Subjective Realities: Poetry and Film Theory

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The crossings between a provocative intervention and the acknowledgment of diversity are fundamental in order to discuss the status of cinema, seen, in a simple way, as a narrative form, so strong is the supremacy of the dominant model Hollywood has imposed since the 1910's since, convention has dictated it, the triumph of David Wark *Griffith's Birth of a Nation* (1915). In the complex relationship between literature and cinema, the preponderance of adaptation, more or less assumed, and the application of narratological models to film seem, therefore, unavoidable: motion pictures seem to aim at telling stories, creating images correspondent to previous literary sources.

The presence of lyrical poetry in film is carefully obscured, as well as the influence of montage theories, resulting from a double intervention: a creative development of technological possibilities of the image in movement; and a disruption in discourse. Much is still to be done to study the insertion of written text in film and the importance of montage as a process in the progressive discontinuity of the Modernist poem.

In a famous article, "The Montage of Film Attractions", the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, dealing with his own previous experience in the theatre, states:

> The application of the method of film attractions the comparison of facts) to cinema is even more acceptable than it is to theater. I should call cinema "the art of comparisons" because it shows not facts but conventional photographic representations (in contrast to "real action" in theatre, at least when theater is employing the techniques we approve of). For the exposition of even the simplest phenomena Cinema needs comparison (by means of consecutive, separate presentation) between the elements that constitute it: montage (in the technical, cinematic sense of the word) is fundamental to cinema, deeply grounded in the conventions of cinema and the corresponding characteristics of perception. (*apud* Lehman, 1997: 18)

Let us take the example of "To Brooklyn Bridge", proem to Hart Crane's long epic poem, in which the poet uses the internal logic of the text to theorize about the representative power of the tracking shot as a means to capture reality, in the abyss between the possibilities of lyrical discourse and the cinematic use of visual capabilities:

> How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
> The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,
>
> Shedding white rings of tumult, building high
> Over the chained bay waters Liberty –
> (...)
> I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
> With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene
> Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
> Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;

The poem clearly acknowledges both the importance of the transforming vision of an overhead shot ("The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him"), the central movement of the virtual camera, invented for the economy of the text, literally a bird's eye view, but also a godlike overview of the object, and the significance of the tracking shot ("panoramic sleights"), a

kind of exhibition of a mechanical skill, destined to produce an effect: that of joining in the mysterious space of an artificially darkened room "multitudes bent toward some flashing scene". By the late 1920's it became obvious the fundamental function of the projection on the screen, reuniting the attention and the critical approach of an ideal spectator, a kind of operative abstraction, enabled to read the cinematic text in a similar way to any other (written) text. Crane is aware of cinema as a metaphor for his own poetical effort; he understands that film becomes a platform for a compulsive reading of both poetry and film, a renewing attitude towards the art of images in movement, as a purpose in itself. >>

Extremely pertinent in this context is the inclusion, in the dialogue between *sister arts* (the concept applied to the long relationship between literature and painting is far from being obvious), the short avant-garde movie, *Manhatta* (1921) by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler (a companion of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, a painter often invoked in terms of the New Objectivist influence on the poet of *Paterson*, especially in the Thirties, when Williams reconstructs reality from flashes and photographic shots),[1] a powerful visual exercise from the cinematic illustration of carefully chosen lines by Walt Whitman, thus articulating the proem of *The Bridge* with the experimentation in a film that precedes it by several years, rephrasing the possibilities of correspondence between a poetical experience and its visual counterpart. This very first evidence of a *City Symphony* also intervenes in the growing dichotomy between documentary, as a visual poem, and film narrative.

According to Goldstein, the keyword to Crane's proem is "panoramic sleights", extensively applicable to the construction of any poem:

> By using words like, "sleights" and "never disclosed" Crane is obviously turning upon film the accusations leveled against poetry, and especially against the poetry he liked to write.

> Film is too accelerated and too various in its swiftly passing scenes to impress itself deeply upon an audience, and the proof is that the audience hastens to the theater again, rewinding cinematic shots through their imaginations but never making intimate and palpable contact with their objects of enjoyment. (...) Film, finally, is an enigma, a Futurist rush of violent motion, luring multitudes in succession, "other eyes on the same screen", but with no deep wisdom of the kind language possesses because of its coeval origins with consciousness. (Goldstein, 1994: 51-52)

Well before *The Bridge*, in "Chaplinesque", poem included in his previous collection *White Buildings*, Crane experimented on the exploration of metaphor, as a process of finding a transformation of Charlie's burlesque art into words as well as a means to invert the order of the representation: to bring the word to the core of the projected moving image, like an imaginary title card, transfigured by the power of poetical intervention, a cinematic modern correspondent to the Pierrots of his earlier poems, in the Laforguian tradition.

Even when we study the importance of the complex traffic between the narrative structure in William Faulkner or John Dos Passos and the possibilities of film contiguity, we tend to ignore the way *The Sound and the Fury* or the trilogy *U.S.A.*, besides working the plurality of points of view or the analogy with the superposition of events, in the sequence of what Dos Passos designates by *newsreels*, transform the essence of vision, according to a lyrical program that makes discursive action become a poem, a form of a visualized intervention upon the poetic.

On the other hand, in the most currently studied examples of adaptation of lyrical texts to film – Rudyard Kipling's "Gunga Din", Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven", or Lord Alfred Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" – one can discern multiple hypothesis of creative crossings that point out a certain kind of reduction to a narrative mode: George Stevens'

Gunga Din explores basic adventure in the Jewel of the Crown, India, regardless of the epic approach in Kipling's text; Michael Curtiz' *The Charge of the Light Brigade* turns into a vehicle for the cinematic chemistry of a film pair of stars, Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland; the numerous adaptations of "The Raven" basically inscribe the poem in the cinematic tradition of the horror movie.

Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931) was never a modernist, but should be considered a fundamental link in any relationship between poetry and cinematic forms. Connected with the Modern American Renaissance, he echoes some of Walt Whitman's grandiloquence and establishes a dialogue and internal rhymes with Carl Sandburg and with the late Victorians, chiefly with Algernon Swinburne. Assumedly the singer of a certain American rurality and the author of elegies for Lincoln, the great emancipator, as he often calls him, he invests in a particular form of evangelical fundamentalism. One could say that at the beginning of 1910's, the decade of the explosion of Anglo-Americans Modernisms, Lindsay has not yet found his poetics. »

Like William Carlos Williams, he always believed that fables possessed a kind of reality which was part of a national idiom, embodying a national *psyche*, as if *In the American Grain* was the book Lindsay would have liked to have written. The insuperable difference between the two poets resides in the fact that whereas Williams chooses, for his book of essays, the form of a mythical biography of America, a modern and distant description, including a pan-American notion of the continent, Lindsay prefers the preponderance of an American *ethos*, a kind of a national indoctrination, more or less restricted to a past overview of the United States as an historical and geographical space.

Once established the non-canonical role of Vachel Lindsay in the context of American poetry, his approach to the Modernist movement has to be drawn through his revolutionary concept of image: Lindsay's generic adaptation of the *hiero-*

glyph to the Romantic modes of pictorial representation tracing a curious contiguity to the use of Chinese ideograms by Ezra Pound, or to Amy Lowell's *vignettes*, for example, bring him nearer than one would suppose possible to the imagist lesson, even if his project seems preferably in tune with the imagetic concepts of the Pre-Raphaelite school or, better still, with William Blake's *illustrations*, uniting poem and drawing in a coherent ensemble.

Nevertheless, if, as a poet, Lindsay remains forever in the near margins of modernity, he becomes an accomplice of that same modernity, when he publishes, as soon as 1915, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, followed by a second revised edition, in 1922.[2] Although a tentative essay on a new (and also tentative) art form, the book reveals a lucid and premonitory view of cinema: it individualizes film from the theater; it presents Chaplin as an accomplished artist at the moment when his status was mostly that of a clown, a comical actor, reduced to the role of a mere entertainer; it understands the capital importance of David Wark Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), presenting, simultaneously, the star-system as a creation of an American pantheon and thus anticipating the godlike treatment of the figure of the star by the growing industry, and even the iconic function that *Pop Art* will coin of the star as an *object d'art*. Besides becoming one the very first exegetes and theoreticians of the new medium, Lindsay consecrates the star quality in two poems, which can be considered as the historical predecessors of the so-called cinematic poems: "Mae Marsh, Motion Picture Actress" and "Epitaph for John Bunyan, Motion Picture Comedian" (Lindsay, 1955: 56-59).

The first poem, though perpetuating a poetic diction of the past, clearly present in the opening quatrain ("The arts are old, old as the stones / from which man carved the sphinx austere"), determines the will to relate the new art to a different kind of focus: "She is a Madonna in an art / as wild and young as her sweet eyes: / A frail dew flower from this not lamp / that is today's divine surprise." The word "Madonna" invokes the les-

son of Renaissance painting, whereas "divine", connotating "surprise", stresses the godlike characteristics I just mentioned. The integration is therefore complete.

The second poem connects the representation of the actor to the evocation of Yorick, made by Hamlet, thus accomplishing the function of the epitaph, as a poetic genre, and uniting the two arts under a renewed cultural metaphor.

In chapter I, of Book II, the one added in 1922, Lindsay supplies an interesting introduction to the problem of the point of view, sketching an historical background of the aspects that singularize it, culminating in the apology for the action movie (or "photoplay of action", as he appropriately calls it), with references to Chaplin's self-transformation in *Shoulder Arms*, mixing comical caricature with the pathetic treatment of war (*Charlie*, the vagabond goes to the trenches and inscribes his recognizable gags in the economy of war horror), as well as to the graphic value of Douglas Fairbanks' acrobatics in *The Three Musketeers*. >>

More relevant than this primitive and incisive historical vision, however, becomes his effort for the creation of an incipient theory of film genres, in chapters VIII, IX e XI, of Book I, "Sculpture-in-Motion", "Painting-in-Motion" e "Architecture in Motion", respectively, finished examples of a definitive intuition of the need for a crossing of the new art with the canonical arts[3]. In the last of these, Lindsay approaches the construction of the past in simulacrum, coming to depict it as an interarts relationship, typical of Modernism, and appealing to a visualization of History, in terms of a religious ascesis, carefully dramatized in the rigorous reconstitution of decors: from Giuseppe Pastrone's *Cabiria*, the perfect model for the development of Italian Peplum, to David Wark Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia*, the remote reference to biblical blockbusters, glorious ancestors of what will become the paradigm of History as a spectacle, Hollywood industry will institute from the first version of Cecil B. de Mille' s *Ten Commandments* (1923), to his last *opus*, the remake of 1956.

In Chapter X, "Furnitures, Trappings and Inventions in Motion", Lindsay includes an additional contribution, suggesting the use of Edgar Allan Poe's gothic mood and proposing a list of adaptable literary texts. Let us consider an example of how much the relationship between cinema and literature owes to Lindsay's revolutionary approach, in a time when the problem of correspondence between the two arts was not even considered, and much less so from a theoretical perspective:

> A statue too often takes on life by having the actor abruptly substituted. The actor cannot logically take on more personality than the statue has. He can only give that personality expression in a new channel. In the realm of letters, a real transformation scene, rendered credible to the higher fancy by its slow cumulative moment, is the tale of the change of the dying Rowena to the living triumphant Ligeia in Poe's story of that name. Substitution is not the fairy-story. It is transformation, transfiguration, that is the fairy-story, be it a divine or a diabolical change. [...] We might define Fairy Splendor as furniture transfigured, for without transfiguration there is no spiritual motion of any kind. [...] Furniture is architecture and the fairy-tale picture should certainly be drawn with architectural lines. (*Idem*: 146-147)

Even accounting for a certain ingenuity in the way it is formulated, we face an essential problem for the future establishment of Film Studies, in a phase where it was far from interrogating itself: well before Jean Epstein's ontological eye or the theories of the French avant-garde, Lindsay announces film's capacity to create a fantastic dimension, centered in a novel kind of transfiguration.

In the book added in 1922, updating the state of the art , "The General Photoplay Situation in America", Lindsay describes the novelty of a film like *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1919), introducing German Expressionism as a drawing of movement, a variation on intimacy and claustrophobia, in which the line dominates the entire composition. And as a

means of establishing the contrast he counterattacks with David Wark Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), opposing it to the devil's *toy house* of Caligari, an allegorical box as a metaphor for the world, showing the universal capacity of playing nation against nation, race against race and attaining with the camera the status of a telescope, which crosses not only the infinite plains of Babylon, but also century after century. And he declares triumphantly: "Griffith is, in *Intolerance*, the ungrammatical Byron of the films, but certainly as magnificent as Byron, and since he is the first of his kind I, for one, am willing to name him with Marlowe." He also states that Griffith must have been the first, in the sequence of the attack on Babylon, to place a soul in movement against a tower also in movement (*Idem*: 10-12). »

In a radio talk, later published in a literary magazine, Sudoeste, nr 2, October, 1935, Portuguese Modernist poet (and painter), Almada Negreiros deals with the integration of film in the context of the other arts, establishing an operative correspondence: cinema is for the theater as photography is for painting, and the creation of a new dynamics in satisfying the imagination provides a kind of excitement that surpasses the simple concept of plot. Thus, cinema has revolutionized the idea of illusion and of the representation of an image, showing an interior visual quality drawn from manufactured material (Negreiros, 1971: 96-97).

If Hart Crane stresses the importance of blending image and word, if Lindsay concentrates on a primordial organization of cinematic forms, Almada Negreiros detects an internal visual poetic quality, that William Carlos Williams will explore, developing what Susan McCabe calls, in her fundamental study, "W. C. Williams and Surrealist Film: a 'Favorable Distortion'", a self-reflexive spectator, nearer to Buster Keaton's distant analysis of comic intervention than to Chaplin's pathos (as was the case in Crane's "Chaplinesque"):

> While Williams also accentuates the materiality of his poems and their "measuring eye," he continually deflates its "x-ray" ambitions. In this way, he approximates Keaton's role of fallible spectator; the comedian maintains his stony gaze, but repeatedly shows his desires rebuffed in an almost willed masochism. Like *Man with the Movie Camera, Sherlock Jr.* makes the cinematic apparatus necessary to its plot, but foregrounds the deflated scopophilia necessary to Williams's self-reflexive spectator. (...) The projectionist falls asleep, and then imagines and "projects" the detective career and the romantic relationship he desires upon the screen. (McCabe, 2005: 108)

This recognition of the projection of desire is also clearly exemplified in Williams' "The Attic Which is Desire" (1930), where, as McCabe detects, "[t]he eye, as if mediated and reflected by the 'darkened pane' of cinema, 'is transfixed' by the neon sign and follows its 'running lights'. The middle of the poem with its soda advertisement, a projection of the poet's 'parched' desires, opens the abyss discovered in the body's 'unused tent'" (*Idem*: 111).

In fact, in devious rhyme with Crane, Williams, who never actually wrote a poem on an explicit film, concentrating on ekhphrastic dialogues with painting and photography, constitutes an operative mirror for modernity, revealing creative possible exchanges with Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* or Germaine Dulac's *La Coquille and the Clergyman. Spring and All* (1923) reveals the extent of his experience on te power of montage, on the dislocation and superposition of different plans of representation, like Keaton's self reflexive *Sherlock Jr.*

If this (provoked) connection between Williams and film exists apart from a specific reference, in his poetics, on the art of the moving images, the case of H.D. is quite a different one: editor, with Kenneth McPherson and the novelist Bryher, of the journal *Close Up* (1927-1933), H. D. wrote extensively about films and cinema theory in the first two years of the publication and participated in a curious experimental film, *Borderline* (1930), starring the African-American actor, Paul Robeson. In

the introduction to *Close Up 1927-1933. Cinema and Modernism*, Anne Friedberg underlines the importance of H. D.' article on *Borderline*, as a kind of a pamphlet for the integration of this experiment in the theories of Siegfried Kracauer (and, for that matter, of Vachel Lindsay).

Let us considerer one of her articles, "Beauty" (published in the very first number of *Close Up*), the first component of a trilogy she called "The Cinema and the Classics":

> Greta Garbo, as I first saw her, gave me a clue, a new angle, and a new sense of elation. This is beauty, and this a beautiful and young woman not exaggerated in any particular, stepping, frail yet secure across a wasted city. (...) Helen who ruined Troy seems to have taken shape, but this time it is Troy by some fantastic readjustment who is about to ruin Helen. (...) And beauty, among other things is reality (...). Miss Garbo has been trained (...) to sway forward with pseudo-Lilian Gish affectation, to pose with a distinct parrot-like flair for the Gloria Swansonesque. (...) Beauty brings a a curse, a blessing, a responsibility. (...) Greta Garbo remains Greta Garbo. (Donald, 1998: 107-109)

This quote underlines not only H. D.'s comprehension of the specific strength of star-quality, detecting everlasting beauty behind a carefully composed image devised for the screen and understanding how myth can surpass the limitations of an art form, but also shows her warm response to the medium (she fights prejudice and defies stereotype, stating that Garbo and her photogeny would have marvelled Leonardo and Tintoretto), capable of rephrasing both the concept of beauty and that of classicism.

However, more important than her contribution to film criticism (or film theory) is the dialogue we are able to establish between the art of the moving picture and her own poetical work, especially what is arguably her masterpiece, *Helen in Egypt*, first published in 1961. In the poem [3] of Book Two of Part One, "Pallinode", the *female-narrator* reveals the origin of her knowl-

edge, allowing her to interpret the papyrus fragments:

> I had only seen a tattered scroll's
> dark tracing of a caravel
> with a great sun's outline,
> [...]
> I was not interested,
> I was not instructed,
> nor guessed the inner sense of the heiratic [sic],
>
> but when the bird swooped past,
> that first evening,
> I seemed to know the writing,
>
> as if God made the picture
> and matched it
> with a living hieroglyph;
> [...]
> In the dark, I must have looked
> An inked-in shadow; [...]
> (H.D., 1961: 22-23)

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The images projected in the dark, a kind of an "inked-in shadow" permit the interpretation of the archetype, through a living (moving) hieroglyph. Is this the only possible reading of the lines? Of course it is not. My purpose here is not to give answers but to leave interrogations. And this extract even allows us to connect Crane's godlike view and Lindsay's reinterpretation of the hieroglyph, through H.D.'s protocinematic vision. In the rich context of American Modernism, poets do count to inscribe discourse in a dialogic process with film language. They function as forerunners of a new revolutionary way of coping with the future; they understand how image and (written) text interact, thus integrating what seems to be strange in a unique (and unified) vision. The otherness of cinema as an art form finds its justification in the return of poets to the Republic of images drawn together in the same virtual (projected) *screen*. <<

NOTES

[1] We should compare, for better results, with a text like "Proletarian Portrait" where the poet draws a complex picture of a woman, from head to toe, looking for a metaphorical nail that afflicts her, in a photographic use of image as a pretext for a poetical process of discovery.

[2] All my quotes from the book take into account the definitive edition, since the added chapters are fundamental for a complete view of the state of cinematic art, showing an evolution of Griffith's narratives and the advent of German Expressionism.

[3] In a clear response to the adventure of the *Ballets Russes* and to other contemporary attempts, namely that of Ricciotto Canuto, to integrate the new art, the seventh art, in the established context.

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