

Georges Duhamel (1884–1966) was a novelist and essayist—for example, *Vie des martyrs* (1917), *Les Plaisirs et les jeux* (1922), *Confessions de minuit* (1924). Joseph Delteil (1894–1978) was best known then for his lyrical study of *Jeanne d'Arc* (1925). André Obey (1892–1975) was a playwright best known for his collaboration with Denys Amiel on *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (1921), the source of Germaine Dulac's 1923 film. Marc Elder was the pseudonym of Marcel Tendron (1884–1933).

³ Pierre-F. Quesnoy argues that the influence of the cinema on literature was actually stronger than Feyder suggests, in “Littérature et cinéma,” *Le Rouge et le noir* (July 1928), 85–104.

⁴ *Le Penseur* (1920) was directed by Léon Poirier for Gaumont; this was the only work done for the cinema by the Swiss writer, Edmond Fleg (1874–1963). *L'Atre* (1920–1923) was adapted from Alexandre Arnoux's play, *La Chavaucbée nocturne*, and directed by Robert Boudrioz for Films Abel Gance.

⁵ Feyder could very well be talking about his own experience as a filmmaker here. After making two very successful adaptations, *L'Atlantide* (1921) and *Crainquebille* (1923), he directed two original scenarios, the first of them his own—*Visages d'enfants* (1925) and *L'Image* (1926)—both of which ran into distribution difficulties. At the time he wrote this essay, he (along with others such as Clair and L'Herbier) was forced by the economic problems of the Cartel des Gauches government, which tended to dry up French film production money, to sign a contract with Films Albatros to make two more adaptations, *Gribiche* (1926) and *Carmen* (1926).

⁶ Feyder is contrasting the classic political and philosophical texts of two writers almost no one would consider adapting for the cinema with the novels of Balzac, which were much in vogue at the time for film adaptations—for example, Poirier's *Narayana* (1920), Baroncelli's *Père Goriot* (1921), Ravel's *Ferragus* (1923), Epstein's *L'Auberge rouge* (1923), Robert's *Cousin Pons* (1924), and de Rieux's *Cousine Bette* (1924)—and with the sentimental romance novels of Paul de Kock (1793–1871), which offered a prototype for the typical French melodramatic films of the 1920s.

RENÉ CLAIR, “Rhythm”

From “Rythme,” *Cahiers du mois* 16/17 (1925), 13–16.

THE EARTH glides by under the hood of an automobile. Two outstretched fists. A mouth that cries out. Some trees snapped up, one after the other, by the muzzle of the screen.

Thought emulates speed in the flow of images. But it slows and, vanquished, gives way to surprise. It surrenders. The new gaze of the screen forces itself on our passive gaze. At that moment rhythm comes into its own.

WE SAY “rhythm” and feel satisfied with that. We find a rhythmic value in every film, with a little kindness. Yet it seems that the filmed world is notably lacking in such rhythm. Nothing is more incoherent than the “exterior movement” of most films. The formlessness of this mass of images would be disconcerting if we didn't know that it came from an era in chaos itself. Occasionally there's hope. Three quick drum beats. The spectator's

body rouses. Delight fades away. The torrent of images continues to run slackly through the well-regulated gearing mechanism.

A GENERAL definition of rhythm. The latest, it seems, is that of Professor Sonnenshein.¹ Rhythm is “ a series of events in time, producing in the mind that experiences it a sense of proportion among the durations of the events or groups of events which constitute the series.” So be it. But on the screen the series of events is produced in time and space. One has to take space into account as well. The emotional quality of each event gives to its measurable duration a rhythmic value that’s completely relative. Let’s not be too hasty to define the nature of cinematic rhythm. Instead, let’s open our eyes.

Before becoming interested in the luminous editing table where images are assembled, I used to think that it would be easy to give orderly rhythms to a film. I distinguished three factors in the rhythm of a film, thanks to which one could achieve a cadence not too different from that of Latin verses:

1. the duration of each shot
2. the alternation of scenes or “motifs” of action (interior movement)
3. the movement of objects recorded by the lens (exterior movement: the performance of the actor, the mobility of the decor, etc.)²

But the relations among these three are not easily definable. The duration and alternation of shots have a rhythmic value which is affected by the “exterior movement” of the film, whose emotional quality is unappreciated. And what metric laws can resist this balancing of spectator and landscape, each equally mobile, on the axis formed by the screen? This ceaseless shifting from objective to subjective, thanks to which we experience such miracles? Thus the spectator who sees some faraway automobile race on the screen is suddenly thrown under the huge wheels of one of the cars, scans the speedometer, takes the steering wheel in hand. He becomes an actor and sees, in the turns of the road, rushing trees swallowed up before his eyes.

AGNOSTICISM. Does our generation know what to think about such a question posed within each film and by film itself? I doubt it. Such an attitude has to be judged incompatible with the knowledge we pretend to require that an artist have of his art. Let’s insist in the cinema on the right of being judged only according to its promises.

Today I myself have learned how to resign myself to readily admitting neither rule nor logic in the domain of images. The marvelous barbarism of this art fascinates me. Here at last are virgin lands. It doesn’t distress me

to not know the laws of this newborn world which is free of any slavery to gravity. I feel a pleasure at the sight of these images which is, too infrequently, what I seek to awaken in myself—a sensation of musical liberty.

Gallop, canter. How the ascending horizons are inverted and the abyss finally opens its petals to welcome you into its soothing heart. Become statue, house, little dog, sack of gold, rolling river of oaks. I no longer know how to separate you from the midst of your kingdom, O huntress [Diana].

Sentences cannot long carry illogic in their arms without working themselves to death. But this series of images which is not bound up with the old tricks of thought and to which no absolute meaning is attached, why should it be burdened with a logic?

Blond, you lift your head and your curving hair reveals your face. This look, this gesture toward the imagined door—I can give them a meaning of my own. If words had given you life, it would be impossible to preserve you from their constrictive power; you would be their slave. Images, be my mistress.

You are mine, dear illusions of the lens. Mine, this refreshing universe in which I take a bearing on flattering features, according to my taste.

¹ A reference probably to Professor Edward Adolf Sonnenschein (1851–1929), a classical scholar, whose *What is Rhythm?* (1925) had just been published by Blackwell's in England.

² Here Clair reverses the meaning of the terms, interior and exterior movement, that Moussinac and Delluc had established several years before.

RENÉ CLAIR, "Pure Cinema and Commercial Cinema"

Translated by Stanley Appelbaum in René Clair, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, ed. R. C. Dale (New York: Dover, 1972), 99–100. Reprinted by permission. The original French version first appeared as "Cinéma pur et cinéma commercial," in *Cahiers du mois* 16/17 (1925), 89–90.

THE CINEMA is primarily an industry. The existence of "pure cinema" comparable to "pure" music seems today too much subject to chance to merit serious examination.

The question of pure cinema is directly connected with that of "cinema: art or industry?" To answer this last question, it would first be necessary to have a precise definition of the concept of *art*. Now, our era is not favorable to such precise formulations. Next, it would be necessary for the cinema's conditions of material existence to be drastically altered. A film does not exist on paper. The most detailed screenplay will never be able to foresee every detail of the execution of the work (exact camera angle, lighting, exposure, acting, etc.). A film exists only on the screen. Now, between the

brain that conceives it and the screen that reflects it, there is the entire industrial organization and its need for money.

Therefore, it seems pointless to predict the existence of a “pure cinema” so long as the cinema’s conditions of material existence remain unchanged or the mind of the public has not developed.

Nevertheless, there are already signs of the pure cinema. It can be found in fragmentary fashion in a number of films; it seems in fact that a film fragment becomes pure cinema as soon as a sensation is aroused in the viewer by purely visual means. A broad definition, of course, but adequate for our era. That is why the primary duty of the present-day filmmaker is to introduce the greatest number of purely visual themes by a sort of ruse, into a screenplay made to satisfy everybody. Therefore, the literary value of a screenplay is completely unimportant. . . .

HENRI CHOMETTE, “Second Stage”

Translated by Stanley Appelbaum in René Clair, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, ed. R. C. Dale (New York: Dover, 1972), 97–98. Reprinted by permission. The original French version first appeared as “Seconde étape,” *Cahiers du mois* 16/17 (1925), 86–88.

NO SOONER had the cinema freed the image from its original immobility than it began to express itself in disappointing formulas. False humor, Italian melodrama, the serial, and “natural” color came along to doom our new hopes. Later, the spectator—anxious for information about the theater but depending on chance for the choice of films to see—discovered *The Cheat*, Chaplin, Mack Sennett, and *Nanook*. And his understandable discouragement gave way to a temporary reconciliation.

At present—except in the eyes of the French legislator, who still classes it along with “traveling shows”—the cinema has been able to win its least favorable judges back to its side. Yet, although it is a newborn force with numerous possibilities, it is still showing signs of only one of its potentials: the representation of known things.

In short, the only role it plays in regard to the eye is partially comparable to that of the phonograph in regard to the ear: recording and reproducing.

Of course, stop-action filming reveals to us events which our eyes did not perceive or did not perceive clearly (the opening of a rose)—but at least we had an idea about the sum of these events. Of course, trick shots give us unprecedented illusions (elimination of gravity, or of the opacity of a body through double exposure)—but only by sticking to objects familiar to our reason, concrete and well-known objects. Do you wish to escape from the real and conjure up something imagined—a soul, for example? You will have to make use of a body, which has become transparent—but is still a

recognizable human body. A conventional representation, but representation.

Thus, all the present uses of cinema can be reduced to films of a single world, the representative, which can be divided into two groups: documentary—mere reproduction in motion—and dramatic (comedies, dramas, fairy-pantomimes, etc.), the origin and essence of which can be found in older types of performing arts (drama, pantomime, vaudeville, etc.).

But the cinema is not limited to the representative world. It can create. It has already created a sort of rhythm (which I did not mention when speaking about current films because its value in them is extremely diluted by the meaning of the image).

Thanks to this rhythm, the cinema can draw from itself a new potentiality, which, leaving behind the logic of events and the reality of objects, engenders a series of visions that are unknown—inconceivable outside the union of the lens and the moving reel of film. Intrinsic cinema—or, if you will, pure cinema—since it is separate from all other elements, whether dramatic or documentary—that is what certain works by our most personal directors permit us to foresee. That is what offers the purely cinematic imagination its true field and will give rise to what has been called—by Mme Germaine Dulac, I believe—the “visual symphony.”

Virtuosity, perhaps, but just like a harmonious concert of instruments, it will move our sensibilities as well as our intelligence. For why should the screen be denied that faculty for enchantment which is granted to the orchestra?

Universal kaleidoscope, generator of all moving visions from the least strange to the most immaterial, why should the cinema not create the kingdom of light, rhythms, and forms alongside that of sound?

HENRI CHOMETTE (1896–1941) was the older brother of René Clair. He worked as an assistant to Robert Boudrioz, Jacques Feyder, and Jacques de Baroncelli; made two short abstract films, *Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse* (1925) and *Cinq Minutes de cinéma pur* (1925); and then directed Dolly Davis and Albert Préjean in *Le Chauffeur de Mademoiselle* (1928).

FERNAND LÉGER, “Painting and Cinema”

From “Peinture et cinéma,” *Cahiers du mois*, 16–17 (1925), 107–108.

THE PLASTIC ARTS all exist in a state of relativity. If you wish to consider the cinema as such, it then comes under the same law.

In my own case, I know that I have used the magnification of the frame or the individualization of a detail in certain compositions. Thanks to the screen, the prejudice against “things larger than nature” no longer exists.

The future of cinema as painting lies in the attention it will draw to ob-

jects, to fragments of those objects, or to purely fantastic or imaginative inventions.

—The error of painting is the subject.

The error of cinema is the scenario.

Freed of this negative weight, the cinema can become the gigantic microscope of things never before seen or experienced.

There's an enormous realm which by no means is restricted to documentary but which has its own dramatic and comic possibilities.

—(Similarly in painting, in the plastic composition of the easel).

I maintain that a stage door that moves slowly in close-up (object) is more emotional than the projection of a person who causes it to move in actual scale (subject).

Following this line of thinking leads to a complete renovation in cinema and painting.

—Subject, literature, and sentimentality are all negative qualities which weigh down the current cinema—in sum, qualities which bring it into competition with the theater.

True cinema involves *the image of the object* which is totally unfamiliar to our eyes and which is in itself moving, if you know how to present it.

Naturally, you have to know how to do this. It's rather difficult. It demands a plastic understanding which, apart from Marcel L'Herbier and René Clair, very few possess.

HENRI FESCOURT and JEAN-LOUIS BOUQUET, *Idea and Screen: Opinions on the Cinema*, vol. I

From *L'Idée et l'écran: Opinions sur le cinéma*, vol. I (Paris: Haberschill and Sergent, 1925).

IN SUM, this famous avant-garde movement can only lead to a massive miscarriage.

—You jest!

—We do not jest. On the contrary, we think the jest has gone on far too long.

On the boulevard, at the end of a preview screening. Three characters are arguing, and from the responses below you can judge for yourself who has won the argument. Sour grapes? Lack of fairness? What do you know about those? An idea . . . We are going to make you decide. To orient you now, let's take up the conversation again from its beginning.

ENTHUSIAST: The film we just saw is worse than useless.

WE: As bad as that?

ENTHUSIAST: You saw it too: it follows the formula of a play, that is, a