

Learning to Look, Learning to See: Visual Literacy as a Basic Skill

John E. O'Connor[1]

copyright © 1986 by John E. O'Connor (1987)

All Rights Reserved

One of the great benefits that was predicted, first with development of photography and later with motion pictures, was that the images of people and events could be captured on film and be preserved as a perfect record of history. Not oral or written descriptions tainted by the reporters' perceptions or biases, not drawings or paintings open to the interpretation of the artist, but detailed, verifiable, mirror-like images -- after 1891 moving images -- of historical personalities, places, and events, could transform the instruction of future generations. Yet, only now, as the anniversaries near 150 years for photography, 100 years for movies, and 50 years for broadcast television, are we coming to grasp fully the analytical challenges these materials present.

The tidal wave of images which began sweeping over industrial civilization near the middle of the last century has become a major determinant in society and culture. On one level, the mechanical reproducibility of images raised serious questions about the nature of art. On another level it made the visual arts broadly accessible to the general population -- now even the poor could hang beautiful pictures on the mantle.[2] Warren Susman has recently reminded us of Vachael Lindsay's characterization of America as a "hieroglyphic civilization," one in which "images-turned-icons" allow us to "literally see the fundamental tensions" in the culture.[3] These tensions are emphasized when we recognize the impact of motion pictures and television on society. Early silent film was especially important as a socializing device for new immigrants into America; it enabled them to share intimately in the American experience without the need to understand the English language. The silent image was sufficient to carry the message, and it did so very convincingly, because no one had to learn how to see -- they did so intuitively. Developments in the technology of synchronized sound, color photography, wide-screen production, and 3D, have all served to make the illusion of the cinema seem more real, more life-like, more deserving of belief as truthful objective records of people and things.

The latest developments in imaging technology present dramatic new issues and concerns. Photographs can now be "digitalized" in a computer and then be "electronically retouched" in ways that are absolutely undetectable. Cameras will soon be available which will use an electronic chip instead of film to digitally capture the information from the lens. Images will be open to easy alteration or combination in ways which look perfectly natural, opening dangerous new options to those who would manipulate or misrepresent. In a few short years the same technology will exist for film and video. It will be possible to reach back into the archives to digitize the images and voice elements of actors and public figures from the past and animate those images and sounds to fabricate wholly

new footage of imaginary events. Television news producers already use computer digitalization to "massage" images. One networks' news producers admit to having "corrected" President Reagan's posture in news photographs of the 1984 election campaign before broadcasting them, justifying their decision with the rationalization that they would do the same for Mondale.[4]

These new potentials for media manipulation are troubling, but in fact they do no more than dramatize problems that have existed since the invention of photography and film. Despite the claims of early promoters, films and photographs are not and never have been simple windows into the past. Photographs, especially great photographs, don't simply happen. They are the results of complex choices made by the photographer about scores of creative factors such as film stock, focus, lens characteristics, composition and lighting. Photographs, therefore, are never raw evidence. Each one represents a complex (if not always conscious) interpretation of its subject -- an interpretation which scholars must give thought to de-coding.

Moving pictures demand still greater care in analysis. The temptation to accept the simple truthfulness of an image is all the greater when it comes to life before our eyes. Yet, it is a serious mistake to assume that simply watching the film or video record of an event is the "next best thing to being there." To comprehend more than the most surface content of a moving-image document, one must develop at least a basic knowledge of visual language -- the elements of a shot (duration, field size, camera angle, camera movement, lighting, color, depth of field, lens characteristics, etc.) and the editing techniques (cuts of various types, rhythm and pacing) with which filmmakers communicate their ideas.

Such "visual literacy" is important for a full appreciation of the art of film and video, but in a democratic society such as ours, it is even more a crucial skill for citizenship. People who are insensitive to the ways in which visual and graphic elements in photography, film and television may influence their perceptions, become fodder for the propagandist. Visual literacy should be recognized as one of the basic skills we wish to impart to every educated person. There are numerous ways to approach it, but the close study and analysis of independently produced and avant garde films of the type common to the Black Maria Film + Video Festival is one valid way to become a more critical viewer.

It would be foolish indeed for a person with no French language skills to try to read the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen" (1789) in the original text. Yet we regularly do the very same thing with film and television. This is complicated by the fact that unlike the frustrated readers who don't know French, passive viewers unconsciously assume that they have in fact fully comprehended the visual document. (Our cliches are instructive: "seeing is believing," "pictures don't lie," "I saw it "with my own two eyes"). Untrained viewers may indeed have taken in the message that the filmmaker wanted them to, but this is never enough. Realizing that surface comprehension represents only the most

rudimentary level of meaning, a thoughtful reader would never be completely satisfied with that level of analysis of a written document. We must learn to demand the same depth of analysis in regard to moving images as well.

Early filmmakers realized that film allowed them the ability to play with time and space. Edwin S. Porter, D.W. Griffith and others pioneered in the use of editing to collapse and to expand time (drawing out a chase for dramatic effect, for example) and to cut from one location to another as an enhancement to dramatic tension (as in intercutting between chaser and chased). One of the measures of success in such creative editing was the ability to involve the audience in the drama to such an extent that they were not made conscious of the visual techniques employed. Perhaps the most interesting historical example of film editors' capacity for misrepresenting facts is the famous footage of Hitler's jig after stepping from the railway car in which he had accepted the surrender of France in 1940. It never really happened. With the help of a laboratory device called an optical printer, a team of patriotic-minded British film editors were able to take an otherwise benign image of Hitler raising his leg and turn it into a diabolical little dance -- and a powerful piece of propaganda.

It should be clear that, to the extent that questions of time, and place, and what really happened, are of concern to people, they must become fluent in the language of images. The full understanding and appreciation of a film requires, in addition to a close reading of the visual text, a sensitivity to other questions regarding (a) the background of the filmmakers and the broader cultural context in which the film was produced and (b) the ways in which viewers have received the film and invested it with meaning.

A moving-image document usually communicates through visual signs and symbols and through the mixing of those visual elements with the dialog and music on the soundtrack. The meaning of some of these may seem self-evident, but it almost always depends on an interaction between the viewer and the film. The only time that it is correct to think of film as a static object is when it is rolled up in its can on the shelf. Any effort to elucidate meaning from it demands a consideration of the spectator. In the last two decades many film scholars have sought to study the "making of meaning" in film through semiology. Borrowed from the study of linguistics, semiology (literally, the study of signs) as an approach to cinema studies springs from the recognition that decoding the meaning of visual images is at least as complex as decoding the meaning of language.

Christian Metz is generally recognized as the father of semiological analysis in cinema studies.[5] Semiologists draw upon the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who defined a sign as made up of both the signifier (some visual element) and the signified (the concept or idea that the signifier stands for). The meaning of many words is arbitrary. There is nothing inherent in the letters d-o-n-k-e-y (this six-letter word is the signifier) which makes for the meaning of a four-

legged animal with long ears (the signified). Films are different in that the image of a donkey in a film does carry with it the direct and overt denotative message: "here is a four legged animal with long ears." But it is the connotative (and often arbitrary) meaning of visual images which makes films interesting. Semiotic analysis involves considering what additional connotative meanings there might be in the presence of the donkey (either meaning consciously intended by the filmmaker or unintended meaning constructed in the mind of the viewer) and how that meaning is created. Typically, semioticians look for such meaning in analyses which they term to be either paradigmatic (how is the donkey different from other donkeys or other animals that might have been shown) or syntagmatic (how does the image of a donkey relate to the other images that precede or follow it within the film). The analysis would proceed through a careful categorization of possible denotative or connotative readings and a consideration of possible codes of meaning -- codes drawn from the broader culture, from other arts, or from the nature of the cinema.[6]

One interesting example is Luis Bunuel's short 1929 classic *Un Chien Andalou*, a wonderful artifact for the study of surrealism and the intellectual history of the 1920's. From the opening sequence which climaxes in the slicing of a woman's eye with a razor, *Un Chien Andalou* shocks its viewers with its destruction of contemporary aesthetic standards -- thus accomplishing one of the central goals of the surrealism as an artistic and intellectual movement. Many of the other images in the film have more or less obvious symbolic meaning. Consider the shot of a man who -- to sexually approach a woman -- must drag behind him symbols of the repressive forces of bourgeois culture (a grand piano), of religion (two priests), and of the essence of moral corruption (the carcasses of two dead donkeys). Here, for example, the meaning of the donkeys in the image comes partly from the composition of the shot which forces viewers to relate to the priests and the piano at the same time as the donkeys, partly from the half-decomposed state of the carcasses (a paradigmatic observation), and partly from the placement of corruption of the main character (a syntagmatic observation).

Beyond the close attention to signs and symbols, the analytical process should involve the conscious breaking down of the document (diagramming it as one would a sentence) to perceive patterns in its structure and form which also communicate meaning, but which might not be apparent at first viewing. Film scholars often turn to models for structural analysis proposed by Russian folklorist, Vladimir Propp, in his *Morphology of The Folktale* (1928) or by anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in his *Structural Anthropology*. (1972). It is helpful to outline the basic sequences of a film, dissecting it into its constituent basic parts, or trying to reconstitute the kinds of "story boards" the filmmakers may have used in trying to design and order the images they put into the film in the first place. For example, when one carefully outlines the five distinct vignettes in *Un Chien Andalou*, the filmmakers' (Bunuel collaborated with Salvador Dali in both the writing of the scenario and the actual production of the film) intentions become more clear. Rather than a straightforward logical narrative, the film

represents a conscious distortion of time and space, a mixture and interaction of dream states and reality intended to strike the viewer with the importance of the irrational.

Despite the persistent tendency of some critics to credit one auteur with the style and presentation of a production, most film and television scholars now recognize that productions are the result of complex collaborative efforts in which scores of people (producers, directors, screenwriters, cinematographers, editors, actors, publicists, etc.) may have contributed creative ideas at various stages in the process.[7] To some extent our understanding of this collaborative process has been demonstrated most clearly by historians who have concentrated on digging in the recently opened archives of some of the Hollywood studios in search of a "paper trail" to document the production process.

The social and political influences at work in the production process may be more or less explicit, but as full as possible a comprehension of them is necessary for a complete analysis of the document. Jack Warner's support for FDR and his involvement in the writing of the NRA code for the motion picture industry should be seen as one potential influence in the pro-New Deal films made by his studio in the early 1930's (*I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang* , *Wild Boys of the Road* , *Massacre* , etc). To view these films without such knowledge clearly limits the insights that can be drawn from them. Any attempt at analysis of such a social problem film as those noted above without a realization that the form became a genre in its own right in the 1930's, would surely invite a misreading.

Returning to *Un Chien Andalou* , we can see how studying the background of filmmakers and the details of the film's production can add insight to meaning. Early in the film we see a grown man riding a bicycle in what seems to be a child's costume decorated with a striped collar and cap, and a striped box hung around his neck. From Bunuel's autobiography we learn that as a boy in religious school he was required to wear a uniform not unlike the one worn by the character on the bicycle in the film, including a striped collar and cap. With this knowledge the scholar can "read" the film more deeply. There is a recurrence of stripes, in the shirt of the man with the razor (Bunuel himself), in the stripes on the costume of the man on the bicycle, in the striped dress on the woman, and the striped suit of the bather in the last vignette. As one scholar has suggested, "In the film stripes come to represent a symbol of an orderliness and regularity, like that imposed by the Jesuits in Bunuel's school, an orderliness and regularity that are no match for the desires lurking in man's subconscious." The recurrence of the stripes offers a visible regularity that cleverly parallels the film's structural disorder.[8]

Questions about reception have been most troublesome for film scholars. There are famous examples of studies making broad claims regarding direct impact. The Payne Fund Studies of the 1930s associated movie watching with juvenile

delinquency and a perceived general decline of morals in America at the time. More recently, television viewing has been tried as a defense in the courtroom, with a defendant's attorney claiming that being brainwashed by the violence on TV had led his client to be unable to distinguish right from wrong. But neither of these efforts offered convincing proof. How can one go about evaluating the impact a film or television program may have had on its audience? It is essential to seek out the published reviews of a film, but reviewers' opinions (where available) and trade newspapers such as *Variety* can offer some idea about the financial success of many productions. Yet, there is still no clinical way to measure the impact of even the most popular film on the people who may have seen it.

If a film is seen as communicating through visual symbols which derive their meaning at least partly from the viewer's cultural values or from other films the viewer has seen, then the viewer must be involved in the construction of that meaning. An older "illusionist" position argued that films created the illusion of reality, an illusion which spectators simply absorbed as passive receptacles. Today this idea is being generally replaced by a much more complex understanding of reception in which the viewer contributes significantly to the making of meaning from a film. In analysing the Classical Hollywood Cinema, David Bordwell borrows from art historian E.M. Gombrich in suggesting that filmmakers build upon traditional formal patterns for the ways of presenting things, "schemata" he calls them, which have been normalized over years of studio production. After looking at scores of films, the viewer has become experienced at interpreting these schemata and has developed a series of "mental sets" through which he processes the images presented to him. The viewing of a film, then, is not a passive experience. Rather the audience member tests each twist in the plot, each cinematic event, against the relevant mental set. If subsequent shots do not obey the schemata he turns to the next most likely alternative. Piecing together the meaning of a film represents a complex negotiation between producers and viewers.[9]

Another problem relates to the varying experiences and frames of mind that any audience brings to a moving-image experience. Different cultural experiences, different racial or class associations, different sexual or political predispositions, are certain to influence the ways in which every viewer, or at least every group of viewers distinguished by differences of class, race or sex, sees their own film.

Reception characteristics change over time as well. A 1930s audience was very different from a 1960s audience in terms of its experience with interpreting images as well as in the expectations it would apply to social and cultural situations portrayed on the screen. The cutting of the eyeball in the opening sequence of *Un Chien Andalou* retains its shock value in the 1980s, but viewers of the film today will not have the same experience viewing it as the audience of artists (including Picasso, Le Corbusier and Cocteau) who gathered in Paris in 1929 for the film's premier -- partly because of the different personal experience

and mind set they bring to the viewing. While Bunuel hid behind the screen, accompanying the film by playing interchangeably records of Argentinian tangos and Wagner's Tristan and Isolde , his pockets filled with stones to respond if necessary to an unhappy audience, the assembled artists and intellectuals fully appreciated his statement of outrage. Thereafter the film had a "successful" eight-month run in Paris, but Bunuel was dismayed that the general audiences and popular critics did not understand him. They classed *Un Chien Andalou* as another production of the French avant-garde and praised it for its novelty, but they missed Bunuel's and Dali's surrealist message. "The film was never meant to please, but to offend. Here was the surrealists' hostility, not only toward societal standards, but toward the concern for technical innovation rather than spiritual values displayed in the avant-garde cinema of the 1920's" In the wake of the carnage of World War I, Bunuel and other intellectuals of the period screamed out at the bankruptcy of traditional nineteenth-century bourgeois values. He demanded that his film be understood in that context. "He demanded that we grasp the absurdity of being horrified more by a sliced eyeball than by the 13 million lives lost during the war years." [10]

The point here is not to suggest that we should all be reading Christian Metz or doing structural analyses of the TV commercials we see every day (as interesting as such studies might be). If the average film viewers, and the 67% of the population who admit to pollsters that they get most of their news information from TV news, were to fully recognize that the images in film and video are not transparent and objective records of reality, it would be an important start toward a visually literate society.

Footnotes

1. John E. O'Connor is Professor of History at New Jersey Institute of Technology and editor of the journal *Film & History*. He has written and edited several books on the historical analysis of film and television. The thoughts presented here have developed out of The American Historical Association's "The Historian and the Moving-Image" project, directed by O'Connor and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This material will appear in slightly altered form in the book which is to emerge from that larger project.

1.

See, for example, Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in Hanah Arendt, editor, *Illuminations*, (New York; Harcourt, Brace & World), pp. 219-253; and *Intellectual History; The Half-Tone Effect*, in John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, Editors, *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 196-211.

2.

Culture as History (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. xvii.

3.

See, for example, Steward Brand, Kevin Kelly and Jay Kinney, "Digital Retouching: The End of Photography as Evidence of Anything, " *Whole Earth Review*, July, 1985; and Roger Armburst, "Computer Manipulation of the News, " *Computer Pictures*, January/ February 1985.

4.

Metz's *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York, 1974) is one of the central works, as are Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (N.Y.: Hill & Wang, 1972) and Umberto Eco *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.)

5.

Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 1969) provides a beginning introduction to semiotic analysis for non-specialists. Another accessible survey is in Arthur Asa Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques* (Sage Publications: Beverly Hills, 1972).

6.

See, for example, Donald Chase, ed., *Filmmaking: The Collaborative Art* (Boston, 1975)

7.

Doris Sher, "Luis Bunuel and the Meaning of *Un Chien Andalou* ," forthcoming in *Film & History* .

8.

David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 7-9.

9.

Doris Sher, "Luis Bunuel and the Meaning of *Un Chien Andalou* ."