



Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918 The Cinema (1913)

In Germany, the advent of film was met with the same type of response found in England and France. The new medium piqued the interest of the public, yet also garnered critical derision. By creating a new type of public space, film broke down social barriers. At the same time, however, it also created a sense of uneasiness amongst cultural producers and educators, who saw film as undermining literature. The tension between experimental exhilaration, popular interest, and conservative suspicion is evident in Ulrich Rauscher's piece, originally published in 1913.

I like to sit in the cinema. I am amused by this very open throwback to the secret vice of the trashy novel. All hypocrisy is banished, the audience is seated in its uncontested domain and the Association for Popular Education [*Verein für Volksbildung*] is nibbling on a meager cabbage leaf – like the caterpillar in the film about its development –, which represents this very cabbage leaf of concession to popular education between the scenes from the life of high society and its vices. All the shame that we have forced upon shoddy directors and the middle class for many years does not exist for the filmmaker. Cinema can do whatever it pleases; things that have never appeared – even in the minds of librettists – are allowed to come to life in the movies. No matter how moronic and easy to guess the fable of the cinema: as long as its fragments are connected by very exciting driving, the audience cheers. The tempo of these fictions is the third gear.

For all that, the cinema has one precondition for audience success with which it unfailingly beats out the theater: although one sees the events as on a stage, that is, no demands are placed on an absent imagination, the principle of its performance is epic, novella-like, story-spinning. It repeats, looks back, reminds the viewer, does not let a single plot element unfold in its entirety, but quickly singles out this or that important narrative point, calls attention to something with an abruptly inserted picture, and now and then provides something merely to look at, a landscape, a trip in a rowboat, a car race. Like a play, the cinema saves the expense of imagination, and yet still works with all the lazy bridges of the book, which it again surpasses in that it can significantly highlight important things a reader might pass over in a book. The cinema caters to perfect laziness and is therefore unbeatable!

Let us be paradoxical: the phrase “cinematic theater” is nonsense, because the cinema is built entirely upon epic principles, and yet nearly the best actress I have seen and studied was in the cinema. Precisely because the cinematograph has nothing in common with the theater except for outward appearance, because it lacks the omnipresence of the entire stage set, because – like a novel – it can deal only with one person at a time, around which the imagination must arrange the others: that is why this one person has the mobility, the importance of a stage star. The “ensemble” is impossible in the cinema, because its picture

becomes immediately flat if merely a single person steps forward; it has no background, the others are distorted across the back wall like frescoes. This is for the most part still the result of actual shortcomings rather than of principles. But the one main character makes a much more lasting and sharper impression than in the theater. The latter takes hold of us intellectually, artistically, socially. In the cinema we (I say: we) see only and primarily the person at particularly expressive moments, because every nuance that is shown is the extract from a thousand successive nuances, because film proceeds from highpoint to highpoint. Of course, a good movie actor provides development even in these short segments that seemed pitched to a single tone, but he must hurry, he may not prepare at length, his portrayal must be brief, assured, truthful, and convincing. The actor can use extended pantomime to prepare the word, if he is sure of its impact; the movie actor can heighten pantomime only with pantomime, which means he must hurry since all he has in reserve is only the heightening of the one tool, but not of the other.

Source: Ulrich Rauscher, "Das Kinotop-Epos" ["Kinotop-Epic"], *Die Schaubühne* 9 (1913), pp. 107-09

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