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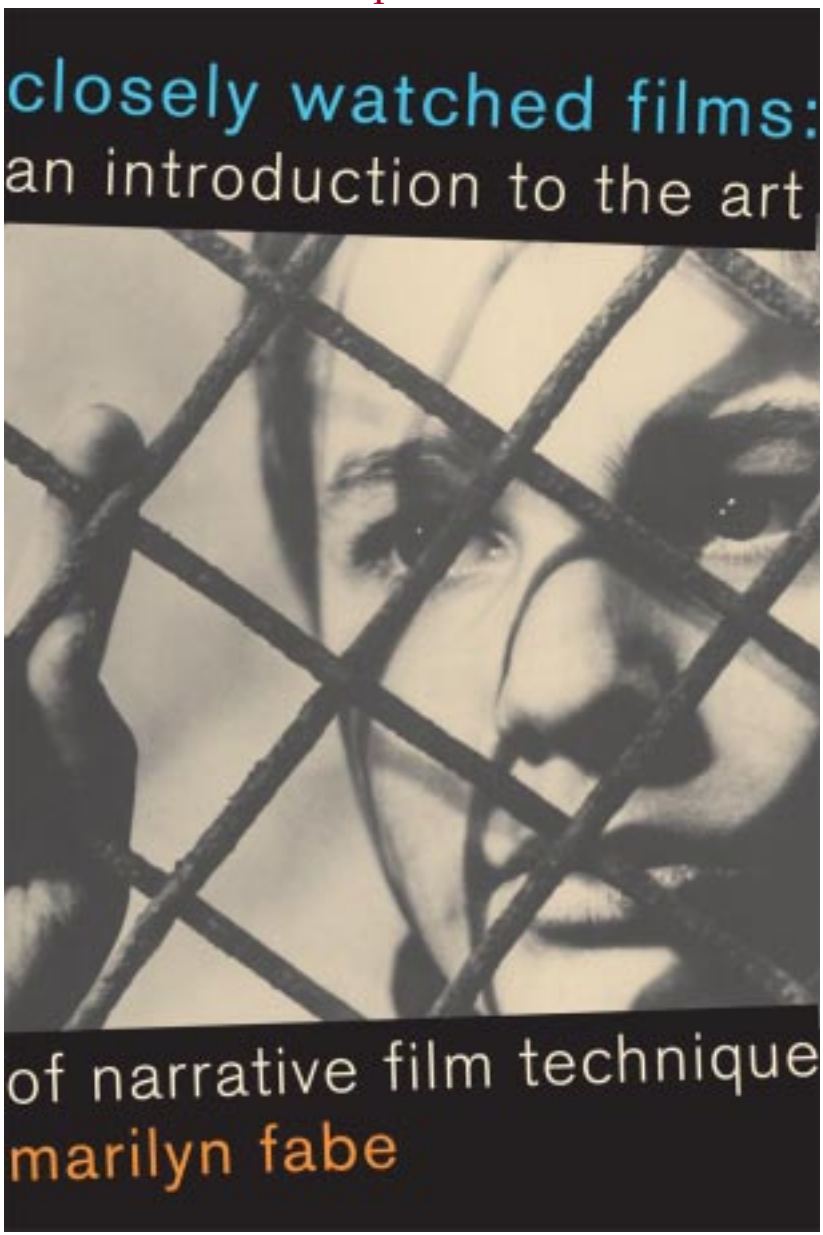

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3

Expressionism and Realism in Film Form

F.W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* and Charles Chaplin's *The Adventurer*

EXPRESSIONISM AND FILM ART: F. W. MURNAU

At the same time that Eisenstein was experimenting with the capacity of editing or montage to give heightened emotional and political impact to his filmed narratives, the German filmmaker F. W. Murnau was concentrating on the potentials of the enframed image, the way specific photographic effects could add psychological expressiveness to the profilmic action. (As discussed in chapter 1, the term *profilmic* refers to the characters, settings, props and other aspects of the film's mise-en-scène before they are captured or enframed on celluloid.) Like many of his contemporaries working in the German film industry in the 1910s and 1920s, Murnau was influenced by Expressionism, the art movement that dominated German painting, literature, theatrical production and acting in the early twentieth century.[1]

In *The Haunted Screen,* a book on German Expressionism in the cinema, Lotte Eisner draws upon the writings of Kasimir Edschmid to define the essence of Expressionism in art:

> Expressionism, Edschmid declared, is a reaction against the atom-splitting of Impressionism, which reflects the iridescent ambiguities, disquieting diversity, and ephemeral hues of nature. At the same time Expressionism sets itself against Naturalism with its mania for recording mere facts, and its

Figure 12. The objects of the natural world have become threatening, unnatural. (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* 1920, Film Preservation Associates.)

> paltry aim of photographing nature or daily life. The world is there for all to see; it would be absurd to reproduce it purely and simply as it is.[2]

The Expressionist artists sought to abstract, distort, and hence transcend the look of everyday reality in order to represent the world—not objectively, but as the artist sees or experiences it. Given the historical context out of which German expressionism emerged—the horrible carnage of World War I, Germany's humiliating defeat, the social instability of the Weimar Republic, and spiraling inflation—it is not surprising that many German artists of this period imbued their vision of the world with feelings of angst, doom, and paranoia.

Cinema's capacity to mechanically reproduce images of the physical world—its ability to faithfully record "mere facts"—might seem to disqualify it as a medium for Expressionism. But German filmmakers nevertheless managed to incorporate the visual motifs and themes of Expressionism into their works. Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) accomplished this goal by photographing its action against a background of recognizably painted Expressionist sets that weirdly distort

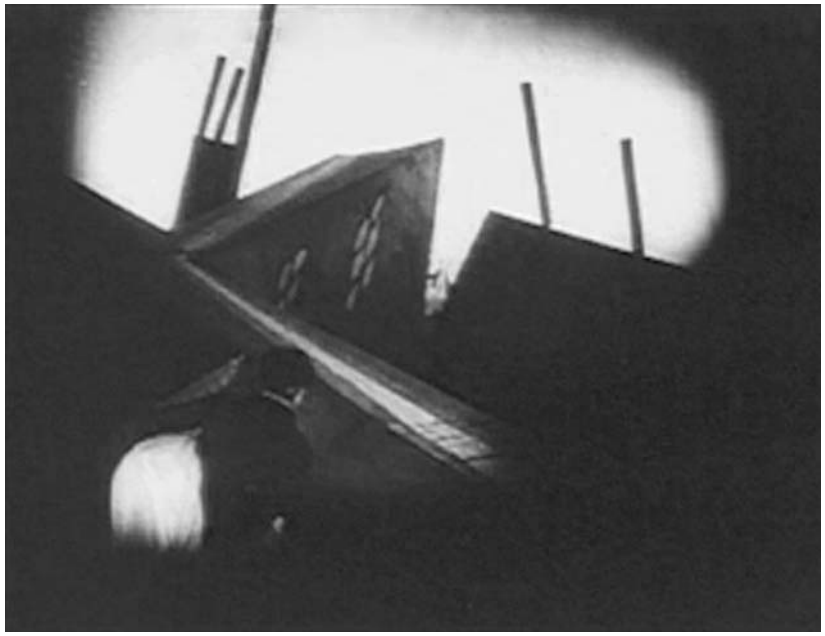

Figure 13. Buildings lean, bend, or rear themselves straight up, against the usual lines. The everyday artifacts that form the world we make to shelter and comfort us have been transformed into the unstable, unbalanced, unsound. (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* 1920, Film Preservation Associates.)

the natural world into forms that externalize the tortured inner world of the film's disturbed narrator. The artists who designed the sets for *Caligari* (Hermann Warm, Walter Reimann, and Walter Röhrig) were practicing expressionist artists and involved with the publication of the magazine *Der Sturm,* which was dedicated to disseminating Expressionist art.

In describing the sets of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* William Nestrick conveys the visual impact of the stylized sets by focusing on their radical transformation of the natural and man-made world (figures 12 and 13).

> In the foreground and background of the shots of Caligari's tent, there are short trees or bushes; similar ones appear in the graveyard, around the bridge in the chase after Cesare, and about the path where Cesare finally collapses. They are recognizable representations of nature, but they have become unnatural. They violate principles of growth; on the hillside, they do not grow in the position in which trees usually grow. Most are denuded of leaves, and where they have leaves, the leaves look like spears. They threaten, they point, they seem to cut even as they themselves are cut . . .

> Something has also happened to the architectural world. Buildings lean, bend, or rear themselves straight up (against the usual lines). Everywhere the right angle is rejected, the very angle that, in the simplest structures, makes for stability, balance, soundness. . . . Everyday artifacts, the world we make to shelter and comfort us, have been transformed into the unstable, unbalanced, unsound.[3]

For Murnau, *Caligari* was both an inspiration and a dead end as a model for cinematic art. It was an inspiration because it abandoned the slavish imitation of a real, objectively perceived world to present a subjective vision. At the end of the film, which is narrated as an extended flashback, it is revealed that the distorted look of the world was a function of the narrator's mentally unbalanced mind. *Caligari* was a dead end because it projected the character's vision primarily through the film's mise-en-scène, that is, its two-dimensional painted sets, a means borrowed from the theater. Hence, it did not fully exploit the expressive possibilities inherent in the cinematic medium.

EXPRESSIONIST TECHNIQUES IN *THE LAST LAUGH*

In his groundbreaking film *The Last Laugh (Der letzte Mann)* (1924), Murnau achieved expressionistic distortions of the cinematic world not by photographing painted expressionist sets, but by capitalizing on the expressive capacities of the cinematic apparatus: extreme camera angles, special optical effects, and exuberant camera movements.[4] The film vividly portrays the emotional deterioration of an aging doorman (Emil Jannings) at a luxury hotel in a big city when he is demoted from his proud station at the entrance to the hotel to the position of lavatory attendant in the basement below. His downfall comes when the manager of the hotel observes that he is no longer equal to the task of lifting a patron's heavy trunk. The change is tragic for the old man because his self-esteem derives from the impressive doorman's uniform he wears, which makes him the idol of his working-class neighbors. Without his uniform, he becomes the object of mockery and scorn. In *The Last Laugh,* the doorman moves through a convincingly real mise-en-scène (in contrast to the obviously artificial sets of *Caligari*). However, the film is richly emotionally expressive because of the way Murnau's photographic techniques (his use of close-ups, camera angles, moving cameras, superimpositions, distorting lenses—all the transformative effects of the enframed image) convey the doorman's inner states of mind.[5]

Murnau was one of the first filmmakers to exploit systematically the

Figure 14. Murnau films Jannings in close-ups and from slightly below, emphasizing his feelings of pride and self-importance. (*The Last Laugh,* 1924, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Stiftung.)

expressive possibilities of camera angle. He realized that, in general, if the subject is seen from a high angle (that is, the camera is shooting from above and thus down at the subject) the character will appear humbled or diminished. If, on the contrary, the subject is seen from below (that is, the camera is looking up at the subject), the character will appear imposing and confident. At the beginning of the film, before he is demoted from his position of doorman, Murnau films Jannings in close-ups and slightly from below, emphasizing his feelings of pride and self-importance. (See figure 14.) When he is obliged to unload a heavy trunk from a carriage, we see him looking up at the intimidating object. Murnau photographs him from a high angle (the camera shooting down at him) to emphasize his feelings of diminishment. (See figure 15.) Then we see the trunk, from his point of view. Shot from a low angle, it seems all the more burdensome. Finally the camera shoots down at the doorman to emphasize his struggle to lift it off the carriage.

In order to project the inner feelings of the doorman, Murnau often presents his world not as it is but as he sees it, distorted by his anxious

Figure 15. Jannings photographed in long shot from a high angle, looking up at an intimidating heavy trunk. The angle and shot type emphasize his feeling of diminishment. (*The Last Laugh,* 1924, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Stiftung.)

mental state. On his way home, after he has lost his job as a doorman, a building sways precariously as if it is about to fall on him and crush him. In this mind's-eye image Murnau has found a concise visual means to express the inner devastation of a man who is crushed by the loss of his job and with it, his status in the world. So as not to lose his status with his neighbors, he steals his old uniform from the hotel and continues to wear it home from work. As he is about to leave for work in the morning wearing his stolen uniform, he encounters a woman on the landing outside his door. She gazes at him admiringly. But when we see her face from the doorman's point of view, it appears grotesquely stretched out and elongated, like a face in a distorting fun-house mirror. This distorted image conveys the doorman's fear of his neighbor. Vulnerable because of the loss of his job, he at last begins to penetrate the falseness of his neighbor's adulation to see the awful truth. Her adoring manner is based not on real affection but on her inflated conception of his importance. The grotesquely distorted image of the woman's fawning posture makes her adoration seem strangely menacing, as if hinting

Figure 16. From the doorman's point of view, the neighbor woman's face is grotesquely stretched out and elongated, conveying the doorman's fear of her wrath once she finds out that he is a false idol. (*The Last Laugh,* 1924, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Stiftung.)

at the rage and contempt she will feel when she discovers he is a false idol. (See figure 16.)

Murnau, in collaboration with his cameraman Karl Freund and his screenwriter Carl Mayer, added a new dimension to the expressiveness of cinema by "unchaining" the camera. When *The Last Laugh* was made, most directors shot their actions with a static camera, employing camera movement only to make action scenes more exciting. In Griffith's last-minute rescues, for example, a moving camera was sometimes mounted on a truck which drove alongside or in front of the rescue vehicle (horses, trains, carriages, etc.) to lend kinetic dynamism to the shot. Eisenstein mounted a camera on tracks that extended the length of the Odessa Steps so that he could intensify the effect of the spectacle of the fleeing citizens by following their movement down the stairs with his camera.

In *The Last Laugh*, the camera is in motion from the beginning to the end of the film, often adding a subtle psychological dimension to the action. The film begins with a stunning moving camera shot: The camera descends in an elevator, and when the door to the lift opens, it heads out

the door through a vast, luxurious hotel lobby, taking the spectator along for the ride. (This shot was obtained by strapping the camera on the chest of the cameraman, who then rode out into the lobby on a bicycle.) The camera then takes us through a revolving door to the front of the hotel where the doorman is on duty. Here the camera movement is more than just a virtuoso display of film technique. The dynamic movement through the hotel lobby emphasizes the spaciousness of the hotel and thereby magnifies our sense of its grandeur. When the camera movement finally ends on the doorman, we understand in a flash the grandiose self-importance he absorbs from his association with such a place. Robert Herlth, one of the set designers for *The Last Laugh*, writes: "we had not 'unchained' the camera for merely technical reasons. On the contrary, we had found a new and more exact way of isolating the image, and of intensifying dramatic incident."[6]

A subtle example of the use of the moving camera to intensify a dramatic incident occurs when the doorman returns to work the day after losing his job but still wearing his old uniform. He has gotten drunk at the wedding party of his niece the night before and has apparently forgotten about his demotion to bathroom attendant. As he approaches the hotel, we see through his point of view an image of the doorman who has replaced him standing at his post in front of the hotel. The shot begins as a long shot of the new doorman and is slightly out of focus. The camera then begins to move in closer and closer to the new man until the lens is sharply focused on the face of the doorman's replacement. The slow camera movement and the gradual sharpening of the image perfectly convey the old doorman's reluctant but dawning recognition that he has been supplanted.

When another neighbor woman[7] discovers the doorman at his lowly new post as bathroom attendant, the moment is given striking dramatic emphasis by a camera movement. We see a shot of the old man taken from outside the bathroom as he timidly opens the lavatory door and peers out to determine who has come to see him. At this point there is a POV shot of the neighbor woman (who has come to bring him lunch) looking back at him. As she opens her mouth to scream the camera lunges toward her until we see her face in an extreme close-up, framing only her eyes and nose. In contrast to the shot described above, in which the camera movement signifies a slow dawning of realization, here the lunge of the camera re-creates the feeling of an unexpected shock—both the woman's shock at seeing her idol so fallen and the ex-doorman's shock at being discovered.

Murnau also uses the moving camera to transfer viscerally to the viewer the doorman's drunken dizziness on the morning after the wedding party. As he sits down in a chair, he begins to start reeling through space. This effect was achieved by placing Jannings on a turntable device that swung back and forth, and then following his movement with the camera. Then we see a POV shot of the room spinning around. Here the cameraman Freund staggered about the room like a drunken man with the camera affixed to his chest. In both shots, the drunken man's vertigo is transferred onto the viewer.

Shortly thereafter, the ex-doorman falls asleep and dreams he still has his old job at the hotel. In his dream he effortlessly lifts an enormous trunk from the top of a hearselike coach and parades with it into the hotel lobby. To the enthusiastic applause of hotel staff and patrons, he repeatedly tosses the trunk into the air and catches it with one hand. The dream is obviously a wish-fulfilling denial of reality. The previous day he had desperately tried to convince the manager of the hotel that he still had the strength to be a doorman by lifting a heavy trunk in the manager's office. The trunk overpowered him, sealing his fate as a lavatory attendant.

Camera movement plays a large part in drawing the audience into the experience of the old man's drunken dream. The camera swishes erratically over the faces of the hotel patrons applauding the old man's prowess with the trunk. At first this shot seems to be a subjective shot: that is, the admiring faces of the patrons are apparently seen from the point of view of the dreamer. But, suddenly, the camera pulls back to capture the dreamer objectively. Here the shift from a subjective to an objective perspective within one shot cinematically re-creates the experience common in dreams that one is simultaneously experiencing an event and watching oneself having the experience. The unpleasant tilting and jiggling of the camera, combined with the manic grandiosity of the content of the dream, has an irritating and disquieting effect, reminding the viewer that the doorman's glorious comeback is only a drunken fantasy.

The dream sequence described above is further enhanced by another special photographic effect, the use of multiple superimposed images to approximate the common dream phenomenon that Freud referred to as "condensation," the merging of two separate people or places into one composite image. Here Murnau superimposes images of the hotel dining room upon images of the doorman's tenement neighborhood. (See figure 17.) The fusion of these separate places into one space underlines the fact that the old man's prestige at work is vital to his well-being at home.

As the dream fades out, a momentary superimposition of dream im-

Figure 17. Multiple superimposed images approximate the common dream phenomenon Freud referred to as "condensation." Here, images of the hotel dining room merge with images of the doorman's tenement neighborhood. (*The Last Laugh,* 1924, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Stiftung.)

ages over a shot of the old man dozing visually conveys the semiconscious state between sleep and waking, when the aura of the dream persists even as the real world intrudes. These images abruptly disappear when the neighbor woman who subsequently discovers the doorman at work enters his room and shuts the window, suggesting that the sound of her action finally arouses him from sleep. This is one of many ways in which Murnau uses a visual device to bring sound to the silent medium of film. So adept was Murnau at conveying everything that needed to be conveyed through images—even sounds—that he was able to construct an utterly compelling ninety-minute story about the mental deterioration of an old man using only one written title.[8]

EXPRESSIVE MISE-EN-SCÈNE IN *THE LAST LAUGH*

While I have been primarily emphasizing the way Murnau uses photographic effects, that is, cinema-specific means, to project the subjectivity

Figure 18. The grandeur of the city created through special effects—the use of model shots and forced perspective. (*The Last Laugh,* 1924, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Stiftung.)

of his character, no assessment of the visual power of *The Last Laugh* would be complete without a discussion of the film's mise-en-scène. The look of *The Last Laugh* set a new standard of lighting and art design for film, and is still impressive today. Especially striking is the design of the grand hotel situated in the center of a large bustling city. Murnau had to make the hotel especially grand because the grandeur of the hotel and the city had to be commensurate with the size of the old man's over-inflated ego. So glorious are the hotel and city in *The Last Laugh* that shortly after the film appeared in America Murnau received a telegram from someone in Hollywood who deplored the fact that America had no city to compare with the grandeur of the one in *The Last Laugh*.[9] Yet the magnificent city and hotel were the creation of set designers and everything was constructed on the back lot of the studio. The splendor of the city was created through special effects—the use of model shots and forced perspectives. In her book on Murnau, Eisner includes an account by one of the set designers, Robert Herlth, to explain how it was done (see figure 18).

> The view, or rather "background," seen from the revolving [hotel] door was managed by means of a perspective shot of a sloping street 15 metres high in the foreground diminishing to 5 in the "distance." The street ran between model sky scrapers as much as 17 metres high. . . . To make the "perspective" work we had big buses and Mercedes cars in the foreground; in the middle ground middle sized cars; and in the background small ones, with behind them again children's toy cars. Farthest away of all, in front of the shops, we had crowds of "people" cut out and painted and moved across the screen on a conveyor belt.[10]

The look of the city is also enhanced by Murnau's carefully controlled, non-naturalistic use of light, which conveys subtle nuances of *Stimmung*, or mood, that coincide with the doorman's mental state throughout the film. The use of the expressive, unchained camera and special photographic effects, combined with stunning sets and lighting techniques, all in the service of telling a complex story focusing on interior feelings rather than exterior actions, made *The Last Laugh* seem to many film theorists and critics of the time the ultimate example of film as high art, equal or superior in its evocative power to drama and literature.

THE ARTFUL ARTLESSNESS OF CHARLES CHAPLIN AND ANDRÉ BAZIN'S REALIST AESTHETIC

Charles Chaplin was a very different kind of director from F. W. Murnau or Sergei Eisenstein, and his films make an instructive contrast with theirs. In the twelve films Chaplin made for the Mutual Film Corporation between 1916 and 1917, which include *The Rink*, *Easy Street*, *The Adventurer*, *The Pawnshop*, and *One A.M.*, there are little or no photographic or editing pyrotechnics. The majority of the shots are static long shots or medium shots with only occasional close-ups for dramatic emphasis. The editing is mostly invisible, because the shots are linked together to convey the narrative smoothly, not to make a comment, create a striking visual contrast, or to distort real time and space for dramatic effect. The lighting is universally high key,[11] and the camera, if it moves at all, usually does so just slightly, to reframe the action. There are no expressive camera angles or camera movements, no superimposition of images, no distorting optical effects, nor any fancy forced-perspective sets. Yet, despite their lack of obviously artful cinematic techniques, these early films are considered by many critics to be minor masterpieces. They are watched today with as much pleasure as when they first appeared.

The French film theorist André Bazin revolutionized film theory in the

1940s and 1950s in a series of essays that tried to account theoretically for the power of filmmakers like Chaplin, whose films do not employ complicated film techniques but are nevertheless powerful and compelling to watch. Bazin referred to these directors as "realists."[12] A theory of film aesthetics, Bazin believed, must take into account the uncanny realism of the photographic image, the basic unit of cinematography. In an essay entitled "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," which first appeared in 1945, Bazin claims that the photographic image is more like a thumbprint or a death mask than a statue or a painting, because the object captured by the camera's lens literally leaves its imprint on the work of art. That is, the impression on the celluloid emulsion is the direct effect of light beams that bounced off the subject when the shutter of the camera was opened. According to Bazin, photography finally satisfies the human demand, based on an unconscious desire for immortality, for a process which can permanently fix, order, and possess the natural world by literally capturing its image through an impersonal, scientific process. Rather than deploring photography's ability to mechanically reproduce images of the world, or seeing this capacity as a limitation to be overcome by the artist, Bazin celebrates it: "All the arts depend on the presence of man," Bazin proclaims, "Only photography derives an advantage from his absence."[13]

Bazin was arguing against the conception of film art put forth by many prominent film aestheticians. Rudolph Arnheim, for example, in his influential book *Film as Art,* first published in 1933, argues that the very differences between the film image and the everyday ways we see things "provide film with its artistic resources."[14] Arnheim believes that unless the film image is molded and distorted for expressive effect by means unique and specific to the cinematic apparatus, film will be seen as a slavish reproducer of reality, or worse, degenerate into an unimaginatively photographed theater. In contrast, Bazin saw the camera's ability to mechanically capture images of the world as a huge advantage, and put its capacity to capture and record the world realistically at the center of his film aesthetics rather than considering it as a limitation to be overcome.[15]

Bazin does not claim that photography is all science and no art. Obviously someone has to choose an image and frame it. But, because the recording or capturing of the photographic image is so complete and total, in contrast to the sloppy, partial, biased way in which the human eye processes the world, photography makes it possible for reality to reveal itself in an extraordinarily vivid and profound new way. Bazin writes:

"Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love."[16] The imposition of "artistic" cinematic techniques, according to Bazin, got in the way of what was truly special about the film medium: the camera's unprecedented ability simply to observe.

Bazin felt filmmakers associated with the Soviet school of montage, for all their clever and ingenious experiments with film editing, perverted film art, because rather than allowing the medium its unique revelatory dimension, their studied shot juxtapositions forced the photographed images to take on a predigested significance. Bazin goes so far as to argue that there is a fascist dimension to montage style because, like a dictator, the director controls everything the viewer sees by chopping up the world into fragments and recombining them in a tendentious way.

Arguing against those Soviet filmmakers who believed that editing is the foundation of film art, Bazin cites examples in which heavy editing or montage would simply be the wrong approach to certain subject matters. He points to Robert Flaherty's documentary on Eskimo culture, *Nanook of the North* (1922), in which Nanook harpoons a seal. To present a powerful and convincing record of this event, Bazin argues, Flaherty had to show Nanook and the seal together, in the same frame, during the entire act of harpooning, in one long take, without editing. If he had broken the scene down into numerous short shots culminating when Nanook drags the harpooned seal out of the water, the scene would lack credibility. We might even suspect that the event was faked. By avoiding excessive editing, and hence capturing the entire action of Nanook's struggle to harpoon the seal in long takes, Flaherty not only makes the scene more believable, he presents the action in real time, thereby creating a dramatic tension that fancy editing would destroy. Bazin writes: "Montage could suggest the time involved. Flaherty however confines himself to showing the actual waiting period; the length of the hunt is the very substance of the image, its true object. Thus in the film this episode requires one set-up."[17]

Bazin, to be sure, did not advocate that films be shot using no techniques at all. He did not want cinema to return to the days before Griffith established the conventions of film as a narrative art. He was aware that the close-up was needed to emphasize what otherwise would not be noticed, and that crosscutting heightened the drama of the story. He simply called into question the belief that fancy montage and manipulation

of the film image through dramatic lighting, acute camera angles, distorting lenses, superimpositions, and flamboyant camera movements were the *only* ways to achieve film art. He suggested that a more self-effacing directorial style, in which the art seems—but not necessarily is—artless, results in a work that is truer to the intrinsic qualities of the film medium.

Bazin favored films created in what has come to be called realist style. Here, I want to emphasize, I am talking about formal realism, the *style* in which the film is shot, as opposed to the realism of the content of the images. *The Battleship Potemkin,* for example, is considered a realist film due to its location shooting and use of nonprofessional actors, but in style it is an expressionist film (as I use the term expressionist in this book) because of the expressive function of its complicated montage. In a realist film the emotional content comes primarily from the profilmic event. In an expressionist film the emotion is conveyed primarily through the director's artful use of film techniques.

Films shot in the realist style favor long takes that sometimes last up to and over sixty seconds, in contrast to the montage style of directors such as Eisenstein, Vertov, and Pudovkin in the 1920s, whose shots average from three to four seconds each and often last less than a fraction of a second. Realist films use lots of camera movements (panning, tracking, reframing), not to create the dramatic and expressive effects of the German expressionist's "unchained camera," but simply to preserve the spatial and temporal unity of a scene so that the actors' performances could been seen intact. They also feature depth-of-focus photography, which frees the viewer's attention to move between the foreground, middle ground, and background of a shot, without forcing any particular object upon the viewer's attention. As mentioned above, realist films strive for invisible editing, which moves the narrative forward through smooth, unobtrusive match cuts, not cuts that deliberately call attention to themselves because their juxtaposition makes some kind of political point or creates an impact through graphic conflict. They use close-ups and extreme close-ups sparingly, preferring to employ the medium shot. In realist compositions, objects spill over the edges of the frame, calling attention to offscreen space. Realist directors conceive of the frame as a window that only temporarily hides a part of the world, as opposed to a picture frame whose lines demarcate the limits of a carefully composed, patently artistic composition.

A realist aesthetic of film art goes a long way toward explaining the appeal of Chaplin's films, which have many of the traits associated with realist style. Since Chaplin was a great comic actor, and his performance

is the main attraction in his films, Chaplin wanted spectators to focus on him and his comic actions, not on the artistic capacity of the film medium. Much of the art of a Chaplin film resides in the careful shaping and structuring of the profilmic event, the complex comic actions that Chaplin devised and performed for the camera to record. If Chaplin's performances were presented in montage style, in a series of short shots, we would lose all appreciation for his extraordinary comic timing, which must be seen in long, uninterrupted shots to be fully appreciated.

An outstanding feature of Chaplin's silent comedies is that they can be enjoyed over and over (and I know this is true because I teach his films repeatedly) without becoming stale or boring. This is owing mostly to the brilliance of Chaplin's comic ideas and his comic choreography. Watching him move offers some of the same pleasure we receive from ballet. But the realist style in which Chaplin's films are photographed contributes to their pleasure as well. Because so much of the action is captured in long, medium, or full shot, in long takes, the grace and precision of Chaplin's comic choreography remains intact. So much is going on within every shot, moreover, that there is always something new for the spectator to observe in subsequent screenings.

REALIST TECHNIQUE IN CHARLES CHAPLIN'S *THE ADVENTURER*

A close look at one shot in Chaplin's popular short film *The Adventurer* (1917) demonstrates the virtues of a self-effacing realist style. The shot under analysis is photographed in one long take that lasts forty-seven seconds with no cuts. In *The Adventurer* Chaplin plays an escaped convict (whom I will subsequently refer to as Charlie). After escaping prison guards by jumping into the ocean and swimming away, Charlie rescues a lovely young girl (Edna Purviance), her mother (Marta Golden), and the girl's oversized, jealous bully of a suitor (Eric Campbell) from drowning. The shot under analysis occurs just after Purviance, who has asked her rescuer to be a guest in her house, invites him out onto the veranda to meet her party guests. The shot begins with her introducing Charlie to some ladies. Rather than bowing, Charlie curtsies,[18] first with one leg behind him and then the other. The girl then formally introduces him to Campbell. Charlie politely offers to shake hands, but Campbell puts his hands behind him and turns his back on Charlie with disdain. Then, as Charlie politely bows to the girl, he jabs his lit cigar into Campbell's hand. Campbell lets out a howl and Charlie looks surprised, giving the girl a puzzled look, as if to say, "What's with him?" As Charlie converses with

the girl, Campbell retaliates by giving Charlie a back-kick. Charlie deftly diverts the girl's attention and back-kicks back. This is apparently so satisfying that Charlie does it again. At this moment the girl's mother enters the space between Charlie and Campbell. Campbell, whose back is still turned and who assumes that Charlie (who has just kicked him twice) is still there, returns a particularly vicious kick, which of course lands on the mother's rear end just as she bows deeply in her greeting to Charlie. She is outraged. The bully is mortified. Chaplin looks scandalized. Eyeing Campbell with a look of moral disapproval, he escorts the girl into the house. The mother fearfully backs away from the bully as he bows deeply to apologize, giving Charlie a perfect target for one last kick. In this sequence, we get the double pleasure of seeing the revered mother (an archetypal mother-in-law figure) unceremoniously kicked in the rear and seeing Charlie's rival caught in an embarrassing act of aggression against the mother of the girl he is courting. Chaplin also deliciously turns a convention of polite society (bowing) into an opportunity for aggression. Campbell's extended rear end in the last moment of the scene seems to be asking for it.

The comic success of this sequence is enhanced because we see it in one unbroken take. It is amusing to see all the kicking going on while the other guests on the veranda are engaged in polite party conversation and somehow do not seem to notice. (See figure 19.) These actions could not have been conveyed as convincingly if the action had been heavily edited. We need to see the sequence in its entirety to believe it. When the mother moves into Charlie's space, the rhythm of the previous kicks sets up the expectation that she will receive the kick that Charlie has coming, an expectation which is all the more satisfying when it occurs because it is expected. The split-second timing of the mother's movement is essential to the comic effect of the action which, again, must occur in real time (as opposed to the artificial time created through editing) in order to be as convincing and funny as it is.

It is much more difficult to sustain a complicated comic action that goes on for 47 seconds than it is to divide the action up into units of short shots and edit the shots together. Because Chaplin for the most part (and I will discuss some of the exceptions later) refused to rely on editing or camera tricks in the creation of his comic actions, it often took him retake after retake to get everything to go exactly right. The cost of these retakes added up: *The Adventurer* and certain other of his Mutual films cost, on average, $100,000 each to make. At the time they were made, this was an extraordinary amount of money for a two-reeler (a

Figure 19. The comic success of this sequence is enhanced by our seeing it in long shot and in one unbroken take. (*The Adventurer,* 1917, Film Preservation Associates.)

film lasting about twenty minutes), especially when we recall that D. W. Griffith had shot his three-hour blockbuster epic *The Birth of a Nation* just two years earlier for only $115,000. Chaplin's films were so expensive to make because achieving the right effect in long unbroken shots cost far more than achieving effects through fancy editing.[19]

THE ROLE OF THE FILM MEDIUM IN CHAPLIN'S "REALIST" FILM ART

Although Chaplin's films look artless in the sense that they do not call attention to the film medium, the film medium does in fact play a large role in the success of Chaplin's comic art. Chaplin, Bazin observes, was a clown of great genius, as evident from his fame as a music-hall performer, but he needed the medium of the cinema to "free comedy completely from the limits of space and time imposed by the stage or the circus arena."[20]

In order to appreciate the role of the cinematic medium in the success of Chaplin's films we need only consider why Chaplin's filmed performances would not work equally well if performed on the stage. First

and most obviously, the film medium permits Chaplin's performances to be seen from the perfect angle and in a much more vivid, intimate way than if we were to see him acting in the theater. The medium shots and medium-close shots which Chaplin frequently employs allow us to see subtle facial expressions that even people in the first row at a theater might miss. The cinematic medium also allowed Chaplin to exercise his talents for comic improvisation in a vastly larger arena than the stage could offer. Because the camera can go anywhere, all the world became his stage. Thus in the first sequence of *The Adventurer*, in which Charlie is hunted by prison guards, Chaplin exploits the seaside caves and cliffs as spectacular "settings" for chase sequences. Charlie avoids capture by running up and down steep cliffs, kicking prison guards over the edges of cliffs, and disappearing into seaside caves. Even the ocean is enlisted for a laugh when a giant wave helps him escape by engulfing the boat of his pursuers.

Although the appeal of Chaplin's films derives from the appeal of Chaplin's persona and the brilliant comic performances of his supporting cast, the gags and comic sequences are all the more amusing because they occur within a narrative context which heightens their comic effects. Chaplin's films gain immeasurably from the use of techniques Griffith pioneered to heighten the dramatic effects of stories told on film. In *The Adventurer*, Chaplin makes excellent use of crosscutting to create comic angst when he cuts between a scene which portrays Charlie's first meeting with the girl's father (Henry Bergman), who, a title tells us, is Judge Brown (most likely the man who sent Charlie to prison), and a scene in which the girl's jealous suitor has found a newspaper with the convict's picture on the front page under a "Wanted" headline. Through the technique of crosscutting the audience becomes painfully aware, before Charlie does, that he is on the cusp of being discovered, even as he is passing himself off to the judge as Commodore Slick, who heard the cries of the judge's distressed family from his yacht.

Also borrowing from Griffith's narrative techniques, Chaplin varies his shot types for dramatic emphasis and edits them together smoothly so that the audience remains unaware of the cutting. Most of his shots are long, full, or medium long shots, but occasionally he uses close-ups to create a joke. In *The Adventurer*, for example, when Charlie wakes up in bed in the girl's house, the camera frames him in a tight medium shot. First he notices he is wearing striped pajamas and then he notices the bars at the back of his bed (an unfortunate detail of the headboard). We know from his expression that he thinks for a moment he is back in

Figure 20. The gag in this shot (that Charlie thinks he is back in prison) only works thanks to the tight framing of the shot. (*The Adventurer,* 1917, Film Preservation Associates.)

jail. (See figure 20.) If this shot were less tightly framed, it would be too obvious that Charlie was in a bedroom, not a prison, and the sight gag would not work.

Perhaps the most important function of the editing in *The Adventurer* is to give a quick comic pace to the action. Every shot lasts just long enough for the spectator to get the point, and not an instant more. The cutting, that is, functions to eliminate all dead time, or any action that is neither vital to the plot nor funny. A particularly good example of this occurs soon after Charlie has escaped from the prison guards by swimming out to sea. Having found a safe haven on the shore, he hears a cry for help and immediately jumps back into the water. This shot is followed by a shot of the drowning mother. Immediately, Charlie swims into the shot. The time it took him to swim out to the mother after he jumped into the water is eliminated through editing. On the stage, such elimination of dead time is impossible because the action, by necessity, takes place in real time and space.

While the editing pace of *The Adventurer* is not as fast and furious as the editing pace of *The Battleship Potemkin,* it does accelerate substan-

tially at the end of the film, in a final chase scene in which the convict desperately tries to evade capture by the police. Here, the pace of the action is also quickened by the use of accelerated or fast-motion photography (achieved by photographing the action at a lower number of frames per second than the projection speed), another effect specific to the cinema.

Finally, the editing in *The Adventurer* creates surreal effects impossible to achieve on the stage. The objects of Chaplin's comic universe are often like objects in a dream, in that they magically seem to materialize when needed. Thus a boat that does not appear on the beach in previous shots suddenly appears when the prison guards need to pursue the convict, who has escaped into the ocean. Similarly, the newspaper picture of the convict materializes out of nowhere. The table on which it appears had only a fruit bowl on it in the previous shots. Just as unexpectedly, a pen becomes available for Charlie to alter his "Wanted" picture to make it resemble his rival. These sudden and surprising appearances of objects also resemble Warner Brothers cartoons in which the dynamite, the bomb, or box of matches is always conveniently at hand, even in the most remote settings. Such effects are possible only in the film medium and would be impossible to achieve on the stage. The dream logic of Chaplin's films lowers the threshold of our willing suspension of belief, making us more receptive to the anarchic humor of Chaplin's absurd comic world.

While Chaplin for the most part created his comedy without camera tricks, he does rely on them in a few additional places in *The Adventurer*. In the opening sequence of the film, he combines accelerated motion with reverse action when Charlie miraculously escapes the prison guards by sliding *up* a hill. This was accomplished by shooting him sliding down the hill but then printing the action in reverse. Other of his camera tricks are more subtle. A gag in which ice cream goes down his pants, for example, would have been impossible to achieve without the help of a stop-motion camera trick. First we see Charlie awkwardly balancing a big scoop of ice cream on his spoon (so he can drink the melted ice cream remaining in his bowl) and then the ice cream falls down his pants. Since it is not easy to guide a scoop of ice cream into one's pants, that is, to make the ice cream land in exactly the right place and still make it look like an accident, the camera was turned off just as the ice cream was about to fall from the spoon. The ice cream was then placed at the right place on Charlie's pants, and the camera was turned back on. When the action is projected on the screen it looks as if the ice cream has plopped from his spoon into his pants.

As the above discussion demonstrates, a good deal of film art went into the making of *The Adventurer.* Chaplin's films are by no means artless—they just look that way. Only by looking very closely does one become aware of the cinematic techniques that heighten the comic effects. The realist style which Bazin preferred (and which he created a theoretical system to justify) does not call for a renunciation of the use of film techniques; Bazin just preferred that the film techniques that are used do not call attention to themselves. The artfulness of films like *The Battleship Potemkin* and *The Last Laugh* cry out for our admiration and attention. Bazin called for a self-effacing style that downplays the use of film techniques and foregrounds the profilmic event, celebrating rather than denigrating film as a medium of mechanical reproduction.

While some filmmakers have veered off toward a stark aesthetic realism (Nagisa Oshima, Yasujiro Ozu, and Jim Jarmusch in *Stranger than Paradise* [1984] come immediately to mind), whereas others (Oliver Stone in *JFK* [1991] and *Natural Born Killers* [1994], Francis Coppola in *Apocalypse Now* [1979], and, more recently, Darren Aronofsky in *Requiem for a Dream* [2000]) use the film medium in a highly expressionist way, the two aesthetics are blended in most contemporary films. The expressionist and realist theories of what constitutes film art offer two compelling ways of looking at the potentials of the film medium. Fortunately, the use of one approach does not exclude the other, so we need not make a choice between them.