Film Art and Film History

"Not everything is possible at all times." This aphorism of art historian Hein-rich Wölfflin might serve as a slogan for our final chapter. So far, our survey of film art has examined various formal and stylistic possibilities, and we've drawn our examples from the entire range of film history. But film forms and techniques don't exist in a timeless realm, equally accessible to all filmmakers. In particular historical circumstances, certain possibilities are present while others are not. Griffith could not make films as Godard does, nor could Godard make films as Griffith did. This chapter asks, What are some ways in which film art has been treated in particular historical contexts?

These contexts will be defined, first by period and then by nation. Although there are other equally good tools for tracing change, period and nation remain useful ways of organizing historical problems. Second, in some of our cases, we'll look for what are typically called *film movements*. A film movement consists of two elements:

1. Films that are produced within a particular period and/or nation and that share significant traits of style and form

2. Filmmakers who operate within a common production structure and who share certain assumptions about filmmaking

There are other ways of defining a historical context: for example, biographical study, genre study, but the category of *movement* corresponds most closely to the emphasis of this book. The concepts of formal and stylistic systems permit us to compare films within a movement and to contrast them with those of other movements.

Our range of choice will be narrowed still further. We're concerned with Hollywood and selected alternatives. We'll trace the development of the commercial narrative cinema while contrasting it to other approaches to style and form.

Since a film movement consists of not only films but also the activities of specific filmmakers, we must go beyond noting stylistic and formal qualities. For each period and nation, we'll also sketch relevant factors that affect the cinema. These factors include the state of the film industry, artistic theories held by the film-makers themselves, pertinent technological features, and cultural and economic

elements. These factors necessarily help explain how a period or movement began, what shaped its development, and what affected its decline. This material will also provide a context for particular films we've already discussed; for example, the following section on early cinema situates Lumière and Méliès in their period.

Needless to say, what follows is drastically incomplete. The writing of serious film history is in its early stages, and we must often rely on secondary sources that will eventually be superseded. This chapter reflects only current states of knowledge; there are doubtless important films, filmmakers, and movements that await discovery. Moreover, there are many unfortunate omissions. Important filmmakers who don't relate to a movement (for example, Tati, Bresson, and Kurosawa) are absent, as are certain important film movements, such as French populist cinema of the 1930s and Brazil's Cinema Nôvo movement of the early 1960s. What follows simply seeks to show how certain possibilities of film form and style were explored within a few typical and well-known historical periods.

Early Cinema (1893–1903)

In order to create the illusion of movement, still pictures must appear in rapid succession. To prepare them and display them at the right rate, certain technologies are necessary. Most basically, there must be a way of recording a long series of images on some sort of support. In principle, one could simply draw a string of images on a strip of paper or a disc. But photography offered the cheapest and most efficient way to generate the thousands of images needed for a reasonably lengthy display. Thus the invention of photography in 1826 triggered a series of discoveries that made cinema possible.

Early photographs required lengthy exposures (initially hours, later minutes) for a single image; this made photographed motion pictures, which need 12 or more frames per second, impossible. Faster exposures, of about 1/25 second, became possible by the 1870s, but only on glass plates. Glass plates weren't usable for motion pictures since there was no practical way to move them through a camera or projector. In 1878, Eadweard Muybridge, an American photographer, did make a series of photographs of a running horse by using a series of cameras with glass-plate film and fast exposures, but he was primarily interested in freezing phases of an action, not in creating the movement by projecting the images in succession.

In 1882, another scientist interested in analyzing animal movement, the Frenchman Etienne-Jules Marey, invented a camera that recorded 12 separate images on the edge of a revolving disc of film or glass. This constituted a step toward the motion-picture camera. In 1888, Marey built the first camera to use a strip of flexible film, this time on paper. Again, the purpose was only to break down movement into a series of stills, and the movements photographed lasted a second or less.

In 1889, George Eastman introduced a crude flexible film base, celluloid. Once this base was improved and camera mechanisms had been devised to draw the film past the lens and expose it to light, the creation of long strips of frames became possible.

Projectors had existed for many years and had been used to show slides and other shadow entertainments. These magic lanterns were modified by the addition of shutters, cranks, and other devices to become early motion picture projectors.

One more device was needed if films were to be projected. Since the film stops briefly while the light shines through each individual frame, there had to be a mechanism to create an intermittent motion of the film. Marey used a Maltese cross gear on his 1882 camera, and this became a standard part of early cameras and projectors.

The combination of a flexible and transparent film base, a fast exposure time, a mechanism to pull the film through the camera, an intermittent device to stop the film, and a shutter to block off light were achieved by the early 1880s. After several

12.1 The Kinetoscope held an endless continuous loop that ran around a series of rollers.
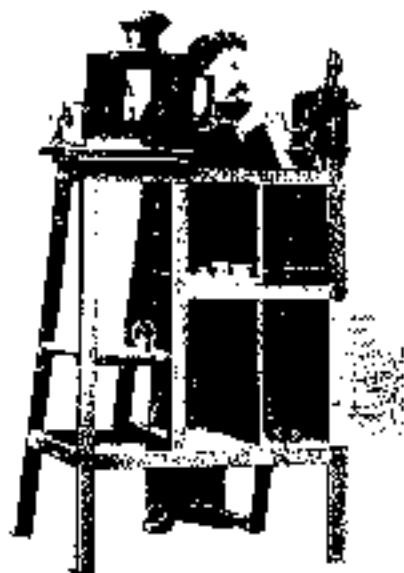
12.2 Placing a single camera behind the Lumière screen turned it into a projector.

years, inventors working independently in many countries had developed different film cameras and projection devices. The two most important firms were the Edison Manufacturing Company in America, owned by inventor Thomas A. Edison, and Lumière Frères in France, the family firm of Louis and Auguste Lumière.

By 1893, Thomas A. Edison's assistant, W.K.L. Dickson, had developed a camera that made short 35-mm films. Interested in exploiting these films as a novelty, Edison hoped to combine them with his phonograph to show sound movies. He had Dickson develop a peep-show machine, the *Kinetoscope* (12.1), to display these films to individual viewers.

Since Edison believed that movies were a passing fad, he did not develop a system to project films onto a screen. This was left to the Lumière brothers. They invented their own camera independently; it exposed a short roll of 35mm film and also served as a projector (12.2). On December 28, 1895, the Lumière brothers held one of the first public showings of motion pictures projected on a screen, at the Grand Café in Paris.

There had been several other public screenings, including one on November 1 of the same year, by the German inventor Max Skladanowsky. But Skladanowsky's bulky machine required two strips of wide-gauge film running simultaneously and hence had less influence on the subsequent technological development of the cinema. Although the Lumières didn't really invent cinema, they largely determined the specific form the new medium was to take. Edison himself was soon to abandon Kinetoscopes and form his own production company to make films for theaters.

The first films were extremely simple in form and style. They usually consisted of a single shot framing an action, usually at long-shot distance. In the first film studio, Edison's Black Maria (12.3), vaudeville entertainers, famous sports figures, and celebrities—for example, Annie Oakley—performed for the camera. A hinged portion of the roof opened to admit a patch of sunlight, and the entire building turned on a circular rail (visible in 12.3) to follow the sun's motion. The Lumières, however, took their cameras out to parks, gardens, beaches, and other public places to film everyday activities or news events—as in their *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (5.61).

Until about 1903, most films showed scenic places or noteworthy events, but narrative form also entered the cinema from the beginning. Edison staged comic

12.3 The hinged portion of the Black Maria's roof, at the center, swung open for filming.

scenes, such as one copyrighted 1895 in which a drunken man struggles briefly with a policeman. The Lumières made a popular short *L'Arroseur arrosé (The Waterer Watered,* 1895), also a comic scene, in which a boy tricks a gardener into squirting himself with a hose (4.7).

After the initial success of the new medium, filmmakers had to find more complex or interesting formal properties to keep the public's interest. The Lumières sent camera operators all over the world to show films and to photograph important events and exotic locales. But after making a huge number of films in their first few years, the Lumières reduced their output, and they ceased filmmaking altogether in 1905.

In 1896, Georges Méliès purchased a projector from the British inventor Robert William Paul and soon built a camera based on the same mechanism. Méliès's first films resembled the Lumières' shots of everyday activities. But as we have seen (pp. 113–115), Méliès was also a magician, and he discovered the possibilities of simple special effects. In 1897, Méliès built his own studio. Unlike Edison's Black Maria, Méliès's studio was glass-sided like a greenhouse, so that the studio did not have to move with the sun (12.4).

Méliès also began to build elaborate settings to create fantasy worlds within which his magical transformations could occur. We have already seen how Méliès thereby became the first master of mise-en-scène technique (4.3–4.6). From the simple filming of a magician performing a trick or two in a traditional stage setting, Méliès progressed to longer narratives with a series of tableaux. Each consisted of one shot, except when the transformations occurred. These were created by cuts designed to be imperceptible on the screen. He also adapted old stories, such as *Cinderella* (1899), or wrote his own. All these factors made Méliès's films extremely popular and widely imitated.

During this early period, films circulated freely from country to country. The French phonograph company Pathé Frères moved increasingly to filmmaking from 1900 on, establishing production and distribution branches in many countries. Soon it was the largest film concern in the world, a position it retained until 1914, when the beginning of World War I forced it to cut back production. In England, several entrepreneurs managed to invent or obtain their own filmmaking equipment and made scenics, narratives, and trick films from 1895 into the early years of the 20th century.
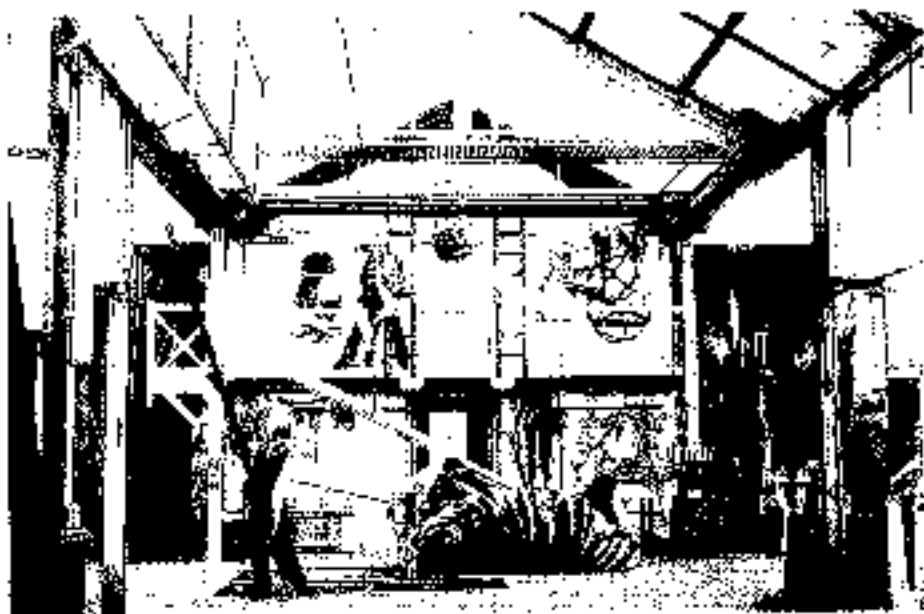
12.4 Méliès's glass-sided studio admitted sunlight through a variety of structures.

12.5   G. Albert Smith's Studio, Chase Lodge.

Members of the Brighton School, primarily G. Albert Smith and James Williamson, as well as others like Cecil Hepworth, shot their films on location or in simple open-air studios (as in 12.5). Their innovative films circulated abroad and influenced other filmmakers. Producers in other countries invented or bought equipment and were soon making their own films of everyday scenes or fantasy transformations.

From about 1904 on, narrative form became the most prominent type of film-making in the commercial industry, and the worldwide popularity of cinema continued to grow. French, Italian, and American films dominated world markets. Later, World War I was to restrict the free flow of films from country to country, and Hollywood emerged as the dominant industrial force in world film production, contributing to the creation of distinct differences in the formal traits of individual national cinemas.

The Development of the Classical Hollywood Cinema (1908–1927)

Edison was determined to exploit the money-making potential of his company's invention. He tried to force competing filmmakers out of business by bringing patent-violation suits against them. One other company, American Mutoscope & Biograph, managed to survive by inventing cameras that differed from Edison's patents. Other firms kept operating while Edison fought them in court. In 1908, Edison cooperated with Biograph to bring these other companies under control by forming the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), a group of 10 firms based primarily in Chicago, New York, and New Jersey. Edison and Biograph were the only stockholders and patent owners. They licensed other members to make, distribute, and exhibit films.

The MPPC never succeeded in eliminating its competition. Numerous independent companies were established throughout this period. Biograph's most important director from 1908 on, D. W. Griffith, formed his own company in 1913, as did other filmmakers. The United States government brought suit against the MPPC in 1912; in 1915, it was declared a monopoly.

Around 1910, film companies began to move prominently to California. Some historians claim that the independent companies fled west to avoid the harassment of the MPPC, but some MPPC companies also made the move. Among the advantages of Hollywood were the climate, which permitted shooting year-round, and the great variety of terrains—mountains, oceans, desert, city—available for location shooting. Soon Hollywood and other small towns on the outskirts of Los Angeles played host to film production.

The demand for films was so great that no single studio could meet it. This was one of the factors that led Edison to accept the existence of a group of other companies, although he tried to control them through his licensing procedure. Before 1920, the American industry assumed the structure that would continue for decades: a few large studios with individual artists under contract and a peripheral group of small independent producers. In Hollywood, the studios developed a factory system, with each production under the control of the producer, who usually did not work on the actual making of the films. Even an independent director such as Buster Keaton, with his own studio, had a business manager and distributed his films through larger companies, first Metro and then United Artists.

Gradually, through the 1910s and 1920s, the smaller studios merged to form the large firms that still exist today. Famous Players joined with Jesse L. Lasky and then formed a distribution wing, Paramount. By the late 1920s, most of the major companies—MGM (a merger of Metro, Goldwyn, and Mayer), Fox Film Corporation (merged with 20th Century in 1935), Warner Bros., Universal, and Paramount—had been created. Though in competition with one another, these studios tended to cooperate to a degree, realizing that no one firm could satisfy the market.

"This [cinematograph] is an invention without any commercial future."

Auguste Lumière, film pioneer

Within this system of mass-production studios, the American cinema became definitively oriented toward narrative form. Early films had consisted primarily of tableaux or vaudeville skits (12.5). One of Edison's directors, Edwin S. Porter, made some of the first films to use principles of narrative continuity and development. Among these was *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903), which showed the race of the firefighters to rescue a mother and a child from a burning house. Although this film used several important classical narrative elements (a fireman's premonition of the disaster, a series of shots of the horse-drawn engine racing to the house), it still had not worked out the logic of temporal relations in cutting. Thus we see the rescue of a mother and her child twice, from both inside and outside the house. Porter had not realized the possibility of intercutting the two locales within the action or matching the action to convey narrative information to the audience.

In 1903, Porter made *The Great Train Robbery*, in some ways a prototype for the classical American film. Here the action develops with a clear linearity of time, space, and logic. We follow each stage of the robbery (12.6), the pursuit, and the final defeat of the robbers. In 1905, Porter also created a simple parallel narrative in *The Kleptomaniac*, contrasting the fates of a rich woman and a starving woman who are both caught stealing.

British filmmakers were working along similar lines. Indeed, many historians now believe that Porter derived some of his editing techniques from films such as James Williamson's *Fire!* (1901) and G. A. Smith's *Mary Jane's Mishap* (1903). The most famous British film of this era was Lewin Fitzhamon's 1905 film *Rescued by Rover* (produced by a major British firm, Cecil Hepworth), which treated a kidnapping in a linear fashion similar to that of *The Great Train Robbery*. After the kidnapping, we see each stage of Rover's journey, to find the child, his return to fetch the child's father, and their retracing of the route to the kidnapper's lair. All the shots along the route maintain consistent screen direction, so that the geography of the action is completely intelligible (12.7, 12.8).

In 1908, D. W. Griffith began his directing career. Over the next five years, he would make hundreds of one- and two-reelers (running about 15 and 30 minutes, respectively). These films created relatively complex narratives in short space. Griffith certainly didn't invent all the devices with which he has been credited, but he did give many techniques strong narrative motivation. For example, a few other filmmakers had used simple last-minute rescues with crosscutting between the rescuers and victims, but Griffith developed and popularized this technique (6.102–6.106). By the time he made *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), Griffith was creating lengthy sequences by cutting among several different locales. During the early years, he also directed his actors in an unusual way, conveying emotion through subtle changes in facial expression (4.3). To catch such nuances, he set up his camera closer than did many of his contemporaries, framing his actors in medium-long shot or medium shot. Griffith's films were widely influential. In addition, his dynamic, rapid editing in the final chase scenes of *Intolerance* was to have a considerable impact on the Soviet Montage style of the 1920s.

The refinement of narratively motivated cutting occurs in the work of a number of important filmmakers of the period. One of these was Thomas H. Ince, a producer and director responsible for many films between 1910 and the end of World War I. He devised a unit system, whereby a single producer could oversee the making of several films at once. He also called for tight narratives, with no digressions or loose ends. *Civilization* (1915) and *The Italian* (1915) are good examples of films directed or supervised by Ince. He also supervised the popular Westerns of William S. Hart (5.52), who directed many of his own films.

Another prolific filmmaker of this period (and later years as well) was Cecil B. De Mille. Not yet engaged in the creation of historical epics, De Mille made a series of feature-length dramas and comedies. His *The Cheat* (1915) reflects important changes occurring in the studio style between 1914 and 1917. During that

12.6 The robbers in the telegraph office in *The Great Train Robbery* prepare to tie up the operator, seen through the window.

12.7 In *Rescued by Rover*, the dog leads his master along a street from the right rear to swing toward the left foreground...

12.8 ...and the pair continue from right to left as they reach the next location.

period, the glass-roofed studios of the earlier period began to give way to studios dependent on artificial lighting rather than mixed daylight and electric lighting. *The Cheat* used spectacular effects of chiaroscuro, with only one or two bright sources of light and no fill light. According to legend, De Mille instructed this effect to nervous exhibitors as *Rembrandt lighting*. This so-called Rembrandt, or *north*, lighting was to become part of the classical repertoire of lighting techniques. *The Cheat* also greatly impressed the French Impressionist filmmakers, who occasionally used similar stark lighting effects.

Like many American films of the teens, *The Cheat* also uses a linear pattern of narrative. The first scene **(12.9)** introduces the hard lighting but also quickly establishes the Japanese businessman as a ruthless collector of objects; we see him burning his brand onto a small statue. The initial action motivates a later scene in which the businessman brands the heroine, who has fallen into his power by borrowing money from him **(12.10)**. *The Cheat* was evidence of the growing formal complexity of the Hollywood film.

The period 1909–1917 saw the development of the basic continuity principles. Eyeline matches occur with increasing frequency from 1910 on. The match on action developed at about the same time and was in common use by 1916. It appears in such Douglas Fairbanks films as *The Americano* (1916) and *Wild and Woolly* (1917). Shot/reverse shot was used only occasionally between 1911 and 1915, but it became widespread by 1916–1917; instances occur in such films as De Mille's *The Cheat* (1915), Hart's Western *The Narrow Trail* (1917), and Griffith's *A Romance of Happy Valley* (1919). During this period, films rarely violated the axis-of-action rule in using these techniques.

By the 1920s, the continuity system had become a standardized style that directors in the Hollywood studios used almost automatically to create coherent spatial and temporal relations within narratives. A match on action could provide a cut to a closer view in a scene **(12.11, 12.12)**. A three-way conversation around a table would no longer be handled in a single frontal shot. Note the clear spatial relations in **12.13–12.17**, shots from *Are Parents People?* (Malcolm St. Clair, 1925). At the time, screen direction was usually respected, as in this case. When an awkward match might have resulted from the joining of two shots, the filmmakers could cover it by inserting a dialogue title.

Keaton's *Our Hospitality* (1923), which we examined in Chapter 4, provides another example of a classical narrative. Keaton's mastery of classical form and style are evident in the carefully motivated recurrences of the various narrative elements and in the straightforward causal development from the death of Willie McKay's father in the feud to Willie's final resolution of the feud.

By the end of the silent era, in the late 1920s, the classical Hollywood cinema had developed into a sophisticated mechanism, but the Hollywood product was remarkably standardized. All of the major studios used the same production system,

12.9 The opening scene of *The Cheat* introduces the branding motif.

12.10 ...that recurs later when the villain brands the heroine.

12.11 In Allan Dwan's *The Iron Mask* (1929), a long shot of the group leads to...

12.12 ...a cut-in to the central character played by Douglas Fairbanks.

12.13 In an establishing shot from *An Parisu Woman* the daughter sits down at the table.

12.14 In the medium shot she looks hesitant toward her father . . .

12.15 . . . who smiles tightsoild at her in the reverse shot.

12.16 The daughter then turns to look to the right at her mother . . .

12.17 . . . who also returns her gaze in a reverse shot.

with a similar division of labor at each. Independent production was less important. Some independent firms made low-budget films, often Westerns, for small and rural theaters. Even powerful Hollywood stars and producers had trouble remaining independent. Keaton gave up his small studio in 1928 to go to MGM under contract; there his career declined, partly because of the incompatibility of his old working methods with the rigid production patterns of the huge studio. Griffith, Mary Pickford, Fairbanks, and Charles Chaplin were better off. Forming a distributing corporation of their own, United Artists, in 1919, they were able to continue independent production at small companies under their umbrella corporation, though Griffith's company soon failed, and the careers of Fairbanks and Pickford declined soon after the introduction of sound).

There were alternative kinds of films being made during the silent era—most of them in other countries. After examining these alternative movements, we'll return to consider the classical Hollywood cinema after the coming of sound.

German Expressionism (1919–1926)

At the start of World War I, the output of the German film industry was relatively small, though some impressive pictures had been made there. Germany's 2000 movie theaters were playing mostly French, American, Italian, and Danish films. Although America and France banned German films from their screens immediately, Germany was not even in a solid enough position to ban French and American films, for then the theaters would have had little to show.

To combat imported competition, as well as to create its own propaganda films, the German government began to support the film industry. In 1916, film imports were banned except from neutral Denmark. Production increased rapidly: from a dozen small companies in 1911, the number grew to 131 by 1918. But government policy encouraged these companies to band together into cartels.

The war was unpopular with many in Germany, and antiwar tendencies increased after the success of the Russian Revolution in 1917. Widespread strikes and antiwar petitions were organized during the winter of 1916–1917. To promote pro-war films, the government, the Deutsche Bank, and large industrial concerns combined several small film firms to create the large company UFA (short for Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft) in late 1917. Backed by these essentially conservative interests, UFA was a move toward control of not only the German market but the postwar international market as well.

With this huge financial backing, UFA was able to gather superb technicians and build the best-equipped studios in Europe. These studios later attracted foreign filmmakers, including the young Alfred Hitchcock. During the 1920s, Germany coproduced many films with companies in other countries, thus helping to spread German stylistic influence abroad.