regaining the height of development it attained before the war.<sup>4</sup>

The important point here is not that Godard (or other new wave critics, for that matter) respects his elders but that he accepts certain filmmaking practices as classical and denounces others as modern. In this early essay, classical and modern are not absolute values but rather are interchangeable notions that serve to canonize new forms of classical narrative cinema. The classicism of modernity and the modernity of classicism—this idea was so important for Godard that he returned to it from time to time later in his filmmaking career. For example, in *Band of Outsiders* (1964), for no apparent reason an English teacher writes on the blackboard “classique = moderne,” and cites T. S. Eliot as saying that “all that is new is by that fact automatically classical.”

It is implicit in Godard's conception that classical and modern relate to each other as the practices of respecting or creating rules and refusing or breaking them, respectively. The scholarly elaboration of this approach makes explicit the conception according to which classical and modern (as a derivative of the classical) are two different types of cinematic prac-

4. “Certainly, one only has to examine the evolution of one of the greatest American artists, Howard Hawks, to see how relative the notion of classicism is . . . what can one see? An increasing taste for analysis, a love for this artificial greatness linked to eye movements, to a way of marching, in short, a knowledge about what the cinema can be proud of, and not the abuse of that, which leads to the anticinema (like in Orson Welles's *Macbeth* or Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*). On the contrary, this is a knowledge of the limits of and a skill for fixing the essential rules.” Godard, “Défense et illustration du découpage classique” *Cahiers du cinéma* 15 (September 1952), reprinted in *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1998), 1: 84.

tice pertaining to different moments of film history. For example, David Bordwell in his *Narration in the Fiction Film* not only considers classical film narration as being classical because it precedes modern film narration, but he also treats it as the standard and most widespread narrative mode to which modern art-cinema narration opposes its rule-breaking methods. He analyzes modern narration as something that deviates from a set of norms established in the 1930s by the Hollywood studio system: “Art-cinema narration has become a coherent mode partly by defining itself as a deviation from classical narrative.” Bordwell's characterization of modern narration consists many times in negative statements, such as “[in art-film narration] the *suzhet* [plot] is not as redundant as in the classical film; . . . exposition is delayed; . . . the narration tends to be less generically motivated.”<sup>5</sup> Bordwell does not entirely discount modern cinema when compared to the classical norm—in fact, he gives equal weight to the classical and the modernist forms—but he holds that the modernist forms are derived from classical cinema.<sup>6</sup> According to Bordwell, modern cinema became institutionalized as an “international art cinema” in the 1960s just like classical Hollywood cinema did in the 1930s. For this reason it is appropriate to speak about two equivalent cinematic practices.

There is a more radical version of this approach formulated by Noël Burch, who dedicated a whole book to show the stylistic, technical, and narrative elements of 1960s modernism that subverted classical cinematic rules, that is to say, the institutional mode of representation (IMR).<sup>7</sup> Although Burch's opinion of IMR is highly critical, his conception implies that the classical form is not an invalid, outmoded, surpassed practice, but something that is always carried on and developed, and opposed, in each period by a modernist counterpoint characteristic of that given period. Modernist form here does not mean a more developed, mature, or more advanced film practice, but only a different, critical, and subversive one. Burch does not treat the notion of modernism as a historical period that follows the classical but rather

5. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), quotations on 228, 205, and in particular the chapters “Art Cinema Narration” and “Parametric Narration.”

6. In the last chapter of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), 378–385, Bordwell and Janet Staiger already explicitly call attention to the dangers of a conception of modern cinema as a simple derivative of the Hollywood film.

7. Noël Burch, *Praxis du cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); translated as *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

as a mode of representation that coexists (after 1919) with the classical—which it disturbs, opposes, and deconstructs.

### Evolutionists

At the same time, many film historians and critics did not stop at the notion that modern cinema was a radically new and different way of making films but went on to hold it as superior to the old, outmoded, and invalid forms. This view, very much like that of the “modern” French poets of the seventeenth century, holds that modern cinema is simply more developed, and technically, aesthetically, and theoretically more capable than the old one. This superiority was often expressed through the metaphor of maturity and adulthood, which underlined even more emphatically the element of an evolution in the concepts of film form. Here is an example from a run-of-the-mill review about Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1961):

A certain anachronistic cinema is dead. Or rather it continues to survive, but together with another cinema, which is as alien to it as *À la recherche de temps perdu* is to *Caroline chérie*. During the last years, languages and conventions were undermined by certain young film authors of the French cinema, and already accomplished works by Ingmar Bergman, Alain Resnais, and Michelangelo Antonioni also appeared. Here is one of those accomplished works. Here is a great example of what could be called a grown-up cinema.<sup>8</sup>

Although critical enthusiasm is not the best standpoint for developing scholarly categories and firm theoretical stances, this passage clearly shows how “new” and “old” become value judgments when used in an evolutionary sense and coupled with the idea of “maturity” or “adulthood.”

The idea of cinema’s aesthetic and intellectual adulthood or maturity appears explicitly in film theory for the first time in Alexandre Astruc’s conception of the development of film language. Astruc elaborated his ideas in several articles in 1948, which became important theoretical starting points of modernism in the sixties and seventies.<sup>9</sup> Astruc’s point is that film has to be raised to the same level of intellectual expression as literature and drama. Cinema’s development elevates it from the state of “spectacle” to the state of “language.” But his “language” of the cinema does not have anything to do with linguistics. Astruc is not a precursor of the 1960s semiological move-

8. *Le Soir*, 24 March 1961, on the occasion of the Belgium release of *L’avventura*.

9. Alexandre Astruc, “Naissance d’une nouvelle avant-garde: Le caméra-stylo,” *L’Écran français* 144 (30 March 1948), idem, “L’avenir du cinéma,” *La Nef* 48 (November 1948), and idem, “Notes sur Orson Welles,” *La table ronde* 2 (February 1948).

ment. For him, cinema is not a language by nature, neither in a linguistic nor in an aesthetic sense. For cinema, becoming a language is the goal of its intellectual development. Here “language” is merely the medium of conceptual expression. The cinema, Astruc says, does not have a future, if this future is not that of the camera’s becoming a “fountain pen.” “The language of the cinema is not that of fiction, nor that of the documentary, but that of the essay.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, film is no less of an intellectual practice than essay writing, or even philosophy, and becoming equal to philosophy is cinema’s only possible destiny. Cinema must become the expression of abstract thoughts but with different tools:

Today, Descartes would lock himself up in his room together with a 16 mm camera and some film stock, and would write his *Discours de la méthode* on film, for today his *Discours de la méthode* would be such that only cinema could give it adequate expression.<sup>11</sup>

So, film’s future is guaranteed only if it becomes capable of expressing abstract ideas—and only when film in fact becomes a language in this sense, could it be called a “mature” art. “An art does not come to maturity unless it finds a way whereby the expressed goes beyond expression.”<sup>12</sup> Maturity of film then included essay-like, philosophical film “writing” in which the written and the filmed text are different from each other only by virtue of their respective materials, but not by their expressive and intellectual power.

This conception is rather close to Bazin’s ideas; Astruc, however, is more radical. Bazin used the term “language” with respect to cinema as a metaphor of “a specific system of artistic expression.” That is what he means when, at the end of his seminal essay “Ontology of Photography” he contends, “We have to consider cinema as a language.” Astruc by turn claims that cinema has yet to become a language. Also, Bazin did not try to restrict cinema’s future to one possible course of evolution, even if he thought that the direction in which cinema would develop was staked out by its enhanced power to represent reality. Bazin was more like a film historian or a film critic who tried to predict future developments of the cinema, whereas Astruc was rather like an ideologist of a particular movement. We could say that on Bazinian grounds, Astruc developed a radical doctrine of the intellectual avant-garde cinema. If Astruc’s idea of the “caméra-stylo” relates to anything, it is the theoretical precursor of textual analysis and the notion of cinematic “écriture” of the late sixties and early seventies. This approach

10. Astruc, “L’avenir du cinéma.”

11. Astruc, “Naissance d’une nouvelle avant-garde.”

12. Ibid.

reiterates the equivalence of the written and the filmed "text" and gives it a large theoretical framework.<sup>13</sup>

Astruc does not use the word "modern" to name the sort of cinema deserving the label of "language," but he obviously has in mind a "new," "more developed," "mature" cinema. Nevertheless, his calling this new cinema "a new avant-garde" and not simply "modern" is quite meaningful. Apparently, he makes no distinction between the two terms, but if one compares the "caméra-stylo" theory to other ideas about modernism, it is clear that Astruc's doctrine of the "caméra-stylo" is the very first appearance of a theoretical point of view in which the classical-modern opposition as a value conflict points toward its extreme development: the experimental avant-garde film of the late sixties and seventies.<sup>14</sup>

### Modern Cinema and Deleuze

By far the deepest and most developed theory of modern cinema has been formulated by Gilles Deleuze in his controversial books on film.<sup>15</sup> This

13. See Jean-Louis Bodry, "Writing, Fiction, Ideology," *Afterimage* 5 (Spring 1974).

14. It is quite common not to distinguish sufficiently the notion of "caméra-stylo" from other conceptions of authorship in the cinema, especially that of the French new wave. However close the two conceptions may seem to be, it is important to note the essential difference between them. While the common ground for both is the distinguished role attributed to the author's personality, they are very different with respect to authorial methods. Astruc's theory sets up a methodological doctrine of an intellectual, subjective, anti-industrial filmmaking, whereas *la politique des auteurs* refuses to distinguish any filmmaking practice. An "author" may work with any kind of genre technique, or subject matter, but his/her personal "signature" should be recognizable throughout. Intellectualism and the expression of abstract thoughts are not necessary features of an "author's" works. The reason for the fusion of these conceptions can be found in the evolution of the modern cinema during the 1960s and 1970s. As will be discussed below, international modern cinema did not share the French new wave's initial enthusiasm for American film genres; rather, it developed according to the intellectual "film writing" conception set up by Astruc. Thus, "caméra-stylo" practice simply became identified with film authorship. For the distinction of the two conceptions, see Claire Clouzot, *Le cinéma français depuis la nouvelle vague* ([Paris]: Fernand Nathan, 1972). For the origins of author theory, see Anne Gillain, ed., *Le cinéma selon François Truffaut* ([Paris]: Flammarion, 1988). And for a detailed explanation of the concept and the debates around it, see de Baecque, *Les cahiers du cinéma*, 1: 147-179.

15. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma*, vol. 1, *L'image-mouvement*, vol. 2, *L'image-temps* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983-1985). For an English translation, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1985), and

theory does not fit in with any previous theoretical frameworks. Deleuze constructs his categories based on his own philosophical system. However original and stunning his theoretical ideas on image, sign, and film form may seem, his notions on film history recognizably follow the Bazinian and partly the Astrucian views about the evolution of film form. No wonder that in the Deleuzian approach to modern cinema one can find all three aspects of the classical-modern dichotomy. He sets out a systematic distinction between classical and modern cinema, whereby modern cinema is seen as a different utilization of moving images. He also sets up a chronological order whereby modern cinema appears as an organic development of classical cinema. Finally, he puts modern cinema on a higher level of evolution where cinema fulfills its potential for expressing abstract thoughts.<sup>16</sup> According to Deleuze, modern cinema is the most developed structural variation of classical cinema, which articulates the actual world better and in a deeper sense than classical cinema. "Classical" does not mean for Deleuze an "everlasting," eternal model of aesthetic value. Not that he does not respect and admire classical auteurs, but he considers classical film form to be outmoded, passé, invalid, discredited. Although Deleuze designates a certain historical moment for the appearance of modern cinema, he does not treat modernism as an art-historical phenomenon in the sense of an art movement, trend, or school. Modern film is the result of the evolution of cinema's inherent power of articulating time.

The difference between classical and modern cinema, Deleuze believes, is to be found in their respective treatment of movement and time. Classical cinema articulates time through movement. It creates an organic system in which perception and action are summed up in a mental quality, which he calls "affection." This is the emergence of subjectivity in the image. The connectedness of perception and action through affection (which takes place in the interstices between the two) is the basis of a space-time unity in which time is located by a determined space, and space is defined through a chronological ordering of time. In other words, classical cinema has its roots in traditional storytelling where a continuous time-frame and a delimited space segment are the bases of the unity of action. Deleuze calls this unity the "sensory-motor circuit," by which he means that in classical cinema

*Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989).

16. "The direct time-image is the phantom which has always haunted the cinema, but it took modern cinema to give a body to this phantom." Deleuze, *Time Image*, 59.

perception is automatically followed by an action or an action by a reaction. In modern cinema the “sensory-motor circuit” is broken, perceptions not followed by action acquire independent value. Modern cinema works with “pure optical and sound situations,” which means that the images we see in modern film are not supposed to imply any imminent action. Perceptions are not controlled by the logic of action but rather by internal mental processes. It is not the logic of storytelling that is revealed by the sequence of images of modern films but the way mental states and forms (e.g., thoughts, dreams, and phantasms) come into being. Since this becoming is separated from physical action, which therefore does not regulate the time of the mental procedures, in modern cinema time stands before us in its purest state, through its mental formations. Historical time, time of action in classical cinema becomes “transcendental” time, time of mental procedures in modern cinema. If classical cinema is an organic system because of the unity of action and reaction, modern cinema is a “crystalline structure” because the “crystals of time”—that is, the articulated mental procedures—are linked to one another by endless variation and multiplication. Modern cinema for Deleuze is the best representation of thinking in the contemporary world.

Modern cinema does not represent a physical world but a mental image of the world on the basis of a belief that this is an existing world. Modern cinema does not say that the world is in a bad way and in need of improvement or that certain representations of the world are incorrect or false. The way modern cinema represents the world is as false as any other mode of representation. Any image of the physical reality necessarily contradicts the mental reality of our times, that is, we cannot believe that things exist as we see them. The specificity of modern cinema takes into consideration this mental reality—not a critique of reality, but a mental correction of the illusion of physical representation. The falsity of physical representation and the mental substitution of physical links become central elements in modern cinema.

One can see that Deleuze’s conception is as ideologically based as those of Burch. Deleuze says that cinematic representation is not false right at the outset; Burch holds that traditional representation after 1919 has been continuously falsified and invalidated. Deleuze claims that modern cinema is the expression of the modern condition and denies that modern cinema ended in the 1970s with the decline of the ideological critique of capitalism. For him, modern cinema is in no way history but actual reality. And in that lies all the difference between Deleuze and the ideologists of modernism. Unlike Burch, Deleuze does not look for the roots of modern film form in the critique of bourgeois ideological representation. For Deleuze, the essence

of modern cinema is not its otherwise undeniable critical function. Its main role is not to deconstruct or criticize classical forms and their underlying ideology.

It is not enough for the victory, to parody the cliché, to make holes in it and empty it. It is not enough to disturb the sensory-motor connections. It is necessary to *combine* the optical-sound image with the enormous forces that are not those of a simply intellectual consciousness, nor of the social one, but of a profound, vital intuition.<sup>17</sup>

He attributes to modern cinema an affirmative function: *modern cinema is a mental substitute for the lost link between man and the world*. Its function is to reconstruct positive mental relations to an already alienated reality by a “profound vital intuition.” The role of modern cinema is to make us “believe, not in a different world, but in a link between man and the world, in love or life, to believe in this as in the impossible, the unthinkable, which nonetheless cannot but be thought.”

The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. . . . The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith. . . . The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link. . . . Restoring our belief in the world—this is the power of modern cinema.<sup>18</sup>

The break between man and the world can be resolved only in a mental dimension, and modern cinema’s forms represent different *virtual* solutions to human alienation without ever crossing the borderline that separates art from actual social or political reality. However, that was not always the case. Cinema did not always lack the revolutionary thrust: “Christian faith and revolutionary faith were the two poles which attracted the art of the masses. For the cinematographic image, in contrast to the theater, showed us the link between the man and the world.”<sup>19</sup> According to Deleuze, these two poles still exist, but they have passed into the third world, while “the crucial point” (i.e., the link between man and the world) has disappeared. In other words, even the most revolutionary third world cinema cannot avoid

17. Deleuze, *Time Image*, 22, emphasis in the original. The translation of the first sentence is erroneous in the English edition.

18. Deleuze, *Time Image*, quotations on 170, 171.

19. Deleuze, *Time Image*, 171.



the consequences of modern alienation, and it cannot alter the substantial falsity of modern cinematic representation.

All this makes Deleuze stand out as an original theorist of modern cinema. In spite of his clearly leftist and anticapitalist inclinations, he does not belong with the large group of film theorists who consider modern cinema from the aspect of political critique. Modern cinema for Deleuze is neither a negation, nor a critique of classical cinema but the dismantling and the virtual reconstruction of human relationships, which in classical cinema was represented as an actual and physical reality. That is what he calls the "restored belief in the world through mental constructions." He defines modern cinema not from the point of view of its relationship to the classical, but from its relation to the present and its perspective in the future. And this is why he does not see an end to modern cinema. If the function of modern cinema is to make us believe in the world, it will last as long as this function, in other words, until the modern condition changes. For Deleuze, every film, which reflects on the break between man and the world by substituting the physical link by a virtual mental form, is modern. His modernity is not Greenberg's escapism; it is much closer to postmodernism's cult of the virtual.

The conclusion that follows from all this is that while the style-analyst approach supposes an important difference between what is called modern cinema (a new and actual cinema of any time), and modernist cinema, that is, a cinematic trend displaying certain stylistic and narrative characteristics, evolutionists have a single and synthetic idea about modern cinema, since they do not distinguish between *modern* and *modernist* cinema.

### Modernism as an Unfinished Project

In *Cinema and Modernity*,<sup>20</sup> John Orr claims that modern poetics of the cinema has remained unchallenged since the 1960s and that "postmodern" cinema continued to use the formal devices invented by early and late modernism. In this perspective modernism could be regarded as an "unfinished project." This is a crucial point, since if cinematic modernism were something that survives other modernisms, cinema should be considered as a unique phenomenon among the arts. Either we would have to say that for some reason, modernism in the cinema lasts fifteen to thirty years longer than it did in literature or the arts, or we would be obliged to consider it as a nonhistorical phenomenon.

20. John Orr, *Cinema and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

Art history has often seen stylistic solutions survive the original cultural or historical context in which they emerged as responses to certain problems. Expressionism, for example, appeared as a version of fauvism during the late 1900s as a pure pictorial problem. It reemerged later in a different version as a reaction to a historical situation, conveying historical and political content, right before and during the First World War. And for the third time, expressionism reappeared during the late 1940s at the beginning of modern American painting known as "abstract expressionism" without any reference to the original pictorial and the later historical contexts. The assertion that the cinema of the 1980s and 1990s uses basically the formal solutions of the modernist period (which is only partly true) does not in any way contradict the fact that modernism as an *ideological project* belongs to a historical moment in the past. One can very well consider cinematic modernism as a historical phenomenon appearing in certain cultural contexts and, at the same time, consider its aesthetic aspects as surviving the historical situation in which they saw the light of day.

Seeing cinematic modernism as an unfinished historical phenomenon is not without basis, but proving this requires a strong historical argument—and the rest of this book will argue that the contrary is true: that the second modernist wave as a movement or as a period lasted until the mid-1970s, even as it is quite obvious that some of its stylistic and narrative innovations continued to enrich different cinematic practices.

The idea of modernism as an "unfinished project," however, is problematic. As treated in the works of Astruc, Orr, and Deleuze, among others, modernism is not a historical phenomenon (or historical only in a Hegelian sense) in that it is an end result of an evolutionary process of film "language" (or the semiotic system of film). If modernism has "never been replaced," as runs the argument of these auteurs, it is not because film history does not continue, but because modernism represents the most developed phase of the evolution of the cinematic form. This is a view shared by many theorists and especially critics of the cinema. No scholar of modern cinema can dodge having to answer this question. It is the first important problem we encounter when entering the realm of modern cinema.

Is it true that modernism is the most developed "adult" form of the cinema and that therefore its project will never be finished? We may conceive of the evolution of the cinema in two different ways: from the point of view of the development of audio-visual technology and of its aesthetic form. Cinema as a technical and industrial medium is subject to the changes of technical progress in rendering perceptual data of the world around us and in creating new sensory stimuli. Whether or not we take the aesthetic



aspects into consideration, a film made in the 1940s was obviously able to convey a greater array of sensory stimuli than works from the 1920s due to synchronic sound effects and higher-grade film stock. Similarly, in the 1960s, a filmmaker had a wider range of technological options at his or her disposal to represent physical reality than he/she would have during the Second World War: color or black-and-white film, different formats, an array of lenses, including zoom, among others. So, from this hardly negligible point of view, cinema's audio-visual superstructure is hitched to the train of technological development, which informs its aesthetic capabilities to a very great extent. However, nobody would claim that 1960s modernism is the supreme form of the cinema because of its technological advantages over previous periods. The "evolution of film language" does not refer to the sheer technical progress of the medium.

46 Cinema as an art form is a recent phenomenon, and has necessarily gone through certain phases in the process of elaborating and refining its expressive tools. No film historian or theoretician would suggest that such a process of development did not take place in the history of the cinema. There is a consensus in film historiography that it took at least twenty to thirty years before certain forms of storytelling, continuity editing, and different forms of montage became standard. Historians' and critics' opinions do not really diverge about which period saw the standardization of narrative norms. Thompson says that by 1917, the classical mode was realized in its basic narrative and stylistic premises.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Burch considers that the institutional mode was complete by the beginning of the 1920s. There is, however, another approach to the aesthetic development of the cinema, according to which the solidification of the narrative standard is not the crucial distinguishing feature. In André Bazin's account, the evolution of film language is a dialectical process in which the pivotal point is its capacity of continuous representation of time and space. In his article "Evolution of Language," he asserts, from a strictly aesthetic point of view, that the evolution of "film language" reaches its height during the 1940s, when staging in-depth and uninterrupted plan-sequences begins to prevail over analytical montage.<sup>22</sup> And from yet another point of view,<sup>23</sup> that of Eric Rohmer, even the late 1940s cannot be considered an era of a crystallized "classical" cinema. We should

21. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 157.

22. Cf. in André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Éd. du Cerf, 1975), 74. However, in one of his slightly earlier articles ("The Myth of the Total Cinema," 1946), and from a strictly technical point of view, he says that "Cinema has not been yet invented!" *Ibid.*, 23.

emphasize that these views do not necessarily contradict each other, since they consider different objects of development. Thompson and Burch talk about the basic principles of classical Hollywood narration, Bazin talks about film's possibilities of rendering reality, and Rohmer alludes to the exploration of intellectual capacities of cinematic expression. So, did the evolutionary phase of the cinema come to an end by the late 1910s, or was there any further evolution leading to a fulfillment in the 1940s as suggested by Bazin? Is the 1960s the peak of the evolution, or ad absurdum, as suggested by Peter Greenaway, that "we haven't seen any film yet"?<sup>23</sup> How far can we go on in extending the evolutionary course of cinematic expression?

47 According to the approach used here, the modern art film is not the end result of an inherent evolutionary process of the cinema. It is not even an entirely inherent cinematic phenomenon. The modern art film is cinema's response to the postwar modernist wave in drama, literature, music, and the arts. Late modern cinema is not a style or practice but a form of modernist art, applying various stylistic solutions to express thoughts and feelings generally accepted in a specific period. And the question concerning the finished or unfinished character of modern cinema, in the final analysis, should be seen in the broader context of the modern and the postmodern. One can consider the postmodern as a specific version of modernism (and consequently modernism as an "unfinished project") or as a radically different phenomenon. But one cannot disregard the historical moment when forms hitherto considered as mainstream, productive, rich, sustainable, or simply fashionable all of a sudden become obsolete, empty, and marginal in the eyes of the audience and the artists. This is when a period, a fashion, or a trend ends and turns into something else regardless of what we call it. And unless a certain artistic practice disappears totally, there will always be *something* to replace those forms considered old and obsolete.

The evolution of European cinema after the general decline of artistic modernism in the 1970s has shown a trend similar to that of the arts. Even if many important films of the 1980s and 1990s have continued to use the stylistic and narrative solutions that modernism invented—in fact, some of these have become popular commonplaces, such as the jump cut or the self-reflective quotation—during this period we encounter important aesthetic phenomena in mainstream art filmmaking that are essentially uncommon to modernism. To mention but a few, I can point to the emphasis on the non-real character of the narrative (whereas one of modernism's main goals was

23. In a television interview conducted by the author in 1995 and broadcast in 1997.

the demystification of narrative fiction), narrative and stylistic heterogeneity (which is contrary to the purity of modernism), and the intensification of emotional effects (as opposed to modernism's intellectual puritanism). All these traits are new not only in comparison with modernism but also with its principles. Evolutionists on the one hand must have a hard time accepting that cinema in a highest aesthetic sense not only has not ceased to exist but has followed the general principles of postmodern art in the 1980s. European art cinema did not revert back to classicism; it became something other than what it had been during the modernism of the 1960s.<sup>24</sup> This is not the least because even the most classical narratives used already many inventions of modernism. Style analysts on the other hand have to explain the considerable fusion of classical and modernist forms in characteristic films of the 1980s and 1990s. To understand the cinema of the postmodern period one has to take into consideration both the transformation of forms of mass entertainment and cinema's artistic utilization. Television, computer games, and digital animation are new forms of audiovisual communication that considerably altered the spectrum of this medium. New forms of audiovisual art become intelligible only when one takes into consideration their new functions adapted more widely to the arts and communication, just as in the era of modern cinema.

24. An interesting variation of the Deleuzian conception can be found in French film critic Jean-Michel Frodon, *L'âge moderne du cinéma français* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995). In his view, modern cinema was an attempt to realize the "essence of the cinema," that is, a new way of thinking, which is different from all other systems of thought (science, ideology, etc.). However, modern cinema remained marginal, and this project was later taken over by new electronic media. Frodon suggests that the modernist project to unfold the "essence of the cinema" was a partial failure, and cinema's evolution turns it into something else. This train of thought could be developed consistently, provided that one gives up the concept of the "essence of the cinema" and accepts the notion of the "essence of the audio-visual medium," of which cinema is only one, ultimately transitory, manifestation.

## PART TWO



Fig. 3. Hour of the Wolf (Ingmar Bergman, 1966).

## The Forms of Modernism