

Ivens, 1931), and *Vive la foire!* (1931). His first feature fiction film was *Pomme d'amour* (1932).

¹ The reference is to *Tabu* (1931), which was then being codirected by F. W. Murnau (1888–1931) and Robert Flaherty (1884–1951).

² The reference is to the short tryptich films Gance made for Studio 28 in early 1928—*Galop, Marine, Danse*.

³ *Autour de L'Argent* (1928) was Dréville's documentary record—and montage experiment in its own right—of Marcel L'Herbier's *L'Argent* (1929).

⁴ John van Canstein was a Dutch friend of Dréville's who conceived the idea for *Quand les épis se courbent* (1930).

⁵ Gaston Doumergue (1863–1934) was “a politician of dependable mediocrity” who served as president of the Third Republic, 1924–1931.

⁶ *Ombres blanches* was the French title for W. S. Van Dyke and Robert Flaherty's *White Shadows* (1927). I have been unable to trace the film with the title, *La Croisière de L'U-35*.

BENJAMIN FONDANE, “From Silent to Talkie: The Rise and Fall of the Cinema”

Translated by Claudia Gorbman from “Du muet au parlant: Grandeur et décadence du cinéma,” in *Bifur*, 5 (April 1930), reprinted in Benjamin Fondane, *Ecrits pour le cinéma*, ed. Michel Carassou (Paris: Plasma, 1984), 71–85.

AT THE TENDER age of thirty, just when we were placing the highest hopes in it, the silent film art has received a terrible blow to the head. Had it really exhausted all its resources? was it imitating itself, getting rusty? was it living solely according to rules and tradition? The answer must be no. Violent death? Maybe. Definitive? I fear as much. A sudden death, certainly, but also sudden birth and feverish life, tormented, restless. A life threatened on one hand by constant dangers, wrought internally; on the other hand, by dark forebodings, a life of one who hastily creates as fast as possible without sparing his forces, without keeping track of time, without looking back. Intellectuals understand nothing of this automatic death; nor did they understand anything, either, about the birth of what they called the “seventh art”: the best of its message was the product of efforts absolutely foreign to their activity. The mystery of its death can only be investigated in the light of the mystery of its life. And what was the life of the silent film, if not one of the most marvelous misapprehensions that history has ever known?

The silent art was of lowly birth, the son of tradesmen without a trade, employees without employment, ignorant adventurers, apprentice photographers. Never would these people have consented to work for any other motive than augmenting their means, increasing the profit yield, strengthening the powerfulness of a machine whose function was as distant as could be from what has since then been called an “art.” Are these the primordial conditions for the birth of an art? Does all activity pursued with a goal in

mind and guided by the economic principle necessarily lead to it? Possibly. Thus the cinema became an art via an absolutely new channel, the channel of non-art, of a well-organized industry which, having understood the commodity value of moving photographs, speculated on its capacity to give pleasure to the masses via the simplest medium, the medium which among all requires the littlest intellectual training—the eyes. But the cinema could against all odds rally around itself the most disparate people, create for itself a homogeneous audience across the broadest continent, fill down the most perfidious holes, that it could satisfy the tastes of savages, puritans, and catholic congregations, impose the laughter of Charlie Chaplin and the young American girl's ankles on farmers in Ohio as well as on Negro villages, on the Russian *muzhik* and on buck privates on furlough, on the light-fingered gentry of the big cities and on the Surrealist artists, that it would dispense morals and anarchy equally, make the criminal believe in the same values as the policeman, outlaw, and common man believe in the same values, appeal to the emerging civilizations, and be supported by moribund ones—this no one could have foreseen, least of all those who produced it.

It was a great cause for astonishment, and it still is. Among human groups so incredibly disparate, it produced a single audience reaction. In order for this to happen, there had to exist either some sort of common thread of identity among the audiences, or else one or more misapprehensions which the cinema cleverly took advantage of. Misapprehension: a film could be read by each group in the sense of the idea they had of themselves, could authorize a multiplicity of self-images, while in reality it was and could only be a single one. Is it because film answered to the primary desire of a mythless society, which had had enough of the lie of compassion and desired an exaltation of its strength, a society that had no further hope of anything but *chance*? Does the reason lie in the fact that the cinema satisfied all at once these various demands: in the lower classes, the taste for melodrama and happy endings; in passive temperaments, the call of adventure; in those of workers, the thirst for travel; in weak souls, the appetite for power; in the individual living in a more and more oppressive society, the nostalgia for the pampas, the steppes, the outlaw—offering to society ruled by religions and deterministic morals the appeal of chance and the magic of the arbitrary; to the revolutionary elites, the passage of the concrete to the lyrical plane, speed, surprise, change; the creation, finally, of a modern mythology?

There is doubtless some truth to all this, but it would be much too simple for us to stop here and jump over the worst difficulties with our hands bound together. It isn't as simple as it might seem at first, because, to reach the truth, the lion's share of raw materials enumerated above turns out to have been the stuff of the literary genre we call the novel; it was all already

there. However, neither the popular novel nor the stage melodrama nor the police serial nor the newspaper—despite their subject matter being identical to that of the cinema—had been capable of penetrating such a heterogeneous audience. For one thing, the intellectual's repugnance for the romantic melodrama is well known, and so is the general public's incomprehension of the lyrical image (i.e., the side of the image that brings it closer to the poetic).

. . . here are some images, a few among thousands, of Charles Chaplin's, which make not only the corner butcher laugh, but the Dada poet too (to whose aesthetic these images are no doubt indebted). The written scenario—novel, melodrama, poem—finds itself in front of an audience which instantly splits into a thousand audiences. Film this same scenario with a camera, and suddenly, as if by a miracle, these thousand audiences become a single one again. Everything that had the effect of separating groups and placing them at insurmountable distances, is suddenly brought together, unified by a single act. But what act? for we might be wrong. Is it the act of transposing material to the visual register? Surely, but this is only a small part of it. To visualize is to make a thing a hundred times more concrete; it acquires in the process a certain lyricism. But is that all? Doesn't an unpleasant thing become a hundred times more unpleasant? These images go by in time, so fast that they lose some of their concreteness. This idea advances us a giant step, but we have hardly eliminated all the difficulties. Will a thing that I dislike because of its psychological meaning cease to displease me solely by virtue of being put into motion? Does the concept of *man* stop appearing as a concept to me, and does it turn into flesh, because Mr. Bergson likes to snap his fingers and make a dynamic concept out of it?

No. The bottom line, a truth stated by La Palisse, is this: these images are silent and the cinema is silent. Not (as we believed) because there was no way to make the characters speak, not because it is flawed and lacking, but because its *raison d'être*, the cause of its good fortune, was to have found (accidentally, and I admit, out of powerlessness) that which differentiated it, set it apart from all the other arts, that which made it unique: this was the fact that it was silent, that it gave us the stuff of the moral, visual, and cosmogonic world, under the guise of silence. To me it seems undeniable that the basest subject matter could find itself thus ennobled, that is, fortified with mystery, and therefore infinitely less shocking to the mind, although it may be inherently shocking. The characters' silence obliged us to lend them other words, other motives than those which their reality indicated on the level of intelligibility. There are no loathsome acts in themselves, only loathsome motives. I know that intertitles strove to remedy what was believed to be cinema's basic vice or weakness. But it is

precisely the intertitles which virtually all of us reproached the most lent film. Fortunately we forgot them quickly enough. They had the tradictory function of trying to translate via readable signs what was ringing in our thought on the level of intuitive attention; they brought us from the poetic back to terra firma—that most arid ground.

What characterized the silent art was not that it was put onto celluloid in order then to be projected on a screen; what characterizes a piece of music is not that it is written for the piano or the orchestra. It's more a matter of a certain internal dream, of an organic pursuit of a certain mode of expression proper to each particular art and unique to it. The silent film's (albeit subterranean and stammering) was fairly perceptibly of a catastrophic tendency: to abolish all speech, all logic that supports speech, all conception of the human which is buoyed up by logic. Those who came to understand the coded language of silent film took offense at intertitles; and they found *imitative* musical sound irritating—this is not that that was so good at adding a supplementary text to what was complete in itself and needlessly duplicating the image. Only an imbecile could have been written: "Storm scenes in the silent cinema are always, we admit, a little ridiculous. Accordingly, silent directors attempted to spirit away such images that are manifestly lacking." The ideal film, such as it was envisioned in films of common production, had necessarily to result in this performance: create a perfect language of mimicry (which man had abandoned in his prehistory), a new means of expression that would not only replace speech, but possibly would defeat it, point out its hollowness; furthermore demand from the spectator a kind of collaboration, this *minimum of sleep* necessary torpor, so that the decor of the sign could be swept away and in its place the reality of dream take form.

All the cinema wished was for the spectator to lose his footing. To see what everyday conversations were expressing with "As for me, I go to the cinema because it relaxes me." But how can this be achieved if the characters don't stop talking from beginning to end, if they awaken us every moment (or rather, if they don't permit us to fall asleep), if they look out from the rooftops who they are (and that they're doubtless all the same, but never what one would *wish* them to be)?

Does this mean that I am taking up a formal position against speech, judging it incapable of supplying references regarding the real, the dream? No. But as soon as speech enters the scene, the intellectual faculties are split at once. Speech presupposes language, of which twenty-seven exist in Europe alone, not to mention the further refinement of writing.

The cultivation of speech, which is inevitable, created gulfs early on between individuals, according to their degree of education and vocation. It even supposes a fairly strong specialization among literate people. I

dition, every time speech departs from the real—and it does so every day, by the very act of its existence—it *affirms*. There is no doubt about what it does, about the values that it tends to impose on us. When speech attained its highest peaks, in Shakespeare, Racine, Sophocles, Mallarmé, it separated itself off from common human understanding, and became *inhuman*. And for that time on, *that* speech was abandoned in favor of a speech which one could well call *imitative* for lack of another term, modeled on usage, and which betrays dream and reality, becomes the prey of all who trade in words, leads to the exhaustion of pure lyricism, and affirms itself as the only liveable speech, with the exception of several dozen individuals as specialized in their dusty libraries as scholars of ancient China are in theirs. . . . It leads up to the legitimate theater, melodrama, penny romances.

How can we accept the power of that speech, which we abhor, but which is today's only currency, how can we not be disgusted with the reality that it conveys? And all the more so when, the subject matter being of the lowest kind, as cinema's is, this speech if we use it (and what other speech could we use) puts our finger in the open wound, and does not permit us to doubt for a second what is really going on in the film. All misapprehension is suppressed. It was really that, and that all along, which we wanted nothing to do with whatsoever. The intertitles already having informed us of the film's true moral value, we lately tried to react, to give this unique medium its veritable subject matter. From this reaction was born the pure film, the absolute film, or what have you. The pure film proved infinitely better adapted to the balance of means by the subject; it turned out more intelligible to an audience for whom its literary equivalent will not doubt always remain inaccessible. No matter that it is destined for specialized cinema houses, for an audience of snobs or specialists. It will never replace the commercial story film; it can only live alongside it, sometimes at its service, sometimes giving it new stimulation. The misapprehension that was its driving force having been suppressed, the cinema cannot but lose its role of prime art of the modern age, available to everyone. A means of communication, better than the airplane, is in the process of disappearing. A new vernacular is falling apart before our eyes; we are falling back into the primal chaos.

The talking cinema has come to replace the silent film, and all our protesting won't do anything about it. Thus we will refrain from protesting. It's not we who have created and killed the silent film; nor is it we who are creating the talking film; we are not the ones who will kill it ten years hence to replace it with the 3-D film, the color film, who knows what. . . . Its destiny escapes us; in any case we won't have the responsibility for the good or evil that might befall it. The fact that film is an extremely costly art, that its power depends as much on production values as on the organ-

ization of its distribution and exhibition—of its exploitation—removes our hopes of ever being able to intervene if only as outsiders, to propose amendments to it, or simply give it the benefit of our suggestions. If it earns our esteem, this will be its sole merit; if in addition, a role is played by *chance*, which saves it from the impasse where it now finds itself, we are certainly not be unhappy.

We must understand that the cinema is an industrial art, the first that it was born under the mystical sign of what is now called mechanical progress, and in the intention of those who brought it into the world did not differ very much from their general conception of the automobile or the airplane. While one art used to take a century to reach perfection, a century to go through imitation and decline, this one is taking two years in which to live and die. We had the five-horsepower film, then the ten-horsepower film, twenty-five; the talkie is the six-cylinder film—we're not going to stop there. In all the arts known to this day, the idea of progress played no part. No one has done *better* since Homer, they do it *other ways*. The film, though, has always been envisaged from the sole point of view of progress toward mechanical perfection; knowing the date of a given film is indispensable so you can make a judgment about it. A person might also say inadvertently, "It's old, but very good nevertheless." Or one might say, as well, "It's very good considering when it was made." We laugh at an old movie as at an old Ford: we admire its good intentions: "Well, why so they knew how to do superimpositions in 1905?" And once this is established, we forget about it instantly.

Alongside many films which have not become dated but which have been denied recognition, there are obviously Chaplin's films, which are credited with not having aged in the least; in fact one would find it impossible to conceive of their not being silents. But Chaplin is a genius, an exception, a parenthesis, a freak—and in order for Chaplin not to prevent us from continuing to think what we currently think about the cinema, we extract him, by some clever rationalizing, from the "cinema." There: once again, the mechanical model can prevail.

Owing to a production schedule of three plays every four years, Greek tragedy evolved slowly, satisfying an aesthetic according to which character, not progress, is the ruling factor of creation. But when one has to produce a thousand films every year no matter what, and have them seen every day and exhaust their novelty in an instant, by means of each imitating the last (for genius is not more abundant than in the past), any aesthetic other than a mechanical one would ultimately be ruinous. It's important not to let the mechanical aesthetic take root. Also, it's obvious that cinema is made for the masses, and the masses believe in progress.

Thus the talking film is born, and nothing can prevent it from existing.

it, too, will be sacrificed in its turn. We must take it for what it is. But that doesn't stop us from envisaging its possibilities, and considering whether we can continue to have the confidence in it which we demonstrated (belatedly of course) in the silent film. Is it capable of maintaining the misapprehension that was so pregnant in the silent film? Can it satisfy our demands for lyricism, and our intellectual needs?

The entire first part of this essay tends to argue to the contrary. If we have been right at all, the talking film and silent film have nothing in common. The talking film neither corrects nor amends the silent, given that one cannot "correct" what was already complete, closed, its goal accomplished and perfected. We have already stated that what is fundamental to the silent film is not the fact of having been recorded onto a strip of film and projected onto a screen. This is secondary, and the talking film has retained *only* the secondary properties of the silents. It will not be the same case in the 3-D or color film as they have been described to us (i.e., not talking).

No, it is something else, which bears only an apparent relation to the silent film. The subject matter is certainly the same, in fact richer and more complete. For as far as story is concerned, it seems certain that a speaking character is more living than a miming character; realism—I mean verisimilitude—is better served. If speech and music can be synchronized, characters will be able to speak dialogue, sing, even dance. Do not fear their modesty: they'll be overjoyed to give themselves to it. The will of the talking film, such as it's announced through its stammering so far, is to attain a close copy not of the real, which remains closed to its resources, but of the pseudoreal, of the type found in operetta, in opera, or even in the musical.

The talking film, having the camera as its basis, certainly won't decline to the point of observing the unity of place, or be content with the three or five acts of the theater. It will borrow the Romantic device of numerous tableaux with rapid scene changes. I say "tableaux" nevertheless—that is to say, "units." In the silents, the succession of shots occurred solely in time and duration, the space factor playing no role in the production of rhythm. Now, on the contrary (and we're touching the second major departure of sound cinema from silent), the importance of rhythm—i.e., montage—loses all meaning and allows dialogue, song, dance, to take complete possession of space, to mark it by their takeover, and even to immobilize it. Sometimes space is immobilized beyond measure, in a visual image that one doesn't dare cut away from too fast, so as not to hinder on one hand the comprehension of the image, and on the other hand the technical direction and soundtrack quality. The film which was whole in its "becoming," in its running, now consents to be fragmented, to signify in frag-

ments. It presents life as the theater does, in “cross sections”; the purely spatial ones.

It goes without saying that I’m interested here solely in the death of the evolution of a species; I won’t hammer away at its vulgar and excessively obvious weaknesses. This is not the time to devote much attention to its pure mechanical “production” and to the faults of the voice-machines which are so evident. I’m confident that the apparatuses will be perfected and do not wish to argue about or reproach their temporary shortcomings. Given what would be the wrong track to take, it is useless to emphasize the costly, immense loss of time the studios suffer in order to obtain from their machines a perfect copy of the human voice—which the good talking machines will precisely never have a use for. The human voice, also, demands cooperation with respect to sound recording, that is, as raw material to be used—proportional not only to the drama, but also to formal magnificence of perspective and of the screen. I won’t hold it against talking film producers that they don’t even in the least try to obtain from the talking machines its own measure, its timbre; its secret, virtual means. They are not too far removed from this perspective which is also the one we must someday adopt to envisage the sound art itself, just as they’re far from understanding that it’s not the cost of a technological product which gives it its real value.

I will insist even less on the shortcomings, which are rather insignificant when one considers productions of the first order like *Broadway Melody* or overwhelming in the case of French productions like *Les Trois Masques* or *Collier de la Reine*.² What we find important to bring out in this essay is the aesthetics of the talking film, its aesthetic *at present*. For something better could be born tomorrow, something else will emerge from the talking film, and above all from the sound film. What will it be?

But first, some remarks on the sound film, twin brother of the talking film but its whipping-boy. People are not putting the same hopes in the sound film as in the talkie. Nor by the same token are they favoring it either publicity or capital. According to current perspectives on it the sound film is guilty of the same defects as the talking film. In the sense in which the term is used, it shouldn’t be called *sound* film—it’s nothing more than talking. When the screen is filled by ocean waves and we are made to hear the roar of the real ocean, when an orchestra is seen playing and the synchronized sound offers what it’s playing, the sound film is duplicating the image, it *speaks*; it immobilizes the image so as not to jeopardize the special effects; sound follows its older sibling in all respects. Certainly, the sound film isn’t used to speech, and this is greatly in its favor, but this is a secondary virtue, a virtue made of a lack. However, we should admit that it suggests infinite possibilities; we have seen evident proof in Walter R.

mann's *World Melody*; we've seen it with the development of the highest order that the sound animated film has undertaken. It should be added, though, that if we have liked these new directions in sound, it is insofar as they *betray* the aesthetic imputed to them. Ruttmann's sound film was conceived first and foremost as a silent film in which the sounds are supposed to fill gaps; animated cartoons are conceived as fantasy films in which anything goes: consequently, sound is allowed to be arbitrary.

Arbitrary: the word that brings us back to art, the word that returns us to lyricism, back to the right track, the only track available to film, whether talking or sound. The sound cartoon should serve as a starting point for the advent of the new art, for it alone has already found its way. It alone suggests that the direction of cinema is toward the arbitrary, that is, the imagination, the true real, and not the real of the theater. Down with the hundred percent talking and sound film! Ten percent, five percent, two percent— isn't this already quite enough? Of what importance is quantity here? It seems to me that words and noises are useable for creating a new art only if they agree to collaborate toward the image's intensity, its thickening. They must give up the idea of collaborating toward the image's easy readability, the image's duplication, which kills it instead of vivifying it. Having two characters ask each other for five excruciating minutes, "How are you?" hearing them *name* the already evident, and seeing a pretty mouth say "Darling": this becomes offensive to the viewer's mind, almost aggressive. The film must remain mute. Speech, sounds, I can see them accompanying it, not inserted into its fabric, but upholstering it, adding to it, as very humble servants.

There's the idea: *superimposition*. Speech, sounds, should be designated to replace in large measure the superimposition, even substitute for it.³ The convention scene in Gance's *Napoléon*, inundated with waves to suggest storminess, could not be utilized often; it's so discordant and clamorous that ultimately it would be tiresome. The noise of ocean surf, in a scene of a stormy family argument; the sound of an orchestra in an image of a confined man who is contemplating breaking the window; an automobile that arrives and is not seen; the noise of a glass that breaks in a shot of a man whose happiness is destroyed and is remembering; the sobbing of an abandoned woman, heard with the image of the happy couple going off; many other things as well, which at this moment I do not see, sitting at my table. This idea should be used sparingly, only when a sound proves necessary to the economy of the effect to be produced: *unnatural, heightened or deformed sound or speech*—such is the sole use of the talking or sound medium, which can maintain all that has been gained from the silents, even if it changes its form, by enriching its hypnotic power. This would result in a new filmic form, not better than the old one, but different, capable of making us

drunk with new intoxications. Its fundamental property would be sound but silence, even more so than in the silent film—the silence which we will reap, thanks to the contrast with speech and noise, unforeseen in its depth: a silence which will have not only surface volume, in fact. If we specify that speech and music are placed/evolve/develop on another plane, in another dimension, than the image, then the film will become, to our greatest joy, both sound film and talking film. Much more sound than talking, of course; very little sound and talk; hence apt to recapture once more the interest of the masses and the elite, to remain intellectual, and to conserve the fruitful misapprehension which had been its strength. . . .

December 1929

BENJAMIN FONDANE (1899–1944) was a Romanian writer who emigrated to Paris in the early 1920s. Besides poems, literary criticism, philosophical essays, and several articles on the cinema, he wrote scenario adaptations for Paramount, chief among them Dmitri Sanoff's *Rapt* (1933), from a C. F. Ramuz novel. Fondane died in the gas chamber at Buchenwald in 1944.

¹ Even a manifestly bad industrial investment to which millions—billions—have been committed won't be scrapped overnight. Once created, the machine will be increased tenfold, which will stupefy people, buy consciences, bury living ones, or starve up the intellects (if there are any left) to death. We already see the phenomenon of an excited, frenzied press facing a jeering audience, who dares to whistle insults even during the newsreels, in front of operators who are increasingly skeptical and much too prudent to take the foreseeable risks. If all audience reactions in other countries are perceptibly less than those of the French public, it's very easy to predict that publicity by itself will be unable to counteract the almost physical malaise that is constantly directed toward it. Publicity could push the cinema toward one of the worst catastrophes the world has ever known. Unless . . . the producers could restrain their panic and *calmly* find the formula for the solution—in the sense that I will indicate later—a solution that *must* involve first keeping the talking machine and its publicity (signs of capitalism), and second, planning how to restore the public's confidence with a slow, loyal and circumspect dose of the additional value the talking machine brings to the economy of the silent film. If the talking film is going to have a future, it will not be by means of killings on the stock market; it will not be by seizing the known operas; it will be solely the result of infinite prudence, infinite psychology, and infinite tact. The rules of probability are even more relevant here than elsewhere—AU.

² André Hugon's *Les Trois Masques* (1929) and Gaston Ravel's *Le Collier de la Reine* (1929) were among the earliest French talkies, released in the fall of 1929. The latter had a lot of comic dialogue, postsynchronized in Germany; the former was shot and recorded in France.

³ Counter to what we generally aspire to for writing, as long as its object is in some sense meta-real, once we approach the purely practical, realistic problem, whose solution is possible only insofar as we have an audience, we stop dreaming that our ideas are going to have any unusual impact or too great an originality. We're happy not to be alone, whether the solution has gotten there before us, whether our idea has gone off on a life of its own, or whether the identity of the object we have in view to consider has compelled in an almost inevitable sense a certain number of minds to furnish the same reaction as ours. Therefore I am glad to note René Clair's apprehensions regarding the passage of the talking film to the