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THE ORDINARY MAN OF CINEMA

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Preface

Here, as the ordinary man of cinema, I would just mention something *inessential*: the cinema is not my profession. I go to the movies for entertainment, but sometimes while I'm there I also accidentally learn something, something different from what the film teaches me. (It will not teach me that I'm mortal, but it might show me a way of rediscovering time, or experiencing a dilation of bodies, and the unlikely occurrence of all this: indeed, rather than being a reader of films, I constantly remain their most submissive servant and their judge.) At the movies, I learn to be surprised at my capacity to live in many worlds at once. *

I will thus speak here as a being without qualities.¹ All I want to say is this: I have no standing to speak about the cinema, except insofar as I spend a lot of time going to the movies. This habit has probably taught me something. Yes, but about what? About the films I see? About myself? About humanity? About memory? *

What this "ordinary man" can say has less to do with a discourse (the transmission of knowledge) than with a kind of writing (a query of which the focus is the mystery, rather than the reconstruction, of an origin). The only origin of writing

which I can properly speak—and discuss before you—is linked foremost to an elucidation of the visible. Not of its status, but of the certainty that it exists so strongly only because a world that is characterized as such opens within us, and because to some extent we ourselves are both the genesis and the fleeting life of that world, suspended to a totality of artifice.

What I've written here is that particular experience of time, of movement, and of images.

And yet I've held myself to certain theoretical premises. This book was never intended to be a theoretical essay on the cinema. It was never intended to do anything other than to give voice to that memory, to the show of its effects, and to lead it to a threshold of perception. I am in effect summoning a spectator's "knowledge" here. But it is *mine*, and so, inevitably, something of my life has transited here.

A machine turns, represents simultaneous action to the immobility of our bodies, and produces monsters: all this might seem rather more delicious than dreadful. Or perhaps, despite being in fact so dreadful, it is first of all an undeniable pleasure. Maybe it is the unknown, uncertain or shifting site of that pleasure, that nocturnal kinship of cinema, that prompts this questioning of both memory and meaning—questioning that, in our memory of a film, remains firmly attached to the experience of that experimental night during which something moves, comes alive, and speaks before us.

For the spectator, cinema is first and foremost something completely different than what filmic analyses reflect of it. The meaning that comes to us (and that comes to us inasmuch as we are a site of resonance for image effects, for the "depth" of images, and inasmuch as we handle the entire future of these images and sounds as affects and as meaning), that very particular quality of meaning made sensible is inextricably linked to the conditions of our vision; quite precisely to the experience (to the quality of that nocturnal experience that is the threshold of reception and the condition of existence of these images), and perhaps even to the very first experience of seeing them.

If the cinema—leaving aside for the moment its constant renewal in every film and in every screening of every film—is defined by its special power to produce lasting effects of memory, then we must know, and must have known for several generations, that through this memory a part of our lives passes into our recollections of films, including films that might seem totally unrelated to our lives' actual circumstances.

I thus wanted to account for that single feeling of persistent strangeness—as if it were that image-receiving humus—born with "my" cinema, and to write it down in order to make it palpable. For it is impossible that my experience of cinema could be completely solitary, for that's precisely the illusion proper to cinema, more so even than the illusion of the mobility of the objects we see on the screen. It is the illusion that this experience of cinema, this memory of it, is solitary, hidden, secretly individual, because it (this story,

these images, these affective colorings) always seems to tie an immediate private pact with an unexpressed part of ourselves: that part given over to silence and to a relative aphasia as if it were the ultimate secret of our lives, when it is perhaps nothing but the ultimate subjection. Through this artificial solitude, it seems as if a part of ourselves is permeable to effects of meaning without ever being able to be born into meaning through our language. There, we even come to know—and to me this is the inprescriptible link between cinema and fear—an increase in sentimental aphasia in our social being. Cinema acts on every social being as if on a solitary being: The fear we experience at the movies (and this is every child's first experience at the movies, the one that colors all the rest) is not unmotivated, it is simply disproportionate. I've understood for a while that it inheres *in the fear* of this aphasic latency, because the latter has already cut into us so deeply.

I don't deny that there is pleasure in this. But I do want to clarify it somewhat (if only its ambiguity). In a word—and I am thus glossing over this entire book—this pleasure is no matter of straightforward enjoyment, or in brief, of aesthetic pleasure. It is, I think, the visual-experiential basis of all the pleasure we take in defining images—the basis, for example, of what we believe to be an “imaginative projection” into filmic action. It is the pleasure taken in our moral being, and that's why, to me, it's so close to its opposite: fear (which constitutes the highest point of simulating the realization of affects that are deprived of objects.) The reality of these feelings is the subjection to a world that derides them. I maintain that this can

be called “experience,” and that we can therefore speak about it seriously.

Suddenly, I attempt to recognize in these forms, on these collections of sounds and images in relation to which I do not intervene, and for whom I remain a spectator, what might be their essential counterbalance... in sum, to what void all form corresponds.

In unpredictable ways, all human forms (all imitations of a destiny) answer to the expression of the feelings that define our humanity, or to the necessity or basic overdue need to express those feelings.

It's not that we project ourselves onto forms or into beings, bearers of a part of identity that would be that part missing from all of life, or that would be the secret of what, since it does not stabilize into an image, keeps it alive outside of images. But the inexpressible also grows in the living as it lives, that is, it continually substitutes action to the possibility it has of contemplation in the void.

But these feelings, which rely upon the idea of a solitary profundity of the human, will be represented here solely *in the actions' body*. In order to sustain them, this body will have to be a new kind of thing so as to indicate the reflexivity of actions, not their power of transition, or their material resolution in the world. This reflexivity will of necessity augment the invisible world, that world in view of which an action properly occurs here (and through which an action is not an event there: such

that the strongest capture of the image occurs in that world; all causality in that universe of images is locked into a body of enigmas, as if through a hint of signification.)

Perhaps a "being without qualities" such as myself will be permitted to state a truth here, to ask a question, and to make a claim. The aim would not be to bolster an image of the human according to theoretically determined structures. Instead, it will disrupt this image with quite deliberate unreasonableness by allowing contents to come to me (relations of contents and representations that are always quite precisely experimentations rather than representations).

If so, this is what must be understood: there is probably nothing theoretically salient to say about cinema that would, in the name of received wisdom about forms, confirm the social forms of anthropology. For cinema is a new kind of experience of time and memory, one that, alone, forms an experimental being.

Cinema doesn't compose or arrange a structure of alienation out of our participation in it. Rather, it creates a structure of realization and of appropriation of something that is real, not of something possible. The real in question is what already and momentarily lives as the spectator. That life is not a momentary and suspended life, but a memory of images and experimental affects: one must thus question the role of the script as the object, not of that person's desire for existence, but of their *fund of affects*. I say this without qualities.

In the same way: the oneiric structure of film is an anthropological delusion. And, if there still is some part of dream in film, it does not concern the fulfillment of desire. Rather, it *legitimizes* desire, which is something much more essential.

There's nothing here that presupposes any specialized knowledge, just a certain habitual *usage of the invisible part of ourselves*—the part of us that needs to be taken up, taken in hand and into our own usage as it were. This part, which is without any sort of reflection upon us, is hopelessly given over to transforming its own obscurity into a *visible world*.

The only knowledge taken for granted here is that which comes from the *use* of our own memory: all it teaches us, ultimately, is how to manipulate time as image, made possible through the "subtraction" of our actual body.

This is not a response to some theory, but the acknowledgement of a simply paradoxical experience, an aporetic duration (the relation of an object of thought to what, in the very act of thinking, absents itself from thought). The experience itself is a source of aporias. Things no longer pertain to a hidden meaning, but to the difficult, vacillating relation between visible things and a secret that would be simply their own (it is thus ours, and like the photograph of our "body," without any resolution in the visible).

The duration of the passions (what Kierkegaard named the alternative to the lie of character)² can only be measured in the persistence of images—not, that is, by their duration in

screen-time, but by their power of persistence, iteration, and recurrence. It is quite close to what defines their transformation into the image's anamnestic double, that is to say, into that kind of trace or back-up copy that would be internal to a slow movement of the disappearance or effacement of phenomena.

*

Cinema and cinematic images don't automatically call up any technical or theoretical knowledge. That kind of knowledge doesn't matter so much to me. And indeed cinema may be the only domain of signification in which no part of me can believe that the operation of its science has a subject.

Cinema is an art that awakens memory, in mysterious conjunction with the experience of a depth of feeling (but also a quite specific life of isolated affects). This is what resonates when Dreyer says: "What interests me—and this comes before technique—is reproducing the feelings of the characters in my films. That is, to reproduce, as sincerely as possible, the most sincere feelings possible... She had taken off her make-up, we made the tests, and I found on her face exactly what I had been seeking for Joan of Arc: a rustic woman, very sincere, who was also a woman who had suffered."³

This memory doesn't merely evoke, but writes an entire life's experience, as it leads away from the world. It is as if we went to the movies to progressively annihilate the film (on those few images we would retain of it) on the feelings we experience there, and then as if this mass of affects could

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progressively restore, in their light and affective coloring, chains of images.

I have been trying to explain how the cinema exists within us as a kind of ultimate chamber where the hope and ghost of an *interior history* circulate. Because this history does not unfold, and if it even occurs, can only remain invisible, without a face, without characters, and most of all, without duration. Through the persistence of their images, we acclimatize all the films we see to this absence of duration and of a scene where that interior history might be possible.

So there is this invisible chamber inside us, where, in the absence of any object, we torture the human race itself, and from which, mysteriously, incomprehensibly, the feeling or conscious anticipation of the sublime comes to us.

None of this clearly marks out the particular germ or anchor of feeling within a film. The film is perhaps nothing more than a kind of reflective surface that appears to us as such only at that precise moment when we are thrust away from it by the very feelings and affects it gives birth to: it does this only by simulating them in characters, in "bits of people" who have to die in order to ensure the continuity of what's beyond them.

Sight, in this way, makes me take leave of myself—that is, take leave of that most uncertain center of myself. Sight pushes it to find semblances of identity that chase it away like a center waiting to be surrounded.

So it's not exactly a commodity (some sort of sexual commodity), nor is it what you might call a pole of projection that I find when I go to the movies. I just find affects playing out a certain kind of scene—really, they're hardly what one would call feelings, just the stirrings of feelings linked to impossible actions, affects without intended objects, without a world, for no world preexists their affective coloring. In their unbreakable alliance, they play out their scene as the *visible interior of a species*. To the extent that it's the spectacle of a *visible human* (though not of course any particular embodied structure of recognizable pleasure, but some unknowable being), all it gives us to understand is that affects are a world, that is, are possibilities of actions occurring elsewhere, and, as such, are an inescapable destiny.

Could I, in good conscience and with a little clearheadedness, reduce the purposiveness of cinematic technique to the mere mechanical production of effects? What need? All of the simulations played out here already do the work of revealing their imperfection, or simultaneously show themselves to be simulations more or less equivalent to the mechanical production of effects. No, in this world, what I find compelling isn't the perfection of its illusions, but rather its illusion itself, and the fact that I can never reach the center of that illusion. This is because its illusion has no proper center, but is instead a mechanism for the elision of objects. There, in sum, bodily movements are not free; they are the spectacle that freedom has been deprived of. I will never reach the center of that illusion, moreover, because its world is composed by affects, not

signification (which is simply the delay of affective relation): a world that is anterior, one that subsists without its proportions having been borrowed or appropriated from the real. By a basic alchemy, objects become prestigious only because they are rare (selected) and ancillary. They compose our cinematic universe, not through their easy resemblance to the things we've actually touched, seen, and coveted, but because they are woven of material altogether different. We desire them because they are a destiny: the dressing gown in *Little Caesar*; Fred Astaire's top hat and cane; Kitty's watch in *They Live by Night*, the dial of which is never seen but which nevertheless tells us the untimely hour of that nocturnal love and of the curse that weighs down upon the adolescents imprisoned by an ancient crime forever lodged into the shadow of their lives; Cary Grant's suit, which is his shield against knowledge of danger and attendant fear (I mean by this not to project an image of a sovereign consciousness but rather of a body in disguise, dressed first and foremost in the prismatic of minor passions, in sequences of gestures, words, and lighting).

The body (or the situation) is only desirable via the hope that it might hold what sheathes it, but also, and simultaneously, that its sheath would carry away with it all the worldly light in which it has been bathed. Did the nascent hallucination in which we ourselves began to repeat various gestures (for example, Eric von Stroheim's tics in *La Grande Illusion*) manage to induce in lieu of our bodies, like a gauzy chimera, the same rigidity as that of the actor, the same pleasure in detail, or to teach us that the cinematic body is a body

that, like the old man in Bichat who “dies piecemeal,” lives piecemeal?⁴ What we could never recreate was the singularity of a world residing in transitions between gestures. It was striking, for example, that action could take place simply through the initiation of movement: someone might never be able to run away, yet their act would be complete, because at that moment, the whole world would necessarily become the entire consciousness of their flight such that nothing of the act could escape signification (and their flight might perhaps even be the singularity of that universe). And yet, endowed with a mobile structure, altered by shifting causalities, *it is nevertheless just a mere intention of a world.*

And the burlesque—wasn't it simply the hypertrophy of a salient detail of our lives—or something we could get to know such that it would in its aggrandizement become the only meaningful detail, like the perpetual life of a fold of skin, or a silly hat always on the same head, or a leg in a permanent cast? There is in burlesque a kind of reflexivity and perception of action that really digs at a body and determines the way it appears. This is why burlesque is frightening: these bodies are already more guilty than clumsy, they are nothing but a light, gesticulatory reprieve as we wait for hell.

* The world and its shadows rise up before our eyes, initiating us in the experience of undetectable movements.

The two trees the camera shoots from a distance, around which it begins to pan and to compose the incomplete panorama

of which they are successively the center and the periphery— this group of trees in *Fortini/Cani* isn't simply composed of trees. This is not because those trees are simply a reflection of themselves, but because the distance from the world that we shall never reach subsists upon them. And this bouquet of trees doesn't simply preserve all the distance of the world. These trees, caught in a slow and brusquely sublime movement, are unnamed and unknown affects. They are that kind of silent, rigid, and delicate circumnavigation of the most unknown feeling. And why—if not because this scene suspends all movement within us—do we understand only that it is sublime?

In *Eureka*, Edgar Allan Poe depicts the genesis of matter, in which atoms apportion themselves by force of attraction and repulsion, and the soul is the product of repulsion.⁵ Similarly, it is the unconsciousness, the misrecognition of this system of the luminous dots riddling bodies and encrusting faces that attends the birth of sentiments unrelated to our lives. Similarly, it is blindly that we enter into this world across a bridge of trembling light. Films are not chiefly constituted by more or less perfectly realized scenes, nor by visible, acknowledged stage settings (like those in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which are theater sets filmed in close-up), nor by perspective points and shifts that reveal them to me. None of this is either credible or implausible. This world, beyond the artifice of its settings and its shots, before which I may remain incredulous, and which therefore can get away with being poorly made, doesn't settle me into the truth of a story. For it

has already introduced me into the commingled truth and strangeness of affects that are whole and new—and dominating, because their quantities are novel, and because their object relations are novel as well.

* I don't believe in the reality of film (its verisimilitude is unimportant), and yet for that reason I am in its ultimate truth. That truth is verified in me alone, not through any final reference to reality; it is, first of all, simply a shift in the proportion of the visible whose final arbiter I will no doubt be, as its body and experimental conscience.

There is no assurance added to this, the way a line might complete a more perfect image of a solid; what is added is the unsettling of the human voice (and perhaps only the doubt that it signifies). From this voice I retain certain qualities, a smoothness, a roughness, an exceptional composition—as was astonishingly realized by Michel Simon in *La Chienne*—and I only hear, behind its memory, the feeble burbling, the incoherence, and what seems the pathetic monologue of a lover's protest. Neither of the two voices, whether it belongs to Michel Simon or to Janie Marèze, is "real," that is, "reproduced." They are simply the truth of the scene. Whereas the voice of Janie Marèze is that of a type (it is "calibrated" to the historical depiction of a social class, attached to the irony of all the characters that borrow it, the irony of the "type"), the voice of Michel Simon is not that of a class, but is an invention, a blend that begins to constitute the volume level of his

character. It is revealed in the scene of their conversation, in the sharing of the untenable secret that precedes the murder. Simon's vocal texture is alone in carrying that "culture that allows him to seem like an imbecile in his own milieu." In it I hear the beginning of that mocking tone which is always detectable in the voice of this actor, and which is the underlying, performed nature of his voice, that strange, old woman's quivering through which a feeling is always relayed, along with the *proper distancing* of the voice from the role, from the dialogue, as well as from the body of the actor himself. One hears the sibilants and dentals that characterize the "accent" of Protestant Geneva (the actor's birthplace), and the texture and composition of this voice play out in the character (Monsieur Legrand) as nostalgia for a place to which he has never belonged. The quivering voice and the rising accent rapidly lend him the air of a lunatic. As if listening to an opera, I can faintly hear what the voice itself signifies, the protest it makes through the sheer instrumentality of singing, which, even at the height of its artifice, cannot disguise the dazzling truth of the body, of the sudden apparition of that *visible human*, trembling like a wet dog.

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