IS CINEMA ART?

Thomas S. Hibbs

Cinema, the novelist Graham Greene once observed, “has to appeal to millions.” Greene, whose works were regularly turned into films and who worked for a time as a film critic, argued that the “popularity” of cinema, as a distinct medium depending primarily on “sound and movement,” was a “virtue not to be rejected as vile.” Yet Greene’s sense that cinema needed defending evinces the way in which its wide appeal has counted against it as an art form or at least as an art form capable of producing masterpieces on par with those of opera, theater, literature, and painting. Beyond its popularity, reasons for resisting film as great art are not hard to find, but, as we shall see, the most common reasons apply to other arts as well, and, where they do apply to film, they do not apply to the best examples of film art. Of course, responding to objections to the cinematic claim to greatness hardly establishes the positive thesis that film is capable of art of the highest order. There is no substitute for the direct encounter, in dark theaters before large screens, of the best films of Bergman and Kieslowski, Fellini and Rossellini, Wilder and Welles, Truffaut and Renoir, to name only a few. In such encounters, we experience what the contemporary film critic calls the “stealthy rapture” of film, its capacity to engage heart and intellect, to move us to a deeper appreciation of the human condition, and to refine the natural human appetite for beauty.

One source of the lack of appreciation of film as great art arises from the common experience of seeing a film based on a book and discovering that the film pales by comparison with the written text. In this case it is hard not to feel that the film version is derivative and second best. Book lovers who happen not to be film lovers often engage in invidious comparisons of great books with popular, mediocre films. But what if the option were not watching the latest Spiderman versus reading Jane Austen but

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watching Kurosawa versus reading the latest James Patterson thriller? Of course the interesting question is how the best films stack up against the best novels, plays, paintings, orchestral suites, and operas. Are these films as works of art of the same magnitude as *Hamlet*, Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, or Caravaggio’s *Supper at Emmaus*?

It is not clear that we can make meaningful comparisons across such varied artistic media, but we can certainly note a set of criteria for great art. It has a certain scope or capaciousness; it is capable of lasting influence not only within its field but across artistic boundaries; it is capable of engaging mind, imagination, and heart, and thus it has the capacity to transport us out of the ignorant present and out of ourselves, if only momentarily; and it rewards multiple encounters. All this can be said of great films.

Two of the most instructive examples of film’s independent artistic excellence come from Akira Kurosawa’s adaptations of Shakespeare called *Ran* (*King Lear*, 1985) and *Throne of Blood* (*Macbeth*, 1957), the latter of which is reported to have been T.S. Eliot’s favorite film. In praise of these films, the fastidious literary critic Harold Bloom notes that Kurosawa ignores Shakespeare’s dialogue and freely refashions his plots. Yet Bloom insists that these films best capture what “Shakespeare was up to.” For all his insight on this issue, though, Bloom’s statement is a bit misleading, making it sound as if Kurosawa were the best mimic of Shakespeare. A similar assumption mars the Criterion Collection’s DVD commentary track from Michael Jeck, an expert on Japanese cinema, who supposes that Kurosawa is filling in gaps in Shakespeare’s narrative. In fact, Kurosawa rivals Shakespeare precisely because he has an independent, if overlapping, artistic vision. The Japanese cultural setting—with its royalty, pageantry, and fierce familial loyalty—certainly aided Kurosawa’s Shakespeare films. He also possessed a stunning and unusual combination of an artist’s sensibility (he began as a painter and had a remarkable eye for light, color, and weather) and a dramatist’s sense of the big questions (he counted among his most important influences the Russian novelist Dostoevsky). Distinctively Japanese elements, from medieval Noh drama and Buddhism, also inform these films.

Even more than in Shakespeare’s tragedies, Kurosawa accentuates the themes of human entrapment, of a hostile fate, and of the seeming inevitability of treachery and betrayal, especially in the political order. For example, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* begins with the prophecy of the “weird sisters,” the witches who, along with his ambitious wife, tempt Macbeth to murder. This occurs on Macbeth’s return from triumph in battle. In Kurosawa’s version, the warrior’s return is prolonged, as he becomes lost in the forest surrounding the castle, a forest he knows well but that has become a maze to him—the visuals here highlight the eerie and unsettling sense of being lost in a region once familiar, now unknown. The film ends not as it does in Shakespeare—with the restoration of natural and political order—but with a vacant castle, the “castle of delusions.” Indeed, the Japanese title of the film refers not to Macbeth or to the “throne of blood” but to the castle itself, Spider’s Web Castle. The lone “witch” in Kurosawa’s version, a ghost of a woman who sits at a spinning wheel, is something of a philosopher of doom. She proclaims that “men’s lives are meaningless,” like insects’, whose destiny is to become the “stench of rotting flesh.” “Men are strange,” she continues, too “terrified to look into the bottom of their own hearts.”

Like Shakespeare’s plays, Kurosawa’s films hold the mirror up to nature, especially to
the human heart, and often discern therein a “strange perturbation.” But neither the poet nor the filmmaker succumbs to nihilism or adopts the conclusion that human life is pointless. Instead, they put dramatically before our eyes the unavoidable and perennial questions about human evil and betrayal, about the tragic frustration of noble human aspirations. They also raise questions about the goodness, justice, and mercy of God, about God’s apparent silence, and the mystery of how human beings can become so twisted and depraved, so blindly bent against the good.

Another reason for supposing films to be inferior to texts is the supposition that written works reflect a fully orbed unity that films often lack. Film seems to be a parasitic art, a kind of pastiche of other arts—music, theater, and literature. One might also worry that film, unlike the other arts, does not reflect a unified artistic vision. The auteur theory, which ascribes the result of a film to the focused intentionality of a master director, seems in part designed precisely to promote the ranking of great filmmakers to the level of great poets, painters, and writers. But the auteur theory cannot discount the fact that there are multiple contributors to the end product of a film, many of them involving considerations not at all or at least not primarily artistic. But other arts are not immune to external influences; nor does this lack of a single, overarching vision articulated in advance necessarily make for inferior art, as Paul Cantor argues in *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture: Liberty vs. Authority in American Film and TV.* He makes a convincing case for the role of spontaneous order in the making of films and TV shows. Against the auteur theory, Cantor recognizes that much of what is produced in Hollywood is the result of a combination of the intentions of many individuals, sometimes even the intentions of viewers who have responded positively or negatively to plots and characters. As Cantor observes, something like this has also been true of great works of literature. Novelists (Dickens and Dostoevsky) have composed under an installment plan or in serialization, under the pressure of financial necessity and arbitrary deadlines. They have also altered plots as they wrote in relation to feedback from readers. Outside influences on the production of art are not peculiar to the modern age. Renaissance painters, sculptors, and architects had to please patrons and conform to the dictates of church and state.

Moreover, the notion that film is a pastiche counts as an objection only if film fails to unify seemingly disparate artistic modes. Great art often seeks to be architectonic, to embrace within its proper medium other arts. Consider the ways in which poetry and even prose attempt to mimic music and natural sound or the ways in which sculpture and painting strive to incorporate the effects of motion. Although he failed to achieve it, there is something admirable and typical about Mel Gibson’s ambition in *The Passion of the Christ* to create a “moving Caravaggio.” Many great films are quite self-consciously trying to blend text, image, and sound in a way that competes simultaneously with literature, painting, and music. Because films narrate a plot, describe human actions, they are also in competition with opera and theater.

The denigration of film as art sometimes is of a piece with a critique of the ascendancy over the past century of images on screens, in the contemplation of which viewers are thought to be reduced to a kind of unreflective passivity.Texts awaken, so the argument goes, while images stultify. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* Neil Postman argues that the influence of TV on our contemporary
mode of life is so thoroughgoing that it shapes us unconsciously. The role of TV in our daily lives seems wholly “natural.” We rarely advert to the phenomenon of TV itself, its mode of communication; instead, we talk about what is on TV. Postman’s insights are many, particularly about the unreflective way in which visual media often operate on us. A more concrete and compelling case can be had in the book *The Myth of the American Superhero*, by John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, who argue that a particular myth saturates American culture, a myth that focuses on the indispensable role of a superhero who uses violence to purge society of evils in the face of which ordinary citizens and democratic processes are impotent. They are highly critical of this recurring allegory, which they think embodies a simplistic dualism of good and evil, a naive faith in human heroes endowed with miraculous powers, and an affirmation of violence as the only effective means of vanquishing evil. Sensing the pointlessness of democratic institutions and practices, citizens await the intervention of a superhero. The result is a “spectator democracy,” where institutions are seen as oppressive and alienating forces.

As convincing as the critique may be in particular cases, it is far from clear that the objection can be generalized to an entire art form. Postman fails to note the way in which visual art often deploys devices designed precisely to enliven our imagination and awaken our intellect. At times Postman comes close to the totalizing and deterministic view of the culture industry that was once a centerpiece of Marxist cultural criticism. Indeed, the harshest critique of film can be found in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the Marxist-influenced jeremiad against the capitalist “culture industry,” which “infects everything with sameness.” The panoply of consumer options in our culture is but a facade that “perpetuates the appearances of competition and choice,” all the while ensuring that no serious challenge to the capitalist system can emerge. In words that parallel those of Michel Foucault, they speak of the way in which such an entertainment culture is adept at “producing, controlling, and disciplining” citizens. Film in particular is an instrument of such capitalist control, as it “denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination.” The result is the “withering of imagination and spontaneity.”

Interestingly, this critique is a version of the traditional critique of the written word. Homer’s written texts are derived from, and lack the impact of, publicly sung performances by bards. Similarly, Plato’s dialogues and the medieval Scholastic disputed question are dim reflections of live debates among multiple interlocutors. Although he left us a series of magnificent dialogues, Plato warned against the dangers of relying on written texts for the communication of philosophical truth.

But neither literature nor film is without recourse. Just as literature makes use of the techniques proper to its medium to invite, sometimes cajole, readers into active engagement, so too does film make use of its own techniques for such ends. Moreover, film, like other arts, not only seeks to awaken the minds and hearts of its audience but also invites reflections on its own conditions. Hitchcock’s habit of appearing in his films was a light, comic way of pointing to the constructed nature of the art, but he had a lot more to say about visualization and the epistemic and ethical conditions of observing
in such films as *Rear Window* and *Vertigo*. As Jimmy Stewart’s character in *Rear Window* puts it, “I wonder if it is ethical to watch a man with binoculars and a long-focus lens. Do you—do you suppose it’s ethical even if you prove that he didn’t commit a crime?”

In an even more dramatic way, Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), in which the writer-director sought to “touch wordless secrets that only the cinema can discover,” begins with a series of fragmented images that includes camera equipment, projectors, and a reel of film that breaks. The constructed, fragmented sources of film art here reflect the constructed, fragmented sense of self of the main characters in the film, a young nurse and her patient, a famous actress who has suddenly ceased to speak. Over the course of the film, the two become so intimately connected that their identities and even physical appearances merge. *Persona* is a kind of mask, a constructed image of the self presented to others, in theater or film but also in real life. Bergman’s film is an instructive reflection on what human life would look like if the postmodern view of the self as without any foundation or unity, as merely the point of intersection of a series of forces or provisional masks, were to become reality. Doubling here leads not to understanding and affection but to fear and violent dissolution. The result is psychological horror.

For contemporary visual art, the temptation is an inducement not so much to unreflective acquiescence as to a hyper-self-consciousness, to intellectual abstraction rather than concrete living. Once again, literature is the target before film is. The narrator of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* laments the way in which his contemporary Russians “are all divorced from life, we are all cripples, every one of us, more or less. . . . Why, we have come almost to look-
characters in such stories: “They only play at self-knowledge; any real consciousness of who they are… would be like the cartoon moment when Bugs Bunny looks down and realizes he’s walking on air.”15 In such stories, there is no hope for an alternative, since the presumption is that there is no alternative. The quest is fruitless. And the absence of any framework of meaning or purpose is not an occasion for a sense of horror or even sorrow, because there is nothing worth preserving or that merits such devotion on our part.

The sense that contemporary visual arts intervene between the human soul and the real hints at a deeper critique, one that stresses not so much our passivity before images but our enthrallment and devotion to them. The objection, which one need not be religious to entertain, is that film is idolatrous. In The Whole Equation, David Thomson, one of our finest living film critics, focuses squarely on the problematic ethics of the moving, visual image. Thomson is at once immersed in, fascinated with, and horrified by Hollywood. Unlike most contemporary critics of Hollywood, Thomson locates Hollywood’s questionable influence on culture not in the late twentieth century, with the rise in explicit violence and sexuality, but in its glory days. He focuses on the “enormous… tidal pull toward new dreams” and the consequent and far-reaching “romantic transformation” wrought by the influence of film and TV in the twentieth century.

As viewers, he asks, are we “watching heightened things—great danger, great desirability, intense loveliness—without being tied by the responsibilities that attach to real onlookers?” “We are,” he suggests, “like voyeurs, spies, or peeping toms.”16 In contrast to literature, which actively engages the imagination to probe the “meaning behind events,” film involves the “fetishization of appearance.” Film is less about glimpsing hidden meaning than about “what happens or appears next.” It thus suffers from “the crushing restriction of visibility.”17

Here Thomson puts his finger on an ethical question regarding Hollywood, indeed regarding film itself as a cultural artifact. Hollywood film, “the professional craft of pretending,” comes to the fore just as our sense of identity becomes “destabilized by the slippage of religious belief.”18 Hollywood offers its own “images to worship,” as it reveals “rather ghastly fake gods.” The new model for humanity becomes the actor, with his infinite variety.

Yet again, the objection as applied to film—namely, that it is a replacement for religion—is simply a new version of an objection that has been, or could be, voiced about other arts. Think about the way, beginning in the Renaissance and culminating in the Romantic period, artists came to occupy places of renown and became objects of adulation and emulation. Of course, at least in the Romantic period, artists came to think of themselves as the priests of cults of devotion, as producing artifacts that will substitute for religious liturgy. As Richard Wagner famously put it, “It is reserved to art to salvage the kernel of religion, inasmuch as the mythical images which religion would wish to be believed as true are apprehended in art for their symbolic value, and through ideal representation of those symbols art reveals the concealed deep truth within them.”19 Indeed, from Wagner to Roger Scruton, a certain strain of conservatism has subscribed precisely to the view of art as supplying in the way of cultural formation what religion is no longer equipped to provide.

Yet the supposition of any straightforward substitution of art, in this case film art, for religion is overblown. It is not just that reli-
igion has not disappeared in the way enlightenment prognosticators promised—a point driven home by the fact that secular sociologists now speak of our age as postsecular. It is also that many of the best twentieth-century films do not so much offer alternative religious visions as dramatize the dilemma of belief and unbelief in our time; furthermore, religious films of very high quality continue to be produced.

Perhaps the most famous dramatization of the crisis of belief is Ingmar Bergman’s early 1960s faith trilogy (Through a Glass Darkly, Winter Light, and The Silence). The series of films is often taken to be Bergman’s statement of unbelief, mirroring his own loss of faith. Yet the characters in the films are so afflicted by unbelief, so disconsolate in their loss, that the films cannot help but keep the question of God’s existence alive. Indeed, Bergman’s preoccupation with the searing results of the absence of God continues until the very end of his life, as is evident from Faithless, a script he penned a few years before his death.

At roughly the same time that Bergman was creating his trilogy, the Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni was bringing to the screen a trilogy of his own. Only indirectly concerned with the loss of religious faith, L’avventura, La notte, and L’eclisse examine alienation in a world of wealth and means but void of any ultimate purpose. The title of the first film, L’avventura, “The Adventure,” is itself ironic; there are a number of searches, in particular for a female character who, while on a cruise with friends off the coast of Sicily, disappears on a remote island, never to be seen again. The main characters also seem episodically to be on a quest for companionship, understanding, and love. But all these searches are futile, devoid of any actual sense of adventure. Two devices peculiar to film accentuate Antonioni’s vision of the alienated human condition. First, on the island, the cinematography underscores the smallness, isolation, and absence of an ultimate framework for the lives of the characters. The camera captures the characters at odd angles with either tight shots that make it appear as if they could easily slip from the land into an engulfing sea or distant shots that underscore the minuteness of humanity in the grasp of an encompassing nature. Second, Antonioni’s use of sound is masterful. On the island, wind and rain highlight nature’s magnitude, power, and grandeur—awe in the face of which is never felt by any of the characters. Sound serves in a second way at the very end of the film to unsettle any hope we might have for enduring human affection. In the final scenes, two main characters, once separated, find one another, a plotline that seems to reverse the disappearance without remainder of their mutual friend. From a distance the camera captures what appears to be a gesture of apparent reconciliation and warmth. Yet the music is decidedly ominous, suggesting that human contact will remain elusive.

Both sets of trilogies, one Swedish, the other Italian, constitute magnificent art, the result of highly talented filmmakers taking on big questions.

In addition to dramatizing a world in which God is dead or at least silent, and in which transcendent standards no longer apply, filmmakers continue to make masterpieces of genuinely religious art. Universally celebrated as a classic, Carl Dreyer’s silent film from 1928, The Passion of Joan of Arc, is the story not of Joan the maiden who leads France to victory but of her trial and death, her passion. The influential film critic Pauline Kael hailed Renée Jeanne Falconetti’s performance as Joan as “perhaps the finest ever recorded on film.”

Dreyer highlights
the drama of human faces, with the accusers visible mostly in low-angle shots to accentuate their superior, indeed haughty, position in relation to Joan, who is shot mostly from above, in a facial posture of petition with expressions of misery and fearful anticipation. Few scenes provide anything like a defining background. Instead, characters seem to float against a white backdrop. Most scenes are designed to capture what Dreyer called “combat in close quarters” so that the audience could feel Joan’s suffering in their own skin. Just as her inquisitors observe, document, and judge, so too does the viewer. Film makes visible what the texts of her trial, which are displayed at the opening of the film, fail to show: her martyrdom, her imitation of the passion of Christ, on whose behalf her accusers claim to speak. That point is made with great visual power in the final frame, as Joan’s stake is juxtaposed, and nearly merges, with the cross.

Classic religious films need not be tragic and somber, however, as is evident from Roberto Rossellini’s film about St. Francis, *The Flowers of St. Francis* (1950), cowritten by Federico Fellini. After opening to mixed and even negative reviews, the film was eventually recognized as “among the most beautiful in Italian cinema” (Pasolini) and even the “most beautiful film in the world” (Truffaut). It is a minimalist film in many senses—with no overarching plot, the film is a series of vignettes, modeled in its structure and themes on early lives of the saint; with only one professional actor, the film uses monks in lead roles, including that of Francis; and with no sets, and costumes consisting of rags for monks’ garments, nearly all the action takes place outdoors or in makeshift huts. Rossellini refuses direct exposition or elaborate narration. As Peter Brunette, in his essay for the Criterion Collection release of the film, notes, the look of the film is that of an almost two-dimensional space: “This pictorial flattening creates a kind of minimalist paysage moralisé out of the monks’ simple community, a stylized, antirealistic locus of genuine Christian kindness and joy.” The film is rife with comic absurdity and slapstick humor, the latter of which is always better appreciated when it is actually seen rather than just imagined. The title itself, *Francesco, giullare di Dio*, poorly rendered into English as *The Flowers of St. Francis*, literally means Francis, the Jester of God. One episode focuses on a simple monk’s quest for a pig’s foot for soup, the crucial scene of which has the monk convincing the pig to donate his foot. Other scenes show Francis gently requesting that birds be quiet so he can pray. In another episode, Francis addresses the greatest of philosophical questions: in what does happiness consist? Having rejected a litany of possibilities, Francis approaches a randomly selected house and asks the residents to pray with him. The request meets with relentless verbal and physical abuse—slapstick humor. That, Francis comments, is happiness, because when one receives such abuse without retaliation or bitterness, one can be sure that one is acting solely for the love of God.

Further examples of religious films could be adduced; the brief selection and summary above gives an indication of the breadth and distinctive cinematic excellence of such films—from films that capture human lives remote from God or from which God and ultimate purpose are remote, through excruciating depictions of martyrdom, to glimpses of the life of faith as a recovery of youthful innocence and jovial devotion to God.

The objections to film as great art that we have considered thus far all miss their mark. They apply to other arts or to only a segment, not to the whole, of the film industry. Of course, the proof is in the view-
ing. Do films provoke in viewers a sense of their “stealthy rapture”? Are they capable of becoming objects of devotion, investigation, and conversation? Do they endure and repay repeated viewings? To advance the discussion about film as art, what is needed is greater familiarity with the history of the art form, with its genres and subgenres, with its developments, and especially with its peak artistic achievements. In addition to greater familiarity with the tradition of film, David Thomson proposes an education in the moving image. He asks, How many of us have had any “education in the nature of moving imagery, its grammar, its laws or lawlessness,” or how can we be “expected to distinguish news from fantasy, art from deception”?23

As a twentieth-century art form, cinema is discovered at just about the time that the traditional arts begin to go into decline. There are notable exceptions, of course, but it is a safe generalization that the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the production of fewer great works across a host of artistic fields than did the first half. Cinema has not been invulnerable to the general decline in the arts. As a popular art form, it has managed to maintain its hold on ordinary citizens longer than, say, painting or literature, not to mention opera. But that success has also led to an identification in the mind of many of film with mass entertainment.

In an essay entitled “The Decay of Cinema,” published in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1996, Susan Sontag offers a nostalgic reflection on the vanished greatness of cinema. She begins with a commentary on the way in which great film created a community of devoted followers, who believed that “cinema was an art unlike any other: quintessentially modern; distinctively accessible; poetic and mysterious and erotic and moral—all at the same time…. For cinephiles, the movies encapsulated everything. Cinema was both the book of art and the book of life.”24 In words that apply to all great art, she states, “Cinema began in wonder…. All of cinema is an attempt to perpetuate and to reinvent that sense of wonder.” Alas, the greatness has faded. Admitting that there are occasional exceptions, Sontag bemoans how rare real art has become in the world of film. She explains:

No amount of mourning will revive the vanished rituals—erotic, ruminative—of the darkened theater. The reduction of cinema to assaultive images, and the unprincipled manipulation of images (faster and faster cutting) to make them more attention-grabbing, has produced a disincarnated, lightweight cinema that doesn’t demand anyone’s full attention. Images now appear in any size and on a variety of surfaces: on a screen in a theater, on disco walls and on mega-screens hanging above sports arenas. The sheer ubiquity of moving images has steadily undermined the standards people once had both for cinema as art and for cinema as popular entertainment.

Her dismal conclusion? “Cinema, once heralded as the art of the twentieth century, seems now, as the century closes numerically, to be a decadent art.” Yet again, similar laments for other arts can be found. We would do well to take into account the sobering comments of Flannery O’Connor about what we should and should not expect from art in our time:

Unless we are willing to accept our artists as they are, the answer to who speaks for America today will have to be the advertising agencies. They show us our unparalleled prosperity and our almost classless society. They could never be
accused of not being affirmative. Where the artist is still to be trusted, he will not be looked to for assurance. Those who believe art proceeds from a healthy and not a diseased faculty of mind will take what he shows them as a revelation, not of what we ought to be but of what we are at a given time and under given circumstances, that is, as a limited revelation but a revelation nonetheless.25

The time is not propitious, O'Connor warns us, for art on the scale, or with the comprehensive vision, of Dante, but we can hope for and expect limited revelations. Cinema has had its share of limited revelations and even a handful of films that might be said to achieve greatness.

What is missing from the assessments of Sontag and O'Connor, coming as they do from very different antecedent assumptions, is the possibility of a popular art that mediates between low and high culture. And that brings us back round to Graham Greene and his defense of the mass appeal of film.

For Greene, film was not necessarily second best to literature. He once stated, “When I describe a scene, I capture it with the moving eye of a camera.”26 For The Third Man, Greene wrote the script first and then a novel based on it. He thus demonstrated that the lines of influence between film and literature can run in both directions. The Third Man is vintage film noir. Set in postwar Vienna, in a city divided into four zones (Russian, American, British, and French), The Third Man is the story of an attempted reunion between Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten), an American author of popular westerns, and Harry Lime (Orson Welles), currently residing in Vienna. Just as Martins arrives in Vienna, he is told that Lime is dead and that his funeral is currently under way.

Perplexed by conflicting accounts of the circumstances surrounding Lime’s death, Martins suspects foul play and begins to conduct his own investigation, a task made particularly difficult by the city itself, a linguistic and legal labyrinth, where, in passing from one street to another, one can rapidly lose any sense of confidence about one’s environment.

The style of the film is paradigmatic noir. Camera angles are skewed in nearly every scene, as the images of the characters are multiplied, reflected, and refracted in glass and water, even in glasses of beer. The sense of spatial disorientation is pronounced from the very beginning, when Holly visits the building where Lime had been living. He stands on a lower level of a spiral staircase and looks up at a porter who is framed off center. The camera alternates between high and low shots as the Porter in German explains matter-of-factly that Lime is dead, “already,” he adds, “in hell or heaven.” As he says “hell,” he points upward, and as he says “heaven,” he points downward. The manner of framing the scene and the gestures of the actor unsettle our expectations about the ultimate frame of reference for human justice and orientation. The sharp and often rapid contrast between dark and light as well as the ample use of shadows reinforces the sense of mystery and danger. Through such devices, noir films place the viewers in the same situation as that of the protagonist, thus allowing for maximum identification with his dilemma, his sense of entrapment.

Among all the arts in the past century, film is exceptional in that it occasionally mediates between high and low culture in a way that reaches a wide audience. James Naremore’s assessment of The Third Man applies to a significant number of American films: it is “one of the best films of a period when a certain kind of high art had fully
entered public consciousness and when European sobriety and American entertainment sometimes worked in tandem.”27 Given the way most art forms in the twentieth century have been antipopulist—instruments of elitist scorn of ordinary human concerns—we might be justified in seeing film’s popularity as a virtue rather than a vice. Precisely because of its popular dimension, it has often salvaged a connection to fundamental human concerns in ways many other arts have not. Harvard’s Stanley Cavell, a teacher of filmmaker Terrence Malick and the nation’s leading philosophical commentator on film, puts the point rather nicely: while we lack “a common inheritance of high culture,” film allows us “to move between high and low, caring about each from the vantage of the other.”28

5 Commentary track, Throne of Blood, directed by Akira Kurosawa (Criterion Collection, 2003), DVD.
10 Ibid., 94.
11 Ibid., 97.
12 Ibid., 100.
14 Ibid., 95.
16 Thomson, The Whole Equation, 49.
17 Ibid., 98.
18 Ibid., 74.
19 Roger Scruton, Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner’s “Tristan and Isolde” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7. Both in Britain and in the United States, Roger Scruton is a leading conservative voice. That his book is an unqualified celebration of the Wagnerian vision is surely a sign of the degree to which contemporary conservatives can be seduced by the Romantic vision. By comparison, T. S. Eliot began, say, in his early poetry and in his essay on Joyce’s Ulysses with a kind of forlorn hope that mythic art could supply what religion used to supply but ended up contending that the only art that could, as he puts it in “Ash Wednesday,” “redeem the time… redeem the unready vision in the higher dream,” was religious.
21 The Flowers of St. Francis, directed by Roberto Rossellini (Criterion Collection, 2005), DVD.
23 Ibid., 296.
26 Parkinson, Graham Greene Film Reader, xxiii.