Film

“Just as painting before it, cinema presents us with familiar images of visible reality—interiors, landscapes, human characters—arranged within a rectangular frame.”

Lev Manovich

By 1905 the work of Monet, Cezanne, van Gogh, and Gauguin had gained strong recognition within the avant-garde and was about to make a significant impact on the wider public that had supported Academic painting. Monet had become wealthy. He was then living at Giverny, painting his gardens. Only Rousseau was yet unacknowledged by either the avant-garde or the general public.

One of the most important developments for Western art at the turn of the century, however, occurred in the mass media. A convenient date to mark the beginning of this next phase of Western art is 1905, for three important reasons: the first nickelodeon (a theater devoted exclusively to the showing of movies) opened in the United States; the halftone process that allowed photographs to be printed in mass publications had been generally adopted; and the French government had dropped its sole sponsorship and dominance of the Academy and the Salon system. These combined factors illustrate the conclusion of the momentous cultural change that had begun in Manet’s time: the substitution of the mass media for Academic painting as Western culture’s most influential source of perspective images to reflect its basic cultural values.
The mass media not only continued, in a meaningful sense, the popular realism of Academic painting, they produced icons that both reflected and helped to create a radically different middle class society from that of the nineteenth century. The most powerful new mass media art form was the movies.

**The Origins of the Movies I: Roots in Academic Painting**

Despite the importance of photography as a mass medium, it was primarily the movies that displaced Academic painting as the new standard of visual imagery. The frame around the screen in Lyman H. Howe’s poster *New Marvels in Moving Pictures* (1855, 7.1) is an attempt to relate the new medium to fine art. The cultivated upper middle class audience shown in the poster was, at this date, as fictional as the battleships on the screen. The movies, in spite of their eventually universal appeal, began as a popular art adopted by the lower class. The film historian Charles Eidsvik has commented:

“The cinema, like the Academy, was born to serve the aesthetic of spectacular romantic realism that dominated the popular arts of the nineteenth century…The picture on a movie screen resembles a nineteenth century painting far more that either resembles the painting on the walls of virtually any museum of modern art.”

The influence of Academic painting on the development of the movies goes back to the early nineteenth century. Louis Daguerre began as an aspiring Academic painter. Lacking sufficient talent for Salon competition, he devoted his interest in realistic imagery to improving the highly popular visual spectacle called the diorama (discussed in Chapter 5). Daguerre’s dioramas were large-scale scenes painted on translucent canvas in such a way that one scene would show if light was reflected from the canvas and another scene would show if light was
projected *through* the canvas from behind. These lighting effects and the addition of a musical accompaniment added a strong touch to drama as well as a sense of passing time. The public gladly paid admission to see these spectacular displays of visual illusion. Dioramas were thus a
major step from painting toward the movies. It was Daguerre’s quest for an increasingly convincing illusion of reality that took him beyond the diorama to collaborate with Niepce in the invention of photography.

[SIDEBAR: Southern Californians can experience a diorama-like presentation at Forest Lawn in Glendale. There, an immense painting of the Crucifixion installed on a stage behind a curtain. Viewers enter a theater and take a seat. The room is darkened, the curtains are drawn back, and spotlights are projected over the surface of the painting as actor Charlton Heston reads the story of the Crucifixion (7.2). Only at the end of the dramatic presentation do viewers see the entire painting.]

7.2 “Crucifixion,” Forest Lawn, Glendale, California.

American artists were also motivated by the urge for maximum visual illusion underlying Academic painting. After all, French Academic painters trained most of America’s most important nineteenth-century artists. Thomas Cole, Frederick Edwin Church, and Albert Bierstadt were either immigrants from Europe with European training or had studied in Europe. Gerome himself at one time had ninety American students in Paris.

The most impressive and original application of Academic painting technique to American themes is seen in nineteenth century landscape painting. American artists created
landscapes that Australian art critic Robert Hughes called “pre-Cinemасcope prodigies” without equal in Europe.

**Frederick Edwin Church**’s *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1864. 7.3) is a superb example of this tradition. The reds, yellows, and greens of the sunset are reflected in the placid blue of the water to create a peaceful symmetry. This sense of order is enhanced by the carefully observed and rendered details of the trees and clouds. The sense of quiet in the scene is as vivid as the colors. The result is both meditative and scientific at the same time. Such stunning, almost visionary landscapes combined the Academic attention to photographic detail with the strong nineteenth-century American belief in their continent as a biblical land of promise. (Ironically, romanticized paintings of the pristine landscape were often purchased by wealthy industrialists whose factories were polluting US urban and rural environments.)

7.3 Frederick Edwin Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1864.

**Thomas Eakins: Beyond the Academy toward the Movies**
One American artist, **Thomas Eakins** (1844-1916), took the photographic realism of Academic painting and of photography itself and pushed both to their absolute limits—short of actual motion.

Eakins, a young man from Philadelphia, was so gifted that in 1866, at the age of twenty-two, he had to choose between art and medicine. With typical intensity, he went to Paris to study art under the direction of the painter he most admired, Jean Leon Gerome, who was, in turn, so impressed with young Eakins, that he avoided a government ban on foreign students at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts by taking him in as a private student in his own studio.

Eakins stayed in Paris for four years, spending long hours at the Louvre and traveling to Spain in addition to working in Gerome’s studio. He was quite sure what he wanted to do; his interest was so completely focused on Academic painting that his letters home mentioned nothing about Manet or the tumult caused by the Impressionists during his stay in Paris.

Eakins’s hard work was rewarded when Gerome acknowledged him as his best student, as assessment Eakins agreed with, as can be seen in a letter he wrote shortly before his return home: “I know perfectly what I am doing and can run my modeling, without polishing or hiding or sneaking it away to the end. I can finish as far as I can see.”

As his words indicate, Eakins was confident that, in approaching the mastery of a Gerome, he was ready to make a powerful impact on American art.

**Eakins in America: Too Real & Too Factual**

Eakins’s first major painting when he returned from Paris, *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull* (1871, 7.4), shows just how far he could finish and how far he could see. A scull is a small rowboat used at that time for a popular form of racing. Eakins’s painting shows Max Schmitt, a well-known sculler, pausing in a spectacularly painted autumn scene. Eakins proudly inserted a
self-portrait—the sculler in the background. Thus Eakins’s work resembled the paintings of Manet and the Impressionists in the sense that he attempted to depict the “heroism” of the immediate environment—which, on America’s east coast, was now far more city than wilderness.

7.4 Thomas Eakins, *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull, 1871*.

Eakins fully expected this painting to earn him public and critical acclaim and establish for him a prominent place in American art. The critics, however, picked at its technical perfection; the public simply found it boring. Professional athletes were not a favored subject in late nineteenth century America. The country had not yet developed the cult of celebrity around sports figures seen today.
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Undeterred, Eakins combined rigorously objective portraiture with the strong theatrical flavor of Academic painting in his next major work, *The Gross Clinic* (1875, 7.5). The composition centers on the famous surgeon Dr. Samuel David Gross. Eakins heightened the sense of melodrama by inserting the cringing figure of a woman—the patient’s mother—in the background. The gray socks worn by the young man indicate that he was poor; the operation was therefore free, because he had agreed to become the subject of the lecture/demonstration. Dr. Gross, meanwhile—as a true hero of science—rises above the trauma to instruct the surrounding tiers of attentive students. Eakins was well qualified to paint this picture; he had spent two years studying anatomy, including several dissections, before taking up art as a career.

Even melodrama did not help with the critics or the public. The bloody hands of the surgeon and the undignified position of the patient (not to mention the patient’s gray socks symbolizing the poorhouse) undercut any potential sentimental appeal in the melodrama.

The greatest insult came, however, when Eakins submitted the painting for display at Philadelphia’s Centennial Exhibition of 1876: the jury rejected it. Eakins had to settle for a place in a display of medical equipment. Officials apparently reasoned that anyone who confronted the painting there was either professionally desensitized to its horrific realism, or was at least properly forewarned.

This public lack of enthusiasm continued to greet Eakins’s painting of contemporary life, which ranged from sporting events to urban landscapes. Despite his current reputation as one of America’s truly great nineteenth-century painters, Eakins in his own lifetime received recognition primarily for his portraits, which included the leading industrialists, social figures, and politicians of his day. His uncompromisingly realistic spirit met opposition even here—many of his portraits were refused by the sitter after completion, and some were actually burned.
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For Gerome, realism was a veneer, a camouflage; for Eakins, realism meant one thing: objective visual truth. This pursuit of it led Eakins to the threshold of the movies.

7.5 Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic*, 1875.
The Origins of the Movies II: Roots in Panoramas

The broad sweep of Church’s “pre-Cinemascop” vision and Eakins’s scientific realism both echoed the popular nineteenth century art form known as the panorama (7.6). First appearing in 1792, the panorama was a combination of theater space and painting imagery. Viewers entered the center of the space—often a rotunda theater built expressly for the panorama—and found themselves surrounded on 360 degrees, by mural-scale paintings. Most panoramas were realistic portrayals of contemporary places and events. Robert Barker advertised his 1792 panorama in the London Times as “a view-at-a-glance of the CITIES of LONDON and WESTMINSTER, comprehending the three bridges, represented in one Painting, containing 1,479 square feet, which appears as large and in every respect the same as reality.” Two years later, Barker presented a panorama of the battle between the British and French naval forces.

Patriotic scenes of military victories were the most popular panorama subjects. Many of them were derived from the photographic record of contemporary conflicts.

The Panorama of Sebastopol

After Napoleon III saw Roger Fenton’s photographs of the Crimean War, he was inspired to send his own artists to record the conflict at Sebastopol in the Ukraine.
Jean-Charles Langlois (1789-1870), a history painter specializing in panoramas glorifying French victories, left Paris with Louis-Eugene Mehedin (1828-1905), a young photographer. When they arrived in Sebastopol in mid November 1855, the siege was already over. Langlois and Mehedin found only abandoned batteries and battlements. Determined to record what was left before other troops entered the city and destroyed everything, they made fourteen photographs to create a panoramic view from Malakoff hill.

Langlois and his assistant returned to Paris and went to work. In August 1860, the Panorama of Sebastopol was installed in the theater constructed by Gabriel Davoiud on Paris’s Champs-Elysees. (Still there, the theater is now known as the Theatre du Rond Point.) In addition to Langlois astonishingly realistic painting—directly derived from the photographs—the artists added three-dimensional objects to the presentation. Baskets, cannons, stones and dirt brought the realism of the image out into the viewers’ space. Like blockbuster movies today, the Panorama of Sebastopol was wildly popular. Over 397,000 visitors saw the panorama before it was replaced in 1865 by the Panorama of Solferino (also by Langlois) (7.7).

7.7 Langlais, a panorama of a battle scene.

Most panorama paintings did not survive into the twenty-first century. However, seven of Langlois’s painted panels are preserved in the Musee des Beaux Arts in Caen. In 1905, the city of Sebastopol built its own panorama theater and commissioned Russian painter Franz Alekseevich Rubo to create a new Sebastopol panorama. Like its nineteenth century antecedent, Rubo’s panorama combined the painting with three-dimensional objects to enhance the realism.
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Rubo’s impressive composition measured over 14 meters tall and has a circumference of 115 meters. As Stafford and Terpak note, “the immersion in the image that a viewer felt inside a panorama rotunda is not unlike the experience of watching an IMAX film in its specially built theater. The thrill provided by the moving camera in IMAX footage was furnished in the monumental panorama rotunda by *trompe l’oeil* [“fool the eye”] effects incorporated into the canvas, natural light shifting across the image, and the visitor’s own progress around the platform.”

Many of these works were so detailed that it was common to use opera glasses to become absorbed within the spectacular imagery. Barbara Novak describes one particularly interesting example of this passion for visual illusion that took the form of an immense moving painting:

“Henry Lewis’s *Mammoth Panorama of the Mississippi River*, painted on 45,000 square feet of canvas, representing the Mississippi from St. Louis to the Falls of St. Anthony, was offered to the public view at the Louisville Theater in Kentucky in 1849. Seats were available through a box office…doors opened at seven forty-five and the Panorama commenced moving at precisely eight-thirty. What was in fact on offer was a moving picture with all its social appurtenances” (7.8).
Similar effects were used in nineteenth-century theater dramas by combining such “moving pictures” with the diorama techniques pioneered by Daguerre. All of these are examples of an emerging “pre-movie” mentality: by the late nineteenth century, artists had certainly made the public ready for the movies.

The Origins of the Movies III: Scientific Roots

The pictorial advances towards cinema were paralleled by technical advances. In 1656—exactly when Vermeer was using the camera obscura to compose his paintings—another Dutchman was inventing what is known as the magic lantern. Astronomer Christiaan Huygens combined a candle and a concave mirror inside a lantern to project the images painted on glass slides. His device anticipated not only today’s slide projectors, but also the movie projector and the data projector. Huygens used his magic lantern to project a frightening series of animated skeletons derived from Hans Holbein’s *Dance of Death* (1538, 7.9).
A century later, Etienne Gaspar Robert developed the *Phantasmagorie*, a magic lantern that projected skeletons, ghosts, and other macabre scenes on translucent screen (7.10). Like today’s movie directors who open their films in one city, then release it for wider distribution, Robert premiered the *Phantasmagorie* in a Paris theater, then toured Europe with it.

Throughout the nineteenth century, inventors added new optical devices to the growing inventory of Industrial Revolution technologies. Thaumatropes in 1826, zoetropes in 1834, and praxionoscopes by 1877 all “offered viewers the thrill of seeing a moving image…each of these devices relied on the phenomenon of the persistence of vision, whereby an image is retained by the brain for a short interval even after the original is removed from the visual field.”

Then, in 1878, a Scottish born photographer named Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) was hired by Governor Leland Stanford of California to create what became the first photographs of moving animals. Stanford, who had made a massive fortune building the transcontinental railroad, was fascinated with the phenomena of motion. A friend of his later remembered that
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Stanford “always said that nobody understood anything about it, and that he was determined to unravel the mystery of motion.” Stanford hired Muybridge to “unravel the mystery” of how horses run, to substantiate with photographs the governor’s belief that horses sometimes have all four legs off the ground while they are running. Muybridge stripped all the white sheets from Stanford’s Palo Alto mansion, hung them up as a backdrop inside Stanford’s racetrack, and lined the track with cameras whose shutters were attached to trip strings. When Stanford’s prize racehorse Occident ran in front of the cameras, he tripped the shutter strings, resulting in silhouetted photographs of the horse in motion. (Exposure time was still too slow to get a full, detailed view of the horse.) The photographs proved Stanford was correct: the horse did have all four legs off the ground at some points (7.11).

7.11 Eadweard Muybridge, *Horse in Motion*, 1878.

Muybridge was encouraged by the outcome of his experiment and began a series of photographs of animals in motion. He ended up producing over a hundred thousand motion
studies, many of which he gathered into an eleven-volume book, *Animal Locomotion* (1887). Even before he published the book, Muybridge became a celebrity. He toured the country, giving magic lantern slides, and wrote several articles about his revolutionary work. Muybridge’s work influenced artists and scientists alike.

Thomas Eakins was intensely interested in photography as a means of acquiring objective information for his painting of the human figure, landscapes, and animals. In *A May Morning in the Park* (1879), Eakins used information from Muybridge’s photography to paint the correct position of horses’ legs while they were running. This kind of visual perfection was possible only through photography, since the speed of horses’ legs is not visible to the human eye.

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*7.12 Etienne-Jules Marey, Pole Vaulter.*

French scientist (1830-1904) saw reproductions of Muybridge’s horse photographs in a French journal. Marey had been researching human and animal motion for years. He was inspired by Muybridge’s work to investigate new possibilities of photographing motion (7.12).
By 1882 Marey had developed a rifle-shaped camera that could take twelve images per second on a single photographic plate. It was rapid enough to document a bird in flight. He also developed a way to record various stages of human and animal motion on a single negative. By 1892, Marey’s rifle-camera process used roll film. At this point “rapid photography” was ready for the final refinement—George Eastman’s more pliable roll film with sprocket holes. Then in July 1889, Marey made a short movie of the human hand in motion.

**Thomas Alva Edison** (1847-1931) met Muybridge in 1888 and immediately initiated his workshop’s research into motion picture technology. Led by William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, Edison’s workshop developed the Kinetograph camera in 1890 and the Kinetoscope viewer the following year. Viewers of Edison’s first movies had to look through a peephole, one at a time. Nonetheless, Kinetoscope theaters opened in 1894 and were soon popular across America. Among the Edison-sponsored films shown on the kinetoscope was *The Kiss* (1896, 7.13), which was simply comprised if unedited footage of Broadway stars John Rice and Mary Irwin kissing. Late nineteenth century audiences were outraged by the content of *The Kiss*, which today would not provoke any response—other than possible boredom in viewers now used to seeing a wide range of explicit sexual encounters on the wide screen.

![7.13 Thomas Alva Edison, movie still from The Kiss, 1896.](image)

The birth of the cinema is usually dated 1895, when **Auguste Lumiere** (1892-1954) and his brother **Louis Lumiere** (1864-1948) projected films in the Salon Indien, in the basement of the Grande Café in Paris. Although some of the early Lumiere films looked back to painting
prototypes—the one of men playing cards quotes Cezanne’s composition of the same subject—other films looked forward into the rush of modernity. The Lumiere film of a locomotive engine pulling into a station (7.14) was so realistic that it shocked and frightened audiences who feared that the engine might come into the theater and run over them. They were not yet accustomed to the separation between screen images and reality. (In addition to its fearsome power, the locomotive can also be seen as an important symbol of modernism. Monet painted Paris train stations as metaphors for the immediacy of contemporary perception. And the train was to become the subject of one of the first narrative films in the US.)

7.14 Lumiere Brothers, movie still from Locomotive.

The realism of the movies was so startling that during their first decade audiences were quite content with repetitive footage of boxers, presidents, vaudeville acts, and other predictable scenes. The artistic qualities of these first films can be judged by their early use as “chasers”—in
many vaudeville houses they were shown at the end of the evening as the signal that it was time to go home.

The first filmmaker who began to explore the potential of both the form and the content of movies as a vehicle for effects unique to motion pictures was the French magician Georges Melies (1861-1938). With Melies, movies became more than a novelty; they began to take their own artistic identity as film.

Georges Melies: Enter the Magicians

Melies had a professional background as a caricaturist, set designer, actor, and producer when he began to apply his energy to the new art form of film. He approached the medium from the beginning as a magician and an artist. Films like The Man with the Rubber Head (7.15) were based on his own scripts and sets, which combined to form what he called “artificially arranged scenes.”

This accurate term also describes his initial approach to the camera: his films featured no close-ups or changes of camera angle. Despite his stationary camera, Melies enthralled audiences with his seemingly uncanny special effects—most of which derived from his career as a
professional magician. By 1900 he had made over two hundred one- to two-minute films, which became the most popular screen events in America.

Melies did more than record magic tricks on film. He discovered and then creatively applied one of the most commonly used devices in film history—the jump cut. While filming on a busy Paris street, the film jammed in his camera, and after freeing it, he resumed shooting. When he viewed the developed footage in his laboratory, the astonished Melies saw a bus suddenly turn into a hearse! The delay in freeing the jammed film had put a bus on one frame and a hearse on the next—with no separation between them. Melies had accidentally made a collage of time and space, and he was creative enough to turn a happy accident into a discovery.

7.16 Melies, movie still from *A Trip to the Moon*, 1902.

In 1902, Melies took a bold step toward the feature film. His masterpiece, *A Trip to the Moon* (7.16), not only more than doubled the standard two-minute-length of a film to five minutes, it also began the long march of space adventures that has led to today’s *Star Wars*. Melies’s film depended on narrative devices that were continued in space adventures in
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particular and science fiction films in general throughout the twentieth century. Melies’s focused his story on the actions of men. Female characters do not advance the narrative; they are scantily clad decorative additions. The dramatic conflict of the film turns on the opposition of “good” European versus “bad” moon men—who, as it happens, wear loin cloths and carry spears in a thinly veiled elision with African “savages.” This conflict is resolved through violence: before the European men escape back to earth in their rocket, they fight and defeat the moon men. Similar dramatic devices continue in films like the Star Wars series, which also focuses on male actions, sets up an opposition between “good guys” and “bad guys” of the Empire, and resolves the conflict through violence.

A Trip to the Moon has had an enormous impact in Europe and America. The rock group Smashing Pumpkins quoted Melies’s masterpiece in their “Tonight, Tonight” video. But long before that, A Trip to the Moon helped inspire an American filmmaker who worked for Edison—Edwin S. Porter (1870-1941)—to go beyond Melies’s own artificially arranged scenes and film a story set in the real outdoors. Melies’s domination of film ended when Porter released his film: The Great Train Robbery (7.17).

Edwin S. Porter: Editing Real Time & Real Space

In The Great Train Robbery (1903), Porter gave America its first classic chase scene, its first illusion of riding a train, the shock of seeing a passenger shot by a bandit, and—finishing off a whole series of such thrills—the experience of a sheriff turning and firing his pistol directly into the audience. Still uncertain about the separation of lived experience and the “real” scenes on the screen, audiences were even more frightened by the sheriff than they had been by the Lumiere’s train.
Even more significant than the full fifteen minutes of special effects and the sense of narrative continuity was Porter’s introduction of a definitive conceptual change in the film process: editing. Instead of first conceiving the film as a play and then filming it, Porter shot a continuing sequence of scenes within a real environment and within the ongoing action. Later, after developing the film, he cut and rearranged the sections of film into the final narrative form. This later examination and reassembling of film is called editing—it is the difference between “filmed theater” and pure film.

While Melies’ Trip to the Moon initiated standard themes for science fiction film, The Great Train Robbery established narrative tropes that continue in Westerns and in crime films today. Again, the focus is on the heroic actions of men and conflicts between the “good” lawmen
and the “bad” bandits are resolved by violence. Women only appear in *The Great Train Robbery* during a social “interlude”—a humorous dance scene that does not advance the narrative at all.

**The Movies Become Independent: The Rise of the Nickelodeon**

*The Great Train Robbery* also signaled an entirely new era for distribution and for the cultural influence of the movies.

John Sloan’s delightful etching *Fun, One Cent* (1905, 7.18) captures the end of the era when movies were viewed in the “peep show” format of Edison’s original kinetoscope. A historic turning point came in 1905 when a Pittsburgh businessman, John P. Harris, opened the first nickelodeon (admission price plus *odeon*, the French word for theater). Films were now considered interesting enough to have their own theater for display and enjoyment. Harris’s nickelodeon had standing-room-only audiences for several weeks with *The Great Train Robbery*.

![Image of John Sloan's etching Fun, One Cent, 1905.](image)

7.18 John Sloan, *Fun, One Cent, 1905.*

Within a year there were thousands of nickelodeons across America. In urban areas, the huge immigrant population flocked to early films, which were understandable across the language barrier. The movies of this period were powerful icons for assimilating millions of individuals from diverse cultures into a common vision of American life.
By World War I, Films had earned enough respectability to move into middle-class neighborhoods. Elegant downtown theaters like the Palace in New York were built to accommodate up to five thousand customers. Movie audiences were also ready for more sophisticated visual techniques and more interesting story lines. The stage was set for the arrival of D. W. Griffith, America’s most internationally acclaimed early master of film.

**D. W. Griffith: The Film as Visual Epic**

D. W. Griffith was an actor and would-be writer who entered the film trade only reluctantly. His first employment in the movies came in 1906 when he accepted an acting role in one of Edwin S. Porter’s films. Even though he considered movies a step down from the theater, by 1908 he was directing his own. Griffith’s greatness lay in his ability to convert two nineteenth-century traditions into the new language of motion pictures: the realistic melodrama of the theater and the combination of grandeur and detailed observation of Academic painting. In 1915 and 1916 Griffith produced two films that often still appear on lists of the greatest films ever made. The first, *Birth of a Nation* (7.19), shows his brilliant ability to make visual melodrama. The second, *Intolerance*, is an example of adept translation of Academic painting into the language of film.

*Birth of a Nation* opened at the Palace Theater in New York in March of 1915 accompanied by a forty-piece orchestra and a chorus. Its 44-week run made film history. In addition, the film generated a controversy that accompanies it to this day whenever it is shown.
7.19 D. W. Griffith, promotional poster for *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915.
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Griffith’s film was an epic about American history, from the Old South through the period of Reconstruction after the Civil War. The plot, by itself, is vintage melodrama centered on the relationships between members of a northern and a southern family who fight on opposite sides and then find a new sense of harmony after the war. Griffith, whose father had been a Confederate officer, presented the Ku Klux Klan as a noble and patriotic group that was needed to defend public virtue against the freed but uncontrollable blacks. One subtitle reads, “The former enemies of North and South are united again in defense of their Arian birthright.”

The overt racism of Birth of a Nation is manifest in several troubling scenes of the film. African American men are portrayed as dishonest, criminally violent and overpowered by their lust for white women. A scene of the state house after Blacks won the vote shows an African American man taking his shoes off and resting his bare feet on his desk, then sneaking drinks of liquor while a state legislator is speaking. In another scene, the Southerners take their Northerner guests to the slave quarters—where the slaves are delighted to entertain their masters with song and dance. Although Griffith did employ Black actors to be “extras” in the film, all of the primary characters who were supposed to be African-American were portrayed by White actors wearing black face makeup. As film critic Roger Ebert has written, “’Birth of a Nation’ is unapologetic about its attitudes, which are those of a white Southerner, raised in the 19th century, unable to see African-Americans as fellow beings of worth and rights.”

Despite being banned in several cities and subject to ongoing criticism today, the film became immensely popular and is still highly acclaimed. This is at least in part because of the technical skill evident in the filmmaking. Griffith showed an amazing ability to weave the complex story and action into a unified balance of both epic and highly personal scenes. His visual techniques became standard for later filmmakers.
Epic vs. Personal

Griffith devised visual methods to personalize every aspect of the drama—including the panoramic war scenes. He transformed the black circle, or “iris” shape, traditionally used to show the end of a scene into a kind of zoom lens: one particular scene opens with the iris contracted to show only the small, sorrowful figure of a woman; as the circle of the iris opens, the screen reveals the cause of the woman’s sorrow—the valley below her is filled with the tumult of battle.

Lighting

Films had previously been shot in maximum overall light. Griffith shot scenes at night, by campfire light, in semidarkness, and so on.

Natural Landscape

He used the backgrounds in Birth of a Nation to create specific moods. To suggest the epic nature of the Civil War battles, for instance, Griffith shot panoramic scenes from distances of up to four miles (7.20). These landscapes were significant also because, instead of Georgia, they were shot in southern California. Griffith is the filmmaker who established California as the movie capital of the world.
Color Tinting

Griffith used what was called “peach stock” for the film so that the skin of Euro-American characters would have natural color. He added emotional drama by dyeing sections of the film; he dyed the burning of Atlanta sequence in Birth of a Nation to a flaming red and dyed the American flag at the end of the film red, white and blue (7.21).

Camera Movement

One of Griffith’s greatest innovations was in the way he used the camera. He understood that the director’s role in the moving of the camera was as important as the directing of the actors and actresses.
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Stereotypes

In addition to his formal or technical expertise, the film also reveals Griffith’s dependence on a narrative device that continues in many mainstream mass media products today: the use of stereotypes. Stereotypes, as applied to people, are fixed pictures or ideas about how a particular group (ethnic, religious, or racial) thinks and behaves, a picture that simplifies, often to the point of caricature, and prohibits the recognition of individual, personal uniqueness. In addition to the racial stereotypes discussed above, Griffith also employed gender stereotypes. Men are portrayed as strong and courageous. Women are weak and often victimized by male aggression. When “renegade” Black soldiers break into the Southern family’s home, the father grabs a gun to defend himself, but the women flee to the basement, where one of the daughters has hysterics.

Intolerance

Despite the box-office success of Birth of a Nation, Griffith was so stung by the charges of racism that he devoted his entire earnings from the film to a 1916 extravaganza aimed at exposing the vicious nature of prejudice. He called the film Intolerance.

Intolerance presented four stories that illustrated injustice and prejudice in four periods of history: ancient Babylon (7.22), the time of Christ, seventeenth-century France, and the modern industrial era. (The segment on France dealt with the persecution of the Huguenots who, it will be remembered, were exiled by Louis XIV.) Despite Griffith’s efforts, the public did not respond. The film’s length (three and a half hours), the confusing changes of scenes, and the amount of bare flesh in the Babylon sequence distracted from the quality of moral outrage that Griffith hoped to communicate. Also, its strongly pacifist sentiment was ill-timed for a period of rising public agitation for America to enter World War I.
Despite its failure with the public, *Intolerance* shows Griffith’s more intense efforts to achieve the grandeur of Academic painting. The attention to archaeological detail rivaled that of a historical painting by Gerome. The set for the city of Babylon featured a wall that was three hundred feet high and a mile long.

Griffith used several Academic paintings as models for individual scenes from the Babylon sequence. The seven-and-a-half-minute “Babylon marriage market” scene is a particularly good example. The action in this section involves an unwilling maiden about to be sold into marriage. She is ultimately saved by the courage of an enamored, and appropriately unprejudiced, prince. Griffith based the entire composition—from figure groupings and details of
the auction platform to the pattern of the tiles on the wall — on *The Babylonian Marriage Market* (7.23), a Salon painting by Edwin Long. (It should be noted that Long’s painting partakes of the Orientalist tradition analyzed by Edward Said. Griffith’s Babylonian scene is an instance of that tradition continuing in cinema.)

Griffith took sixty shots in the Babylonian sequence to take in every detail of the human emotions and physical environment. As in *Birth of a Nation*, he made the crowd more than a spectacle by cutting to shots of individual faces, whose contrasting expressions of greed, fear, and lust heightened the involvement of the viewer. The setting and its historical details had been already given by the painting; Griffith’s genius lay in being able to amplify the potential of the painting into the heightened realism of film.

Griffith’s intention to insert his motion pictures into the grand tradition of Academic painting is clearly seen in a publicity photo from *Intolerance*. The image is surrounded by an
ornate frame. A small plaque on the bottom identifies the scene; another plaque on the top of the frame reads: D.W. Griffith: INTOLERANCE (7.24).

7.24 D.W. Griffith, promotional image for “Babylon.”

Birth of a Nation and Intolerance educated movie audiences to the epic potential of film. They also solidified the appeal of film to all audience levels and provided the starting point from which European filmmakers created the first avant-garde films.

Sergei Eisenstein: Narrative Editing Becomes Revolutionary Montage

Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) based his films on his admiration for and study of Griffith’s work. He expanded Griffith’s editing process to involve a careful assemblage of sequences of frames he called montage. He worked on the premise that two well-edited frames can create an effect together that far surpasses the sum of their individual parts.
Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin* (7.25) was made in 1925 to commemorate the 1905 revolt of the crew of the Potemkin—a revolt that failed, but nevertheless temporarily rallied the people of the port of Odessa into opposition to the czar (and thereby anticipated the Russian Revolution of 1917). Eisenstein’s most famous montage sequence in the film is the one showing the relentless progress of the czar’s troops down the Odessa steps, firing in to the crowd of civilians. Even more effectively than Griffith, Eisenstein succeeded in personalizing an epic event by moving the camera from close-ups of individual faces to sweeping scenes of chaotic activity. The sequences evoke the violence and horror of Goya’s images of the Napoleonic War in Spain.
Eisenstein survived Stalin’s purges and made several more films. He even journeyed to Hollywood in the late 1920s in the hope of learning more about cinema in the movie capital founded by D. W. Griffith. Paramount Studios signed him to a contract, but even though studio executives admired his script for the popular muckraking novel *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser, they would not allow a Soviet director to shoot such a politically sensitive film. Eisenstein, disillusioned, returned to Russia.

7.26 Dziga Vertov, movie still from *The Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

**Dziga Vertov’s Film About Filmmaking**

The Soviets realized that the greatest propaganda device was film. Lenin himself was quite specific: “For us the cinema is the most important of all the arts.” Artists produced films for the 1917 Russian Revolution, and many were shown in special cars attached to agitprop trains.
Dziga Vertov’s (1896-1954) *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929, 7.26) included scenes of him filming scenes in the film, scenes of the film being edited, and scenes of audiences watching parts of the film. It made the viewer aware of the material (film) and the process (inserts, camera angles, etc.) used to create the final work. Viewers were forced to see the movie *as a movie*; they could not be swept away in the illusion of a real-life experience. Vertov wanted to unite the viewer with the very mechanics of filmmaking, because it was symbolic of other relationships between human being and machine. The intended icon impact of Vertov’s film is revealed in his own words:

“We discover the souls of the machine, we are in love with the worker at the bench, we are in love with the farmer at his tractor, the engineer on his locomotive. We bring creative joy into every mechanical activity. We make peace between man and the machine. We educate the new man.”

7.27 Fritz Lang, movie still from *Metropolis*, 1926.
Friz Lang: From Class Conflict to Hollywood Entertainments

A European filmmaker who, unlike Eisenstein, did make a successful move to Hollywood was Austrian-born Fritz Lang (1890-1976). Lang worked with his wife and screenwriter Thea von Harbou (1888-1954). For their masterpiece *Metropolis* (1926, Germany, 7.27), Lang and von Harbou constructed sets that pictured a futuristic world in which impoverished workers live and labor in underground factories while wealthy owners live on the surface of the earth surrounded by luxury. The propagandistic plot about upper class abuse of lower class innocents is sustained by the stunning visual impact of Lang’s sets and his use of the camera. The science fiction world of *Metropolis* contrasts the abundance and grace of a privileged paradise with a shadowy terrain of inexorable machines and stark, intimidating buildings. Other futuristic dystopias, like *Blade Runner* (1982, US, Ridley Scott, 7.28), have been inspired by Lang’s dark vision.

![7.28 Ridley Scott, movie still from Blade Runner, 1982.](image)

As part of the *Metropolis* owners’ efforts to keep the workers pacified, a crazed scientist creates a robotic simulacrum of a beautiful, innocent woman. The robot’s animosity to “natural” human life anticipates the behavior of many later filmic robots, such as those in *I, Robot* (US,
2004), who similarly threaten or do violence to people. After the son of the evil ruler of Metropolis goes underground to help the workers, he collapses against the immense clock he is running, and his body echoes the position of the crucified Christ. A character that imitates Jesus’s life or actions is called a Christic character. In *The Matrix* (1999, US, Larry Wachowski & Andy Wachowski, 7.29), a later science fiction film strongly influenced by *Metropolis*, the Keanu Reeves character Neo similarly performs a Christic role as he endeavors to save humanity from the ominous control of computers.

![Wachowski Brothers, movie still from *The Matrix*, 1999.](image)

Lang moved to Hollywood in 1935 and, with other German and Austrian émigrés, contributed to the development of what is known as *film noir* (from the French for black or dark film). Many *film noir* plots come from 1930s detective novels featuring hard-boiled men who are drawn into crime and violence by alluring but dangerous women. The characters move through dark, shadowy worlds that are expressionist metaphors for the male protagonists’ psychological malaise. Lang’s *Ministry of Fear* (US, 1944), *The Woman in the Window* (US, 1945, 7.30) and *Scarlet Street* (US, 1945) are classics of the *film noir* genre. In both *Scarlet Street* and *Woman in
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*the Window*, an “innocent” man becomes obsessed with a younger woman who seduces him with her beauty and tempts him to break the law.

7.30 Fritz Lang, movie still from *The Woman in the Window*, 1945.

*Film noir* articulated the fear and pessimism of the decade dominated by World War II.

Two decades before that, however, Hollywood had given America a much more up-beat vision.

**Charlie Chaplin: The Film’s Mythic Autonomous Individual**

The filmmaker who successfully consolidated the potential of the Hollywood film to entertain all levels of American society was [Charlie Chaplin](https://www.charliechaplin.com) (1889-1977). If Griffith approached film with the sentimental and epic scope of Academic painting, Chaplin leaned toward the sharply sketched by affectionate caricature of popular culture. Chaplin presented the common man as a raggedy “little tramp” who not only coped with mechanization, bureaucracy,
and a wide variety of superior-acting people, but often gained temporary--and gratifying--triumphs over them. Film critic Richard Schickel has described Chaplin’s irrepressible film character this way:

“He was eternally the average man at his best: hopeful, inventive, constantly at war with his environment, constantly acting out the dream so many of us share—the dream of being able to escape simply by setting off down the road to find better life when things get too tough.”

For fifteen years Chaplin films were the undisputed epitome of film possibility—especially in terms of individual expression.

The later 1920s, however, brought changes that eclipsed even the film genius of Charlie Chaplin. One change was the addition of sound to the movie image; another was the descent of American society into the horror of the Great Depression.

“Talkies”: Hollywood Upholds the American Dream

Chaplin’s 1936 film Modern Times (7.31) was a success with the public even though the only sound in it was its own musical sound track. Nevertheless, “the little tramp’s” lighthearted and successful subterfuges against bureaucracies and would-be aristocrats began to lose their appeal for the American people during the Great Depression. As President Roosevelt so decisively understood, people had a single overwhelming need: the need for hope.

At the same time, technical innovations, including sound and the increased mobility of the camera that enabled it to follow the director’s eye, brought the sensual and imaginative impact of film to a new level of sophistication and realism. Millions of people who had the twenty-five cents for admission could escape for three hours from the spectacle outside the theater of an America turned upside down. Edward Hopper (1882-1967), a great painter of America’s urban scene from the 1930s through the sixties, caught the mixture of loneliness and
tranquilizing illusion typified by the movie theaters during the depression years in his *New York Movie* (7.32).

Statistics show that during the depression years the average American saw two films a week. Hollywood cranked out more than a movie a day (470) in its peak year, 1936. What did people see in these projected dreams? Not the grim reality of the depression, of course, but comedy: Marx Brothers’ slapstick, Cary Grant’s high-society romances, musicals by Busby Berkeley, and the upbeat personalities like Fred Astaire and Shirley Temple. When the depression intruded into these films, it was vanquished (in innumerable variations) by the heroism of the common man or woman.
Two filmmakers in particular represented the iconic or culture-building role of Hollywood during the crisis that accompanied the depression: Walt Disney (1901-1966) and Frank Capra (1897-1991).

**Walt Disney: From Free-Form Fantasy to Imagineering**

Walt Disney’s short cartoons were the direct heirs of Melies’s magical films, as well as the early twentieth-century newspaper comic strips. The newspapers had already produced a famous mouse, Ignatz, from the “Krazy Kat” strip, which ran from 1910 to 1944. Ignatz was feisty and suspiciously anarchistic. His favorite pastime was hurling bricks at Krazy Kat: his constant task was to avoid being jailed by Offisa Pup. (Fans of the “Simpsons” will recognize
that the antics of Ignatz and Krazy Kat anticipate those of Itchy and Scratchy in the popular television program’s “animation-within-an-animation.”

Like Melies, Disney created a visual world of unlimited possibility. This was especially true of his early black-and-white animations, including the immediately popular cartoons starring Mickey Mouse.

In these early cartoons Mickey was the hero of a fantasy world that was unpredictable, full of surprises. In the midst of it all, Mickey somehow survived, with a kind of Chaplinesque indestructibility.

In The Opry House (1929), the piano Mickey is playing comes to life and kicks him out of the theater. In Traffic Troubles (1930), Mickey’s cab bites another car to get a parking space. In the 1928 cartoon Steamboat Willie (7.33), a goat eats Minnie Mouse’s sheet music, and she twists its tail like a crank as the goat’s mouth opens and projects out the sounds (with notes drawn in the air) of “Turkey in the Straw.”

But this world of open-ended and sometimes sinister surprise lost its appeal as the grim surprise of the 1930s ground American society to a halt.
As early as 1932, *The Three Little Pigs* (7.34), Disney’s first color cartoon (which earned him his first Academy Award), showed Mickey’s free-wheeling fantasy world coming down to earth. Mickey, in this film, became more respectable—more middle class. In subsequent films he took on the role of a leading man in a whole series of boy-meets-girl mini-dramas. Mickey was definitely headed for Main Street.

Disney began to employ his increasingly technical mastery to teach a single overriding lesson: Individualism is to be channeled by close attention to society’s rules, without anarchy.

In *The Tortoise and the Hare* (1934), the anarchistic hare loses the race. In *The Flying Mouse* (1934), the brash mouse pilot (not Mickey) who scares people with his stunts and
maneuvers has to be saved from evil bats by the intercession of a good witch, who intones to the grounded individualist, “You learned your lesson. Do your best. Be yourself. And life will smile on you.” The true depth of Mickey’s conversion is seen in Pluto’s Revenge (1935), when Mickey berates Pluto (his dog) for chasing a cat! How conservative can a mouse get?

Disney, with a deliberation of purpose that deserves his self-chosen term—“imagineering”—had by the mid-1930s accepted the role of cultural mythmaker, determined to reanimate and brightly color the badly faded image of the American dream.

This approach took epic scope as Disney began to do to animation with what Griffith had accomplished for the live-action drama film: he created sentimental narrative epics whose visual detail and richness of color rivaled the accessibility and appeal of the Academic paintings of the Photographic Age. In Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (7.35), which won an Academy Award in 1937, and Sleeping Beauty in 1959, Disney reached a level of animation art that he never achieved again.

7.35 Walt Disney, movie still from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937.
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Perhaps some of the popularity of Disney animated films derives from their narrative reinscription of the same dominant cultural values formerly celebrated in Academic paintings. Once again, young women are beautiful and passive (indeed, you can’t get much more passive than the coma Sleeping Beauty falls into!) They are always rescued by the heroic actions of athletic young men. All of the people in Disney’s early popular films are white, heterosexual and able-bodied. Their goal is wealth, privilege and life “happily ever after.” (It was not until after Walt Disney’s death that the Disney company produced animations such as Aladdin [1992], which featured characters who weren’t European or Euro-American.)

Frank Capra: Reconstructing Main Street

Frank Capra’s films of the 1930s show a remarkable similarity to Disney’s mythic evolution during the same period.

Capra’s plots are fantastically improbable, yet the messages of the stories are pragmatic and hopeful: the common man can make the system work; friends will come through in the clutch; and so on.

The titles of three of his films from this period suggest their upbeat emphasis on politics and the average citizen. Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936), Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939, 7.36), and Meet John Doe (1941). In these films, the support for the hero—Gary Cooper as Mr. Deeds, Jimmy Stewart as Mr. Smith—came from the people as much as from the beautiful heroine. They also showed that the wealthy and powerful were not necessarily benign; they ranged from sinister businessmen to corrupt politicians whom the hero—representing and backed by the people—had to either reform or oppose.
7.36 Frank Capra, movie still from *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, 1939.

The message of Capra’s films at the time was clear. The average person counts; the people will find their leaders among themselves. Power, both economic and political, can be controlled. Or, as Walt Disney films put it at about the same time, the system—with a little bit of imagination and postponed gratification—works. Beyond the makeshift colonies of drifters and unemployed on the fringes of every major city (called Hoovervilles) was the promise of Disneyland—and Disneyworld.

**Hollywood Film Genres**

We have seen that Louis XIV’s French Royal Academy of Fine Arts ranked paintings by subject matter or genre, with history painting receiving top marks. Although the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) does not officially rank film subjects, genres are “central to Hollywood’s mode of production.” As film historian Robert Sklar notes, “Spectators become familiar with these codes, anticipate them, and take satisfaction as they play themselves out within structures that allow, but limit, variation.”13 The genres of Hollywood film were the same ones intrinsic to popular entertainment of merging mass society of 19th century. We have already discussed films that fall into several of these categories: science fiction, westerns and
crime dramas, war, romantic dramas and historical epics. We will discuss horror films and thrillers below. In chapters 9 and 12, we will look at various avant-garde films that are situated outside of traditional genre categories.

Like the French Academy before it, the AMPAS has annual competitions, giving Academy Awards (or “Oscars”) for outstanding achievement in various categories. The most coveted award, of course, goes to the Best Picture of the Year. Throughout the twentieth century, the Best Picture Award went to more films of the historical genre than to any other category. Among the historical films that won Best Picture in the last half of the century were *Patton* (1970), *Gandhi* (1982), *Amadeus* (1984), *The Last Emperor* (1987), *Schindler’s List* (1993), and *Braveheart* (1995, 7.37). The filmic biographies of historic men can be compared to Academic portraits like Jacques Louis David’s paintings of Napoleon: both serve to inspire viewers.

The historical fiction of *Gladiator* (1999), itself inspired by an Academic painting, also focused on the inspirational life of a heroic man. Not a single film that won the Best Picture Award in the twentieth century dealt with the life of an historical woman.

**Michael Curtiz’s Casablanca: Filmic Archetypes Hold a Reunion**

Perhaps the most popular winner of the Best Picture Award is another historical fiction, Michael Curtiz’s *Casablanca* (1942, US, 7.38). Italian critic Umberto Eco has analyzed *Casablanca* to reveal how its cult status is based on its repetition of filmic codes. A thrilling story set during World War II, *Casablanca* pairs two of the twentieth century’s most revered actors—Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman—as lovers reunited in North Africa while Europeans flee before Hitler’s inexorable march of conquest across Europe. Eco points out that, in *Casablanca*, film clichés are multiplied and “talk among themselves,” generating “an intoxicating excess of signification.”

He notes that, “Every story involves one of more archetypes. To make a good story a single archetype is usually enough. But *Casablanca* is not satisfied with that. It uses them all.” He goes on to analyze the first 20 minutes of the film and comes up with over 20 archetypal images. Eco observes that films involve what he calls “common frames”—structures for representing stereotyped situations such as dining at a restaurant or going to a railroad station; in other words, sequences of actions more or less coded by our normal experience. Films also involve “intertextual frames”—stereotyped situations deriving from preceding textual traditions, such as the standard duel between the sheriff and the bad guy.
According to Eco, in *Casablanca*, “The archetypes hold a reunion… *Casablanca* has become a cult movie because it is not one movie. It is ‘movies.’” Eco mentions *Raiders of Lost Arc*, *E.T.*, and *Star Wars* as films that, like *Casablanca*, have cult status precisely because they are based on reunions of archetypes.

**Alfred Hitchcock: Thrillers & the Gaze**

*Psycho* (1960, 7.39) and *The Birds* (1963) also have cult status. Both are psycho-sexual thrillers and both were directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980). In both cases, beautiful blonde women are first presented as objects of the spectator’s gaze, then subjected to intense filmic violence.
Hitchcock made his directorial debut in Munich, then worked in his native Britain until he moved to Hollywood at the outbreak of World War II. Hitchcock’s silent masterpiece, *The Lodger* (1926), is a dark and ironic study of the psychology of suspicion. His 1929 *Blackmail*, the first sound film made in Britain, shows that he had already mastered montage as a device to heighten filmic suspense. A consummate, perhaps even obsessive artist, Hitchcock constructed elaborate storyboard drawings for each scene of his carefully crafted films. He wrote, “The screen ought to speak its own language, freshly coined, and it can’t do that unless it treats an acted scene as a piece of raw material which must be broken up, taken to bits, before it can be woven into an expressive visual pattern…You gradually build up the psychological situation, piece by piece, using the camera to emphasize first one detail, then another. The point is to draw the audience right inside the situation instead of leaving them to watch it outside, from a distance.”
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Audiences were often on the edge of their seats during Hitchcock’s films, seduced by the stylized visuals, captivated by the suspense, and thrilled by the looming threats of deception and evil. Viewers watched in fascination as Ingrid Bergman psychoanalyzed the possibly criminal Gregory Peck in *Spellbound* (1945, 7.40). The suspense built as Cary Grant was chased by a relentless crop-duster in *North by Northwest* (1959) and exploded in terror when Janet Leigh was savagely attacked in the shower in *Psycho* (1960).

Although his work covered several genres—crime, detection, espionage, romance, betrayal and horror—one of Hitchcock’s major themes was the nature of looking. Sklar notes that several of Hitchcock’s films raise “self-reflexive questions about looking: what it means to use a camera or to be a spectator, a voyeur who sees while unobserved.”

7.40 Alfred Hitchcock, movie still from *Spellbound*, 1945.
Filmmaker and theorist Laura Mulvey uses several of Hitchcock’s films to analyze the three different looks associated with cinema: 1. the look of the camera as it records; 2. the look of the audience as it watches; and 3. the look of characters within the screen illusion. In traditional film, the first two are denied and subordinated to the third. Mulvey uses psychoanalytical theory “to discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by preexisting patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and social formations that have molded him. [She] takes as a starting point the way film reflects, reveals, and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference that controls images, erotic ways of look, and spectacle.”19 Focusing on Hitchcock’s Rear Window (1954, 7.41), Mulvey deploys Freudian

7.41 Alfred Hitchcock, Rear Window, 1954.
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corcepts to discuss the woman played by the beautiful blonde Grace Kelly as image and man played by James Stewart as bearer of the look or gaze. In the film, Stewart’s character is a photojournalist who has been injured and is confined to a wheel chair. He spends his time looking out the rear window of his New York apartment at the other apartments across a courtyard and believes he sees a man murder his wife. Mulvey interprets Rear Window as a metaphor for film viewing, with the Stewart character functioning as audience and the apartments across way as screen. Mulvey notes that Rear Window, like several Hitchcock films, “focuses on the implications of the active/looking, passive/looked-at split in terms of sexual difference and the power of the male symbolic encapsulated as the hero.”

In Hitchcock’s Psycho, two beautiful women—Janet Leigh and Vera Miles--function as the “objects of the gaze.” The audience gazes as them when they are seductively displayed before the “eye” of the camera. The heroic John Gavin gazes at them longingly; the crazed Anthony Perkins gazes at them malevolently. The violence against Leigh can be seen as cinematic “punishment” for her sexual and criminal transgressions (she has an affair out of wedlock, then steals money from her boss), as well as the outcome of Perkins’ tormented mind. In The Birds, beautiful blonde Tippi Hedren receives the gaze of the audience and of heroic Rod Taylor. Sexy, superficial socialite Hedren is savagely punished, as are several other residents of Taylor’s small coastal town, when nature goes awry and birds begin to attack people.

Dracula: The Dark Side of Psycho-Sexual Power

The violence against women seen in several of Alfred Hitchcock’s films is a major component of the horror film genre. Horror film monsters from Dracula to Frankenstein to Freddy Krueger have ravaged their victims on screen, and most of their victims have been women. Indeed, the 1996 parody of the horror genre, Scream (US, Wes Craven, 7.42) opens with
a scene of pretty young Drew Barrymore being terrorized and eviscerated while babysitting. The history of vampire films can be summarized in order to chart the development of horror films as a genre.

7.42 Wes Craven, movie still from Scream, 1996.

One of the earliest cinematic references to vampires was made by the prodigious Louis Feuillade (1873-1925). Feuillade, who directed more than 800 films, is best known for his 1913-14 series about the black-masked arch-criminal Fantomas. His 1915-16 Les Vampires is comprised of ten episodes that last a total of seven hours. Feuillade’s audacious nightmare portrays a criminal gang, “The Vampires,” preying on wealthy Parisians. In an interesting reversal of traditional gender roles, the leader of the gang is a woman, Irma Vep. She is pursued by a heroic male journalist. Some scholars have interpreted Feuillade’s use of a woman as leader
of the gang as a reflection of social tensions over the liberated “new woman” of the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{21}

7.43 F.W. Murnau, movie still from \textit{Nosferatu}, 1922.

A more traditional filmic telling of the vampire legend is German expressionist filmmaker \textbf{F. W. Murnau} (1888-1931) ’s \textit{Nosferatu} (1922, Germany, 7.43), which has been described as a “symphony of horror.” Max Schreck portrays the legendary vampire Count Dracula as a loathsome, macabre figure whose “bald head, rodent face, long pointed ears, skeleton-like frame and talons will chill the most callous viewer.”\textsuperscript{22} Dark and moody, the film rehearses the now familiar narrative: the “un-dead” Count turns into a bat to prey upon unsuspecting women whom he enchants with his seductive powers. German director \textbf{Werner Herzog} quoted Murnau’s film in his haunting version, \textit{Nosferatu Phaton der Nacht} (1979, Germany), which stars Klaus Kinski as the pale, hypnotic count. (The actual production of
Murnau’s film was the subject of *Shadow of the Vampire* with John Malkovich as Murnau and Willem Dafoe as Schreck [7.44].

The vampire myth has such powerful resonance in the Western cultural psyche that dozens of films have reinterpreted it. Many versions have Dracula in the title, including the two that were shot simultaneously in Hollywood, one starring Bela Lugosi (*Dracula*, 1931, US, Tod Browning), the other in Spanish with Carlos Villarias (*Dracula*, 1931, US, George Melford). 1931 was also the year of the *James Whale Frankenstein* starring Boris Karloff as the monster. The large number of horror films shot in the early 1930s can be connected to the cultural malaise that followed the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and led to the rise of Fascism in Europe.

Yet another 1931 Dracula film was Danish filmmaker Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *Vampyr*, which has been described as “one of the screen’s most visceral thrillers.” Dreyer based the
story very loosely on a Victorian tale of the supernatural, Sheridan LeFanu’s “In a Glass Darkly.” In a textual frame, we are told—in words that recall Andre Breton’s Surrealist Manifestos of 1924 and 1929—that the young male protagonist is “a dreamer for whom the boundary between the real and the unreal has become dim.” Dreyer’s protagonist moves through the dark haze of the film like a sleepwalker in a trance, sometimes becoming translucent like an emanation of fog or smoke. At one point, we see his perspective looking up from inside a coffin: trees, sky, clock towers all loom with mysterious threat. The film is laden with symbols, from a man carrying a large scythe like the Grim Reaper, to another whose eyes have been gouged out, representing the limits of human vision.

Other famous Draculas have starred Christopher Lee, Jack Palance, Frank Langella, and, in the humorous rendition by Mel Brooks, Leslie Nielsen. Francis Ford Coppola’s Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1992, US, 7.45) presents Gary Oldman as the Count and Winona Ryder as his victim, in a film that uses several master paintings as sources for scenes. In Dracula’s mansion, his self-portrait is modeled after Albrecht Durer’s Self Portrait as Christ. Some of the landscapes recall paintings by German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich. When Dracula seduces one of his first victims, the scene is composed like Henri Fuseli’s Nightmare. When viewers first see Anthony Hopkins as the Doctor Van Helsing who will finally defeat the vampire, he is giving a lecture in a room that echoes the one in Thomas Eakins’s Gross Clinic. Coppola referenced the history of film as well as the history of art in his Dracula: the use of dislocated shadows in Dracula’s castle is taken from Dreyer’s 1931 Vampyr. Later in the film, Oldman as the charming count takes the naïve Ryder into a London theater where audiences are enthralled by early projected films.
Fractured Filmic Narrative

New media never completely displaced old media; instead, new media interact with old ones, shifting our perceptions of both. Throughout most of the twentieth century, mainstream films presented seamless narratives that, imitating live theater, advanced in a linear fashion from beginning, to middle, to end, with each progression anticipated in the previous one. However, with the growing dominance of television and the increased availability of films on television, the unified film-viewing experience is no longer the only option. When we watch movies on our television screens, they may be interrupted by commercials, or we may pause or stop them to perform personal tasks. Computer technologies have further altered film-viewing. With DVDs, we get additional information, alternative endings, and interactive possibilities that the nineteenth century viewers of the Lumiere Brothers’ projections in the Paris café never imagined.
Madan Sarup relates the often-interrupted way we watch movies on VCRs (and, by extension, DVD players) to the way we read books and concludes, “We are no longer compelled to submit to the jurisdiction of an authoritarian author or auteur [director]. We may play-back, or freeze the frame. There is a subjugation of the work of [filmic] art to one’s natural or domestic rhythms.”

The technology that allows us to break the narrative line of traditional film viewing was anticipated by the alternative visions of artists who fractured filmic storylines. Most Hollywood films have been structured like those of D. W. Griffith, who produced what has been called “cinema of narrative integration,” or like those of Georges Melies, who pioneered the “cinema of attractions.” In contrast, Louis Feuillade’s early films like Les Vampires employ fluidity of character identity and spatial-temporal uncertainty to initiate what Vicki Callahan calls “a rich tradition of questioning narrative certainty.”

In Last Year at Marienbad (1961, France, 7.46), director Alain Renais (b. 1922) worked with novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet to disrupt time and space in what may or may not be the story of a man (X) who encounters the woman (A) with whom he had an affair the previous summer. Shot in stunning black and white, the film balances glamour, geometry and evocative mystery as characters move in and out of scenes composed as carefully as any painting.
The relationship between art and both the films of Resnais and the novels by Robbe-Grillet is not incidental. In fact, one of Robbe-Grillet’s works is *La Belle Captive*, a novel written in dialogue with seventy-seven paintings by Belgian Surrealist Rene Magritte. The novelist explains his use of images with non-linear narrative: “[T]he reader-spectator is invited to participate (in order to create his own itinerary) in this circulation of meaning between the shifting organization of the sentence that allows us to see and the picture that narrates.” The Robbe-Grillet statement that serves as epigraph for the English translation of *La Belle Captive* could be used to describe the film he did with Resnais: “This waking dream could simply be art, of which sleep, it is true, sometimes gives us fragments, but which only a conscious effort allows us to reassemble.”

The Resnais/Robbe-Grillet collaboration is only one of several innovative films that have disrupted the linear storyline format. In *Toute Une Nuit* (All in One Night, 1982, Belgium), Chantal Ackerman abandoned standard narrative to present a dizzying collage of romantic vignettes. Set on one hot summer night in Brussels, the austere, fractured scenes refuse to cohere into a singular plot line. Instead, they seem as random, unresolved and unconnected as lived experience.

Twelve years after Ackerman’s alternative narrative, radical young American director **Quentin Tarantino** released the impressively original *Pulp Fiction* (1994, US, 7.47), a story about hit-men and other criminals, starring John Travolta, Samuel L. Jackson, Bruce Willis and Uma Thurman. Tarantino disassembled and scattered the storyline, scrambling time and space to make the shocking content of drug overdose, casual murder, and vicious rape even more unsettling. Formally, *Pulp Fiction* resembles the avant-garde art of earlier in the century, such as Cubist collages or the Futurist visions of a mechanized city (see Chapter 9). In 2003 and 2004, Tarantino directed a two-part movie sequence (*Kill Bill: Vol. 1* and *Kill Bill: Vol. 2*, 7.48) in which he mixed various visual languages of the history of film—from animation to *film noir*—in a fractured narrative about love and revenge.

![7.48 Quentin Tarantino, movie still from *Kill Bill: Vol. 2*, 2004.](image)

The narrative line of *Memento* (2001, US, Christopher Nolan) is not only broken and scattered; it also proceeds backwards in time. Guy Pearce portrays a man who has been so traumatized he has lost his ability to form new memories. Thinking he is in pursuit of the man who killed his wife, Pearce’s character tattoos onto his own body statements he wants to remember about what his detection efforts have uncovered. Frustrated and violent, he becomes
the prey of various liars and criminals. In the end, most viewers are not certain who killed his wife, or how much of what they have seen was actually supposed to have happened.

One of the ways Pearce’s character tries to create or hold onto memory is by taking photographs. Indeed, the use of photographs as ciphers for memory has been an ongoing theme in filmmaking history.

Photography in Film

As early as Griffith’s 1915 Birth of a Nation, photographs were used to bolster historical accuracy. Some of Griffith’s war images resemble Mathew Brady photographs. Several of the textual frames of Birth of a Nation insist that the tableau vivant-like scenes are “historical facsimiles” of the actual event. One example is when Lincoln signs the first call for 75,000 volunteers to initiate the Civil War, another is when Grant and Less sign the peace treaty to end it.

Photographs were also used to advance the narrative of Griffith’s masterpiece: A photograph inspires the central romance of the film. When the Northern sons travel to visit the Southern family, they bring a photograph of their pretty sister, played by Lillian Gish. The older Southern son immediate falls in love with Gish’s image and places the photograph in his jacket pocket.

Ridley Scott’s science fiction classic, Blade Runner (1982, US, see 7.28) proposes that in a dystopic future Los Angeles, robots are so realistic that they can’t be visually distinguished from humans. The major difference between the two is that the robots construct their memories solely through photographs. Several narrative sequences recall Susan Sontag’s assertion that remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of remembering and understanding.
In Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966, GB/Italy, 7.49) David Hemmings plays a fashion photographer who thinks he sees a murder being committed in his photographs. *Blow-Up* is a meditation on the camera as tool for sexual seduction and instrument for stalking, and on the relationship of photography to memory and truth. It is also a stylish look at countercultural London of the mid-1960s, and features a performance by an avant-garde British rock group filmed years before they became famous as Led Zeppelin.


Chris Marker is a remarkably innovative French filmmaker whose works are little known to the American public. His *La Jetee* (The Jetty, 1964, France) is a haunting film that consists entirely of still photographs and voice-over narration. Perhaps because of the way Marker links photography and death in *La Jetee*, Susan Sontag calls it “one of the most disquieting films ever made.” A science fiction film about a man whose memories are used to

In *Sans soleil* (Sunless, 1982, France), Marker interspersed images from Japan, Africa and Iceland with a sequence analyzing Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* through photographic stills. Part of the soundtrack is a woman’s voice reading letters from a photographer. *San soleil* is, like *Blow-Up*, a meditation on photography and film. Sklar notes it is a meditation “that leaves room for the spectator to connect with his or her own meditations on the many topics which the film evokes.” Marker continued his examination of the nature of photography in his *Lettre de Siberie* (Letter from Siberia, 1958), in which a banal sequence is shown three times with three contradictory voice-overs.

Viewers must ask of Marker’s film, as they must of all media products, where is truth? What is true in any form of representation?

As we shall see, these become questions of profound importance for avant-garde artists at the end of the twentieth century.
Chapter 7: Film

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