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RITES OF REALISM

Essays on Corporeal Cinema

Edited by IVONE MARGULIES

BAZIN

'DEATH EVERY
AFTERNOON.'



Death Every Afternoon

André Bazin

Translated by Mark A. Cohen

I understand that Pierre Braunberger nurtured the idea for this film for quite some time. The result shows that it was worth it. The chances are that a noted aficionado like Braunberger saw nothing more in this project than a way to honor and promote bullfighting as well as make a film his producer would not regret. From this point of view, it was probably a good investment—deservedly so I must add—because bullfight lovers will rush to see it while the uninitiated will go out of curiosity. I do not think fans will be disappointed because the footage is exceptionally fine. They will find the most famous matadors in action, and the shots Braunberger and Myriam have compiled and edited are astonishingly effective. The bullfights must have been filmed copiously and repeatedly for the camera to convey the action of the bullring so completely. Many are the passes and coups de grâce filmed during top events featuring stars, which afford us long, practically uncut takes in which the framing of man and animal is never tighter than a medium shot or even an American shot. And when the head of the bull comes into the foreground it is not a stuffed head, the rest follows.

Perhaps I am a fool to be so astonished by Myriam's talent. She edited the footage with diabolical skill, and you have to pay careful attention to

see that the bull that comes into view from the left is not always the one that left the screen from the right. So perfectly do the matches on action conceal the articulation of the shots that the film would have to be viewed with a moviola to distinguish with certainty between a single shot and a sequence created by patching together five or six different shots.¹ Without us noticing the switch, a "veronica" beginning with one matador and bull ends with a different man and a different animal. Since *The Story of a Cheat* (*Le Roman d'un Tricheur*) and especially *Paris 1900*, everyone knows that Myriam is a brilliant editor. *The Bullfight* has proved it yet again. When it is this good, the art of the editor goes well beyond its usual function — it is an essential element in the film's creation. Such a conception of montage film calls for further discussion. At issue here is something quite different than a return to the old primacy of montage over découpage (shooting script) as taught by early Soviet cinema. Neither *Paris 1900* nor *The Bullfight* are "Kino eye." They are "modern" works, aesthetically contemporary with the découpage of films such as *Citizen Kane*, *Rules of the Game*, *The Viper*, and *Bicycle Thieves*. The goal of the editing is not to suggest symbolic and abstract links between the images, as in Kulechov's famous experiment with the close-up of Moszhukin. If the phenomenon revealed in this experiment is to play a role in this neomontage, it is for a radically different purpose: to fulfill both the physical verisimilitude of the découpage and its logical malleability. The image of a naked woman followed by Moszhukin's ambiguous smile signifies salaciousness and desire. What is more, the moral significance in some sense preexists the physical one; the image of a naked woman plus image of a smile equals desire. No doubt the existence of desire logically implies that the man is looking at the woman, but this geometry is not there in the images. The deduction is almost superfluous; for Kulechov, moreover, it is secondary. What counts is the meaning given to the smile by the collision of images. In this case, the relationship is quite different. Myriam aims above all at physical realism. The deception of the editing supports the verisimilitude of the découpage. The linkage of two bulls in a single movement does not symbolize the bulls' strength; it repetitiously replaces the photo of the nonexistent bull we believe we are seeing. The editor makes sense of her editing just as the director of his découpage, based solely on this kind of realism. It is no longer the camera eye, but the adaptation of editing technique to the aesthetics of the camera pen.²

That is why novices like me will find in this film the clearest and most thorough introduction imaginable. The footage was not edited randomly

according to the shots' spectacular affinities but with precision and clarity. The history of bullfighting (and of the bulls bred for it) and the evolution of fighting styles up to and since Belmonte are presented with all the didactic resources of the cinema. When a figure is being described, the image is frozen at the critical moment and the commentator explains the relative positions of man and animal. Probably because they did not have access to slow-motion equipment, Pierre Braunberger relied on a truca, but the freeze frame is as effective.³ Needless to say the didactic qualities of this film are also its limit, or so it would appear. The project is less grandiose and all embracing than Hemingway's in *Death in the Afternoon*. *The Bullfight* might seem nothing more than a feature-length documentary, a fascinating one to be sure, but still a "documentary." This view would be unjust and mistaken, unjust because the pedagogic humility with which it was carried out is less a sign of limitation than of a conscious refusal. Faced with such a grand subject, such rich material, Pierre Braunberger acted in all humility. The commentary restricts itself to explanation; it avoids a facile verbal lyricism that would be overwhelmed by the objective lyricism of the image. Mistaken, too, because the subject transcends itself, and this means that Pierre Braunberger's project is perhaps even greater cinematically than he could have imagined.

The experience of filmed theater — and its almost total failure until some recent successes redefined the problem — has made us aware of the role played by real presence. We know that the photographic image of a play only gives it back to us emptied of its psychological reality, a body without a soul. The reciprocal presence, the flesh and blood confrontation of viewer and actor, is not a simple physical accident but an ontological fact constitutive of the performance as such. Starting from this theoretical given as well as from experience, one might infer that the bullfight is even less cinematic than the theater. If theatrical reality cannot be captured on celluloid, what about the tragedy of tauromachy, of the liturgy and the almost religious feeling that accompanies it. A photograph of a bullfight might have some documentary or didactic value, but how could it give us back the essence of the spectacle, the mystical triad of animal, man, and crowd?

I have never been to a bullfight, and it would be ridiculous of me to claim that the film lets me feel the same emotions, but I do claim that it gives me its essential quality, its metaphysical kernel: death. The tragic ballet of the bullfight turns around the presence and permanent possibility of death (that of the animal and the man). That is what makes the ring into

something more than a theater stage: death is played on it. The toreador plays for his life, like the trapeze artist without a net. Death is surely one of those rare events that justifies the term, so beloved of Claude Mauriac, cinematic specificity. Art of time, cinema has the exorbitant privilege of repeating it, a privilege common to all mechanical arts, but one that it can use with infinitely greater potential than records or radio. Let us be even more precise since there are other temporal arts, like music. But musical time is immediately and by definition aesthetic time, whereas the cinema only attains and constructs its aesthetic time based on lived time, Bergsonian "durée," which is in essence irreversible and qualitative. The reality that cinema reproduces at will and organizes is the same worldly reality of which we are a part, the sensible continuum out of which the celluloid makes a mold both spatial and temporal. I cannot repeat a single moment of my life, but cinema can repeat any one of these moments indefinitely before my eyes. If it is true that for consciousness no moment is equal to any other, there is one on which this fundamental difference converges, and that is the moment of death. For every creature, death is the unique moment par excellence. The qualitative time of life is retroactively defined in relation to it. It marks the frontier between the duration of consciousness and the objective time of things. Death is nothing but one moment after another, but it is the last. Doubtless no moment is like any other, but they can nevertheless be as similar as leaves on a tree, which is why their cinematic repetition is more paradoxical in theory than in practice. Despite the ontological contradiction it represents, we quite readily accept it as a sort of objective counterpart to memory. However, two moments in life radically rebel against this concession made by consciousness: the sexual act and death. Each is in its own way the absolute negation of objective time, the qualitative instant in its purest form. Like death, love must be experienced and cannot be represented (it is not called the little death for nothing) without violating its nature. This violation is called obscenity. The representation of a real death is also an obscenity, no longer a moral one, as in love, but metaphysical. We do not die twice. In this respect, a photograph does not have the power of film; it can only represent someone dying or a corpse, not the elusive passage from one state to the other. In the spring of 1949, you may have seen a haunting documentary about the anti-Communist crackdown in Shanghai in which Red "spies" were executed with a revolver on the public square. At each screening, at the flick of a switch, these men came to life again and then the jerk of the same bul-

let jolted their necks. The film did not even leave out the gesture of the policeman who had to make two attempts with his jammed revolver, an intolerable sight not so much for its objective horror as for its ontological obscenity. Before cinema there was only the profanation of corpses and the desecration of tombs. Thanks to film, nowadays we can desecrate and show at will the only one of our possessions that is temporally inalienable: dead without a requiem, the eternal dead-again of the cinema! 4 12-11-07/3

I imagine the supreme cinematic perversion would be the projection of an execution backward like those comic newsreels in which the diver jumps up from the water back onto his diving board.

These observations have not taken me so far as it seems from *The Bullfight*. One will understand me if I say that the film of a performance of Molière's *Malade Imaginaire* has no theatrical or cinematic value but that if the camera had been present at Molière's final performance it would be an amazing film.⁵

This is why the representation on screen of a bull being put to death (which presupposes that the man has risked death) is in principle as moving as the spectacle of the real instant that it reproduces. In a certain sense, it is even more moving because it magnifies the quality of the original moment through the contrast of its repetition. It confers on it an additional solemnity. The cinema has given the death of Manoleite a material eternity. On the screen, the toreador dies every afternoon.

Notes

1. A movieola is a playback machine.
2. Translator's note: Given that *The Bullfight* has a voice-over commentary written by Michel Leiris, it is probable that Bazin sees this as an essay film, as suggested by his use of Alexandre Astruc's term *caméra stylo*.
3. A truca is a special effects optical printer.
4. Translator's note: In the French this is *re-morts*, which is a pun on *re-mords*, meaning "remorse."
5. Translator's note: Molière died shortly after falling ill onstage during a performance of this play in 1672.