

Introduction

The Human Figure on Film

FEW THINGS HOLD THE GAZE as does the human figure. Movement in the figure holds the gaze even more. It is, at once, the most obvious and elusive of all our concerns. It is obvious because we see it in the course of daily life: on the street, out of windows, at work, in the mirror. We appraise and evaluate the figures of others; we act on the basis of the signs they give off. We draw close to ones whose movements are agreeable and avoid those that threaten some possible danger. Yet if called upon to give our criteria for judgment, we might balk and protest and soon be at a loss for words. “Why was it the movement of his arm stirred her as nothing else in the world could?” asks D. H. Lawrence.¹ The question goes unanswered; the movement remains elusive; and the figure that stands before us becomes an utter mystery. This is not, in itself, unpleasant or bad. A world without mystery would be a poor thing indeed. Still, one feels there are more pointed questions that could and should be asked of a thing of such great interest.



Whatever questions we pose are likely to arise as well when we see such figures moving on a screen, in a film. Almost all films are full of human figures that file past the camera “as though of right.”² They are there in the early days, kissing and sneezing; soon they are

living, loving, and dying; by the end of the 1920s they are even seen talking. Names like Vitascopie and Biograph support the impression that life itself is on display when the figures start to move. The cinema might even function as a surrogate for life; the screen is full of energy and we leave the theater “charged.” The prototype of such a naive response is given by Frank Norris in his novel *McTeague* (1899). “Look at that horse move his head,” McTeague gasps. “Look at that cable car coming—and the man going across the street.” Mrs. Sieppe beside him says she knows it is a trick; little Owgooste falls asleep as he struggles to hold his bladder. But McTeague remains riveted, “quite carried away,” and each new image draws from him some further exclamation. Later, going home, he assesses the performance. “Wasn’t—wasn’t that magic lantern wonderful, where the figures moved? Wonderful—ah, wonderful!”³ The whole episode is proof of the character’s simplicity. Yet most of us today do not get much further. We might use more and bigger words, but the substance would be the same. Though we speak with conviction of this or that actor, of this or that performance as good or poor, we do not really know what provokes the impression and we fall back on language that convinces no one. The adjectives we use are curiously resistant to verbal expansion or extension of the referent. What remains are a perception—namely, that the figures moved—and a feeling wedded to it, such as “ah, wonderful!”

Wonderful is not always a bad place to start. It marks a thing of vital interest to the person who says it. And so one might begin with the work of description: of saying what is there as it changes or doesn’t. Then one will at least have a more precise record of whatever it is that elicited wonder. Some films consist, or seem to consist, of little more than moments that make us feel wonder. *The Big Sleep* (1946), for instance, has been said to work this way. Its plot is hard to follow and it is best not to try. The film has other compensations; it is interesting to look at. Apparently its authors had no greater ambition than to make every sequence into “something that was fun.”⁴ My own favorite scene occurs fairly early when the hero first enters the house on Laverne Terrace. I see that figure enter after screaming and gunshots and a bright flash of light have caught its attention, and I am entranced. I see it run from a car across the darkened street and to the front door, then to a nearby window; kick the window open,

step in and look around; investigate the setting, which includes a man and woman. The man is quite dead and the woman, intoxicated. In any case they are part of what functions as background. For one or two minutes there is just the mute poetry of a human figure as it moves against this background.

Poetry, of course, is not just ineffable. It has a material vehicle that can be analyzed quite prosaically. One can look at the image and make a plain description, which in our case would probably go something like this. Shot 1: Long shot of the windows from inside the house as the running man enters through them. The windows open at his kick and the score abruptly ceases. He steps down and looks around. A sofa flanks him on one side and a chair on the other. The camera pans slightly as he takes a few steps into the room and looks offscreen left. Shot 2: Long shot of a bedroom as seen through hanging beads, which sway gently with the wind coming in from the window. Shot 3: Medium shot of the entrant, who looks from offscreen left to offscreen right. Shot 4: Long shot of a woman sitting in a wooden chair, humming, using an index finger to stroke her left knee. She never looks up; at the end of the shot, she titters. The chair is in an alcove on a slightly raised platform with another couch behind it. In the setting there are statues, incense burners, embroidered drapery, and other things. Shot 5: The man walks through the room, eyes lowered and mostly covered by the shadow of a hat—and so on.

But this attempt at a plain description is not very successful. It has already made a number of assumptions about visible figures and units of analysis. For one, the figures are given genders: there is a man and there is a woman. They are distinguished as living from another figure who is dead. The film is broken down in terms of separate shots, or periods of apparently continuous shooting, and hence the observations are preponderantly macro, for they deal with units ranging from one to sixty seconds. Perhaps a more granular form of description would avoid the assumptions of everyday language. We could, for example, call the figures A and B, and then proceed to map their physical displacements at a frame-by-frame level, one limb at a time. We could say every time a given limb moves and in what direction it moves across the screen. We could mark every change of flexion to extension or from adduction to abduction in all movable parts, as well as note the scale of the figures in the frame and any displacements

of the camera that frames them. We could, finally, look at all this as a train of events in time that also builds a space out of fragments of space. But we would not get any closer to a form of observation that makes no assumptions about what is seen. Our language betrays us. We still assume, for instance, that the figure is human; that the human has a figure; that a camera has framed it—framed it in unreal space. Thus any description of it is laden with concepts, if not with a fully formed theory about it. As soon as we take any step beyond “wonderful!” we are already working with one or more concepts. And each of these concepts can generate knowledge when pressed into service self-consciously, systematically.

If I think I am looking at a moving human figure, I inevitably ascribe to it the quality of life, and life, whatever else it may be, is sustained by interaction with its surroundings. It lives in a state of dynamic exchange with the flora and fauna of its environment. So when I see the running figure move over to the house, I see not mere motion but a response to the environment: in this case to the noise and the flash of bright light that decisively change the aspect of the environment. Let us call this a natural-historical way of looking, with a natural human organism as the object of our regard. We are interested in the relation of organism to environment and in the emergent quality of the organism’s behavior. This particular organism, a fortyish white male, can be seen to behave differently before and after the commotion. Before he is slouching and dozing in a car as he puffs the last smoke from a stubby cigarette. After, his gaze becomes fixed on a definite object and his muscles contract in a new state of tension. Then he launches forward across the street and yard. The impulsion, however, is suddenly checked upon entry to the house through the French windows. His movements grow slower as if he now passes through a more viscous medium than the air outside; his eyes, blinking constantly, scan the room for evidence. Shifting our own gaze from region to region, we start to find patterns, regularities of behavior. We might see, for instance, that most of his movement is done in the regions of head and hands; even more specifically, around his mouth and fingers. The line of his shoulders almost never changes as he walks, and his arms always seem to be slightly akimbo. The majority of his figure holds together as a block, which makes the small flurries in head and hands that much clearer. Whenever

something puzzles him he does one of two things: exposes the teeth slightly or taps with his fingers. He does this with the corpse, the cocktail, and a hollow head of Buddha with a camera inside it. He peers inside the head and grazes it with his fingers, then peers at its face and taps the table under it. Most of his movements are short and precise and clearly marked by pauses like the space between words. It would be difficult for us to notice them otherwise with all the competition offered by the decor.

For, whatever else the scene may be, it is also an affair of shapes. It impresses the viewer with a clash of different shapes, with the eccentric lines resulting from its overdressed aspect. The pan-Asian decor seems intended, at one level, to make a death inscrutable with hints of Eastern mystery. But at another level of reception, the inscrutableness results from the scattering of our gaze. Strong shapes at the periphery vie with the human figure, which is really just one shape among many others. Such is the effect, at any rate, of the pictorial mode of looking that I have adopted. I no longer see a woman sitting in a chair; I see a diagonal formed by the extended leg of a figure posed forty-five degrees to the camera. I see the twist of a dragon across the figure's sleeveless dress that echoes and is echoed by other forms in the vicinity: the shadows of tracery cast on the wall behind, the curling smoke that rises from a bulbous incense burner. All of which contributes to my impression that the woman is quite at home here, that her shape is congruent. The intruder, however, is decidedly not at home. His shape is incongruent with the shapes I see around it. Pausing before the curtains of the French windows, it falls into a space that rapidly narrows into the point of a triangle formed by two lines: one from the armchair to the figure's right, the other by a sofa to the figure's left. Moreover, our eyes may be pulled from this figure in the center to the extreme periphery because of a standing lamp, whose twisting form spans the frame from top to bottom. It, too, is shaped like a dragon, with dragon-shaped handles and curlicues of flame. The thing is so striking that even the camera seems affected when it tracks and swivels backward, tracing an S in space.

We may start to think that the man's constant blinking is due to the strain of this view on his eyes. Or perhaps it is due to the fatigue of the actor whose figure this is, the actor named Bogart. We know his name from the credits where "Humphrey Bogart" appears over

a man's silhouette. We may have known it already from his appearance in other films. If so, then his appearance in this one becomes a phase of his persona and an entry in a list of all his screen credits. I realize that as I watch him, I watch him at work, and I happen to have a sense of how such work proceeds. Other films and shows have dramatized the process of making a film under similar conditions, and an enormous literature of memoirs, biographies, and reports has grown up around this social institution. When I take from the shelf a book about Bogart and follow the index entry for *The Big Sleep*, I come upon the following piece of information. "Bogart's personal turmoil dominated the production almost from its October 1944 shoot. On several days Bogart was late reporting for work"—a pattern that continued and intensified through November.⁵ Not only was he late, but his acting also seemed to suffer; he resorted to old and half-forgotten tics. His marriage was breaking up in a very public way while he worked back to back on films the whole year. One wonders if the scene in the house on Laverne Terrace was filmed before or after he had his nervous breakdown; before or after the studio forced him out of bed to work. In any case his gestures start to look different when seen in the mode of institutional vision. They seem like the lazy protest of someone who, in his own words, was "tired of the studio's attitude that I am a half-witted child."⁶ The image becomes a prison whose bars are the shadows cast by the arc lights just outside the frame.

These shadows are at once a part of the environment, an element of composition, and an index of filmmaking as an institution. They might also be expressive of a whole state of mind if I concede that the human figure does have a thing called *mind*. I would then treat the figure more or less as a character, in the sense that this word is normally used—as an individual with fears, goals, and desires, with feelings that seek some form of expression. Then the background becomes potentially charged in a new way in relation to character. It becomes an expression or reflection of character, worked up by an artist or artists for that purpose. And in the case of Bogart I know he is also the fictional detective named Philip Marlowe. I am unlikely to forget the fact entirely if I have followed his story up to this point. He is wary and cynical, sometimes unscrupulous, although he seems to uphold the prevailing moral order. Yet forces of degeneracy, per-

version, and corruption continue to drag him deeper to a point of no return. His entrance to the house at the end of Laverne Terrace commits him, irrevocably, to the struggle with darkness. The shadows, the clutter, the sharp and twisting shapes together form a vision of what he dare not speak. They are his fears writ large, his confusion made tangible. They are condensed in the figure of the woman in the chair; she is an object of desire and thus of temptation. She is also one sign of the general enigma. She is mirrored by the hollow head of the Buddha to which the camera pans as Marlowe walks from her to it. A relay is established among people and things and this relay is a clue to the inner life of character. The setting is linked to character; it appears as one phase in the character's development, and therefore changes of setting signal changes of character. Philip Marlowe will return to this house several times. Only on the last occasion does he fire a gun. And in our fictional mode of looking we know what to think when he leaves the head of Buddha on the table all shot up (see figures I.1–I.6).



Figure I.1. *The Big Sleep*, dir. Howard Hawks, US, 1946. Digital frame grabs.



Figures I.2 and I.3. *The Big Sleep*, dir. Howard Hawks, US, 1946. Digital frame grabs.



Figures I.4 and I.5. *The Big Sleep*, dir. Howard Hawks, US, 1946. Digital frame grabs.



Figures I.6. *The Big Sleep*, dir. Howard Hawks, US, 1946. Digital frame grabs.

“Wonderful—ah, wonderful!” But somehow these words no longer fit the film before me.



Natural, pictorial, institutional, and fictional are the four modes of looking this study will treat. We normally use them all together, but we can, in analysis, privilege now one, now another mode of looking. Each is a specific optic, a way of looking at the human figure, a way of dealing with the people whose images we find on film. As methods or ways of seeing, they are obviously selective. Each commits us to the form of data that its guiding concept yields. And so, having chosen, we proceed in a way that resembles the way of science, for to think with criteria is a scientific project. One uses a concept or conceptual scheme to structure observation and yield a so-called truth. What counts as true will vary from one science to the next. Each has its operations, its standards of evidence, which may exclude without

denying other concepts and standards. Each method has criteria that follow from its concept, whether natural, pictorial, institutional, or fictional. The concept, for its part, cannot claim objects that belong to it alone. Rather, it discloses an aspect of the same object that other concepts also cover while disclosing different aspects. Aristotle called this a distinction in the concept without a difference in the instance.⁷ In our case the instance is the filmed human figure, which may serve all the concepts in succession or at once.

Natural, as we saw, means natural-historical, where the figure is the object of a natural history. Those who call themselves naturalists or natural historians will investigate that figure as a source of behaviors. And since every figure must have also its ground, the naturalist treats the figure as an organism in its environment. Environment includes objects and other nearby organisms as well as the terrain and the weather or climate.

The pictorial concept belongs at once to art history and visual psychology. Its figure is what is meant when artists speak of figure drawing, that is as a shape for pictorial manipulation. Its ground is the composition in which that shape is set, and this ground extends only to the borders of the frame. Knowledge of the figure then consists in the judgment of its role in composition and its contribution to aesthetic pleasure.

The institutional concept derives from social science, particularly anthropology. An institution is a form of social organization that endures long enough to be recognized and named: the family, the army, the school, political parties, and in our case the cinema. For movies are products of social organization—of a ground partly visible in the artifact itself. Their figures are units with defined social functions of which the most important is performance for the camera.

Fiction as a concept would seem to be self-evident. It names what is imaginary, or less factual than fact. Its ground is the self-enclosed fictional world it erects from the shards of reality that suit it. The critic of fiction sees figures as characters—as bundles of traits with goals and desires. And the setting or background in which the figure stands expresses those traits of character, those goals and desires; it expresses what is sometimes called a state of mind.

Definitions such as these are always too general. We shall not remain long in the realm of abstraction, for we want to see how the concepts will function in practice; how they frame and delimit and

make knowledge from an object. To do so we require exemplars of all the concepts. Exemplars, for us, are thinkers with coherent and substantial oeuvres behind them. Coherence will derive from the force of a given concept, whose use we can study in depth and in detail. That is the strength of our approach by exemplars. But all writers inevitably have their eccentricities—habits and dispositions that limit the concept's range. The reader will do well to keep this in mind, for such is the price we pay for our fine-grained approach. Nonetheless I have tried to choose four exemplars that show the strengths and weaknesses of each favored concept. More important, they show how strength and weakness are intimately related; they illustrate contradictions, tensions in the concept, points at which it overlaps with the content of other concepts. They also illustrate the fact that the concept comes to life in a chain of operations performed on the filmic object. It makes a world of difference whether the human figure is viewed on a special projector for frame-by-frame viewing, or in sets of still images hung on the wall like paintings, or after conducting interviews with those involved in a film's production, or in a movie theater, larger than life. Yet these are the several methods of the writers I treat: Ray Birdwhistell, Victor Freeburg, Hortense Powdermaker, and V. F. Perkins. They exemplify, respectively, the natural, pictorial, institutional, and fictional as these are brought to bear on the filmed human figure. Their exemplary status is not incompatible with their eccentric or accidental features. With each standing in for other writers of a genus, they share the generic qualities bestowed by the guiding concept, but they are also individuals in a particular place and time. Their limitations should be obvious when we note that all were white, most of them were men, and all were employed at some point in higher education. Any concept of the figure is marked by exclusions, and when a writer selects it for use in a study, it is even more limited by her or his background. It is filtered by the writer's position in history. Hence this book, while not a history, treats its subjects historically. And since history involves diverse forms of practice—tools and techniques, accepted ways of doing—our book is necessarily a study in praxeology. We study the concept as realized in practice by historical agents who are typical and unique at once. The physical supports of their four ways of looking are definite ingredients in the concepts they produce. Diversity of tools should come as no surprise in the wild, early days of any young medium. But at the

center of those efforts is the same raw material: the filmed human body, or rather, the human figure.



“It is an incontestable fact that in a motion picture no live human being is up there. But a human *something* is, and something unlike anything else we know.”⁸ What we choose to call this *something* is a matter of some importance. No amount of definition can negate what a word connotes. A word poorly chosen might lead us astray by provoking expectations that will then be disappointed. Our purpose in this study is to better understand how the human *something* on film becomes an object of knowledge. Knowledge, as I have said, implies use of criteria: rules of thumb by which the object is made to yield data. More simply it means that we ask certain questions that define in advance what will count as an answer. We want, therefore, a word for that *something* that accommodates many questions and yields many answers. Two words present themselves as obvious candidates, the figure on the one hand and the body on the other.

A figure is an object seen against a ground; it is something external, something over there. It has a definite contour that allows it to appear as separate from other figures, and especially from ourselves. If we refer to our own figures we already assume the stance of an outside observer seeing ourselves. The word is also used in the realm of mathematics and this gives to it a chilly, intellectual cast. Everyday language expresses this well. We figure out puzzles, riddles, and ciphers. We figure on having such and such an income when planning our outlay for the calendar year. We use figures of speech to point up an argument, or insert into our text some figures for illustration. A figure is something distant that we perceive and we perceive it because it is minimally distant. “I have tried to figure her out, I have thought about her as I might do about a problem in algebra.”⁹ Thus Dowell in Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*.

The body, on the other hand, seems somehow thicker: not merely because it has extension in space but because it suggests a thing with a certain depth and density. It has weight and resistance and it teems with inner life. Sometimes the inside bubbles over to the outside, in retching, belching, sneezing, and flatus, all of which are seen as causes of embarrassment. They embarrass because largely beyond our control.

Yet that loss of control has its own unique appeal. The body in all its thickness and wildness seems to escape the formalism that constrains the human figure—that turns human beings into human figures. For what can be figured can also be known: identified, tagged, reckoned with, dealt with. The body resists such knowledge; it resists in the absence of any conscious resistance, and so the contour by which any figure is bounded is shivered to pieces by eruptions of the body. The concept of *the body* comes to name whatever in us escapes form and power, as the sea escapes the net.

The Cinematic Body by Steven Shaviro offers illustration of this concept at work. Its politics are broadly antiestablishment, and the body is something that resists the establishment: capitalism, patriarchy, normative sexuality, or any discourse that polices the body's activity. This policing takes the form of representation with its ascription of identity to this or that body. Such tags of identity include, for example, the categories of gender, sexuality, and race. It is not enough for Shaviro to simply critique these categories as he finds them employed in the field of representation. "Too much has already been conceded," he writes, "when representation is accepted as the battlefield. It is necessary to go further."¹⁰ The only way out from under the thumb of discourse is to embrace some other term that falls outside discourse. This term is the body, which is too much for discourse—"unruly," "transgressive," "asubjective," "immanent." It is profoundly mysterious. Hence rather than submit to the tyrannies of identity, one might instead submit to the powers of the body. Then, in the absence of structure, and of the tags of identity that limit its play, the body can do its work of liberation and negation. Then watching a film would be something other than cognitive activity based on visible and audible cues. Then it would be a form of surrender in which one is "violently, viscerally affected."¹¹ There would be no representation, and thus no repression, only the sights and sounds and the disturbances they generate.

So the cinematic body is the viewer's body. But it is not only the viewer's body. "There is," Shaviro writes, "a continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my own body and the appearances and disappearances, the mutations and perdurances, of the bodies and images on screen." Again, the film is a medium "for affirming, perpetuating, and multiplying" bodies. Each visible body "provokes and compels us." And thus we are forced "beyond a certain limit."¹² Such statements seem to follow more or less directly from use

of the word *body* for viewer and image. If both bear the name, they must have something in common; perhaps there is even a degree of synchronicity. A writer would then be justified in sliding between them in the course of discussion of the cinematic body. Others have even called the camera a body, moving as it does through three-dimensional space; or called the film a body, which can manifest symptoms; or called the screen a skin, something all bodies have.¹³ There would seem to be few limits to the word's application.

Certain is that language becomes a kind of shell game whose referent is lost in the textual shuffle—a game performed not with intent to deceive but to affirm a continuity across these phenomena. The body is that which “touches” and “wounds,” and “abolishes the distances,” so it cannot be thought or figured in any real sense.¹⁴ It allows for a kind of free fall into immanence, where subject and object lose their distinctions. In other words the body is an anti-intellectual concept. Those writers who embrace its ambiguous reference do so to capture something real in their experience: the forgetting of ourselves in the course of a film's unfolding. But this forgetting is perhaps less frequent than they imagine. Again we might quote from *The Cinematic Body*, whose discussion of Jerry Lewis is characteristic and revealing.

“He experiences chaos in his own body; this chaos is then disseminated in waves around him.”¹⁵ The different iterations of the Lewis persona seem to tell a single story of a body beyond control. Whether costumed as a bellboy or hospital attendant, he brings about disorder by his excess of zeal. His body is so responsive to suggestions and commands that he executes them wildly, in no particular order. Breakdown soon manifests in spastic contortions, which in turn will produce the destruction of property. The breakdown spreads throughout the *mise-en-scène*; it reaches the other characters and eventually hits the audience. Shaviro calls it “contagion,” a transmissible fever that makes the viewer share in the joy of abandon.¹⁶ There is no conscious assent; the image “provokes and compels” and the body accedes before the mind has time to stop it. The task of the writer is to convey this excitement of a body-to-body linkage—convey it in prose that reflects the loss of self and therefore of any intellectual distinctions. That is why it is so remarkable that distinctions should creep back in. For the manifest irrationalism of the description is tempered by criteria, that is to say thinking, and in a single datum like the body of Jerry Lewis one finds levels and degrees, aspects and

sides. There is, for one, the biological organism “in its inertia and its dense plasticity.” As the organism is progressively shaken by impulse, it produces for the viewer some “strange, ungainly shapes.”¹⁷ And this particular viewer who committed his thoughts to writing knew Lewis already as a star with a life offscreen, known for his “philanthropic endeavor and appeals to public sympathy.”¹⁸ But, in his films, he puts this energy to other uses; he plays fictional characters with clear-cut desires, like the bellboy whose driving goal “is to become an obedient employee.”¹⁹ Thus the writer finds four different aspects of the object: natural, pictorial, institutional, and fictional. He makes the object yield different answers to his questions. He makes from its body a fourfold human figure as a gem cutter works up a rough piece of stone. Let us work the stone further in the chapters to follow. We will generally opt to call it the filmed human figure without being too pedantic about this distinction.



Elias Canetti once wrote of the process of composing his novel *Auto-da-Fé* (1935): “I tried to help myself by forming strands, a few individual features, which I tied to human beings; this brought the beginning of perspicuity into the mass of experiences.”²⁰ He gave to them each a guiding obsession as well as a language in which to express it. So the scholar thinks only of his thousands of books; his maid, of the money she can make from his books; and Fischerle, of chess. Despite their narrow limits, they have “daring, surprising thoughts.”²¹ Their forms of expression are “precious and unique.” We learn something important when we follow them each in detail. Hidden aspects of experience, hidden because alloyed, come out with the clarity of chemical elements. The will to know, or acquire, or compete and strike down are given form within the shapes that these characters describe. Yet even their author did not want their borders to be so clear and hard that interaction was foreclosed. He imagined them all together in a pavilion for madmen; he hoped that in the end “they would talk to one another.” Our concepts are also like this. Hence we put in place a rule that might foster their talking. We state it here again: the overlap of concepts. And so our stone is somewhat worn around the edges of its facets.