



CINEMA AND CUBISM

In the first decades of this century, visual artists looked to the young art form of cinema for new avenues of expression. Aspects of Cubism, such as multiple points of view, an emphasis on geometric abstract form, a reintroduction of everyday objects into the realm of art, were explored by artist/filmmakers like Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, Germaine Dulac and Fernand Léger.*

Film had captured the attention of artists and poets like Francis Picabia, Paul Eluard, Tristan Tzara and George Grosz, all of whom wrote articles on this new medium. (Around 1913, Picasso, an avid filmgoer, also expressed interest in using film to produce a kind of mechanized art, but no known film resulted.) French poet Blaise Cendrars proclaimed:

"The latest scientific findings, world war, the concept of relativity, political convulsions, everything seems to indicate that we are on the road toward a new synthesis of the human spirit, toward a new humanity, and that a new race of man will appear. Their language will be that of the cinema."

One of the earliest attempts to combine geometric design with movement was Léopold Survage's 71 gouache drawings for the abstract film *Colored Rhythm* (1913). World War I intervened, however, and this project was never completed. Another unrealized cinematic project of this early period was a proposed collaboration between the composer Arnold Schonberg and artist Wassily Kandinsky for a film of Schonberg's second opera *Die Glukliche Hand*--an attempt to merge color, movement and sound into one aesthetic experience.

The first "non-objective" film, *Rhythm 21*, was produced by German painter Hans Richter in 1921. Black, gray and white rectangular forms are filmed as if the screen were a flat canvas (rather than a "window" through which depth can be perceived). In the same style, Richter also made *Rhythm 23* (1923), *Rhythm 25* (1925, no longer extant), and *Film Study* (1926).

Another avant-garde film of this period, Swedish painter Viking Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony* (1921), explores an image which "moves" along a diagonal axis. Between 1920-25, German painter/architect Walter Ruttmann produced a series of short abstract films entitled *Opus I* (no longer extant), *II*, *III*, and *IV*. Ruttmann's cinematic creations featured a series of gently undulating forms, an experiment with a playful interaction of curves and lines.

Artists like Richter, Eggeling and Ruttmann used film as a means to an end--a way to test theories about a new painting aesthetic. One of the first visual artists to use film as an end in itself was the French painter Fernand Léger, whose film *Ballet mécanique* (1923-24) was made at the end of what is now called his mechanical period (1919-24). The film attempts to depict simultaneous images and the speed of modern urban life, within a non-linear time frame. As Léger put it, he wanted "to create the rhythm of common objects in space and time, to present them in their plastic beauty.... I maintain that a close-up of a door moving slowly is more emotional than the image of the person who is opening that door."

Divided into seven sections with such titles as "Mechanical Movement of Objects in Motion" and "External Rhythms: Men and Machinery," *Ballet mécanique* was shown publicly in Vienna in 1924, and then in New York City along with a film by French critic and filmmaker Marcel L'Herbier, *L'Inhumaine*. To be shown at The Cleveland Museum of Art on March 11, *L'Inhumaine* (1923) features futuristic sets designed by Léger and architect Mallet-Stevens, and a crowd scene with such luminaries as Picasso, Erik Satie, Darius Milhaud, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and the (then) Prince of Monaco.

These avant-garde films opened the way for films like Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* (1926), which includes a cinematic study of a leaping man (calling to mind Marcel Duchamp's painting of a *Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1912). Drawing on a tradition of "trick films" by filmmakers like Georges Mèliés, the fantastic and the surrealistic were expressed in early films by artists like Man Ray, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, René Clair (whose *Entr'acte*, 1924, was a collaboration with painters Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia), and Jean Cocteau (whose film *The Testament of Orpheus* will be shown at the Museum on March 6 and 8).

The Testament of Orpheus (1960) was funded in part by French filmmaker François Truffaut, who used profits from his film *The 400 Blows* for this purpose. This was Cocteau's last film, following on his artistic success in such films as *The Blood of a Poet* (1932), *The Eternal Return* (1943), *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), and *Orpheus* (1950). With guest appearances by Picasso and his wife, Jacqueline Roque, and Yul Brynner, *The Testament of Orpheus*, like all of Cocteau's films, involves a system of connecting and contrasting signs which must be intuitively deciphered. Language is used as much for its sound, and for its associations, as for its meaning. Cocteau felt that cinema was (in his words) "the active dream ... the only possible vehicle to achieve the balance between the real and the unreal, to raise a modern story to the heights of legend."

The Depression and the introduction of the sound film in the late 1920s brought an end to this early stage in the avant-garde film movement.

In conjunction with the *Picasso and Things* exhibition, the Museum has planned an extensive series of films about the life and times of that artist. Films which directly comment on Picasso's life, through interviews with his contemporaries and some archival footage, are: *Pablo Picasso, The Legacy of a Genius* (March 13 and 15), and the Canadian production *O Picasso* (April 17 and 19). The interview motif is also used in *The Challenge: A Tribute to Modern Art* (April 10 and 12), narrated by Orson Welles. The short film, *Picasso: Joie de Vivre* (March 6 and 8), concerns four months Picasso spent creating sculpture, painting, pottery, and murals at an empty castle in Antibes.

Fictional accounts include: *The Moderns* (March 20 and 22), a presentation of the world of art collectors in the 1920s of Paris, and the Swedish film *The Adventures of Picasso* (March 27 and 29), described as a "nonsense history of Picasso's life and career."

In a genre often referred to as "docu-drama," the film series will present the films *Waiting for the Moon* (April 3 and 5), based on the relationship between Picasso's contemporaries Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and Orson Welles' *F for Fake* (April 24 and 26), which walks a fine line between fact and fiction in its exploration of the world of the art forger.

Short films focusing on one of Picasso's most celebrated works, *Guernica*, will be shown on April 3 and 5 (in a film by French director Alain Resnais), and on April 10 and 12 (in a film by the "father of the documentary," Robert Flaherty). Picasso's art will be featured in two other short films: *Picasso, Romancero du Picador* (April 24 and 26), and *Picasso and the Circus* (March 27 and 29), in which a young girl interacts with the pictures in the National Gallery of Art's exhibition *Picasso: The Saltimbanques*.

Linda C. Ehrlich

* The Cleveland Museum of Art has shown films by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray in its "Moving Pictures: Films by Photographers" series (June 1990). Other films from this early period of French cinema were shown in the "French Impressionist Film" series (Jan/Feb 1987).