

BLAISE CENDRARS, "On *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*"

Translated by Stuart Liebman from "Sur *Le Cabinet du Docteur Caligari*," *Cinéa*, 56 (2 June 1922), 11. An earlier translation of Cendrars's essay appeared in *Broom*, 2 (July 1922), 351.

I DO NOT LIKE this film. Why?

Because it is a film based on a misunderstanding.

Because it is a film which does a disservice to all modern art.

Because it is a hybrid film, hysterical and pernicious.

Because it is not cinematic.

A film based on a misunderstanding because it is a sham produced in bad faith.

It heaps discredit on all modern art because the subject of modern painters (Cubism) is not the hypersensibility of a madman, but rather equilibrium, tension, and mental geometry.

Hybrid, hysterical, pernicious because it is hybrid, hysterical, and pernicious. (Long live cowboys!)

It is not cinema because:

1. The pictorial distortions are only gimmicks (a new modern convention);
2. Real characters are in an unreal set (meaningless);
3. The distortions are not optical and do not depend either on the camera angle or the lens or the diaphragm or the focus;
4. There is never any unity;
5. It is theatrical;
6. There is movement but no rhythm;
7. There is not a single refinement of the director's craft; all the effects are obtained with the help of means belonging to painting, music, literature, etc. Nowhere does one see [the contribution of] the camera;
8. It is sentimental and not visual;
9. It has nice pictures, good lighting effects, superb actors;
10. It does excellent business.

FERNAND LÉGER, "*La Roue*: Its Plastic Quality"

Translated by Alexandra Anderson as "A Critical Essay on the Plastic Quality of Abel Gance's Film, *The Wheel*," in *Functions of Painting*, ed. Edward F. Fry (New York: Viking, 1973), 20-23. Reprinted by permission. The original French text first appeared as "*La Roue*: Sa valeur plastique," in *Comoedia* (16 December 1922), 5.

ABEL GANCE'S film involves three states of interest that continually alternate: a dramatic state, an emotional state, and a plastic state. It is

this entirely new plastic contribution whose real value and implications for our time I shall struggle to define precisely.

The first two states are developed throughout the whole drama with mounting interest. The third, the one that concerns me, occurs almost exclusively in the first three sections, where the mechanical element plays a major role, and where the machine becomes *the leading character, the leading actor*. It will be to Abel Gance's honor that he has successfully presented an *actor object* to the public. This is a cinematographic event of considerable importance, which I am going to examine carefully.

This new element is presented to us through an infinite variety of methods, from every aspect: close-ups, fixed or moving mechanical fragments, projected at a heightened speed that approaches the state of simultaneity and that crushes and eliminates the human object, reduces its interest, pulverizes it. *This mechanical element* that you reluctantly watch disappear, that you wait for impatiently, is unobtrusive; it appears like flashes of a spotlight throughout a vast, long heartrending tragedy whose realism admits no concessions. The plastic event is no less there because of it, it's nowhere else; it is planned, fitted in with care, appropriate, and seems to me to be laden with implications in itself and for the the future.

The advent of this film is additionally interesting in that is is going to determine a place in the plastic order for an art that has until now remained almost completely descriptive, sentimental, and documentary. The fragmentation of the object, the intrinsic plastic value of the object, its pictorial equivalence, have long been the domain of the modern arts. With *The Wheel* [*La Roue*] Abel Gance has elevated the art of film to the plane of the plastic arts.

Before *The Wheel* the cinematographic art developed almost constantly on a mistaken path: that of resemblance to the theater, the same means, the same actors, the same dramatic methods. It seems to want to turn into theater. This is the most serious error the cinematographic art could commit; it is the facile viewpoint, the art of imitation, the imitator's viewpoint.

The justification for film, its only one, is *the projected image*. This image that, colored, but unmoving, captures children and adults alike—and now it moves. The moving image was created, and the whole world is on its knees before that marvelous image that moves. But observe that this stupendous invention does not consist in imitating the movements of nature; it's a matter of something entirely different; it's a matter of *making images seen*, and the cinema must not look elsewhere for its reason for being. Project your beautiful image, choose it well, define it, put it under the microscope, do everything to make it yield up its maximum, and you will have no need for text, description, perspective, sentimentality, or actors.

Whether it be the infinite realism of the close-up, or pure inventive fantasy (Simultaneous poetry through the moving image), the new event is there with all its implications.

Until now America has been able to create a picturesque cinematographic fact: film intensity, cowboy plays, Douglas [Fairbanks], Chaplin's comic genius, but there we are still beside the point. It is still the theatrical concept, that is, the actor dominating and the whole production dependent on him. The cinema cannot fight the theater; the dramatic effect of a living person, speaking with emotion, cannot be equaled by its direct, silent projection in black and white on a screen. The film is beaten in advance; it will always be bad theater. Now let us consider only the visual point of view. Where is it in all of this?

Here it is: 80 percent of the clients and objects that help us to live are only noticed by us in our everyday lives, while 20 percent are *seen*. From this, I deduce the cinematographic revolution is *to make us see everything that has been merely noticed*. Project those brand-new elements, and you have your tragedies, your comedies, on a plane that is uniquely visual and cinematographic. The dog that goes by in the street is only noticed. Projected on the screen, it is seen, so much so that the whole audience reacts as if it discovered the dog.

The mere fact of projection of the image already defines the object, which becomes spectacle. A judiciously composed image already has value through this fact. Don't abandon this point of view. Here is the pivot, the basis of this new art. Abel Gance has sensed it perfectly. He has achieved it, he is the first to have presented it to the public. You will see moving images presented like a picture, centered on the screen with a judicious range in the balance of still and moving parts (the contrast of effects); a still figure on a machine that is moving, a modulated hand in contrast to a geometric mass, circular forms, abstract forms, the interplay of curves and straight lines (contrasts of lines), dazzling, wonderful, a moving geometry that astonishes you.

Gance goes further, since his marvelous machine is able to produce the fragment of the object. He gives it to you in place of that actor whom you have *noticed* somewhere and who moved you by his delivery and his gestures. He is going to make you *see* and move you in turn with the face of this phantom whom you have no more than *noticed* before. You will see his eye, his hand, his finger, his fingernail. Gance will make you see all this with his prodigious blazing lantern. You will see all those fragments magnified a hundred times, making up an absolute whole, tragic, comic, plastic, more moving, more captivating than the character in the theater next door. The locomotive will appear with all its parts: its wheels, its rods, its signal plates, its geometric pleasures, vertical and horizontal, and the for-

midable faces of the men who live on it. A nut bent out of shape next to a rose will evoke for you the tragedy of *The Wheel* (contrasts).

In rare moments scattered among various films, one has been able to have the confused feeling that there must be the truth. With *The Wheel* Gance has completely achieved *cinematographic fact*. Visual fragments collaborate closely with the actor and the drama, reinforce them, sustain them, instead of dissipating their effect, thanks to its *masterful composition*. Gance is a precursor and a fulfillment at the same time. His drama is going to mark an epoch in the history of cinema. His relationship is first of all a technical one. He absorbs objects and actors; he never submits to means that ought not to be confused with the desired end. In that above all his superiority over the American contribution resides. The latter, picturesque and theatrical in quality, in bondage to some talented stars, will fade as the actors fade. The art of *The Wheel* will remain, armed with its new technique, and it will dominate cinematographic art in the present and in the future.

FERNAND LÉGER (1881–1955) was a French painter initially aligned with the Cubists, whose work came under the influence of the “Purist” movement after the war. But Léger also became involved in attempts to produce a synthesis of the arts as a popular spectacle—for example, the ballet dramas *Parade* (1917) and *Skating Rink* (1922), L’Herbier’s film *L’Inhumaine* (1924), and his own *Ballet mécanique* (1924).

EMILE VUILLERMOZ, “*La Roue*”

From “*La Roue*,” *Cinémagazine* 3 (23 February 1923), 329–31, and (2 March 1923), 363–65.

ABEL GANCE’S latest film establishes once again that even though the cinema is silent, filmmakers are not chary with words. *La Roue* has provoked numerous discussions and debates, and the hubbub shows no sign of abating. The release of this majestic work does not, however, raise complex problems, rather it highlights—and in huge close-ups even—several elementary questions on which, it seems, everyone can easily agree.

In *La Roue*, Abel Gance has spun out an incalculable number of symbols, some of which are magnificently beautiful and poetic. One can also spin out another: *La Roue* is the very image of cinema, that is, a machine that is steadily revolving and yet seems to be revolving in place. The film industry is a prisoner of this gyrating motion which forces it to follow the same circle forever, to commit the same mistakes, and to fall into the same errors. Never has this elementary truth been demonstrated so obviously as in this splendid work which I intend to examine.

La Roue proves several things. First, that the current commercial formula of cinema exhibition is absurd and dangerous, and, second, that its

fate of Orpheus, who was torn apart by the bacchantes; but, like Orpheus, it will survive the punishment.

We must have a reshaped and tightened version of *La Roue*, relieved of the slight imperfections which have been imposed on it by circumstances.¹ All the elements of a masterpiece exist in this composition. It's perhaps the first time that a cinegraphic production has contained such pleasing and persuasive treasures. All those who love the cinema and have confidence in its future must lay claim to this "artistic model" in the work of Abel Gance.

For, if there have been more refined, more delicate, more ingenious works before this, I cannot remember ever having contemplated a production as clear-sighted as it is powerful, in an exclusively cinegraphic style. *La Roue* will make those who are still unsuspecting now understand the prodigious future of this art form of moving images. Later they will come to see that *La Roue* was a prophecy. Why are we not immediately attempting to comprehend the broad range of its advance?

¹ A reedited 4,200 meter version of *La Roue* did premiere at the Colisée cinema in February 1924.

RENÉ CLAIR, "*La Roue*"

Translated by Stanley Appelbaum in *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, ed. R. C. Dale (New York: Dover, 1972), 97–98. Reprinted by permission. The original French text first appeared as "Les Films du mois: *La Roue*," *Théâtre et Comoedia illustré* (March 1923).

La Roue is the archetype of the film that is Romantic in spirit. Just as in *La* Romantic drama, you will find in M. Abel Gance's film improbable situations, a superficial psychology, a constant attempt to achieve visual effects—and verbal effects as well—and you will find extraordinary lyrical passages and inspired moments of movement, one could even say, the sublime and the grotesque.¹

Given a drama so obviously "thought out," so carefully stuffed with literary ideas and ambitions, it is tempting to debate these with the author. No need to bother. If a screenplay ought to be merely a pretext, here it is a cumbersome pretext, sometimes annoying, rarely necessary, but in any case not deserving of lengthy consideration. It is hardly unusual that, like most filmmakers, M. Gance has made a mistake as a screenplay writer, even if the mistake is more serious at times than we are accustomed to. If we were asked to judge M. Gance by the psychological intentions he expresses on the screen and by the titles he writes, I have to admit that my judgment would not be in his favor. But right now we are concerned with cinema.

As I see it, the real subject of the film is not its odd story, but a train,

tracks, signals, puffs of steam, a mountain, snow, clouds. From these great visual themes that dominate his film, M. Gance has drawn splendid sequences. We had, of course, seen trains before moving along tracks at a velocity heightened by the obliging movie camera; but we had not been completely absorbed—orchestra, seats, auditorium, and everything around us—by the screen as if by a whirlpool. “That’s only a feeling,” you will tell me. Maybe. But we had not gone there to think. To see and feel is enough. Fifty years from now you can talk to me again about the cinema of ideas. This unforgettable passage is not the only one that testifies to M. Gance’s talents. The catastrophe at the beginning of the film, the first accident Sisif tries to cause, the ascent of the cable car into the mountains, the death of Elie, the bringing down of his body, the circular dance of the mountaineers, and that grandiose ending amidst veils of cloud: those are sublime lyrical compositions that owe nothing to the other arts. Seeing them, we forget the quotations from Kipling, Aeschylus, and Abel Gance throughout the film, which tend to discourage us. And we start to hope.

Oh, if M. Abel Gance would only give up making locomotives say yes and no, lending a railroad engineer the thoughts of a hero of antiquity, and quoting his favorite authors! If he were willing to create a pure *documentary*, since he knows how to give life to a machine part, a hand, a branch, a wisp of smoke! If only he were willing to contribute in that way to the creation of the Film that can barely be glimpsed today!

Oh, if he were willing to give up literature and place his trust in the cinema! . . .

RENÉ CLAIR (1898–1981) was a young journalist and actor—for instance, in Feuillade’s *L’Orpheline* (1921) and *Parisette* (1922). In 1922, he worked as an assistant director to Jacques de Baroncelli; a year later he was making his first film, *Paris qui dort* (1924).

¹ Victor Hugo’s theory of the sublime and the grotesque, enunciated in his dramatic manifesto, *The Preface to Cromwell* (1827), became one of the French Romantics’ main themes. Clair here uses the term ironically to describe Gance’s ups and downs, rather than in an accurate historical way. [Note by R. C. Dale]

LÉON MOUSSINAC, “On Cinegraphic Rhythm”

From “Du rythme cinégraphique,” *Le Crapouillot* (March 1923), 9–11.

IF, IN A FILM, the images have to possess a particular beauty and value in and of themselves, beyond their significance in relation to the whole, this beauty and value can be singularly diminished or increased according to the role those images are given in time, that is, the order in which they succeed one another.

For example, it’s evident that if they projected, all by itself, the image in *El Dorado* where Marcel L’Herbier shows his heroine walking along the