

# The cinema as an instrument for a better understanding of human nature

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## Summary

The cinema is a powerful cultural tool that allows us to gain insight into some elements of the human condition through images and sound that is enriched with all the fine arts with a view to sparking the intellect and the emotions. It attempts to reach the spectator through empathy with the characters and the projection of one's own experience onto what is seen on the screen. Here we review the importance of mirror neurons and of empathy so that spectators can feel close to the situations and circumstances portrayed on the screen and the need for proper training to understand the medium better.

*Keywords:* Literature; Philosophy of the image; Cinematographic language; Empathy and Projections.

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The cinema is now an important route for the transmission of universal culture. Our society is formed and informed through the cinema and television, fiction films, and reports or documentaries, all of which afford another approach to understanding the world of human beings. Films strive to document and provide testimony about a given reality, and in some cases portray and inform about a story with a view to offering an underlying message. To do so, it takes advantage of spaces and time, images and words, realities and fictions, knowledge and feelings, all with a view to stimulating vision, hearing, and the other senses in order to generate the empathy of the observers towards the characters portrayed. *The cinema is a "true empire of the senses" where we see and we hear, and its capacity for recall means that we smell, taste, touch and feel the reality portrayed*<sup>1</sup>.

Cinematographic expression builds a more complete and perfect story that encompasses the art of reproduction and the art of beguilement; that is, it expresses reality by means of figuration<sup>2</sup>. The magic of the cinema has created another method for capturing a reality that organises and lends meaning to the objects and practices of daily life (it helps to establish rules or useful conventions for the development of

our social lives), which stimulate new ways of thinking about social roles, sex, concepts of honour, and patriotism, and at the same time serves to denounce injustice, exploitation, the problems affecting a certain parts of the world, job risks, etc<sup>3</sup>.

Unlike literature, what a character thinks cannot be expressed or replaced by the concepts-images of the cinema, not even when sound is added. The difficulty does not have to do with the presence or absence of words. The cinema is externality, aspect, evidence. Much of what is interior can be made visible, although never with the vivacity so typical of literature<sup>4</sup>. The cinema is *an open experience, always rediscovering itself, permanently fleeing the rules that try to imprison it within a cage of codes. The film is real time, with the rhythm that the director imposes on it* (Jean Claude Carrière, cited in 2).

The reproductive and productive power of the image in motion *marks the emergent character of the cinema, and how distinctive it is, something that is only possible thanks to the rhythm imposed by the director*<sup>4</sup> The particular temporality and spatiality of the cinema, its almost infinite capacity to assemble and reassemble, to invert things and to set elements in place, the structure of its

cuts, etc, is what marks the difference. The recent advent of digital images has propitiated a huge change in the audiovisual field that very directly affects films and allows us a glimpse of hitherto completely inaccessible realities. With digitization, the cinema has opened up to a new type of realism, more revealing of the human condition and not only a very direct way of cutting costs and creating virtual worlds.

### The importance of the cinema

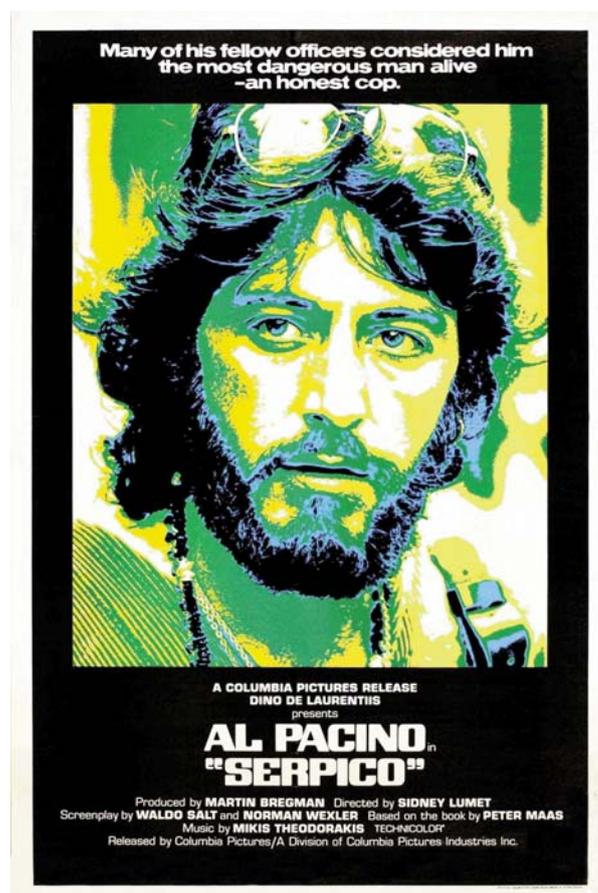
All peoples of the world have stories that they cherish with pride because they allow them to identify themselves and others that they share with the rest of humanity. Traditional narrative in general addresses knowledge about life, culture and morality, and it has had a huge impact on individuals, societies and cultures. Literature and the cinema are narrative arts and hence a pretext to tell stories, as they have since their inception. Literature uses words and cinema images, but the goal is identical: the story told which transcends language to become a source of emotions and feelings. It is said that in the cinema stories are seen with the eyes open while in literature the eyes are closed. There is not necessarily a contradiction between the art of the image, of light, of plasticity and the art of the word<sup>1</sup>. The cinema interprets history; it translates the essence of the literary text to cinematographic narration, but at the same time it allows the film to acquire its own life. The script itself is literature; a “special literature”, thought up in images and, in this sense, in all films the word is the cornerstone of the image.

The cinema performs an exercise of synthesis with literature because the image is unable to absorb the richness of life and nuances that the narrator has expressed in the book, but in turn the original story may be improved in the hands of a good director until it becomes the work of a maestro<sup>1</sup>. *What the cinema provides is a kind of “superenhancement” of the conceptual possibilities of Literature since it manages to increase the “impression of reality” hugely and hence the instauration of experience indispensable to the development of the image concept, with the subsequent increase in the emotional impact that characterises it<sup>4</sup>.*

As a form of cultural preservation, the cinema complements the role played by narrative traditions (biblical, evangelical, Homeric –*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, “chansons de geste” –*El Cantar de Mio Cid*) that over time have been key elements in transmitting moral attitudes<sup>2</sup>. There are many films that have become a paradigm of morality and ethics for the

anonymous public. The cinema is an instrument whereby we are invited to ask ourselves about the “whys” of living and dying, and even about the possible answers to these issues, and it is able to awaken different sensations, depending on the cultural environments where it is shown. All this reveals that people’s attitudes change with time.

Once moving pictures were developed, this itinerary appeared: From the image to feeling and from feeling to the idea; that is, from cinematographic art to emotion, thereby gaining critical judgment through this (According to Sergei Eisenstein, cited in 2). Cinema images enter through the eyes, whence they travel to the brain, and because of this they have many more opportunities to arrive rapidly at the main issue in hand; more than what could be done by a sober philosophical or sociological treatise. Perhaps most (or all) truths shown in the cinema have been said or written before, but the person who seizes them through the cinema is involved in a completely different way. Thus, film makers from all periods have shown us that it is the capturing of what is real, even though by means of fiction, what makes us feel and reason; that the essence of the cinema is the idea of the world; life as a whole: humanity<sup>2</sup>.



The cinema stirs not only the intellect but several senses at the same time because the sense of the world can only be gained through a combination –strategic and amorous- of *sense* and *sensibility*, as Jane Austen would have it, and hence rationality<sup>4</sup>, is not excluded but mediated by emotional impact. Regarding the affective component, rationality is included as an element essential to accessing the world and, therefore, to grasp a philosophical problem it does not suffice merely to understand it; one must live it, feel it under one's skin, dramatize it, suffer it, feel threatened by it and realise that our usual bases of support are radically affected. If it is not like that, even though we fully “understand” the objective enunciation of the problem, we shall not have truly grasped it, and we shall not have really comprehended it<sup>4</sup>. We must become aroused *to understand*, not necessarily *to accept*. For this reason, *it is necessary to redefine reason and make it broader in such a way that it will include affections, feelings, values, preferences and beliefs. So it is when reason is understood thus that it immediately ceases to be something abstract and becomes concrete. This concretion, in all its complexity, is what must necessarily be expressed in narrative form*<sup>2</sup>.

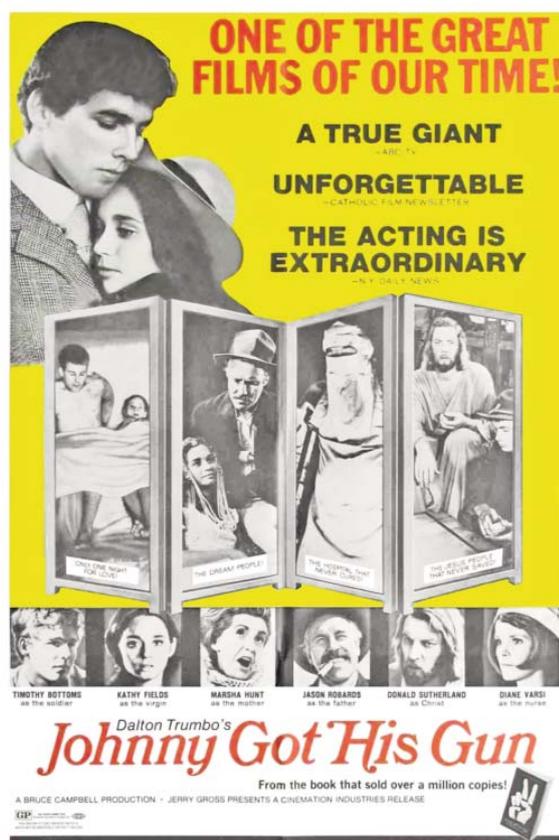
Cinematographic philosophers consider that *that sensitive representation should produce “some kind of*

*impact” in those engaging in it and finally, that through that “impacting sensitive representation”, some realities will be attained that can be defended with “pretensions of a universal truth”. Accordingly, one is not dealing with simple psychological impressions but with fundamental experiences linked to the human condition, that is “to all humankind, and that therefore have a cognitive sense*<sup>4</sup>. To say that war is absurd is not the same thing as seeing *Johnny Got his Gun* (1971) by Dalton Trumbo or *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) by Oliver Stone). Saying that drug addiction is appalling is not the same as seeing *Pink Floyd The Wall* (1982) by Alan Parker. Saying that injustice is intolerable is not the same as seeing *Sacco and Vanzetti/ Sacco e Vanzetti* (1971) by Giuliano Montaldo<sup>4</sup>. What penetrates the eyes produces an enormous impact at many sensory levels. It is through the effect of shock, of sensitive violence, of frank exhibitionist aggressiveness that it is possible for the spectator to become acutely aware of the problem; better still, to become sensitised. The emotion we feel does not stop at what is particular but serves to make people attain the universal idea more convincingly. It is perhaps emotional mediation –indispensable for understanding problems such as war– not just for becoming touched by them. As human beings we are structurally moral and ethics is the backbone of our acts; a film becomes a paradigm of morality. The cinema or life as a whole melds with ethics as a practical reason of life and human behaviour.

### The language of the cinema

The spectator in front of the screen, almost without observing shots, scenes and sequences, captures different messages from the human models and the plurality of behaviours, etc. This makes the cinema the most complete intergenerational form of transmission within the media that have to date been used, and allows part of our own nature to be recognised, together with the panoply of feelings and common problems that affect human relationships that are and have always been so important.

Films normally have a meaning beyond the plot that can be explored in some of the deepest levels, integrated and expressed in other ways. The filmmaker chooses a part of reality and inverts it objectively and then recreates it according to his/her fantasy and ingeniousness. Through the action, the filmmaker fragments and reconstructs space and time; if seen fit, things can be brought from the past or an imaginary future. As stated by Carl T. Dreyer *what is important for me is not merely to capture the words. What I seek in my films, what I want to get, is to penetrate the deepest*



*thoughts of my actors, through their most subtle expressions. Because those expressions unveil the nature of the character, his/her unconscious feelings, the secrets hiding at the bottom of the soul, It is that the cinema is interested in human drama, going deep into life and its conflicts and people's experiences.*

*Rapid scene changes, that mixture of emotion and sensations, are much better than the compact and prolonged literary paragraphs to which we are accustomed. They bring the cinema closer to life. In life, too, the changes and transitions sparkle before our eyes and the emotions of the soul are like hurricanes. Film-makers have guessed the mystery of movement. And in that lies their greatness<sup>7</sup>. In this way the cinema offers a language that, among other things, would provide a "purely emotional" vehicle (equivalent to a shout); another type of rational articulation that includes an emotional component. What is emotional does not rule out what is rational: it redefines it.*

Music, gestures, the angles of the camera and silence, which form part of the cinematographic language, can describe experiences with better precision when words prove to be inadequate or insufficient. Words are related to time and images to space, but with the invention of the cinematographic camera the concept of time passing becomes inseparable from visual experience and the way we see human beings changes; perspective stops being the only one available<sup>8,9</sup>. Dziga Vertov, a soviet director, said in 1923: *I am the ciné-eye. I am the mechanical eye. I am the machine, I show you the world in the way only I can see it. I am now totally liberated from human inertia. I am within interrupted movement... Liberating myself from the passage of 16-17 pictures at one second, from the frames of space and time, I bring together every point of the universe I recorded. My path leads to the creation of a new perception of the world. That is why I explain things in a new way unknown to you* (cited in<sup>10</sup>).

*The symbolic terrain is a key element in social life<sup>3</sup>, and it is used a lot in the cinema because all language has a symbolic content that must be known to be understood, especially because in it there are above all many elements of non-verbal communication. There are characters who seem more interesting when they are in silence than when they talk because with their silences they say everything there is to be said. Knowing how to give an appropriate space to silence and work with it requires talent. Movie directors try to give testimony to the social reality surrounding them. Films are also a collective work such that they reflect the moment and the social reality and politics of the years when they were filmed.*

The act of communication demands that the interlocutors share, at least partially, the same language, the same representation system, but unlike other languages, such as oral language or body language, the capacity of individuals to use (decode) audiovisual language is very limited: most receivers of this language (us) could be clearly dyslexic, or almost completely "dysgraphic", in handling it<sup>2,3</sup>. The greater our cinematographic education, the more we shall see and hear in a film and the more meaning we shall derive from it, such that it is necessary to acquire information about the world of images. *If we make films it is so that we can all see something that we would not have seen until then; something that we did not know how to see; something that we did not know how to read. It is so that things can reveal themselves to us* (Nicholas Philibert, cited in 2). Owing to the influence of the cinema in the formation of the masses, even though the cinema often works in what the public likes it is necessary for spectators to learn to distinguish what is real from what is accessory, what is in the scene from what is not. Teaching people to see images, decoding in them what is being expressed, is as important as knowing how to read and understand a written text. Hermeneutics, or the art of interpreting the senses, the facts, the texts, the narratives, is for that. It is the science and art of "understanding"<sup>2</sup>. Understanding is differentiated from explaining, where natural facts bared to us: cultural and historical events or happenings are understood. Understanding is a complex phenomenon based on the interpretation of data in their relationships with meaning. Words and images are structures that link or transmit feelings. However, "feeling" is never identified with the "sign", be it linguistic, pictorial or of another other nature. The sign is not simply identified with the meaning. The cinema takes us beyond that in understanding. Pragmatics is the discipline that studies language, but it also addresses the relationships between people and words; words as they are pronounced and received by people<sup>3</sup>.

*Cinema is an art that, by means of images in motion and sound, aims to reflect the lives of human beings in their most diverse aspects and all that affects them and interests them, although under the supervision of the director and interpreted by actors<sup>11</sup>. A good film would be one that manages to make the most of the expressive possibilities of the cinematographic device. Regarding the choice of films, François Truffaut<sup>12</sup> claimed that it should be possible to summarise all good films in a single word and, as an example, he stated that *Last Year at Marienbad/ L'année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) Alain Resnais was no more nor less than "persuasion".*

## Empathy and the cinema

Human beings can more or less gain pleasure from anything. Edgar Morin (cited in <sup>13</sup>) considers that spectators who are able to cooperate with the films they see combine *interjection* (empathy towards the characters) and *projection* (experiences more or less lived, transplanted into the story in front of their eyes). The cinema, as visual technology, offers the possibility of exploring the experience of approaching “the other” thanks to a process of identifications that the spectator derives from the film<sup>14</sup>. One element that offers a significant aid for understanding the influence of the cinema in the lives of human beings is the existence of mirror neurons, with which we are equipped biologically for empathy and compassion, to break down the barriers that separate us from one another and allow us to feel like “the other”. This neuronal group, identified in the nineties by Giacomo Rizzolatti<sup>15</sup>, at the University of Parma, is a zone close to Broca’s area. It is a system that can be considered key to our condition as social beings, in processes of learning, the understanding of disturbances such as autism, and even the development of language<sup>16</sup>.

The system of mirror neurons begins to function when we perform an action, when we see

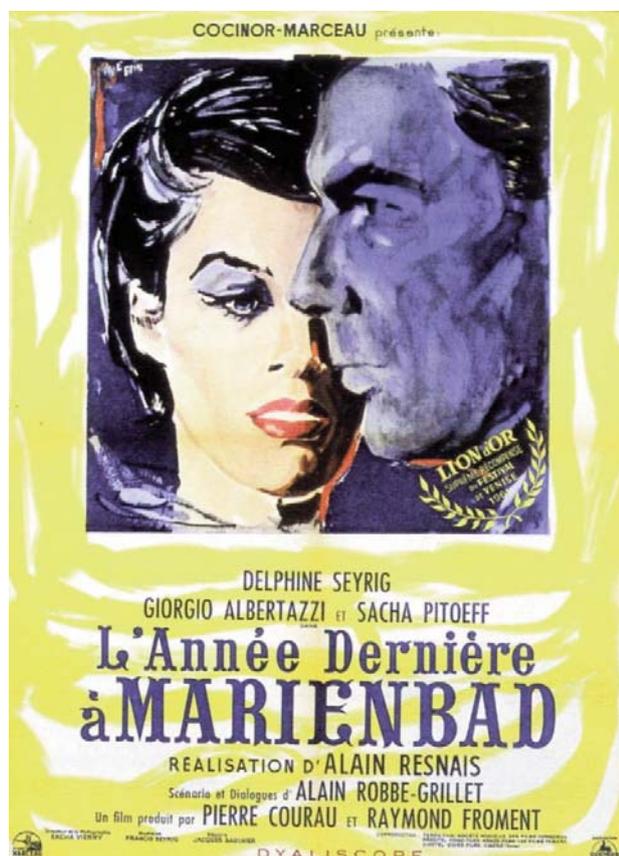
someone performing the same movement. Their activity implies recognition of the intentions of others. They form the basis of intentional communication<sup>17</sup>. They allow us to imitate such actions and understand them, and they provide a way to make this distinction and react appropriately<sup>15,17</sup>. It is believed that these nerve cells could be intimately related to empathy, to the capacity to imitate others, and to the skills of our minds to snoop into the minds of others<sup>18</sup>.

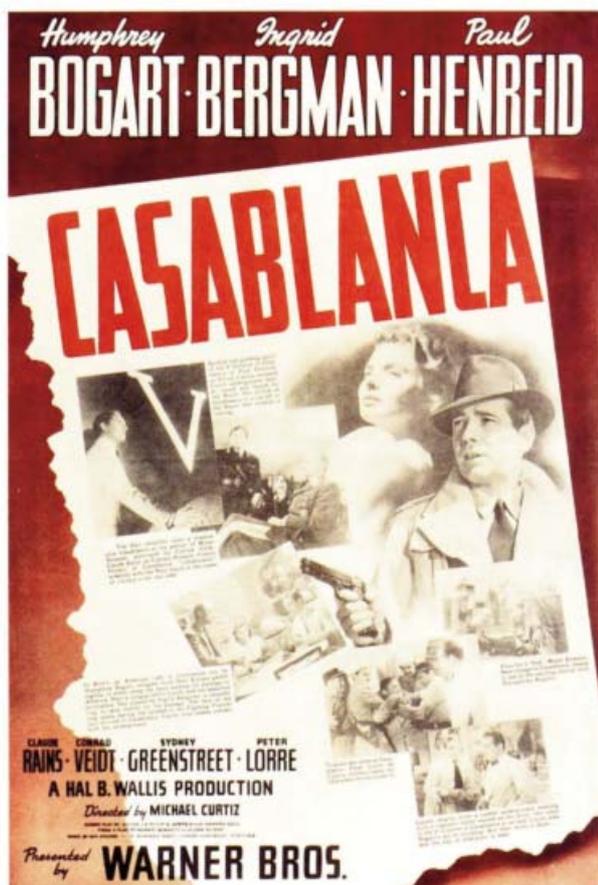
Thus, *when an individual sees someone pick up a ball, his/her brain also picks it up and s/he lives the whole process of throwing it as though this were really taking place*. However, the mirror system does not stop at movement but also reflects more subtle aspects of behaviour, such as emotions, and it shows that we are true social beings<sup>16</sup>. To survive socially implies knowing how to place oneself in someone else’s shoes, a competence lacking in autism<sup>15</sup>. We are put in the shoes of others, but not in an abstract way, as Rizzolatti says, but by feeling like that other person, which explains our propensity to identify ourselves with the great love stories, such as *Casablanca* (1942) by Michael Curtiz<sup>16</sup>.

*To look at a film is not so much to discover the meanings that the director offers on screen as the production of “meaning” by the spectators<sup>3</sup>. Many experiments have shown that people tend to imitate the movements of others unconsciously because this type of motor empathy facilitates relationships and mutual appreciation. Social emotions such as guilt, shame, pride and even humiliation are all reflected in mirror neurons. We have a system that calls to us because human beings are conceived to react to others*. However, this requires awareness<sup>15</sup>. *Without awareness of ourselves and of others it is not possible for us to place ourselves in their shoes. As occurs with empathy, in this case too there are people with better radars than others for capturing them, their mirror system presumably being more active<sup>16</sup>*. What is essential in all realistic representations is that the spectator should have the sensation that if s/he were placed in the same circumstances s/he would act in exactly the same way, either in the good sense or the bad sense. The weaknesses of the character must be human because in this way the spectators can recognise their own weakness in the characters such that when a character acts in a heroic fashion the spectators can also identify with that character. The cinema is universal not in the sense that “it necessarily happens to all of us” but in the sense of “it could happen to anyone”.

## Conclusions

Today the cinema is an extremely important element for the diffusion of culture, the creation of





public attitudes and the transmission of ideas about science and society in general. It allows us to see life as a whole. It moves the intellect, affection and several of the senses all at the same time, and through the empathy that is built between the spectator and the experiences of the actors it is able to facilitate a better understanding of human beings. To take full advantage of it, however, we must acquire a good training in how to see and distinguish what is real and what is accessory and in decoding the meaning of the images. The struggle to seek truth and universality does not

disappear with the arrival of the cinema but, quite the contrary, is reinforced through it and other languages and manifestations of human expression. The cinema shows us how to know the world better.

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