

## *From Dialectical to Normative Specificity: Reading Lukács on Film* \*

by Tom Levin

The role of cinema in György Lukács' extensive writings on aesthetics is at best marginal. Still, it is a topic to which he devoted attention repeatedly, although sporadically, throughout his career. The absence of critical reception of these texts in film studies and in Lukács scholarship<sup>1</sup> alike, however, has allowed an important series of theoretical reflections on film and a polemical debate in contemporary Marxist aesthetics to remain virtually unknown. Typical of the misinformation which abounds regarding Lukács' work on film is the description of an early essay as "his sole attempt to come to terms with the specific aesthetics of cinema,"<sup>2</sup> and the equally misleading claim that "Lukács' interest in

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\* This essay grew out of a talk given on a panel on "Classical German Film Theory" at the 1986 Society for Cinema Studies Conference in New Orleans. I would like to express my thanks to Miriam Hansen and David Rodowick for careful reading and helpful critical comments.

1. There is, to the best of my knowledge, nothing on this subject written in English; in other languages the literature is basically limited to three authors: 1. Guido Aristarco, "Lukács' Beiträge zu Film and Filmkritik," in Frank Benseler, Hrsg. *Festschrift zum achtzigsten Geburtstag von Georg Lukács* (Neuwied & Berlin: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1965), pp. 588-604 (I am grateful to Tony Kaes who called this article to my attention); "L'incarico sociale del cinema e la sua conversione nell'estetico," *Cinema Nuovo* 16:185 (January-February 1967), pp. 20-32; "Lukács: Fedeltà al reale e Fedeltà al Marxismo," *Cinema Nuovo* 20:212 (July-August 1971), 257-261; "Sulle concezioni dell'estetica filmica di Lukács," *Filmkultura* (Budapest) 6 (1971); "Lukács, le Cinéma et la double Mimesis," Pierre Billen, trans. *Cinéma* 71 #161 (December 1971), 72-80. 2. Ugo Finetti, "Lukács, coscienza di classe e controautocritica," *Cinema Nuovo* 17:191 (January-February 1968), pp. 30-39; "Della Volpe, Lukács e i problemi critici del film," *Cinema Nuovo* 20:212 (July-August 1971), pp. 248-256. 3. Zoltan Novak, "La teoria del cinema nell'opera di Lukács," *Cinema Nuovo* (Translated from the Hungarian by Magdi Szekeres Simeoni) Part 1: 29:266 (August 1980), pp. 29-33; Part 2: 29:267 (October 1980), pp. 31-35; Part 3: 29:268 (December 1980), pp. 29-34; Part 4: 30:269 (February 1981), pp. 21-23 (hereafter referred to as "Novak I-IV"). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

2. Introduction to Georg Lukács, "Thoughts on an Aesthetic for the Cinema," Barrie Ellis-Jones, trans. *Framework* (London), 14 (Spring 1981): 2; (Hereafter referred to as "Thoughts"). As will become evident below, both the claims that the essay was "hith-

cinema was continuously present throughout his entire life” (Novak I, 29). In fact, Lukács wrote numerous texts on film at various stages in his career beginning in 1913 with an extraordinary essay “Gedanken zu einer Aesthetik des Kino” [“Thoughts on an Aesthetic for the Cinema”] and then — following a forty-five year hiatus — continuing with a series of shorter pieces which appeared in the Italian film journal *Cinema Nuovo*, a section on cinema in *Die Eigenart des Aesthetischen* [*The Specificity of the Aesthetic*], a preface to Guido Aristarco’s *Il dissolvimento della ragione: Discorso sul cinema*, and a series of interviews published by the Hungarian journal *Filmkultúra*. Through a generally expository reading of this largely untranslated work, the following essay will sketch the development of Lukács’ writing on cinema from the pathbreaking observations of 1913 to the increasingly myopic anti-montage polemics of the 1960s. In the process, it will be argued, Lukács abandons an earlier dialectical model of cinematic specificity (which was particularly open to the radicality and critical potential of the medium) in favor of an increasingly normative position on the question of cinematic realism.<sup>3</sup>

Lukács’ interest in film, while ambivalent, was certainly long-standing, spanning a 60-year period which began in 1910, the year that he and Erast Bloch jointly founded a shortlived club in Heidelberg dedicated to exploring the “latent artistic possibilities of the cinema.”<sup>4</sup> During these student years, he frequented the cinema with some regularity and developed a passion for Chaplin which he retained his entire life.<sup>5</sup> This was, Lukács recalls not without some pride, at a time when few of

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erto unavailable in English” and that it represented a “unique contribution” on Lukács’ part are equally mistaken.

3. The scope of the present investigation is limited to only those essays which deal explicitly with the cinema in order to focus attention on the most obvious feature of this neglected dimension of Lukács’ production. As such, it can only serve as a prolegomena to a future discussion of Lukács and film which would also have to examine relevant issues located elsewhere in his corpus. For example, it is not possible in this context to situate the questions of realism raised in the texts on film in terms of the arguments concerning realism developed in Lukács’ readings of Balzac, Zola, Tolstoy and Stendhal. Nor will the remarks on cinematic montage be related to Lukács’ polemics against montage in theater and literature. However, these and other comparative analyses remain indispensable for an understanding of the significance of cinema in the Lukácsian corpus as well as of Lukács’ contribution to contemporary film theory.

4. György Lukács, “Rivoluzione e psicologia della vita quotidiana,” *Cinema Nuovo* 21:217 (May-June 1972), pp. 171-172 (hereafter referred to as “Revolution”).

5. “I must admit that Chaplin was one of the greatest experiences of my life.” (“Revolution,” 172)

his contemporaries were even willing to acknowledge film as an artform.<sup>6</sup> Lukács' relation to the cinema then took on a more concretely political character during his tenure as Minister of Education in the government of the Hungarian Council Republic which not only founded a state film institute but also, with the passage of ordinance XLVIII on April 9, 1919, was the first to nationalize both film production and distribution. Although it remains unclear just what role Lukács played in these decisions, in the second issue of the journal *Vörös Film* (April 19, 1919) one does find the remark that "the large scale literary proposal of the Minister of Public Education, György Lukács, also includes a provision for the constitution of an official institute for the development of talent for the cinema" (Cited in Novák I, 31-2). Notwithstanding his inability to recall any involvement,<sup>7</sup> Lukács did have some official responsibilities that had to do with film. It is known, for example, that in 1928, when Belá Balázs turned to the Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party with the request to make a film on the Council Republic, it was Lukács who was designated to supervise the project.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of written work, it is readily apparent that Lukács' commitment to film was quite limited. When asked about it, Lukács often 'explained' that this textual paucity was due to time constraints which prevented him from gaining the mastery necessary to work in this discipline — a response which only begs the question. Nonetheless, Lukács felt that "the most relevant social and aesthetic problems associated with the cinematographic art can also be fully grasped by someone who considers them from an abstract point of view" ("Preface," 7), and so he did not refrain entirely from expressing his ideas on the subject.

Lukács' first essay on film, "Thoughts on an Aesthetic for the Cinema," was published in 1913 by the *Frankfurter Zeitung*<sup>9</sup> which had se-

6. György Lukács, "Vorwort" in Guido Aristarco, *Marx, das Kino und die Kritik des Films*. Andrea Spingler and Maja Pflug, trans. (München/Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1981), p. 7 (hereafter referred to as "Preface").

7. In an interview about this period fifty years later Lukács could not remember being engaged in any film-related activities. ("Revolution," 170)

8. In a letter to Elek Bolgár and Aladár Komját dated August 31, 1928, Lukács informs them that the project has been approved and that they have been put in charge of political and ideological content (cited in Novák I, 32). Novák's conjecture that it was actually Lukács who wrote three articles on film signed by László Nemes which were published in the journal *100%* between 1927-1930 remains unsubstantiated.

9. *Frankfurter Zeitung und Handelsblatt* Vol. 58 #251, September 10, 1913. It appeared on the front page of the "Erstes Morgenblatt" edition and was signed "Georg von

lected it over a large number of submissions, including a piece “On Melody in the Cinema” by Ernst Bloch.<sup>10</sup> Although available in English since 1974 and in an adequate translation since 1981,<sup>11</sup> this unjustly ignored document in the archeology of film theory has not received nearly as much attention in the English-speaking world as it has in Hungary, in Italy where it has existed in translation since 1964, or in Germany where it has been anthologized repeatedly.<sup>12</sup>

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Lukács (Heidelberg),” an aristocratic affectation which the philosopher dropped soon thereafter. According to Lukács the article was written in 1912 (“Revolution,” 171) and not in 1913 as indicated under the title of the English translation. (“Thoughts,” 2)

10. This essay, “Die Melodie im Kino oder immanente und transzendente Musik” was subsequently published in the journal *Die Argonauten* 1 (1914): 82-90; it is reprinted as “Über die Melodie im Kino (Versuch 1913)” in Ernst Bloch, *Literarische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1965), pp. 183-187, together with a later version, “Nochmals die Melodieschicht im Kino (Fassung von 1919),” *Ibid.*, pp. 197-190. In a letter to Lukács dated September 3, 1913 Bloch informs his friend of his rejection: “By the way, Simon rejected my Kino-article because he has already accepted yours and because, as he puts it, he has an entire drawer full of such submissions. What a fortunate, productive and rich time this is, if work of our caliber accumulates in a drawer!” (Letter #65, in Karola Bloch, et al., eds., *Ernst Bloch Briefe 1903-1975* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985) vol. 1: 122. When he writes on June 5, 1914, Bloch promises to send Lukács his comments on the published essay — “In my next letter I’ll get to (...) the Kino essay,” (Letter #72 in *Ibid.*, p. 134) — but this missive, if it exists, is unfortunately not included in any of the collections of correspondence which have been published to date.

11. An unsigned and very unreliable translation (rendered into English from a prior Hungarian translation: reference in following note) was published as “The Poetry of Film,” *The New Hungarian Quarterly* 15:54 (Summer 1974): 62-67 (I am grateful to Phil Rosen for calling my attention to this text). Nearly ten years later a translation based on the German original was published as “Thoughts on an Aesthetic for the Cinema” (“Thoughts,” 2-4). In the latter, however, besides numerous smaller problems, there is an unfortunate omission of five lines which renders Lukács’ comparison of the temporality of stage and cinema unintelligible; the opening of the last paragraph in the left column on page 3 should read as follows: “The temporality of the stage, the flow of events across it, is always paradoxical: it is the temporality and flow of important moments, something internally very calm, almost frozen which has become eternal precisely due to the tortuously strong ‘presence.’ The temporality and flow of the ‘cinema,’ however, are entirely pure and unswayed. The essence of ‘cinema’ is movement itself, eternal mutability, the never-resting change of things.” (“Thoughts,” 3) In subsequent citations from this text I have modified the translation where necessary.

12. In Hungary, although the essay only became available in 1972 in a translation by Agnes Erdélyi for *Filmkultúra* 5 (1972), Zoltán Novák writes that “still today Lukács’ text is cited by many.” As an example he cites an article by Georg Alexander published in *Filmkultúra* 6 (1976) in which the author argues that Lukács’ 1913 essay provides the foundation for an aesthetic of the ‘Western’ (!) (Novák I, 32). In Italy the text was published as “Riflessioni per una estetica del cinema,” in *Georgy Lukács: Scritti di sociologia della letteratura*. (Milano: Sugarco 1964). In Germany it is included, for example, in Peter Ludz,

From the very opening of the essay it is evident that, in contrast to much of Lukács' later work on film, the approach here is primarily descriptive rather than normative. Unlike most considerations of film at that time, which imposed either pedagogical or economic questions on this "new and beautiful" thing — cinema —, Lukács proposes to subject it to an analysis on its own terms which, he insists, is the province of aesthetics. Governed by an attitude not uncommon among the more progressive writers of that period,<sup>13</sup> the task was to distinguish the different means of persuasion characteristic of theater and cinema so that each medium might pursue its own development: in short, it was a question of *specificity*. This can be seen already in the title, where the employment of the word 'Kino' — enclosed in quotation marks throughout the essay — functions as a gesture towards cinematic specificity on the linguistic level by virtue of its rejection of a dominant vocabulary whose terms (such as *Filmschauspiel*, *Kinoschauspiel*, *Kinodrama*, *Lichtspieldrama*, etc.) are almost all borrowed from the theater.<sup>14</sup>

It is mistaken, Lukács insists, to claim that film will one day replace the theater, for this ignores the significant differences between the two media. Their respective temporalities, for example, are quite distinct. The live actor is essential to the theater, Lukács writes, because "the

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ed., *Georg Lukács: Schriften zur Literatursoziologie*, (Neuwied am Rhein: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1963), pp. 75-80; in *Filmstudio* 35 (May-June-July 1962), pp. 4-7; in Karsten Witte, ed., *Theorie des Kinos: Ideologiekritik der Traumfabrik* (Frankfurt a.M. Suhrkamp Verlag 1972), pp. 142-148; in Anton Kaes, ed., *Kino-Debatte: Literatur und Film 1909-1929*. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1978), pp. 112-118; and, in an abridged form, in *Hätte ich das Kino! Die Schriftsteller und der Stummfilm* (Catalogue to an exhibit in the Schiller-Nationalmuseum, Marbach a.N., 1976), pp. 40-42.

13. Compare, for example, the work of Kurt Pinthus who, in the same period, edited *Das Kinobuch*, a collection of *Kinostücke* (works written specifically for the cinema). In the introduction, which explores many of the same *topoi* as Lukács' text, he writes: "The more a scene is theatrical, the less it is cinematic: the more cinematic a scene is, the more impossible it is for the theater." ("Das Kinostück: Ernste Einleitung für Vor- und Nachdenkliche," in: Kurt Pinthus, ed., *Das Kinobuch* [Leipzig: Wolff, 1914], p. 2).

14. In light of the significance of the particular word *Kino* in this text, it is curious that whenever the essay is anthologized or cited today, the title, which originally read "Gedanken zu einer Ästhetik des KINO" (my emphasis), invariably becomes "Gedanken zu einer Ästhetik des KINOS." While both instances are grammatically correct, the regularity of the change deserves comment. The less frequent genitive form without the 's' is reserved in German for proper names and foreign words; thus consistent with his emphasizing of the term throughout the essay with quotation marks, Lukács employs a form in the title which also marks it as foreign or new. The employment of the more common genitive construction "des Kinos" today confirms that the term has since lost this linguistic otherness.

stage is the absolute present” and thus its transitoriness is not a failing but a “productive limitation” (“Thoughts,” 3) which also functions to expose the pseudo-immediacy of the quotidian. Film, on the other hand, is characterized precisely by the absence of this “presence” which, Lukács quickly adds, is also not a lack but rather “its limitation, its *principium stilisationis*” (“Thoughts,” 3). Significant, however, is that the life-like but “absent” images of the cinema are not simply the negation of the “reality” of the stage, but rather:

their life is of a completely different kind. In a word, they become fantastic. The fantastic is not, however, the opposite of living life, it is only a new aspect of it — a life without existence in the present, a life without [...] causes, without motives [...] without background, or perspectives, without measure or order, essence or value, a life without a soul, pure surface (“Thoughts,” 3).

Lukács sees in the cinematic medium not the destruction or violation of reality or nature, but instead a new conception of it. Compared to the theater, film celebrates everything which is repressed in the staging of ‘destiny’: in Lukács’ terms, it presents actions, not meanings or reasons; its figures have movement not souls; what happens is an event, not fate. Film, in other words, illuminates the current state of a nature which is constantly changing and is thus historical.

The insights which the new medium affords could be read in a number of ways: as a foregrounding of the alienation which, for Lukács, characterizes daily life under capitalism (an argument very close to the critical theory of distraction put forward by Siegfried Kracauer in “The Cult of Distraction”);<sup>15</sup> or, in a Benjaminian manner, the cinematic “absence” which Lukács describes could be read as a lack which ruptures the continuum of the extant such that a space opens up for social change. In either case, Lukács’ model of the specificity of the cinema is both critical and utopian. This becomes clear in Lukács’ further elaboration of the comparison between theater and film. The former is governed by “inexorable necessity” while the latter qua fantastic is characterized by its “wholly unlimited possibility”: through the “sheer extremity of its nature there arises another, completely different metaphysics” (“Thoughts,” 3). This claim assumes that it is “cutting” which

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15. Included in this issue, cf. pp. 91-96.

is paradigmatically cinematic, enabling the medium to restructure temporal sequence and thereby produce radically different structures of causality. “‘Everything is possible’ — that is the philosophy of the cinema,” Lukács writes, articulating the often jubilant celebration of film’s suspension of spatio-temporal laws as a liberation from sociopolitical constraints as well, a theme which appears with some frequency in the film literature of the first two decades of this century.<sup>16</sup>

However, Lukács also notes that there is another *equally paradigmatic* aspect of the medium — the indexical<sup>17</sup> status of its photographic signifiers. “Everything is real” would be the philosophy of cinema that results from an emphasis on this dimension. This indexicality, Lukács observes, accounts for the affinity of the medium to nature, to the acrobatics of the body in movement, and to the documentation of “everyday activities in streets and markets,” especially automobiles (“Thoughts,” 3).

Theories of film based on the cut tend to emphasize the dimension of *possibility* which resides in the capacity of montage; theories of film which insist that the photographic status of the images is the decisive characteristic tend, on the other hand, to be concerned with how, why, and by whom “*reality*” is conveyed. What distinguishes Lukács’ essay from other meditations on the specificity of the cinema such as that of Bazin is

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16. Ivan Goll puts it quite bluntly: “The laws of matter have been overthrown. Space and time have been conquered. We have the film.” Writing only a few years after Lukács, Hugo Zender conveys the sense of new possibilities which the radicality of the new medium seemed to promise: “The foreign, never seen, unbelievable, miraculous, the a-logical — i.e., what is really alive: the film.” According to Paul Beyer, by taking dreams seriously, film reveals the “bizarre and fantastic aspect of reality” and thereby smashes the reigning terms of legitimacy of the real world. Equally symptomatic, of course, is the recognition that the new medium posed a very real threat: as early as 1911 Albert Helbring, a Berlin legal counselor, denounces such ‘violations’ as ‘illegal,’ accuses film of exploiting a ‘lure of criminality’ and proposes steps to fight this transgression. (Cited in Thomas Köbner, “Der Film als neue Kunst: Reaktionen der literarischen Intelligenz; Zur Theorie des Stummfilms (1911-1924),” in Helmut Kreuzer, ed., *Literaturwissenschaft — Medienwissenschaft* (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1977), pp. 11, 22, 22 & 12, respectively.

17. This term derives from the work of C.S. Peirce and F. de Saussure where, very generally, it is used to describe the specific semiotic character of a class of signifiers (such as smoke or hoofprints) which share an ‘existential bond’ with their signifieds (respectively, fire and horse). Unlike the signifier-signified relation in language which is considered ‘conventional,’ the indexical (and iconic) character of the photographic sign is of a ‘motivated’ sort. For a more detailed treatment of the “index,” cf. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 151ff.

that it does not choose to stress either one of these poles. Instead — in what may well be the earliest articulation of an idea that has since become a standard assumption in film theory — Lukács insists that the unique quality of the medium is its *combination* of these two equally paradigmatic characteristics:

Because at any individual moment its technology is able to express the absolute (even if merely empirical) reality of that moment, the function of ‘possibility’ as an oppositional category to reality is suspended. Each category is the equivalent of the other; they assume a single identity (“Thoughts,” 3).

The *dialectical* specificity of the cinema is that for it “everything is possible and real; everything is equally possible and equally real.”<sup>18</sup> This is what distinguishes film from other media and also gives it its *rhetorical* strength: not simply fantastic nor exclusively empirical, it is fantasy coupled with the rhetorical strength of the empirical.

The result is nothing less than a shift in the status of reality: “a new, homogeneous and harmonious, unitary and variegated world has come about with the ‘cinema’ [...]: maximum vivacity lacking an internal third dimension; [...] strict naturalistic reality and extreme fantasy” (“Thoughts,” 3). To give this some content, Lukács details various techniques of ‘fantastic naturalism’ in cinema — superimposition, trick shots, shots filmed upside down or in reverse motion — and gives some concrete examples, one of which is unmistakably a description of the nightmare sequence in E.S. Porter’s *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1906).<sup>19</sup> Suspending or, perhaps, sublaing the familiar Méliès-Lumière opposition, Lukács writes: “the naturalism of the ‘cinema’ is not [...] tied to our reality” (“Thoughts,” 4).

Corresponding to this fantastic naturalism there is also a shift in the character of spectatorship. The viewers of a film are no longer ‘concentrated

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18. In order to maintain the intelligibility of the argument I have made a strategic replacement in this quotation which, while logically coherent, effaces a remarkable parapraxis on Lukács’ part. For, after declaring that ‘possibility’ and ‘reality’ are no longer opposed but identical, Lukács’ summary reads: “Everything is *true* and real; everything is equally *true* and real.” (“Thoughts,” 3)! This extremely symptomatic elimination of “possibility” and the substitution *ex nihilo* of “true” in its stead foreshadows the tendency in Lukács’ later work on film to repress the exploratory dimension of the medium in favor of its documentary capacities.

19. This is pointed out by Karsten Witte in an editor’s footnote to the reprint of the 1913 essay in *Theorie des Kinos: Ideologiekritik der Traumfabrik*, p. 147.



trated' like the audience in the theater but instead are 'irresponsible'. In the cinema, the coherent viewing subject breaks down: "the child which inhabits all of us is released and becomes the master of the spectator's psyche." Rather than being edified and uplifted, this new spectator enjoys a "vacation from the self." Significantly, this perceptual stance characteristic of "amusement" is only marked negatively by Lukács *when it occurs in the theater* because it is inappropriate to the demands of the stage. While Lukács does not explore the political stakes involved in these different types of spectatorship, it is clear that for him cinema, in its otherness, stages an equally valid but radically different cultural practice. In cinema, amusement and its corresponding mode of spectatorship has found a form which is not only entirely appropriate but also, Lukács adds, "able to be truly artistic" ("Thoughts," 4). Even if the cinema of his era hardly lived up to this potential, all that was lacking was the creative consciousness to transform it: "An Arnim or a Poe of our days would find in [the cinema] a ready instrument for their scenic longings [*szenische Sehnsucht*] as rich and internally appropriate as the Greek stage was for *Sophocles*" ("Thoughts," 4). For Lukács this is a very high compliment indeed.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, his emphasis on the artist as the key to the development of the medium's potential, while itself problematic, is also significant as evidence that already here Lukács avoided an uncritical confidence in the capacities of the *medium itself*. In a proleptic critique of Benjamin, Lukács condemns the fact that "the things that have been done so far were produced naively, often against people's wills, simply out of the spirit of the *technology* of the 'cinema'" ("Thoughts," 4) because the critical and utopian possibilities of cinema are just that: possibilities. The apparatus alone is neither progressive nor reactionary in itself: it has the potential to be *both*. Lukács' stress on the artist as the agent that will raise what is merely technological up to the level of a *style* can be read as the recognition that the politics of a medium depend upon the specific terms of its employment. What is at stake here and, in various guises, throughout Lukács' subsequent work on film, is the status of technology in discussions of the politics of aesthetics.

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20. The editors of *Framework* overlook the real potential which Lukács accorded cinema and instead erroneously cast him as a Luddite who "considered this technological art not to have lived up to its potential" and for whom "as a technological artform cinema had little to recommend itself." Blind to the utopian dimension of his essay, they see in Lukács' position on film only what they call a Frankfurt School "cultural pessimism." (Introduction to "Thoughts," 2).

Explicit references to cinema are almost completely absent in the discussions of realism, narration and description which occupy Lukács during the following decades, despite the relevance of these issues to film theory. Indeed, he does not write again about film *per se* until 1958, in a series of epistolary remarks on a book on film aesthetics edited by a former student, István Mészáros. Breaking this long silence, Lukács immediately resumes his polemic on the status of technology in the elaboration of an aesthetic of the cinema. In a letter published together with Mészáros' proposed table of contents in *Cinema Nuovo* under the title "On the Aesthetic Problems of Cinema,"<sup>21</sup> Lukács describes the conflation of technological and aesthetic questions — which he sees exemplified in the work of his old friend Béla Balázs<sup>22</sup> — as "the greatest defect in the literature of film theory, as far as I know it" ("Problems," p.135). The argument is that form can only be judged in terms of content: technical innovations are to be valorized only insofar as they contribute to the "organic unity" of the film.

Commenting on selected points, Lukács then rehearses distinctions already elaborated in the 1913 essay such as that between the temporality of theater and film, and between the primary function of dialogue in drama and its secondary status in the cinema where it is subordinate to the visual. The latter claim, however, is now enlisted in a

21. György Lukács and István Mészáros, "Sui problemi estetici del cinematografo," *Cinema Nuovo* 7:135 (September-October 1958), 128-137 (hereafter referred to as "Problems"). Both on the cover of the journal and in the introductory remarks, Lukács' contribution is incorrectly announced by the editors as his first direct remarks specifically on issues in film studies.

22. While a student in Hungary, Lukács published a number of essays on Balázs' dramatic works which then appeared as a book, *Balázs Béla és akiknek nem kell* (*Béla Balázs and his Enemies*) (összegyűjtött tanulmányok, Kner, Gyoma: 1918). But, according to Lukács, this volume was not the beginning but the end of his collaboration with Balázs (G.L., *Gelebtes Denken: Eine Autobiographie im Dialog*, Hans-Henning Paezke, trans. [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981], p. 103). Although his first published citation of Balázs' theoretical work on film in 1958 is decidedly critical, Lukács' later references to the same texts in *The Specificity of the Aesthetic* definitely acknowledge a theoretical indebtedness to, and respect for, Balázs' work. Indeed, according to Novák, the only books on film in Lukács' library were by Aristarco and Balázs (Novák III, 84.) For an extensive study of Balázs' film theory, cf. Jean-Michel Palmier, "Béla Balázs, Théoricien Marxiste du Cinéma," in Béla Balázs, *L'Esprit du Cinéma* (Paris: Payot, 1977), pp. 7-117; (the introduction to Palmier's translation of *Der Geist des Films*). In a footnote (p. 57) which dismisses Lukács' 1913 essay as "summary and dogmatic" Palmier refers to a forthcoming essay of his on Lukács and film, which, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet appeared.

very different argument, providing the ground for Lukács' contention that since film is not primarily composed of words it cannot convey 'intellectual' contents. Therefore film is unable to represent the 'totality of objects', a limitation also characteristic of the novella, the literary genre which Lukács considered closest to cinema. This is a decisive shift. In 1913 Lukács claimed that since film was silent and words alone provided continuity, film was not bound to produce continuity and was therefore free to explore other, purely cinematic organizational principles. In 1958 film is subjected to the measure of a literary yardstick and faulted for the primacy of the visual over the linguistic (in a narrow sense). Although Lukács points to this as one of the central issues facing film aesthetics, the possibility of a strictly "*cinematographic language*" is not even raised. The issue of montage is, however, implicit both in Lukács' emphasis on the significance of causality as a cinematic problem and in his warning to Mészáros against reading a linked series of Hogarth drawings as a proto-cinematic narrative. Each drawing is an autonomous unit, Lukács writes, whereas in film "every image is in principle the continuation of the preceding one and the preparation of the one that follows; its entire meaning resides in these connections" ("Problems," 136). Nevertheless, this unelaborated and rather banal suggestion is all that remains of Lukács' earlier position on the radical potential of the cut.

Lukács' remarks subsequently became the object of a polemical critique by Umberto Barbaro in an article which appeared in *L'Unità* on the occasion of the publication in Italian of an essay collection by Lukács entitled *Prolegomeni a un'estetica marxista* [*Prolegomena to a Marxist Aesthetic*] (Editori Riuniti, 1957).<sup>23</sup> Barbaro is outraged that in a work of Marxist aesthetics Lukács has completely ignored what Lenin considered the most important of the arts: film. This absence, Barbaro contends, reveals that essentially Lukács is at best a 'paleo-Marxist', that is, a Marxist still under the spell of idealism. Turning to the letter to Mészáros which he characterizes as "hermetic," Barbaro points out the almost word for word similarity between one of Lukács' opening claims and a text on cinema by the idealist Giovanni Gentile<sup>24</sup> in which the latter also argues that the question of film's artistic status is obscured by the growing tend-

23. Umberto Barbaro, "Lukács, il film e la tecnica," *L'Unità* (Rome), January 22, 1959.

24. Giovanni Gentile, preface to Luigi Chiarini, *Cinematografo* (Rome: Cremonesc, 1935).

ency to focus on its technology. Barbaro insists that the devaluation of technology exemplified in Lukács' critique of Balázs is paradigmatically idealist for it fails to recognize that it is *precisely* the primacy of the technological in film that can lead Marxist aesthetics out of the dead-end of idealism. Like Croce, Lukács continues to use the anachronistic category of *intuition*, writes Barbaro, which locates the artwork in the creative consciousness of the artist and completely ignores the materiality of its expression which is dismissed as secondary. This model must be jettisoned before "typicality" and "reflection" can function meaningfully as part of a Marxist aesthetic.

Lukács' blistering retort --- so caustic that its publication was delayed until after the very ill Barbaro had died --- is less interesting for its arguments, which are few, than for the symptomatic virulence of its tone.<sup>25</sup> Insisting that Barbaro's article does not merit a reply, and that he is only responding because of the authority it gained by being published in *L'Unità*, Lukács claims that his epistolary remarks were provisional and never intended for publication. Moreover he contends that Barbaro has read neither the book which ostensibly provoked his remarks nor the 1958 letter. Instead, Lukács asserts, Barbaro's critique is based entirely on one paragraph of the letter which the editors had cited in the introduction to the exchange. Lukács counters Barbaro's label of 'paleo-Marxist' by calling him a 'neopositivist'<sup>26</sup> and dismisses Barbaro's contention that the absence of work on film in his corpus is evidence of his disregard for technology-intensive media. Lukács accuses Barbaro of employing the logic of a person who, when informed that someone has taken the train instead of the bus to Rome, immediately accuses them of ignoring and discriminating against automotive transport.<sup>27</sup> In other words, just because Lukács has written more on literature than on film does not mean that he is not interested in the latter. Lukács closes

25. György Lukács and Umberto Barbaro, "Diavolo azzurro o diavolo giallo," *Cinema Nuovo* 10:154 (November-December 1961), pp. 500-505; hereafter referred to as "Devil." (This publication combines a reprint of Barbaro's text "Lukács, il film e la tecnica," *op. cit.* together with Lukács' response.)

26. An attack which the editors of *Cinema Nuovo* feel is so unjustified that they apologetically explain it in an introductory note as due to Lukács' unfamiliarity with Barbaro's work. ("Devil," 500).

27. Lukács here compares literature and film with two means of public (and, in Italy, state-run) transportation both of which share a common destination. A more detailed reading of this overdetermined ironic analogy might elaborate a critique of Lukács' work on film by exposing the pitfalls of such a *vehicular* aesthetic.

with perhaps the only substantive claim in this polemic, pointing out that instead of the reductive Zdanovian opposition of *either* technology (positivism) *or* intuition (idealism), the relation between these two must be a dialectical one. Otherwise one is left facing two equally inadequate alternatives or, as Lukács puts it (citing an expression of Lenin's), the choice is between a turquoise and a yellow devil.

The real significance of the Barbaro polemic only becomes evident a few years later when, in 1963, Lukács publishes *The Specificity of the Aesthetic*. Unlike his previous study, which lacked any discussion of cinema and thereby provoked Barbaro's scathing remarks, this work contains an entire section devoted to the subject.<sup>28</sup> The 30-page text, by far Lukács' longest theoretical reflection on film, is located in a chapter entitled "Marginal Questions of Aesthetic Mimesis" following sections on music, architecture, arts and crafts and gardens. It is, as Lukács would later describe it, his attempt "to take a stand on the problems of an aesthetic for the cinema which struck me as most important" ("Preface," 7). Although the general concern of this "interesting but debatable chapter"<sup>29</sup> is similar to that of the 1913 essay — Lukács is still interested in the "categorical construction" of the medium (*Specificity*, 475) — an important shift has taken place which is already signalled by the title: "Film." In 1913 Lukács employed the term *Kino* to mark an approach that sought to explain the *otherness* or the rhetorical specificity of the new medium in terms of a dialectic of indexicality and montage. In 1963, although these two moments are still evident in Lukács' reference to the "double mimesis" of cinema, this dialectic has been abandoned and instead one of

28. Georg Lukács, "Film," Chapter 14, part V of *Die Eigenart des Aesthetischen* (Berlin & Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1981) Volume II, pp. 467-499 (hereafter referred to as *Specificity*). It is interesting to note that this text and the first essay on film — separated by exactly fifty years — coincide precisely with Lukács' two attempts (at the beginning and at the end of his career) to produce a systematic aesthetics: the earlier text is published in 1913 at the time of the recently discovered *Heidelberg Philosophie der Kunst 1912/14* (which Lukács subsequently abandoned) and the later one is part of the 'mature' aesthetics of 1963. While it is beyond the scope of the present discussion, it would be fascinating to undertake a comparative examination of the role of the cinema in the architectonics of these aesthetics along the lines pursued by Nicolae Tertulain in *Critica, Estetica, Filozofie* (Bucharest: Cartea Româneasca Publishers, 1972) and in his afterword to the first chapter of the *Philosophie der Kunst* in *Neue Hefte für Philosophie* 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), pp. 32-37.

29. Jean Michel Palmiër, "Béla Balázs, Théoricien Marxiste du Cinéma," *op. cit.*. For a strictly exegetical reading of the film section of *The Specificity of the Aesthetic*, cf. René Micha, "Le Cinéma dans l'Esthétique de Lukács," *Cinéma* 70 #149 (September-October 1970), pp. 65-74.

its aspects, that of photographic indexicality or *film*, has been privileged. In other words, if in 1913 Lukács explored the rhetoric of the empirical in the service of the fantastic, in 1963 the concern is with the rhetoric of the empirical in the service of the “realistic.” As a result, it will be argued, Lukács’ dialectical model of cinema’s rhetorical specificity is replaced by an increasingly normative position on cinema’s “realist” imperative.

The proto-Benjaminian reading of cinema’s utopian potential which Lukács elaborated in 1913 is noticeably absent in the 1963 text. Indeed the later essay opens with an explicit critique of Benjamin whose important contributions to film theory are acknowledged even as his sharp and differentiated observations are described as suffering from the myopia of a romantic anticapitalist attitude (*Specificity*, 467). Lukács disagrees with Benjamin’s positive description of the “anti-artistic tendencies” of capitalism as a ‘destruction of aura,’ particularly with regard to film. Acknowledging that the rise of capitalist production has affected all art — and film in particular since it is “spiritually as well as technologically” a product of capital (*Specificity*, 469) — Lukács, while not entirely dismissing the possibility of critical practice under these conditions, is generally pessimistic: “the rise of non-capitalist ‘islands’ is much more difficult in film than elsewhere” (*Specificity*, 469).<sup>30</sup> The tenor of Lukács’ remarks having been established by this rather bleak prognosis, the focus shifts to the conventionally aesthetic considerations which dominate the remainder of the essay.

The organizing principle of Lukács’ rambling meditation is the notion of film’s “double mimesis” — the first level photographic or indexical and the second structural or organizational which is repeatedly taken up and rearticulated, often in contradictory terms. Although it is not immediately apparent, the first of these two mimetic economies,

30. Lukács later resumes his critique of Benjamin, objecting to his remarks on the changed status of the actor before the film camera. Benjamin is correct to note that film destroys the ‘personal’ relation of actor to audience, but, so Lukács, this does not destroy the ‘aura,’ it simply creates a new one. The lack of human presence in painting and sculpture, for example, has not precluded a certain kind of effectivity and, Lukács insists, even mechanically reproduced works such as Daumier lithographs or Rembrandt etchings, have aura (*Specificity*, 471-472).

In his study “Benjamin and Lukács. Historical Notes on the Relationship Between Their Political and Aesthetic Theories,” (*New German Critique* 5, Spring 1975: pp. 3-26), Bernd Witte refers to Lukács’ discussion of Benjamin’s *Frauerspiel* book elsewhere in *The Specificity of the Aesthetic* but, curiously, makes no mention of the critique of the “Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.”

the “photographic basis of film” (*Specificity*, 493), takes on increasing importance over the course of the essay. On the one hand, Lukács insists that because of the *difference* characteristic of its images — their unusual perspectives, lack of movement, sound, etc. — “photography as a foundation is in itself disanthropomorphizing” (*Specificity*, 468); film, according to a traditional supplemental logic, works to compensate for these lacks and thus has an “anthropomorphizing” effect. The means specific to the cinema function to *restore* an impression of “normal vision,” employing various devices to approximate the “forms of appearance of daily life” (*Specificity*, 470). On the other hand, Lukács also emphasizes the ‘accuracy’ of the photographs qua indexical traces which, in turn, make of film a ‘faithful record’ of reality because it is simply the sum of such indexical units: “film is a visually exact report about a piece of reality, a construction — a montage — of such precisely reproduced fragments of reality” (*Specificity*, 493). In both of these cases, Lukács makes statements concerning cinematic form based on qualities of its photographic technology.

The great mistake of film theory, as Lukács repeatedly stresses, is the conflation of technological and aesthetic questions: an aesthetic of film can not be derived from its technology. Since the first (photographic) level of cinematic mimesis is purely technological, according to Lukács’ own logic it cannot provide the basis for an aesthetic. The second-level mimesis, while based on the first, is not obligated to “follow” it: indeed, if in both of the above cases film is claimed to be “anthropomorphizing,” Lukács also observes that “the technology of film even presents the possibility of a turn back into the disanthropomorphizing, for example in time ellipsis” (*Specificity*, 468). In a passage very reminiscent of the 1913 essay Lukács argues that it is precisely the combination of the anthropomorphizing and the disanthropomorphizing — of the *rhetorical power of the indexical* with the restructuring capacities of montage — that constitutes the unique quality of the cinematic medium:

film — precisely as a result of its photographic authenticity — can lend sensuous reality and evidence to the most unusual fantasies. ...[in film] presentation there are no limits; here too transitions into and out of the quotidian can take place (*Specificity*, 484).

This, Lukács argues, reveals the locus of the aesthetic capacity of the medium. Cinema is artistic, he suggests, to the extent that it *violates* the

purely indexical first-level mimesis:

It is purely and only the restructuring of the individual photographs and their sequence which can prevent film from remaining caught at the level of daily-life perception and can raise it to artistic heights (*Specificity*, 494).

The elaboration of this second level of cinematic mimesis, described as a “highly complicated restructuring of what was initially a document of reality” (*Specificity*, 494), leads Lukács to finally come to terms with the subject of montage.

The treatment of montage is linked almost immediately with a discussion of “*cinematographic language*” clearly indebted to Béla Balázs who is cited as the source of various anecdotes regarding the unintelligibility of film to the uninitiated. These tales, which Lukács recounts at length — the panic that swept through the audience at the sight of the first close-up in a Griffith film — “show very clearly that film — like every art — is a particular ‘language’ that must be ‘learned’ if one wants to have experiential access to the works” (*Specificity*, 116). However, Lukács then qualifies this claim, insisting on the specificity of a cinematic semiotics. In terms very reminiscent of early Metz (cinema is different from language due to the indexicality of its signifiers, lacking double articulation, a language without *langue*, etc.) Lukács notes that the linguistic character of film is not based on ‘vocabularies’ but on taste, and that cinematic language is less permanent and more work-specific than the languages of other artistic media (*Specificity*, 477).

In order to further specify the peculiarity of what is referred to as cinematographic language, Lukács introduces a new term — atmosphere (*Stimmung*) — which he proposes as the “universal and dominant category of film’s effect” (*Specificity*, 492). Every image as well as every series of images, it is claimed, generates a unity of atmosphere (*Stimmungseinheit*) if it is aesthetically organized. Film language is the means by which such atmosphere is produced and maintained:

All technical means of film recording (close-ups, dissolves, etc) gain their aesthetic significance only as the means for the expression of a unity of atmosphere, of transitions from one atmosphere to another, of contrasts of atmosphere; similarly, the cut, montage, tempo, rhythm, etc. are nothing but the means of leading the spectator from one atmosphere to



another within the ultimate atmospheric unity of the whole  
(*Specificity*, 490).

Interestingly, among the examples which Lukács provides to illustrate this concept are scenes from films by Pudovkin and Eisenstein: the abandoned hall of the Winter Palace from *The End of St. Petersburg* in which a huge chandelier begins to shake and finally crashes to the floor, and the Odessa steps sequence from *Potemkin* where one sees only the boots of the cossacks descending the stairs. In both cases, Lukács notes, it is not *what* is in the image (the denotation) but what the image *means* (the connotation) which is important. The language of film is the catalogue of devices employed to direct this meaning, to control the association: it is, in other words, a syntax of connotation. At the same time it is the locus of the medium's aesthetic potential. Yet, curiously, Lukács refuses to work out any further details of this aesthetics of atmosphere, insisting that this is outside the scope of his investigation and is more properly the province of a film dramaturgy (*Specificity*, 495).

The abandonment of the question of atmosphere despite its central importance for the elaboration of an aesthetics of cinema is justified through a very symptomatic move whereby Lukács notes that before one can examine the atmosphere of an image, that is, *what* it connotes, one must first consider *how* such connotation takes place. In film the basis of connotation, its condition of possibility, is the photographic image. The most important question is therefore what the photograph connotes qua photograph. For Lukács the answer is — 'reality':

The possibilities and limits which film encounters are based first and foremost on the particular kind of atmosphere which the authenticity of the photographic representation can produce in the spectator. Every film image is experienced as the mimesis of a reality which is certified as reality from the outset by the very fact of its having been photographed: since it was able to be photographed it had to be really present in precisely this form (*Specificity*, 491).

Prior to all atmosphere of an image, the photograph conveys the atmosphere of its indexicality. In other words, even before the image of a swaying chandelier or cossack boots is 'read' as a signifier of decline or oppression, respectively, each is perceived as a trace of a 'real' object. The *meta-connotation* of every image not only precedes but also structures all subsequent connotational particulars: "the relationship to reality de-

termines both the character and the specific quality of the atmosphere which reigns in the artworks" (*Specificity*, 492). With this move, Lukács has shifted the focus away from the question of atmosphere as cinematic language (read: montage) which provided no foundation for a prescriptive realist aesthetic. Instead, an emphasis on the connotation of indexicality seems to provide a criterion — the 'real world' — as a norm for cinematic practice.<sup>31</sup>

The transformation which occurs in Lukács' position between 1913 and 1963 can now be understood as the move away from the 'fantastic' and towards 'reality' as the primary concern of the cinema. Even montage will become subject to the realist imperative: "The aesthetic organization of the photographic pieces and their combination can also be thoroughly realistic [...]" (*Specificity*, 494). The shift can be strikingly illustrated through a comparison of Lukács' remarks on the soundtrack in both texts. In the early essay, Lukács argues that the essential visuality of the cinematic medium requires the exclusion of sound. Anticipating Arnheim's well-known thesis by more than ten years he insists that cinema *by nature* suspends the acoustic:

anything of consequence in the events portrayed is and has to be expressed exclusively through actions and gestures; any recourse to the word is a denial of this world, a destruction of its fundamental value. [...] That is why -- and only apparently because of present technical imperfections -- the scenes in the 'cinema' are silent ("Thoughts," 3).

Fifty years later Lukács uses the very same argument to make the exact opposite point, claiming that cinema, as the reproduction of the 'real', *essentially* always already included sound:

the imperative of organically connecting auditory moments with the visuality specific to the cinema was already implicitly

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31. The difficulty is that, as Lukács recognizes, "the 'language' of film in all of its specific traits demonstrates the same problematic of truth and lie which inhabits every use of language in man's life" (*Specificity*, 496). To get around it, Lukács shifts the emphasis to the photographic, thereby profiting from what is acknowledged to be an *impression* of reality: "the authenticity of what is represented contributes significantly to the *evocation* of an increased *effect* of truth and of reality. The *impression* arises very easily that a verbal report could lie without difficulty whereas a photographic account would necessarily correspond to something real." (*Specificity*, 495; my emphasis)

contained in the silent film; the fact that from the start no silent film was thinkable without musical accompaniment was clear evidence of this (*Specificity*, 469).

Lukács notes that with the advent of the “Talkies,” the soundtrack took over both the maintenance of narrative coherence (from the intertitles) and the production of emotional coding (from the ‘live’ music). However, in order to insure that the acoustic is not accorded an autonomy which would lead to a sound-image relation akin to *montage*, it is carefully stressed that the role of sound in film is in principle *secondary*. Citing *Citizen Kane* as an example, sound is relegated to the status of accompaniment (*Specificity*, 476), simply a necessary accessory in the reflection of the ‘world’.

In order to dismiss the ‘fantastic’ dimension of film and to establish the imperative of a realist cinematic aesthetic, Lukács now stresses the *rhetorical force of the index*. If in 1913 Lukács argued that the specificity of the cinema resides in its *combination* of indexicality and montage, this fragile dialectic is here destroyed by the claim that the first-mentioned photographic aspect of film has priority over the second:

Independent of any aesthetic characteristic and even independent of any ultimately completely alienating effect it might produce, every photograph must give the impression that at the moment it was taken the represented object actually looked exactly as it appears on the photograph (*Specificity*, 473).

Any arrangement of these photographic images, no matter how bizarre, Lukács argues, will not change this “authority” of the index and indeed cannot change it since the authority stems ‘from the world’. Therefore — and this is the crucial move — the imperative expressed by the indexical images “must be maintained, must constitute an essential aspect of the homogeneous medium in film art” (*Specificity*, 473). This holds even when a film wants to violate the canons of ‘realist’ production, for if a film wants to be “unreal” it must still obey a photographic imperative: “If a film wants to make a ‘miracle’ authentically effective it has to prepare the photographed object in such a way that its unmediated manner of appearance has the character of the real” (*Specificity*, 474).

This gives Lukács the much needed aesthetic imperative with which he can argue against cinematic expressionism such as *The Cabinet of Dr.*

*Caligari*. Although film involves a *double* mimesis, unlike that of other arts its primary material is itself already mimetic to such an extent that it completely overwhelms the second order mimesis: “Film’s closeness to life *determines* the essential stylistic questions of the medium” (*Specificity*, 477) which are “to present life in as transparent and graspable a manner as possible” (*Specificity*, 476).<sup>32</sup>

Anticipating the objection that only a few pages earlier he had used the same reasons to argue that aesthetic creation in film required one to *violate* indexicality, Lukács remarks that “it thus seems that a naturalism which would otherwise be antiartistic might be artistically possible in film” (*Specificity*, 479). By making the technological fact of film’s photographic basis the foundation of his *aesthetic* prescriptions — i.e. insisting on “the primarily photographic mimesis as the foundation of filmic construction” (*Specificity*, 479) — Lukács engages, ironically, in the very practice for which he so condemned both Benjamin and Balázs. If the former, according to his critique, uncritically fetishized montage, Lukács has simply chosen to fetishize the other side of the dialectic. If Balázs was faulted for according excessive significance to technology, Lukács’ dependence on indexicality can be similarly faulted. Lukács summarizes the polemical thrust behind his remarks on film as follows:

We believe that only the employment of general aesthetic categories which are commensurate with the specificity of film will enable the authentically artistic and truly realistic character of film to be worked out in detail and thereby free it from a technologico-positivistic metaphysics of montage (*Specificity*, 495).

What Lukács has produced in the film section of *The Specificity of the Aes-*

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32. In their different conceptions of the mediation between social and cinematic form — one normative, the other critical — one can see the distance between the positions of Lukács and Kracauer. Lukács makes reference to and even praises Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler* — agreeing that film can be read as a symptom of societal forces and desires (*Specificity*, 493 & 919, note 101) — but, it is important to note, the citation is taken from the German translation published in 1958 by Rowohlt which, as Karsten Witte has pointed out in his editor’s afterword to the new retranslated version, *Schriften 2* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979) was an extremely tendentiously edited, entirely depoliticized skeleton of the original study. The reception of Kracauer by both Lukács and Adorno must be considered in the light of the distortions caused by this dubious edition. A careful comparison would show that Lukács’ arguments have a much greater affinity to Bazin’s ‘realism’ (for example in “Montage Interdit,” *Qu’est-ce que le Cinéma?* [Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1985], p. 49-61) than to Kracauer’s film aesthetics.

*thetic* is nothing less than a technologico-positivistic metaphysics of indexicality.

Lukács' section on film, although relatively insignificant within a nearly 2000-page work, is nevertheless read by some as an indication of his renewed interest in the medium. When in the following years the anticipated proliferation of texts on film does not occur, a number of attempts are made to provoke Lukács to write more on the subject. Indeed, it is largely due to the efforts of the editors of *Filmkultúra*, Yvette Biró and Szilárd Ujhelyi, and the editor of *Cinema Nuovo*, Guido Aristarco, that Lukács publishes a few short pieces on film during the last years of his life.

The longest and most serious of these late remarks takes the form of a four-page epistolary preface to Guido Aristarco's massive study of American and Eastern European cinema *Il dissolvimento della ragione (The Dissolution of Reason)*.<sup>33</sup> In this text, which begins with a deprecation of the 1913 essay as a one-sided occasional piece ("Preface," 7) and an observation that the film section in *The Specificity of the Aesthetic* lacks a detailed consideration of the historical development of the medium, Lukács proposes a different approach to the question which, he insists, is still the most important issue in film studies: the politics of the preoccupation with technology in film aesthetics. If film theory has ignored issues of social significance and aesthetics in favor of a focus on technological questions, Lukács argues, this is not due *exclusively* to the primacy of technology in cinema's material base. It is also (and perhaps *primarily*) a function of a widespread current tendency towards "manipulation" which privileges isolated technical problems over fundamental aesthetic issues in the consideration of art. Because film is more completely and immediately imbricated with capital "by its very nature and more than any other art cinema is exclusively made to achieve imme-

33. Georg Lukács, "Introduzione," in Guido Aristarco, *Il dissolvimento della ragione: Discorso sul cinema* (Milano: Feltrinelli Editore, 1965). Lukács' preface, dated 'April 1965,' was reprinted as "Manipolazione culturale e compiti della critica," in *Cinema Nuovo* 14:178 (November-December 1965), 406-409. The prefatory remarks were subsequently included in a separate publication of the first chapter of Aristarco's book under the title *Marx, il cinema e la critica del Film* (Milano: Feltrinelli Editore, 1979), pp. 11-15. In the translations of this shorter volume Lukács' text appears as "Preface" in the French edition *Marx, le cinéma, et la critique de film*, Barthélemy Amengual, trans. *Etudes cinématographiques* no. 88-92 (Paris: Minard, 1972), p. 7-12; and as "Vorwort" in the German version *Marx, das Kino und die Kritik des Films*, Andrea Spingler and Maja Pflug, trans. (München/Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1981), pp. 7-10. (All citations are from the German version, *op. cit.*, note 7; ("Preface").

ciate mass effects" ("Preface," 8). In the vital struggle against such cinematic manipulation, the overemphasis on the technological aspect is reactionary, writes Lukács, because it serves — sometimes intentionally — to efface the *human* and *social* basis of this manipulation and thereby promotes the belief that such manipulation is unstoppable.

As in the "Film" essay, the addressee of this critique is clearly Walter Benjamin. But where the former text explicitly cited and took issue with Benjamin's "Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," the later preface refers to Benjamin not by name but by topos. For the paradigmatic example of manipulation which Lukács chooses to examine in some detail — the effect of shock (*Schockwirkung*) — is nothing other than the term Benjamin coined to describe the radically different character of spectatorship in the cinema which is brought about by montage. Whereas in 1913 Lukács described the specificity of cinematic spectatorship as distracted instead of contemplative — terms very analogous to those Benjamin would later employ — here this mode of reception is subjected to a political critique. Lukács now describes shock as the "irruption of the unexpected, of sudden change, of the sensational, etc. [which] can be produced in the easiest and surest way by a new technological trick" ("Preface," 7). Like Benjamin who explains that "shock" destroys the spectator's train of association, Lukács describes the effect of shock as a momentary jolting of the nerves. But for Benjamin this trauma leads to an *increase* in critical awareness — "the shock effect of film, like every shock effect, needs to be absorbed by a heightened presence of mind"<sup>34</sup> — whereas Lukács insists that the opposite is the case. Shock, he argues, so numbs the critical apparatus that it is incapable of getting to the root of manipulation. Although shock makes revolutionary claims, its effect, Lukács concludes, is ultimately that of a quietist pseudo-radicality:

the explosive effect of shock and the unusual character of its appearance give the illusion of a non-conformist attitude to those who experience it and even more to those who produce it, without however producing on either a theoretical or ethical level any decisive opposition against being manipulated;

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34. Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," sec. 14, *Gesammelte Schriften* 1:2 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980), 503; compare "The Artwork in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn, trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 238.

that is, without any manifestation of an authentic non-conformism ("Preface," 8).

For Lukács, whether intended or not, shock — and that means montage — serves the interests of the ideology of manipulation.

The inevitability of manipulation, however, is only apparent: resistance, Lukács writes, is always possible in many ways. It even finds expression, he admits, *within* the press and the cinema, albeit in much weaker fashion, as for example in the work of Chaplin.<sup>35</sup> Because film theory and criticism are by their nature less industrialized and commercialized than actual film production it is even more incumbent upon them to engage in resistance. For Lukács this would take the form of an "authentic, convinced and convincing theory" ("Preface," 10) informed by Marx's statement that "To be radical is to grasp matters at the root. But for man the root is man himself":<sup>36</sup>

The primary task of any film critic who deserves the name today is to overcome technologism in the theory and practice of cinema and to prove that behind every apparently purely formal question there are serious, major problems which face man. The means of artistic creation can influence whether man finds or loses himself ("Preface," 10).

In what will become the leitmotif of his last remarks on film, Lukács passionately insists that all work must be judged in terms of its capacity to address pressing social concerns.

The 1965 preface to the Aristarco book proves to be Lukács' last sustained train of thought on the cinema. The subsequent publications devoted to the subject take the form of question and answer sessions which explore little or no new ground, serving instead to clarify or confirm earlier positions. In general, they convey the impression that

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35. Chaplin's films are lauded because they fruitfully employ new technological possibilities of the medium in order to express man's struggle to survive and to unmask the forces that threaten him. In *The Specificity of the Aesthetic* Lukács likens the critical impetus in Chaplin's work to that of the films of Eisenstein and Pudovkin in which the depiction of the events of the Russian revolution also gives expression to vital issues of oppression and liberation (*Specificity*, 482). Years later he again remarks that "Chaplin is one of the great figures in the artistic struggle against the alienation of the imperialist epoch" ("Revolution," 172). The interviews in *Filmkultúra* contain similar remarks about the political engagement of the New Hungarian cinema.

36. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Joseph O'Malley, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 124.

Lukács, although increasingly willing to acknowledge film's great potential, is simply unable to get past the myopia of his deep seated prejudices. The least successful of the sessions, entitled "Film, Ideology and the Cult of Personality," consists of a series of four rather disparate questions posed by Guido Aristarco in 1967 to which Lukács responds with a very vague and rather short letter published in *Cinema Nuovo* on the occasion of the first Italian translation of *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>37</sup> Much more extensive and substantive is the discussion between Lukács and the *Filmkultúra* editors Yvette Biró and Szilárd Ujhelyi which took place in the philosopher's house in May 1968.<sup>38</sup> Before the interview which concerns, on the one hand, questions of "Technology, Contents and the Problem of Language" and "The Expression of Thought in the Cinematographic Work" (the titles given the Italian translation) and, on the other hand, the new Hungarian cinema, Lukács was shown a series of films by directors such as Miklós Jancsó, András Kovács and István Szabó. As a result, Lukács is able to illustrate a number of problematic issues with concrete citations. Kovács' use of flashback in *Cold Days* (1965), for example, is cited as an instance where technology is employed in a "correct manner" ("Technology," 408) as a means of conveying a specific content, in this case the depiction of latent fascism in a mediocre commune. The use of the new technique is "correct," Lukács explains, because the innovation has been translated into artistic terms, i.e. the audience recognizes that through this technique new types of relations can be expressed:

If film as a work of art succeeds in making people reflect seriously about a past or present situation and confront it with their own situation, then its goal has been achieved ("Expression," 8).

37. György Lukács, "Film ideologia e culto della personalità," *Cinema Nuovo* 16:188 (July-August 1967), 248-249 (hereafter referred to as "Ideology").

38. György Lukács, "Tecnica, contenuti e problemi di linguaggio," *Cinema Nuovo* 17:196 (November-December 1968), 408-419 (A translation by Ivan Lantos of part I of an interview with Lukács conducted by Yvette Biró and Szilárd Ujhelyi and published in *Filmkultúra* 3 (1968); (hereafter referred to as "Technology"); "Espressioni del pensiero nell'opera cinematografica," *Cinema Nuovo* 18:197 (January-February 1969), 8-13 (A translation of part II of the abovementioned interview; hereafter referred to as "Expression"). A short version of the interview, edited by Marcel Martin and translated into French (from the Italian version) by Paul Robert, appeared as "Le Cinéma Hongrois est à l'avant garde de la culture nationale," in *Cinéma*, 69. 140 (November 1969), 28-39. (I am grateful to Yvette Biró for having drawn my attention to this interview and for generously discussing with me her encounters with Lukács on the subject of film).



To make audience comprehension the measure of the effectiveness of a technique is highly problematic not only because it is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to measure but also because, as Yvette Biró notes, it is unclear whether the audience should even be the site of adjudication. Could it not be, she asks, that the level of the film is far ahead of the sophistication of the audience? Lukács' indicative non-response is:

If, on the one hand, people were as backward as the bureaucrats would have us believe, a socialist revolution would not have been possible. If, on the other hand, people were as progressive as the bureaucrats at other times insist, the revolution would not have been necessary. Since neither is true and the revolution did take place it is necessary for the cinema and the other arts to work in the interests of the revolution and intellectual development ("Expression," 9).

Here Lukács makes explicit a tendency which was latent already in the film section of *The Specificity of the Aesthetic* where he insists that film must "follow its often unarticulated social mission" ("Technology," 470). Aesthetic considerations are now openly subordinate to political pragmatics: "The discussion of film," Lukács writes in the concluding paragraph, "is only possible from a communist point of view" ("Technology," 13).

The criterion of effectivity provides Lukács with a new means to dismiss certain cinematic techniques. The fast cuts in many current films, for example, are faulted because their rapidity threatens ready intelligibility. But, asks Biró, is it not possible that such a faster tempo is a response to a shift in contemporary perception which, while still new today, will in time seem 'normal'? Although Lukács reluctantly admits that this might be true, he insists that film nevertheless remains *incapable* of expressing the serious material characteristic of drama and literature due to the primacy of its visual component: "an intellectual problem cannot be expressed by a picture" ("Technology," 10).<sup>39</sup> When Biró then points out that the word or dialogue in film must be considered as one part of a multifaceted, poly-semiotic construction or montage, Lukács' resistance is pronounced:

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39. Although at one point Lukács is less categorical and admits that it may simply be that film has *not yet* developed these capacities, this is quickly followed by the old argument that film is structurally incapable of intellectual expression due to the subordinate status of the word.

This is a topic I do not discuss. All I can say is that cinema must find a way [...] to make use of its own specific means. This is a major enterprise and I do not think that cinema has resolved the problem even though some solutions must exist. But I am not competent to say more about this ("Technology," 11).

By forcing the issue, this valiant attempt to confront Lukács with the contradictions in his work on film theory makes painfully obvious the limits of his conception of the cinematic medium.

Lukács' final observations on film occur in one of the last interviews he granted before his death, a discussion with the filmmaker András Kovács which was broadcast on French television on March 5, 1971. During the course of this session, which is more interested in establishing a history of Lukács' relation to film than in pursuing theoretical issues, Kovács inquires whether the recent work on film indicates a change in Lukács' conception of the medium. Lukács responds that in every epoch certain arts or artists play a leading role in cultural transformations and that today:

I have the impression — and I must emphasize that it is only my impression so that it not be accorded excessive significance — that in this most complex process whereby we are trying to form a new Socialist culture, cinema plays a decisive role in the avant-garde. It must be said that cinema has brought out many problems of vital importance from which many specialists in various camps shy away ("Revolution," 172).

However, when Kovács remarks that in his aesthetics, on the whole, film played a secondary role, Lukács readily concurs:

Indeed. My aesthetics were based primarily on literature. I then added — still in my youth — figurative art and later music, mostly under the influence of Bartok. My involvement with the cinema was only incidental ("Revolution," 171).

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40. György Lukács, "Rivoluzione e psicologia della vita quotidiana," *op. cit.* ("Revolution"). An unsigned translation of the last interview with Lukács before his death, conducted by András Kovács and broadcast on French television on March 5, 1971; published in Hungarian in *Filmkultúra* 1 (1971).

Nearly sixty years earlier Lukács, with great foresight, had argued that the cinematic medium required its own aesthetic and that its specificity was dialectical. Over the course of the prolific career which followed, film, when not completely ignored, was increasingly subjected to normative aesthetic imperatives which stemmed, as Lukács himself acknowledged, from the privileged status of literature and drama in his work. Yet, despite its marginality, Lukács' work on cinema — and the 1913 essay "Thoughts on an Aesthetic for the Cinema" in particular — is not insignificant. It remains important not only for the study of his oeuvre (where it provides a new approach to the debates about 'realism' and serves as an index of the shifting priorities in his aesthetics) and for the concerns of Marxist aesthetics (as an illustration of the consequences of excluding cinema from the consideration of contemporary cultural production) but also, finally, for contemporary film studies to which it offers an unexamined moment in the archeology of film theory and a new voice in the discussions of spectatorship, the rhetorical specificity of the medium, and the aesthetics and politics of the artwork in the age of its technological reproducibility.

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