

Introduction

LIKE MANY PEOPLE, I GREW UP watching films and talking about them with friends. I was also reading books and studying music and occasionally seeing a play production—this was North Carolina off the beaten path, the small city of Fayetteville in the 1950s and early 1960s. As I began to see what the great traditional arts were, it dawned on me that I, and seemingly everybody, was involved in one such art with movies.

Foreign films and nonfiction films seemed to belong with the more popular variety. A neighborhood theater where I went as a child on Saturday afternoons to see double-feature westerns and science fiction serials, became a few years later the venue for a local literary club's Sunday film series, showing us *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *Night and Fog* (1956), *Les parents terribles* (1948) . . . A walk downtown to the two or three grander theaters might bring one to John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) or Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). From the downtown, a descent came to the old Cape Fear River port of Campbellton, in whose eighteenth-century tavern building Carson McCullers lived for a time around 1940 and completed *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, while gathering impressions from nearby Fort Bragg for *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. At the great oak tree on this spot Flora MacDonald, who had helped Bonnie Prince Charlie escape to the Isle of Skye, rallied Royalist troops against the American Revolution. Somewhere on the fringes of the old town had lived the remarkable turn-of-the-century black writer Charles Chesnutt, then and still unknown to most of Fayetteville's inhabitants.

As I was growing up there, traveling to play piano in competitions, getting involved in the horse world, coping with the books assigned in school and the many more books each of these led to, even then the

power of film and the uncanny rightness of organization of whole films reached me and stuck in my mind. Film seemed to ask for the responsiveness and thought that books and plays and music had received.

I went off to New Hampshire for the last years of secondary school, where the educational atmosphere was tense with the ethics and aesthetic taste of, let us say, Thoreau—a spartan idealism. Yet there were crosscurrents. The Art Gallery presented a series of films, including Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1957), which astonished me at what the medium of film could address and could do. A maverick English teacher summoned a group of the interested to a basement classroom for a secret screening of Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963). Saturday nights at the gymnasium gave everybody *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955), *Hud* (1963), *Zulu* (1964). Some of us who wrote stories and poems and put out a literary magazine found all of this film eminently discussible.

I studied literature at Harvard and Princeton in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where courses in film were not yet given. But outside the formal curriculum films were much screened and discussed, and I knew many people seriously interested in fiction and drama and the other arts who were ready to attend to film and give it its due, listening to what new it had to say. Friends and I at Princeton returned from our seminars on Spenser and Dickens and Calderón, and stayed up all night watching films on the New York television stations. We made trips into the city for retrospectives of D. W. Griffith and Buster Keaton. The intellectual stimulation was constant.

A well-developed criticism seemed to be called for. And it seemed about to happen; the way seemed to be opened. Some of Sergei Eisenstein's and André Bazin's daring, exploratory writings on film were current in English translation. Jean-Luc Godard's and François Truffaut's pronouncements on film were making an impression, as their own films continued to appear and give excitement. Andrew Sarris was making the case in articles and books for the artistic worth of American popular film (a high point of my graduate school years was walking into a Princeton newsdealer's and opening the *Village Voice* to discover they had printed an article-length letter of mine defending Sarris against a reviewer of one of his collections, who claimed that popular art could not have depth or be worth serious attention). Robin Wood, with an impressive background in literary study under F. R. Leavis, had turned to film and made the case in a fine small book for the artist who seemed popular film's most powerful voice, Hitchcock. Stanley Cavell published *The World Viewed*, reflecting on his lifelong attachment to movies and showing how much

a distinguished philosopher of aesthetics found to think about in film. It reaches out to a reality we fear we do not possess; it reflects on itself, like the other modern arts. Good books on directors, free-thinking books on the medium, continued to appear.

Yet when I began to teach literature and film in the 1980s, it seemed that possibilities had shrunk. Film studies had caught on as an academic discipline, but the ways of thinking about film seemed to have narrowed. I was discouraged, as were others, by repeated talk of film as a component of bourgeois, capitalist culture, or as a distortion of women, in order to bolster the patriarchy. Discussions of film along these lines gave one second thoughts about our culture and general attitudes. But the rich and diverse art of film seemed not really to be listened to. Images and words and sounds, the variety of deep feelings a film could stir, the range of thoughts it could provoke, seemed mostly turned away from. Women's many anarchic appearances in film, their following out of their own destinies there, seemed overlooked. (Molly Haskell's critically astute 1974 book, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, was unfortunately not a factor in shaping academic film studies, though the book is still read and admired.)

Academic film studies also gave the call—and still gives it—for a strictly historical account of the production of films and their reception by audiences. A film, seen historically, is what its makers intended it to be, as well as what audiences have taken it to be. But the evidence for intention and reception is never good enough. The intention of a *work* is something broader than the consciously held intention of a maker. Reception is a matter of individuals.

My disposition as a critic is akin to that of the American New Critics, writers I love and admire—John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and others. The New Criticism finds, and avers, that the work of art, looked at with openness, will always surprise one. An understanding of history, of psychology, of the ways of working of cultural assumptions, may help one to understand art. But understanding brought from the outside will never go far enough, and may distort what is there. The work needs to be followed out, paid attention to in detail, submitted to, sometimes talked back to. If the work is remarkable, it asks that the critic give testimony to it, wanting to save the valued experience and offer it up to others, using the various powers of language to evoke the experience and direct others into the life that is there. R. P. Blackmur is for me a supremely inspiring critic for riding out the waves of a work, getting thoroughly involved in it, and yet pushing for insight into what

the gesture of art is, after all, what the giving of intelligent attention is, what indeed intelligence and aliveness are.

Crucial to me is the note of importance, of urgency, in criticism—as in Blackmur, the critical writings of D. H. Lawrence, F. R. Leavis, or Q. D. Leavis, Wilson Knight, Yvor Winters, Charles Olson, Susan Howe. How the art works, what it does, is taken to have immediate bearing on how we might live—how we might perceive the world, and use our imaginations, and act. The sense of art's urgency, and a liberating directness in writing about the work, often go with willingness to acknowledge the critic's self, to test by reflection the quite personal reaction and push it toward some general usefulness. Ezra Pound writes in *ABC of Reading*, "The critic who does not make a personal statement is not to be trusted" (30). In any case, I say something about myself here and in the chapters that follow—paint in my sensibility and my relation to the films I take up—hoping this will help to make clearer what I am saying about the films.

A film, like any work of art, becomes fully itself only in interaction with a thinking, responding reader, only in having its way of being, its meaning, its connections to other works of art and to life, acknowledged. Films ask for thought, and answer back to it. They were meant for thought, for being read. Is there a danger of critical subjectivity? One supposes so—yet there is a danger in fear of subjectivity, for there is a wild element to art that speaks to the open sensibility of a *person*, who may testify to a response, may reason or point or insist, looking to others for, as Leavis put it, a "yes" or "yes, but. . . ." (*English Literature* 47). Responding to art is, finally, a question of sensibility, of the nerves and heart and brain all at once. I see this. Do you see it?

I offer here extended essays in critical engagement—I call them "long takes"—with four films, taken up one by one and sequentially, from the film's opening to its close: Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975), Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail Mary* (*Je vous salue, Marie*, 1984), Dušan Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971), and (in the book's longest essay and the only one devoted to a so-called classical Hollywood film) Josef von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus*, with Marlene Dietrich (1932). The second part of the book consists of "short takes," more varied in format but addressing similar issues, on *Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1960) and *Le joli mai* (Chris Marker, 1963); *Jeanne Diehman, 23 quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), and other films by Chantal Akerman; Ross McElwee's *Time Indefinite* (1993); *L'Avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960); the cinema of Michael Haneke; and *Rosetta* (Jean-Pierre and

Luc Dardenne, 1999). The volume concludes with a brief postscript, occasioned by the death (in 2016) of Victor Perkins, a film critic whose work I greatly admire, that serves to sum up my aspirations in writing the essays in this book.

All these films themselves reflect on the nature of film, its ontology, its sources in the creative imagination, film's ways of working and speaking, what film offers an audience or challenges an audience to undergo. A close look at the films draws these reflections out.

Further, all the films find and use the image of a reflective water surface as a pointer to film and its nature—thus my title. And all the films focus on a woman character who seems to be the creative source of the film, to generate its images and flow and thus the stream of thoughts it provokes, including reflection on the place of the woman or the feminine in film imagination and creative imagination more generally.

I pursue these themes throughout the book. Yet I have adhered to the idea of essays, tryings out, on individual films in order to let the films themselves be the source of instruction, sensing that the films have more to say than any set of ideas that might be used to frame them. The films have a way of going on talking, as from an endless depth, and ought to be allowed to talk themselves out, with their twists and rebuttals and qualifications. The work belongs “uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself,” says Martin Heidegger in his great essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” to which I often refer (41).

I offer this book believing that more is going on in film than has even yet been acknowledged—that there is more possibility in the contact of film and viewer than has been supposed.

I make strong claims about films, episodes in films, shots, words, sounds . . . and about the very medium of film, what it is, where it comes from. I claim connections from film to books and the other arts and philosophical ideas over a wide range. I write hoping that what I say will be acknowledged, will be accepted as true, whatever else may be true as well.