Cinema Has Not Yet Been Invented: Lecture by Ian Christie

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Introduction

For the first seminar of the AHRC Screendance Network at the University of Brighton (September 2009), Claudia Kappenberg invited Professor Ian Christie to give a presentation based on his Slade Lectures at Cambridge University in 2006, in which he surveyed the history of cinema under the title: *The Cinema has not yet been invented*.[1]

Appropriated as "Screendance has not yet been invented," Professor Christie's phrase has constituted a useful starting point for the Screendance Network, facilitating a critical review of the development of screendance in the context of twentieth century film and a reflection on the possibilities inherent in the art form.[2]

In his Slade Lectures, Ian Christie examined debates across the twentieth century, which considered film variously as a mechanical advance, as popular entertainment or as a form of art. Today, different bodies of work such as popular narrative cinema and experimental film practices continue to hold conflicting views as to the potential and use of the medium. The different points of view create a healthy diversity of discourses and references, and also allow for the development of a variety of platforms and audiences.

The original series of Slade Lectures consisted of eight lectures; the transcribed material below summarizes the key points and issues that were presented in the lecture to the Screendance Network.

Ian Christie: To begin with I will show you an extract from a compilation by the German filmmaker and collector Werner Nekes. His collection of optical devices and apparatus from the centuries before moving pictures appeared on the strips we call "film" is probably the largest in the world and has toured in the form of various exhibitions. One of these was *The Eyes, Lies and Illusions*, at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 2004–05. Nekes has put a lot of his archive material onto six DVDs, under the general title *Media Magica*, and I want to show you one section of Volume II, which is called *Historical Shadow Theatre*. What I find valuable and thought provoking about this is that it gives us the option of *not* regarding cinema as beginning in 1893 or 1895 (depending on whether you regard Edison or the Lumières as founders), but thinking of it being at least a 300-year span.

Shadow theatre is really the longest tradition of projected entertainment before cinema began, alongside the magic lantern. It covers a vast amount of traditional entertainment, and while we may all have some sense of shadow theatre, none of us has seen anything like the full range of it. A surprising number of countries have their own tradition of shadow theatre; they are all different, and what you can see in very condensed form on this DVD is a selection of about six or eight of these surviving traditions. They have been

filmed both in front of the screen—in "audience view"—and also behind the screen, so you get a sense of what the range of this form might be. And I think it might be especially interesting to you as screendance practitioners and historians.

Screen shot of traditional Cambodian *Nang shek* or shadow theatre. Werner Nekes, *Media Magica,* Volume II. Mülheim an der Ruhur, Germany: Arte, 2004. DVD.

This reminder of shadowplay as both an ancient and continuing tradition raises the whole question of the limitations of our concept of cinema, and I think provides a useful starting point for our discussion. The starting point for my Slade lectures, and the title "The Cinema has not yet been invented," came from an article by the French critic André Bazin, who was influential through the 1940s and 50s, and became a sort of father figure to the "new wave" film-makers, especially François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, before his premature death in 1958. Bazin's essays from the 1940s are particularly important and have become canonic in film studies.[3] One of these is a review of the first volume of a huge history of cinema by George Sadoul, and towards the end of it Bazin says: "The more you look at the nineteenth century the more you realize that the pioneers of cinema, the people we think of as pioneers, were actually imagining something that was total, integral realism."[4] What has happened since, Bazin suggested, is a series of approximations towards that ideal; and he ends up saying, paradoxically (writing in 1946), that "cinema has not yet been invented," even though it keeps getting closer and closer to the original dream of its pioneers.

Question: So the dream of the pioneers was a total realism that has only been approximated?

IC. Yes it has been approximated by various developments such as the introduction of sound and color, stereo and things like that.

Q. Do you think this is true?

IC. No, in fact I think it's quite misleading. Bazin was offering a Catholic idealist interpretation of a Marxist history, which he either failed to understand or didn't want to.

The problem is that today all film students are taught Bazin in college, using the rather poorly translated California University Press texts, and they're rarely encouraged to question him. But even if I disagree with Bazin's interpretation of pre-cinema history, I still think he provides a valuable stimulus to think about "what cinema is."

Let me set alongside the Bazin quotation one by Virginia Woolf about the future of film, from the only essay she wrote on cinema, in 1926:

> Is there . . . some secret language, which we feel and see, but never speak, and if so, could this be made visible to the eye? . . . Something abstract, something which moves with controlled and conscious art, something which calls for the very slightest help from words or music . . . of such movements and abstractions the films may, in time to come, be composed.[5]

Woolf wrote this essay immediately after seeing *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919) at the Film Society in London. However, she was less interested in the film than in a blob of dirt that got stuck on the projector and became on screen "a shadow shaped like a tadpole . . . that swelled to an immense size."[6] This inspired her to wonder if film could move beyond the "disastrous" photoplays that she despised, to express the subjectivity of the inner life. Here I might add that I've had a special affection for Woolf's vision of film even since I wrote a television series for the centenary of cinema, in the mid–1990s, and we managed to get Fiona Shaw to play Virginia Woolf.[7] The

Film still of Dickson's *Experimental Sound Film* (1895) with W. K. L. Dickson playing the violin. Courtesy FilmSound.org.

speech I wrote for her took some lines from the 1926 essay, and extended them in a way I hope Woolf would have approved of.

We could say that 1896 marked the official beginning of cinema, or rather of moving pictures, when they went public and projection on the screen before an audience began. But Edison had been making subjects for his Kinetoscope peepshow machines since 1894, and most of these were performance-based. They were all shot in his "Black Maria" studio in New Jersey and the performers were mostly popular performers from Broadway. One, however, is strikingly different. It shows two men dancing together, with a third playing the violin beside a large Phonogram horn.

This *Experimental Sound Film* dates from 1894, and the director (and violinist) was W. K. L. Dickson, a Scot born in France, who became the key figure in Edison's team working on moving pictures. Edison always thought that moving pictures would combine with recorded sound, which of course he had pioneered with the Phonograph in 1877. This film was apparently made to demonstrate the principle of the Kinetophone, an early attempt to synchronize phonograph cylinders to moving pictures. For a long time it was thought to be something of a fake or at least ahead of what was possible at the time. Then the original cylinder was discovered, and it could indeed be synchronized, as the editor and sound designer, Walter Murch, has demonstrated.[8] We might want to consider this the founding work of screendance: modest in its choreography, yet focused on what the new apparatus could deliver.[9]

A decade after the first films appeared in music halls and fairgrounds, the standard programmed had increased in length to an average of 70 minutes, but still consisted of a mix of mostly ten-minute films of different genres—topical, knockabout comedy and trick films. These last made use of reverse-motion and stop-motion substitution for magical effect, keeping alive the novelty of "animated photography" that had seized the imagination of early viewers. Then, from about 1908, things began to change. One aspect of this was what had depressed Virginia Woolf: the trend towards "realistic" drama, often drawing on well-known literary works. Yet despite those who deplored this trend, many more saw in it a new dramatic mastery that integrated all the elements of film to create a convincing "world."

The key work in this new vein was *The Assassination of the Duc de Guise* (France, 1908, Calmettes and Le Bargy), which drew on the resources of the Comédie Française, France's leading classical theatre, to dramatize a famous episode in French history, when the Duc de Guise was lured to his death at the court of Henry III. With its richly authentic costume and decor, and well-plotted movement and editing, the film also benefited from a score by the leading composer, Camille Saint-Saens. This was the first major score written for the cinema, an extremely successful piece of music, which anticipates the next twenty years of film music, and much beyond. And yet, for all its achievement, many historians of cinema subsequently repeated the claim that the *Duc de Guise* marked a "wrong turn," subordinating film to theatre. What is undeniable is the influence of the "film d'art" movement that the *Duc de Guise* spearheaded, and which soon gave rise to a wave of historical subjects in many countries. Whether this distracted cinema from other possibilities remains open to debate, but it undoubtedly broadened the medium's appeal to the educated classes and paved the way to its tackling more ambitious subjects.

Ambition flourished particularly among Italian producers during the next five years, as they developed the distinctive new genre of the epic portrayal of antiquity. Using stories from Roman history and Greek mythology, with lavish sets and large casts, they created a taste for spectacle that would take film into the 'teens, filling existing concert halls and vast new cinemas with an ever-growing audience, which now included royalty.[10] Despite the ostensibly Christian themes of *Quo Vadis?* (1912), *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1913), and *Cabiria* (1914), these films also had a frankly sensational and exotic appeal, harking back to the popular paintings of ancient Rome by Gerôme and Alma-Tadema, and establishing film as a medium of popular spectacle. Their scale and popular success prompted other filmmakers to consider treating more recent national history on a similar scale: hence, a rash of battle films and, strongly influenced by the Italian model, D. W. Griffith's account of the American Civil War, *Birth of a Nation* (1915).

Screen shot of a pioneering "art" film: *The Assassination of the Duc de Guise.* **Directed by André Calmettes and Charles Le Bargy, 1908.**

But during this crucial development, as the new longer "feature" films displaced the previous standard programmed of varied short films, there was an important moment of reflection. 1913 saw a cluster of polemics

and experiments that would change the status of film and ultimately establish its claim to be considered a new artistic medium. The Russian Futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky, a firebrand young poet at this time, was skeptical about cinema and he spoke for many when he insisted that it "obviously" could not be an independent art form, in a series of articles for an early Russian film journal.[11] Yes, he agreed, it could certainly provide "aesthetic enjoyment," but "cinema and art are phenomena of a different order." Embedded in Mayakovsky's position at the time—a time, as we now know, when Russian filmmakers were creating some of their earliest masterpieces—is the old charge that film depends on machinery, or that it merely multiplies and distributes images, like the printing press or the typewriter.[12] Another Russian, the playwright Leonid Andreyev, argued at this time that the cinema would take over the stage's role in popular entertainment and that this would leave drama free to do different things.[13] To some extent they were right, a certain kind of play or spectacle that had been done on stage was taken over by the screen; and five years later, after the October revolution, Mayakovsky would throw himself into film, writing and starring in three highly experimental works that explored and exploited the ontological ambiguity of film as representation.[14]

Then there were still others whom we might consider the visionaries of 1912–1913, who already began to see a new art form coming into existence. Let me give some examples of these very different characters. Certainly the most distinguished was Sir Hubert Von Herkomer (1849–1914), who was an established artist, a Royal Academician, and painter of some of the most famous pictures of the nineteenth century, such as *Hard Times* (1885) and *On Strike* (1891). Herkomer announced in 1913 that he was giving up painting in favor of cinema, since he saw "the greatest possibility of art in the film."[15] He set up a studio in the grounds of his suburban house and plunged into film production, but unfortunately died just a year later and all the films have been lost. His move, however, marked quite a profound shift and indicated that for social realists like himself, films were beginning to seem the best way to reach a mass audience, as he had previously done through his illustrations for *The Graphic* in the 1870s.[16]

Artists of a very different stamp, Wassily Kandinsky and the composer Arnold Schönberg (who also painted), both speculated from 1911 to 1913 about the possibility of using animated film in complex experimental stage works they were both wrestling with—Kandinsky's *Der Gelbe Klang* [The Yellow Sound], a "colour-tone drama," and Schönberg's quasi-opera *Die Glückliche Hand* [The Lucky Hand]. Both wanted to avoid having actual bodies on stage in what were essentially abstract expressionist works, and wondered if animated film might produce a suitably spectral image.[17] As it turned out, neither proceeded with the idea of commissioning a film, probably for the same reasons that Picasso did not proceed with his idea of making a film around the same time, or that Léopold Survage failed to secure backing for his "coloured rhythm" series of paintings in 1912–1913.[18] Few artists had any contact with the world of filmmaking at this time, and although color tinting and toning were routine for commercial films, these industrialized processes would hardly have satisfied the requirements of a Kandinsky or a Picasso.[19]

If visual artists would not engage directly in filmmaking for another decade, there are plenty of examples from the 'teens of what could perhaps be described as a "proto-filmic" impulse. The Bloomsbury painter Duncan Grant, for instance, produced an uncharacteristic work in 1914, entitled *Abstract Kinetic Painting with Sound*, which consists of a 4.8-metre scroll

decorated with geometric shapes that was intended to be wound by a motor slowly past a rectangular viewing aperture to the accompaniment of one of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos.[20] Now too fragile to be operated, this singular work—very different from anything else by Grant—was filmed and with accompanying music in 1974 and can now experienced *as* the abstract animation that it points towards. Grant was not the only artist of this period to experiment with the "scroll" form: Sonia Delaunay collaborated with the poet Blaise Cendrars to make a "simultaneous" fold-out book of his modernist narrative poem *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* in 1913 that extends as a two-meter scroll.

Léopold Survage, from the series *Le Rythme coloré* (1913). Image courtesy Scala Archives, SCALA Group S.P.A., Florence.

The 1920s is probably the era we all know best as the cradle of avant-garde film, with a number of fully-fledged alternatives to mainstream cinema produced by what are sometimes called the "historic avant-gardes." A curious feature of this period of intense productivity is that these off-shoots of Futurism, Cubism and Expressionism are all ten to fifteen years "late"—as if cinema had to reach a level of technical sophistication and diversity to allow the original impulses behind these earlier movements to reach the screen. In the case of the French avant-garde formed by Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Marcel L'Herbier and Germaine Dulac, this has been labeled "Impressionist," although only some aspects of Delluc's and Epstein's work corresponds to the original Impressionist agenda, with Art Deco a more obvious correlate. Among all these "delayed" '20s film avant-gardes, only Dada and Constructivism really produced contemporary film equivalents: Dada in Man Ray's films and the Picabia-Clair *Entr'acte* (1924), and in the animation of Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling; and Constructivism primarily in Dziga Vertov's and Sergei Eisenstein's films.

From a distance, avant-garde film of the '20s can easily seem to belong to a common aspiration to "free" cinema from conventional narrative and bourgeois values, but it was actually a period of intense struggle between competing groups and movements. Many of these struggles were over rival definitions of film's intrinsic or essential quality—what sets it apart from all other media and is "specific" to it. In France this coalesces around the idea of *photogénie*, meaning that the moving photographic image has a particular hypnotic or arresting quality, especially when showing close-ups of faces and objects.[21] This theory or belief was sharply challenged by the "montage" school, mainly Soviet Russian filmmaker-theorists, who argued that, on the contrary, the specificity of film lay in the *juxtaposition* of images rather than in their content or photographic qualities. This clash was well illustrated by an exchange over *The Battleship Potemkin* in 1926. The Hungarian-born critic Béla Balázs had praised the "hidden symbolic expressiveness" of *Potemkin*'s images in an article entitled "The Future of Film," which was republished in

Screen shot, *Entr'acte* (1924), directed by René Clair from a script by the Dada painter and activist Francis Picabia. Paris: Re-Voir, 2005. DVD.

Russia.[22] Eisenstein retorted with a stinging rebuke, "Béla forgets the Scissors," in which he pours scorn on the "individualism" of single shots and on the "honest" narrative of American cinema, insisting that "*the expressive effect of cinema is the result of juxtapositions*."[23] (I should add here that seeing this as a straight choice rather oversimplifies a more complex field of possibilities. Among German filmmakers in particular there was an intense development of the "plasticity" of the image, which amounted to sculpting in light, in films by Robison, Murnau and Lang; and I think this should be regarded as neither impressionist nor montage-based, but really amounted to *building* film as a kind of dramatic architecture, and it would lay the foundations for the mature Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 40s).

Despite their differences, a common feature of the 20s avant-gardes was what I would call a utopian aspiration. Amid the many manifestos of the inter-war period, film is increasingly seen as having the potential to create a "new language" of the image—in Soviet Russia and France above all, but also in many other countries that had apparently shown little interest in the artistic potential of the new medium. Even a figure such as Kazimir Malevich, convinced of the importance of his Suprematist revolution in painting, believed that film

Screen shot of the intense plasticity of the image in Murnau's European masterpiece, *Faust* (1926). Courtesy http://www.archive.org.

could achieve still more, if it could overcome its attachment to mere narrative and figurative representation. Writers other than Woolf, from Pirandello to Joyce and Dos Passos, were intrigued by the potential of film to carry forward their experiments in multi-dimensional construction. And works such as Gance's *Napoleon* (1927), Murnau's *Faust* (1926), and Eisenstein's *October* (1928) pointed towards the possibility of a new *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Then came the Talkies. It's a failure of a rather myopic film history to overplay this technological transformation. Synchronized sound-on-film certainly arrived as an industrial fact of life between 1928 and 1930. But its impact can scarcely be separated from profound changes in the economic and political structure of the world, due to the Wall Street crash, Stalin's drive for industrialization in Russia and the rise of Hitler—not to mention those filmmakers who believed in progress. Many factors conspired to de-rail the historic avant-gardes, which found themselves dispersed and in disarray at the beginning of the 1930s. At the same time, new avant-gardes began to emerge, along with new genres and opportunities for filmmakers to reach vast new audiences.

Recorded music was the most obvious beneficiary of the new technology—and the "intended" use for synchronized sound. The "talkies" were never expected to talk, except as an adjunct to musical performance, as in the early Vitaphone demonstration films, and the realization that audiences were prepared to listen to a lot of speech came as something of a surprise. But the rapid development of the "musical" in the early '30s created what was substantially a new cinematic form, and one in which dance would prove as important as music *per se*. Documentary film was a less predictable creation of the sound era. There had of course been many earlier forms of non-fiction film, but the '30s saw the documentary become established and recognized as a genre, giving rise to many different practices and to a body of theory.

There were inevitably very different attitudes towards the new genres made possible by recorded sound. Some mourned the loss of what had now become "silent" cinema's universality, and regarded the talkies as responsible for a loss of artistic or radical potential. In the United States, for elites such as the left-leaning intellectuals of *Partisan Review* and connoisseurs of Modernism involved with the Museum of Modern Art, "Hollywood" became synonymous with a debased mass culture. And when Soviet cinema began to produce its own musicals, led by Eisenstein's former associate Grigori Alexandrov, these were denounced as the equivalent of, but inferior to, Hollywood's own opium for the masses.[24] We, of course, now tend to see considerable aesthetic and even political value in the Depression-era musicals to which Busby Berkeley

Grigori Alexandrov's *Jolly Fellows* (1934) disappointed many left-wing intellectuals who prized the seriousness of Soviet cinema—which now seemed to be converging with Hollywood's new musicals, as the critic Dwight McDonald lamented in his *Partisan Review* articles of 1938. Mosfilm, 1934. Image courtesy of Grading Dimension Pictures, Inc.

contributed pyrotechnic routines. But there were real culture wars in the 1930s over which side were you on, and we're still living with the legacy of these to some extent.

Question 1: There are a number of feminist readings of Berkeley's work.

Question 2: But in the context of screendance, it is generally not discussed in a critical way.

IC. There were many voices in these critical debates, and I want to mention just two, by way of contrast. Erwin Panofsky was a great art historian and the founder of the study of "iconology" as an art historical method. A refugee in America, he gave an important paper in 1934, in support of the Museum of Modern Art's film collection, which was published as "Style and Medium in the Motion Picture."[25] Perhaps surprisingly, this advances a trenchant argument in favor of popular Hollywood cinema. Panofsky took a stand on the Marx Brothers, the Western and popular genres, arguing that these can be traced back to earlier periods of culture, and that such commercially viable culture is always superior to subsidized art which is intended for the elite. Film, he maintains, is the only contemporary art whose disappearance would register with the public as a disaster. And Panofsky was probably the first major critic to identify a "nostalgia" for the silent era, while insisting that every gain in artistic progress involves some loss, but remains a gain "provided that the basic nature of the medium is realized and respected."[26] Another key figure from the 1930s, Walter Benjamin, did not escape Europe to a new life in America, and did not advocate Hollywood as a model for popular culture. In his pioneering 1936 essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin looked to Soviet cinema and radical documentary as models, where "any man today can lay claim to being filmed."[27] From opposed ideological positions, Panofsky and Benjamin are both arguing for cinema as the paradigm art form of the twentieth century, intrinsically popular and democratic.

Amid the major upheavals of the early '30s in cinema, one strand is often overlooked. This is the growing use of film for public information and commercial advertising, which was another innovation of the sound era. John Grierson managed to persuade the British establishment that there were important lessons to be learned from such otherwise antipathetic examples as Soviet cinema, and secured funding for an Empire Marketing Board film unit, from which would follow his work at the Post Office's equivalent unit, where he brought together many of the period's most talented young artists to work on films such as *Colour Box*, *Night Mail* and *Coal Face*. Advertising was also undergoing change, and as director of publicity for Shell-Mex and BP, Jack Beddington was instrumental in employing artists to produce the

Screen shot from Len Lye's *Rainbow Dance* (1936), which combines graphic and choreographic elements in an exuberant display of "screendance." Image courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, the New Zealand Film Archive, and the British Post Office.

Shell Guides and many collectable posters, and to make innovative and entertaining films such as *The Birth of a Robot* (1936), co-directed by Humphrey Jennings and Len Lye. Between them, Grierson and Beddington paved the way for a recognizably modern pact between artists and sponsors, where the latter support the former's experimentation, without insisting on a "hard sell."

Two of Grierson's protégés at the GPO film unit were important pioneers of screendance: Norman McLaren and Len Lye. Lye's earliest and best-known films are abstract animation set to dance music, but his *Rainbow Dance* (1936) is different, in that it incorporates the human figure, photographed and "rotoscoped" into a series of stylized graphic "sets," so it has much more complex material. For me, this is Lye's greatest achievement. It's very interesting also in terms of the cultural history of the 1930s, because the figure of the dancer you see is Rupert Doone, the founder of the Group Theatre, which commissioned T. S. Eliot's first play, *The Rock* (1934), and presented Brecht and Weil's early collaborations. Doone was a dancer who wanted a fusion of dance and theatre, initially inspired by Diaghilev (for whom he had danced) and by the new German theatre. I've never discovered how he became involved with Lye, although some other artists like W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten were involved with both Grierson's documentary unit and the Group theatre.[28] In any case *Rainbow Dance* marked a real moment of coming together of different avant-garde currents and the film must have been seen by hundreds of thousands of people through being widely distributed in the cinemas.

I advised on several sections of the Modernism exhibition at the V&A in 2006, and we ran this film in the last section of the show, where it played for about two and a half months.[29] When I visited the exhibition, I felt people had their spirits lifted by *Rainbow Dance*— it's very infectious in a truly audiovisual manner, and an incredibly ambitious piece for that time, working just on the edge of what was possible with the new color processes. You feel that Lye is trying to do everything in one film, just in case he doesn't get a chance to do it again. So this would be my prize example of early screendance, because I think that it produces a wonderful synthesis.

Question: It sounds as if you're talking only about formal considerations.

IC. No, I think there's much more to it than that. These public-service films were produced at a time when the idea of the modern state was beginning to take shape. In 1930s Britain, the state was creating a "public sphere," as we would say today, with bodies that were funded through government, and which projected a vision of a cohesive society. So there is a kind of social philosophy underpinning these films, from the Empire Marketing Board, the Post Office and the Gas Council. They are really about how things will work for you as a citizen—the spoken text at the end of Rainbow Dance is rather quaintly poetic: "The Post Office Savings Bank puts a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for you. No deposit too small for the Post Office Savings Bank." And I think this was something the filmmakers were very comfortable with; this was their philosophy too. I mentioned Edgar Anstey, who co-directed *Housing Problems* (1935), and carried his experience from the 1930s into the film units that were created by the nationalized industries post-war, like the National Coal Board and British Transport. These film units continued into the '50s and '60s until they were dismantled. The Ford Foundation also became a very enlightened sponsor and really took up the whole idea of documentary with a very liberal social vision, as in a film like *We*

Are the Lambeth Boys (1959, dir. Karel Reisz). They certainly weren't just trying to promote Ford products. So I think there is a social philosophy behind many of these works, which sits well with their formal liveliness and vivacity, and it's the kind of thing you also find in some French modernists, such as Léger. As a modernist and a Communist, Léger had a very clear social vision in his work of social inclusiveness. If you look at his later work it is all about co-operation and teamwork, workers working together as in *The Builders* (1950) or the cyclists and campers in other paintings. I think there is a lot of that in the 1930s and although we might be more likely to see the formal side of it, you've got to consider the broader ideology of democracy and citizenship as well.

Question: I respect this, but it seems important to start talking about these objects as works of art, if one can use that term, beyond works of culture, and within a larger context of aesthetics.

IC: I agree, and I think they are works of art, although sometimes they stand in an oblique relationship to the main currents of contemporary art. If you try to place a figure we are all familiar with, Maya Deren, within this landscape, then I would suggest her early films hark back to the 1920s avant-gardes—just as some of those films were themselves "belated." Of course Deren had been shaped by their vision and she was the inheritor of many of those traditions because of her education and background. But what helps to make her films very obviously "art" in the mid–40s is the sense that they refer back to what has now been canonized, as well as seeming out of step with the rest of the cinema by the 1940s.

Screen shot from Maya Deren, *At Land* (1944). Paris: Re:Voir, 2008. DVD.

By the 1940s, most of the "historic" avant-gardes had either run their course or reformulated their premises of the 1920s and moved on to a new agenda—which had been forced on them not only by the rise of Fascism and the outbreak of war, but also by accelerating technological development. The aesthetics of the 1940s are in danger of being overshadowed by these major issues, but in many ways this was a highly creative period— one of synthesis when, for instance, there was a fusion of the musical and the melodrama, and a return of phantasmagoric subjectivity (of which more later).

Far from Hollywood, the mid–1940s saw the climax of Eisenstein's artistic achievement. He had probably been the main inspiration for radical filmmakers and for artists in other media in the 1920s and even in the 1930s; and his essays provided the body of theory, which people were using right into the 50s and 60s. But after 1930, Eisenstein completed very few films, although his *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) was probably seen by more people than all his previous films had been, in view of the censorship they had faced.

After *Nevsky* "rehabilitated" Eisenstein in Stalin's Russia, he chose to use his new prestige to make another historical film, *Ivan the Terrible*, whose first part was overtaken by the

Screen shot from Powell and Pressburger's phantasmagoric *The Red Shoes* (1948): "Total cinema" of the post-war period. Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. UK: ITV, 2009. DVD.

war and came to be seen as a message from beleaguered Russia, awarded the Stalin Prize and subsumed into wartime propaganda. But the more daring and personal second part, *The Boyars' Plot*, was banned and not seen until 1958, ten years after Eisenstein's death. By then, it seemed completely out of time. Khrushchev had started the process of criticizing Stalin and Soviet cinema was showing a new modernity in films like *The Cranes are Flying* (Kalatozov, 1957) and *The Ballad of a Soldier* (Chukhrai, 1959). Audiences were about to see *Les quatre cents coups* (Truffaut, 1959) and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Reisz, 1960), so the late arrival of *Ivan The Terrible, Part II* with Eisenstein's later thinking about montage in the era of sound and color, attracted less attention than it might otherwise have done. And of course Eisenstein's vast body of writing, about montage, Disney and much else, was still to be translated. Seen in this light, I would argue that *Ivan Part II* is actually one of the great aesthetic statements of the mid-century—and its mise-en-scene still has a lot to contribute to the evolution of screendance.

After World War Two, Eisenstein still dreamed of a "total cinema" using color, stereoscopy and even variable screen shape.[30] And, not coincidentally, Hollywood actively experimented with these variations on the classic film format. Hitchcock, in particular, was preoccupied by immersive techniques from 1946 onwards, using "seamless" sequence shots (*Under Capricorn*, *Rope*), dream imagery (*Spellbound*), and even 3D in *Dial M for Murder* (1954). Meanwhile Bazin, writing in 1946–48 and distinctly hostile to *old-style* Soviet montage, theorized a new realism, which was influenced by the deep-focus/long-take mise-en-scene of Welles's *Citizen Kane*

and Wyler's *The Little Foxes*, and by Rossellini and Neo-realism. So we have real aesthetic choices here: the "total cinema" of Eisenstein, Hitchcock, and indeed Michael Powell (*The Red Shoes*, *Tales of Hoffmann*) versus Bazinian "realism."

It was "les enfants de Bazin," the filmmakers of the French *nouvelle vague*, along with all the other new waves of the 1960s (Czech, Polish, Russian, British), who helped produce an international "art cinema" that in many ways seemed to fulfill the long-awaited promise of what cinema might achieve. It was a body of work which had the same kind of moral and formal complexity—the same sense of being rooted in its own national cultures, yet able to travel—that great literature, drama and painting had. And by the mid 1960s, cinema seemed in many ways more important than what was happening in those other media—I called it a "universal theatre" in the Slade Lectures. There was a certain moment when Bergman, Godard, Buñuel and maybe twenty other filmmakers seemed to constitute the front line of what was happening in world culture. It didn't last, but it did hold for a certain period in the '60s.

The same 1960s saw a contestation of art cinema, the international art cinema that had a very significant following amongst the international intelligentsia, and the challenge came from artists and theorists—often the same thing—who were interested in minimalism, serialism and the concept of art as a self-referential discourse. This of course goes back to Clement Greenberg's version of formalism, fixated on "medium specificity," which influenced a whole generation of artists. Examples in film are Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), Yvonne Rainer's *Lives of Performers* (1972) and Laura Mulvey's and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), three films that celebrated in different ways a highly self-referential discourse of film.

Screen shot from Mulvey and Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) explored performance, feminism and film itself. British Film Institute Production B.

One of the leading artist-theorists figures of the movement known as "structural film" (which now seems a rather reductive label), Hollis Frampton, declared in a 1968 performance piece entitled A Lecture: "It seems that a film is anything that may be put into a projector, that will modulate the emerging beam of light."[31] His actions during the performance, which essentially involved a 16mm projector turned on and off, included holding a pipe cleaner in the light beam—an action which may recall for us Virginia Woolf's delight at that accidental "tadpole" seen on the Film Society screen. Another work from the same period, Anthony McCall's *Light describing a cone*, first shown in 1973, invited spectators to regard the projector's light-beam as a spectral sculpture, asserting a similarly minimalist/ materialist view of "film."[32]

In the 1970s and '80s radical filmmakers took on board a series of critiques and aspirations that were driven by—variously—the rise of feminism, the claims of the Third World, radicalized psychoanalysis according to Lacan and Deleuze and Guattari, and many other challenges to the idea of film having what Frampton scorned as "a coherent normal

paradigm."[33] And while this was going on in one corner, the Hollywood studios, after their acute anxiety during the 60s, were busy devising bigger and better ways of increasing their revenues and keeping control of the international entertainment business. Need I remind you that *Jaws* (1975) is now regarded as the first "blockbuster"?

So, to end, two open questions that arise from thinking about the history of this approximation to "cinema." 1995–1996 saw widespread celebration of the centenary, and prompted much stocktaking and pondering about "what is cinema?" And this ontological anxiety over defining something that is clearly in flux has continued ever since. A recent example I would recommend is the essay by Yuri Tsivian, "What is Cinema?," subtitled "An Agnostic Answer," which he wrote originally in answer to a post-centenary questionnaire circulated by the French journal *Trafic*.[34] The thrust of Tsivian's essay is to move away from essentialist definitions and to recognize that "what cinema is has changed enough times for a history of cinema's identities to be written."[35] In common with a number of historians of the medium (such as myself), he recognizes that we are dealing with a plural phenomenon, and one that very definitely cannot usefully be defined by a single technological structure or canon of works. This last point is relevant to thinking about your field: screendance. While the practice of defining cinema according to "great works" and established traditions—mainly of narrative-based fiction film—continues, there are many other traditions and uses of, let us call it, the filmic apparatus. So, thinking about cinema from the standpoint of movement, of interaction, of "choreography for camera" could prove as legitimate as many other frameworks. Feel free to enter the business of canon-creation!

The second question, which we can hardly avoid, is one that has stoked the ontological anxiety I mentioned above: what difference has digitization made during the last decade? Is, for instance, Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2003), entirely captured by a digital camera and composited rather than edited, still cinema, albeit by other means? For Sokurov, it was definitely cinema by other means, since he had no intention to make a break with the past. On the contrary, he simply used digital capture as a tool to realize a particular vision he had of making "a film in a single breath," as he calls it. He hasn't actually shot in digital much since then and seems to have no particular interest in it *per se*.

For many filmmakers (note how this word persists, indeed is becoming consolidated), digital is essentially a tool; but for some theorists, such as David Rodowick, its widespread adoption marks the start of a new era, which has actually replaced cinema, perhaps without anybody noticing.[36] Or, to put it in older terms, could we describe it as an epistemological break, which is the sort of critical language popular in the 1970s, when people used to argue that there was an epistemological break between early and late Eisenstein (David Bordwell), or before and after Cubism (John Berger). Is it useful to think about an epistemological or ontological

Screen shot from *Russkiy kovcheg,* or *Russian Ark* (2002). Cinema by other means, by Alexander Sokurov. Fora-Fil'm, 2003. DVD.

"break" between the photochemical era and the increasingly all-digital one we're inhabiting? And what indeed are the implications of using digital media to "quote" films—as Godard has done in his *Histoires du cinéma*, and as I have been doing in this talk?

Question: Screendance has been invented and there is a body of work that one can look at, but one has to apply extant methodologies to reading those works—as was done in the 70s and 80s in Feminist and Queer Studies and though various other lenses.

IC: Of course, but I think one of the questions for the screendance community is really what to do about work made outside of the concept of screendance, but which appears to belong to it. And clearly there are going to be different positions, with some wanting to be quite purist and consider only work which is produced within a defined set of parameters and intentions. This is going to be a narrow canon, which goes back to Maya Deren and perhaps sees her as its ideal progenitor. Or there is the other extreme, which would want to be quite heterodox and choose material from a wide range of sources, perhaps seeing screendance as a search system to remap cinema according to a set of ideas, which relate to dance in the widest sense. I've heard some of you use those terms when you've talked about the choreographic aspect of a film which has nothing resembling dance in it. So it's conceivably possible to recast the whole history of cinema in terms of a dance dimension and find it everywhere (Frampton cheekily suggested that "the whole history of art is no more than a massive footnote to the history of film").[37] But this perhaps loses what specificity you want, and runs the risk of dispersing the idea of "screendance" too widely? It depends what you want to do with the concept . . .

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Notes

1. Christie, "Cinema."

2. The title was later to become the title of the first issue of the *International Journal of Screendance*.

3. Selections of Bazin's essays have appeared in the two volumes of *What is Cinema?*, which were edited and translated by Hugh Gray and published in 1967 and 1971.

4. Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," 21.

5. Woolf, "The Cinema," 57.

6. Woolf, "The Cinema," 56.

7. Christie, *The Last Machine*.

8. The synchronized sound version now available online was restored in 2000 by Walter Murch and Rick Schmidlin, working at Industrial Light and Magic and George Lucas's Skywalker Sound, in collaboration with the Library of Congress and the Edison National Historic Site. The restoration shows the film with different degrees of digital "repair" (for details, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dickson_Experimental_Sound_Film; and for the restoration, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6b0wpBTR1s).

9. The fact that the film shows two men dancing has led to its adoption as an early film of significance to gay culture, although Edison scholars are at pains to point out that it is more likely Dickson simply used workmen from the factory when he needed a "performance" to music.

10. Schools were invited to arrange parties to see *The Last Days of Pompeii* in London in 1913; and King George V and Queen Mary visited the Albert Hall in 1915 to see *Cabiria*.

11. Mayakovsky, "Relationship," 36, 37.

12. Evgeni Bauer's career as a director began in 1913 with *Twilight of a Woman's Soul*, but the rediscovery of pre-revolutionary Russian cinema's extraordinary riches did not begin until the Pordenone festival of 1989.

13. Leonid Andreyev, "Second Letter on Theatre," 37–38.

14. Mayakovsky wrote and appeared in *The Young Lady and the Hooligan*, *Creation Can't be Bought* and *Shackled by Film*, all in 1918, of which only the first survives. On Mayakovsky's complex, ultimately frustrated relationship to Soviet cinema, see Wollen: "Two Mayakovsky Scenarios with an Introduction", 122–51; and Christie, "Vladimir Mayakovsky: 1913–1927," 4–6.

15. Herkomer, *Bioscope*, 341.

16. On Herkomer and early film, see Christie, "Before the Avant-Gardes: Artists and Cinema, 1910–1914."

17. Christie, "Before the Avant-Gardes"; and Christie, "Film as a Modernist Art," 299.

18. Christie, "Painting and the Visual Arts," 497.

19. Projecting "colour music" was however undertaken by Bernard Klein in an exhibition in London in 1913. (Ward, *Oxford Companion to Music*, 209.)

20. See Christie, "Before the Avant-Gardes" and the works in the collection "Eye Music" in the 2003–2004 Exhibition "A Century of Artists' Film in Britain" at the Tate Britain.

21. Christie, "French Avant-Garde Film in the Twenties: From Specificity to Surrealism," 37–46. See also Christie, "Surrealism and Film Study Day – Part 6."

22. Bálazs, "The Future of Film," 144–45.

23. Eisenstein, "Béla Forgets the Scissors," 145–49 (italics in the original).

24. See for instance Dwight McDonald's writing for the *Partisan Review* in 1938–1939, in Taylor and Christie, *The Film Factory*, 2, 9.

25. Panofsky's paper is available in various contexts, including Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 151–169.

26. Ibid, 145.

27. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 10. The films cited, in which ordinary people could appear, are Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs about Lenin* and Joris Ivens's *Borinage*.

28. There was a short-lived attempt to form a Group Theatre offshoot, Film Group, in 1936. (Sidnell, *Dances of Death*, 171.)

29. *Modernism: Designing a New World 1914–1939*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London April–July 2006.

30. Eisenstein's essay on screen shape, "The Dynamic Square," originally given as a speech to the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences in Hollywood in 1930, appeared in print in *Close Up*, March 1931, and is collected in *Film Essays and a Lecture*, edited and translated by Jay Leyda (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 48–65. His essay on "Stereoscopic Films" was written sometime in 1947–48 and appeared in shortened form in *Notes of a Film Director* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 129–137 (based on a Soviet collection edited by Rostislav Yurenev). A fuller version of the essay appears in French in François Albera and Naum Kleiman, eds. *Eisenstein: le mouvement de l'art* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1986), 97–158.

31. Frampton, "A Lecture," 195–96.

32. McCall's work has been revived on a number of occasions and was included in *Eyes, Lies and Illusions* at the Hayward Gallery in 2004–05.

33. Frampton, *Circles of Confusion*, 123.

34. Tsivian, "What is Cinema? An Agnostic Answer," 754–776.

35. Ibid, 755.

36. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*.

37. Frampton, *Circles of Confusion,* 123.