

# Film And /As Literature

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BÉLA BALÁZS

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## The Script

Not so very long ago it was still difficult to convince the Philistines that the film was an independent, autonomous new art with laws of its own. To-day this is scarcely ever questioned and it is also admitted that the literary foundation of the new art, the script, is just as much a specific, independent literary form as the written stage play. The script is no longer a technical accessory, not a scaffolding which is taken away once the house is built, but a literary form worthy of the pen of poets, a literary form which may even be published in book form and read as such. Of course scripts can be good or bad, like any other literary work, but there is nothing to prevent them from being literary masterpieces. That the literary form of the film script has not yet had a Shakespeare, a Calderón, a Molière, an Ibsen is no matter—it will have some day. In any case, we do not even know whether there may or may not have been some great masterpiece lost among the thousands of film scripts to which we paid not the slightest attention. We never searched for masterpieces among them, often even denied the very possibility of one being found in such an unlikely place.

Most cinema-goers do not realize that what they are watching is the staging of a film script, very much as they would be watching the staging of a play in the theatre. And even in the theatre, how many spectators think of this? If the newspaper reviews did not discuss the play itself and the performance of it as two distinct subjects, few theatre-goers would think of the literary creative work that has to precede every stage performance of a play.

From Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1970. Reprinted through the permission of the publisher.

That public opinion distinguishes more easily between play and stage performance than between script and screened film is due to the fact that a play can be performed in many ways in many theatres, thus demonstrating that the play has an existence of its own apart from the performance. The film on the contrary mostly absorbs the script completely so that it is not preserved as an independent object which could be used again for a different film production. In most cases it is not available in print; it is not yet an accepted custom to publish scripts for reading.

The film script is an entirely new literary form, newer even than the film itself, and so it is scarcely surprising that no books on the æsthetics of literature mention it as yet. The film is fifty years old, the script as a literary form only twenty-five at most. It was in the twenties of this century, in Germany, that specially interesting scripts first began to be published.

In this again the film slavishly copied the development of the stage. There had been highly developed and popular theatre, there had been great playwrights for centuries before plays began to be written down and made available for reading outside the theatre. In ancient Greece, in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance the written play was always a product of a later differentiation. The drama began with ritual or improvisation, or was born on the stage itself out of the permanent characters of the *commedia dell' arte*. The stage is a much older thing than the play. It is well known that Shakespeare's plays were pieced together later from the parts written out for the actors.

In the same way the film is much older than the script. "Much" here means about twenty years—but that is nearly half of the whole history of the film.

When the film began, there was no script; the director improvised each scene on the set, telling each actor what to do during the next shot. The sub-titles were written and cut in later.

The film script was born when the film had already developed into an independent new art and it was no longer possible to improvise its new subtle visual effects in front of the camera; these had to be planned carefully in advance. The film script became a literary form when the film ceased to aim at literary effects, planted itself firmly on its own feet and thought in terms of visual effects. The picture sequences of the photographed theatre could be written down in the form of a stereotyped stage play; but a film using specific visual effects could no longer be pressed into the form of the drama, nor of the novel. A new form was needed. Its terms of reference and its novelty were determined by the

paradoxical task it had to fulfill, which was to present in words the visual experiences of the silent film, that is, something that could not be adequately expressed in words.

The first scripts were in fact mere technical aids, nothing but lists of the scenes and shots for the convenience of the director. They merely indicated what was to be in the picture, and in what order, but said nothing about how it was to be presented.

In the days of the silent film the importance of the literary script grew in the same measure in which the adventurous film stories were simplified and the films themselves given a deeper meaning. The type of imagination the adventure-story writers possessed was no longer suitable; a special filmic imagination was required, subtle visual ideas without intricate plots. The intensity of the close-up drove out the complicated story and brought a new literary form into being.

Such a simplification of the story did not, however, simplify the film at all. There was less adventure, but more psychology. The development turned inward and script-writing was now a task worthy of the pen of the best writers.

It should be said here that this decline of the adventure story was not the only trend in the development of the silent film. There was at the same time a leaning towards the most exotic romanticism—and both these trends can be traced to the same origins. They were both escapist trends, but running in opposite directions. On the one hand the film provided escape into exotic, romantic adventure, on the other escape to some particle of reality entirely isolated from the rest.

With the birth of the talkie the script automatically came to be of paramount importance. It needed dialogue, as a play did, but it needed very much more than that. For a play is only dialogue and nothing else; it is dialogue spoken, as it were, in a vacuum. The stage, though indicated by the author's directions, is not presented in literary form. In the abstract spiritual space of the drama the visual surroundings of the *dramatis personae* were a mere background which could not influence their state of mind and hence could not take part in the action. But in the film visible and audible things are projected on to the same plane as the human characters and in that pictorial composition common to them all they are all equivalent participants in the action. For this reason the script-writer cannot deal with the scene of action by means of a few stage directions. He must present, characterize, depict the visual aspect as well as the rest, express it by literary means, but in much greater detail than for instance the novelist, who may leave a great deal to the imagination of his readers. In the script the script-writer must define the

part played by the images of things every bit as carefully as all the other parts, for it is through them that the destinies of the human characters fulfill themselves.

Thus the now fully developed and mature film art had borne a new fruit, a new literary form, the film script. By now many scripts are available in print and soon they may be more popular reading than the more abstract stage play. It is difficult to say how much time must elapse before our literary critics finally notice this new phenomenon born before their eyes; for this reason we shall try to define the laws governing this new literary form.

The problem is: in what respect does the film script differ from the stage play or the novel? The question is put in this form because it will be easiest to define the specific principles and laws of the script by defining the essential qualities which distinguish it from the other forms most closely related to it.

The present-day script is not an unfinished sketch, not a ground-plan, not a mere outline of a work of art, but a complete work of art in itself. The script can present reality, give an independent, intelligible picture of reality like any other form of art. True, the script puts on paper scenes and dialogues which later are to be turned into a film; but so does the drama put on paper the stage performance. And yet the latter is regarded as a literary form superior to the former.

Written music is only a symbol of the music to be produced by the instruments, but nevertheless no one would call a Beethoven sonata 'unfinished' or a 'sketch' because of this. We even have film scripts now which are intended for reading and could not be shot—just as there are 'book' plays which could never be staged. Nevertheless such scripts are not novels or short stories or stage plays—they are film scripts. They belong to a new literary form.

The basic fact which underlies every form of film and determines the laws governing the script is that the film is an audible spectacle, a motion picture, i.e. an action played out in the present, before our eyes.

One of the things that follow from this basic fact is that the script, like the drama, can present only "real time." The author cannot speak for himself in the script, just as he cannot in the drama. The author cannot say "meanwhile time passed . . .," he cannot say ". . . After many years . . ." or ". . . after this . . ." The script cannot refer to the past, cannot tell us about something that happened long ago or in some other place, it cannot summarize events, as the epic forms can. The script can only present what can be enacted before our eyes, in the present, in a space and time accessible to our senses; in this it is similar to the drama.

How, then, does the script differ from the drama?

In the film, as on the stage, the action is visible and audible, but on the stage it is enacted in real space (the space of the stage) by live human beings (the actors). The film on the other hand shows only pictures, images of that space and of those human beings. The film does not present some action played out in the imagination of a poet, but an actual event enacted in real space by real human beings in nature or in a studio, but presents only a picture, a photograph of these events. Thus it is neither a figment of the brain nor immediate reality.

The upshot of this is that the script as a literary form can contain only what is visible and audible on the screen. This appears to be a truism if we do not examine the bounds set by this rule. But it is on this that everything turns.

In one of the finest Soviet films, *Chapayev*, the political commissar attached to Chapayev's partisan troop arrests one of the partisan leaders for stealing a pig. But why lock him up on the farm where they are staying? There is only a dilapidated barn with a broken door that cannot be locked. We see this because the giant partisan more than once pushes his tiger-like head through the door. He could of course come out at will. What prevents him from kicking down the whole tumbledown contraption? That Furmanov, the political commissar, has placed a sentry to guard the door? But the sentry is even more decrepit than the barn; he is a hollow-chested short-sighted, pitiful little figure, a clerk who scarcely knows one end of his rifle from the other. The giant, savage partisan could blow the funny little man away with a breath of his mighty lungs. But he does not do so. It is thus made obvious that what holds the giant captive is not physical force but a moral influence. And we can see this moral influence, it is quite unmistakably manifested in a pictorial effect.

Then Chapayev himself comes to release his friend. But the ridiculous, miserable little private who is guarding the prisoner, bars his way. Whose way? The way of the commander, the tremendously strong, fierce, dangerous Chapayev, who rages, flings his sword away—but does not shove the ridiculous little soldier out of the way. Why? Here again it is not physical force that stops Chapayev, but a moral power rendered evident by the visible, pictorial presentation; a moral force incarnated in the hollow-chested, short-sighted, clumsy little man put there on guard by the representative of the Party. It is the authority of the Communist Party which even the undisciplined, unruly, fierce partisans respect and which endows the ridiculous little sentry with a conscious dignity.

Here the authority of the Party, although it may seem an abstract idea, has been rendered visible in a dramatic scene, and thus something that can be photographed. It is to be particularly noted that in this

example there are no symbolic or "metaphorical" shots, they are all quite real, ordinary, pictures with nothing improbable about them and yet they radiate a "deeper meaning."

### LESSING AND THE FILM

In analysing the basic difference between the drama and its stage presentation, Lessing outlined the difference between the film script and the film a century and a half before their time. His definition of the nature and laws governing the stage were so brilliant that now, 150 years later, they helped us to define the different laws and the different nature of a different although not entirely unrelated art.

At the beginning of his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* he speaks of plays made from novels and says: "It is not at all difficult . . . to expand single emotions into scenes . . . but to be able to transpose oneself from the point of view of a narrator to the true point of view of each character and instead of describing their passions make these come into existence under the eyes of the spectator and develop without a break in an illusory continuity—that is what is needed here." In this passage all is said about the most essential difference between drama and epic. The same difference exists between the film script and the epic. Like the drama, the script does not describe the passions but makes them come into being and develop under the eyes of the spectator. But in this same passage Lessing also defined the difference between the drama and the film script and has helped us to understand one of the basic principles of film art. He says that the drama presents the passions without a break, in an illusory continuity. And truly this is the specific quality of the drama; such continuity is a necessary consequence of the fact that the drama is written for the stage. For a character coming on to the stage is under our eyes in uninterrupted continuity, without a break, until it leaves the stage again.

### PARALLEL ACTIONS

The novelist can take his readers into a large gathering and then deal with only one person of all the company. He can tell the whole life-story of that one person without informing the reader of what the other people present were doing all that time. The reader may easily forget that they are there at all. In the epic forms such "jumps" are possible and the illusion of an unbroken continuity of scene is not

imperative as it is on the stage. This is the basic difference between epic and dramatic forms.

In this respect, however, the film script is related to the epic rather than the dramatic form. The film, like the epic, is not bound to maintain the illusion of unbroken continuity,—such continuity is not even possible. In a film scene all the persons present at the same place not only need not all be visible in every shot but to show them all, all the time, would even be contrary to the style and technique of the film. The public has the illusion that the participants in the scene are present, but they are not always all of them visible. In ceaselessly changing short shots and close-ups we see only those whose face or words happen to be needed just then. The film can lift such a figure out of the greatest crowd and devote special attention to it, penetrate deeply into its emotions and psychology. In this the film and the film script are related to the epic.

The film can interrupt the continuity of a scene not only by not showing all the persons in a scene all the time—the whole scene itself can be interrupted, the film show a different scene enacted in quite a different place, and then the previously interrupted scene can be continued. This is inconceivable on the stage. The possibility of showing in parallel sequence more than one simultaneous action is a quite specific feature of the film and hence a specific possibility of the film script as an art form.

The unity of space thus binds the film even less than the least form-bound of dramas. For the drama cannot in the middle of a scene show another scene enacted in quite a different place and then return to continue the original scene. The law of the unity of space does not apply to the film at all. But the unity of time all the more so. For even if we interrupt a scene and the interpolated scene is enacted *elsewhere*, it must not be enacted at another *time*. It must happen neither sooner nor later, but at the same time, else the audience would either not understand what was going on or would not believe it.

### TECHNICAL CONDITIONS AND ARTISTIC PRINCIPLES

The question now arises: if there are several characters on the stage but only one or two of them are really engaged in speech or action, do not the others pale into mere lifeless properties? (This is what the technique of the film enables us to avoid.) In a good play this cannot happen, because a good play always has a central problem which organ-

ically binds together all the *dramatis personae*. Whatever is said on the stage, whoever says it, always concerns questions vital to all the characters and therefore they all remain alive and interesting. Thus the technical requirements of the stage determine the literary structure of the drama.

As we have seen, the technical requirements of the film are different and therefore the literary structure of the script is different too. The single central problem, the grouping around a single central conflict, which characterizes the structure of the drama, is contrary to the nature of the film, the technical conditions of which are different. The visual nature of the film does not tolerate a structure consisting of a few long scenes. The reason for this is that while long scenes without a change of setting are possible if they are full of internal movement and people can talk in a room for hours if their words express some internal movement or internal struggle, the film, in which the decisive element is always the visual, cannot be content with such long-drawn, merely internal—and hence non-visible—events. The film requires an external, visible, “shootable” picture for every internal happening. For this reason the film script—again like the novel—does not centralize the conflicts but faces the characters with a series of problems in the course of the story.

One of the laws governing the form of the film script is its prescribed length. In this it resembles the drama, the length of which is determined by the duration feasible on the stage. Of course there are also dramas which are not intended to be performed and which disregard this condition. In the same way it is possible to write fine film scripts intended only for reading and not for shooting as a film.

The film, too, has by now developed a standard length, partly for business reasons, to enable the motion picture theatres to give several shows daily; but there are also physiological reasons which have limited the length of films. For the time being, films longer than ten thousand feet tire the eye.

These are merely external, technical considerations. But it often happens in art that external technical conditions harden into laws governing the internal artistic composition of the work. The short story was created by the predetermined length of the newspaper feature and this art form then brought forth such classics as the short stories of Maupassant or Chekhov. Architectural forms dictated many a composition of sculpture.

The predetermined length may also determine the content. The prescribed length of the sonnet determines its style. No one is forced to write sonnets or film scripts. But if one does, the predetermined length must not become a bed of Procrustes which curtails or draws out the

required content. The theme, content and style of the film script must be inspired by the predetermined length of it. This predetermined length is in itself a style, which the script-writer must master.

By now the script has come to be an independent literary form. It was born of the film as the drama was born of the stage play. In the course of time the drama gained precedence over the stage play and now it is the drama that prescribes the tasks and style of the stage, and the history of the stage has long been merely an appendage to the history of the drama.

In the film there is as yet no trace of a similar development. But it will come in time. Up to now the history of the film script has been merely a chapter in the history of the film. But soon the script may in its turn determine the history of the film. . . .

[1945]