

# Cinematic Schooling



# Cinematic Schooling:

*Popular Learning at the Movies*

By

James Combs

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In celebration and memory of the life and friendship  
of Stellar Combs, my wonderful feline friend for over  
twenty years.

His gentle nature and imperturbable spirit  
will always be with me.

Here no more but There forevermore.

When I located myself in a cabin deep in the Appalachian woods, I found reading and writing conditions were much enhanced, not only by the remote quietude and lovely surroundings of mountainous forests, but also for the delightful flora and fauna that graced the area. My wife would go off daily to teach at the local community college, leaving me much time to do my own thing. But something serendipitous happened that turned out to help me much in both work and play. Stray cats began to show up, so they began adopting us, and pretty soon we had a substantial tribe of tiger. At work, they would assist me by staying close and sleeping, which I found very relaxing and rewarding. They became essential as my "team" composing a book.

One in particular, named "Biscuit", I will single out, since she just died as I was finishing another work. We bonded because we shared the characteristic of being strange and solitary, and also since we both seemed to others to be gentle and shy. So Biscuit was suitable company, quietly staying close in the long hours of human effort she no doubt found dubious, when I could be napping like her. And she finally displayed what I like to think about myself, that she lived as she wanted to live, and also that she went peaceably and willingly into that good night. Thanks, Biscuit, for your companionship. If we get our wish, we will meet and enjoy each other on those abiding Banks of Green Willow.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### EXPLORING SEEING AND LEARNING: OF CAVE PAINTINGS AND PRIMAL EXPRESSION

As our species' ancestors began to acquire both stereoscopic vision and complex mental capacities, they could see and think about the various features of their environment: curiosity began to develop about themselves and the world around them and they tried to make sense of things. In our own way, we are still curious about the world and our place in it. In the largest sense of continuity, we inherited from our specific past that habit of curiosity which served our interests in helping us to understand how to survive and prosper. It has further served to instruct us in the arts of living so that we may enjoy our lives in the world we inhabit and pass on to our progeny and society as a whole something of what we have learned about the nature of our world. This acquisition and communication of social knowledge, which has been disseminated and utilized throughout society and across generations, is a major factor in explanations of the continuity of our species. This sharing of knowledge may be beneficial or harmful but is intended to be effective. Such sharing can be institutional or individual, emanating from families, churches, schools, or coming more informally from those thought to be authoritative or wise. This teaching-learning process is such a ubiquitous and familiar feature of social life that we take it for granted and usually reflect little upon what exactly is being taught and learned.

This process is complicated by the fact that there are multiple sources of learning, especially in modern societies which offer a wide variety of possibilities to someone who is seeking to learn. Learning is often selective, garbled, and changed by the learner so that, for each individual, the mosaic of what is learned is not at all consistent with the intention or the content of what is being taught. Even more

important is the expanded cultural presence of new modes of learning, many of which are located in the vast environs of popular culture. Thus, traditional and institutional loci of learning may well be marginalized or ignored as less important and impressive forms of cultural play. It may be the case that learning from such popular forms of entertainment or fashion threatens to supersede the more “serious” sources of knowledge, so that increasingly people will take cues on how to live and what to value and expect from life, from depictions created and presented as play. These may range from familiar forms such as fiction, to the semi-fictional such as film documentary, to “human interest” news programming. There is evidence that play-learning is more effective and attractive than “work-learning”, probably because it is more fun and therefore somehow more memorable and long-lasting. As the “play ethos” becomes more ingrained into our contemporary way of living, it may be the case that “schooling” and “entertaining” will become indistinguishable (or at least allied) in the social project of educating and the popular project of “funning.” This does not mean that we will lose our grip on reality or our respect for the facts; indeed, the introduction of play-learning may well expand our horizons, introduce new metaphors, and make use of sources drawn from popular culture venues. We could well be at the historical cusp of living in a world increasingly devoted to the pursuit of playtime and the demand for more time to play, with play superseding work as the norm by which life is measured. In that way, the future might develop such expectations, with the realization of a way of life that could be different and perhaps even better.

For this possibility to become an eventuality is likely to require the kind of play-learning that schools us in the edifying knowledge of aesthetic felicity; the capacity to understand the world of qualitative appreciation through seeing things in the light of sentient ludenics; our playful and exploratory sensibilities. This humane undertaking returns us to the root-meaning of *aesthesis*, our elementary awareness of and feeling for sensory experience and sensible musing through imagination. In the classical formulation, prehensile sentience is the process through which we come to grips with the primary data of human sensibilities, including sensing, musing, and “festing”. In the ontology of sensation, we engage in active transactions with our environments to apprehend our grasp, ordering and

temporal placement of things. Our continual transactions with an ever-changing world and always-active mind make sensing things mandatory. Musing is helpful for making sense, and festing assists in our ability to cultivate enjoying things both in retrospect and prospect. We are in the broadest and most fundamental sense at play in the world and, in ways we never fully understand, the world is at play with us. Our human capacity for play has both pragmatic and imaginative components, stemming from our innate ability for *aesthesis* — our experience of the world in the concreteness and particularity of our senses. In our encounters with the perceptible things of our lives, we exercise the Vicoian *verum factum*, in that truth is precisely what we make ourselves. In this way, we make our lives and the things that we encounter in the world. Through the utilization of our native wit and experiential discovery, making sense becomes our own creative act, since through that use of wit we learn how to cope and, more importantly, how to learn. This habit of creative action is encompassed in the term *poiesis*, which includes the most mundane to the most exalted kinds of makings — making sense, making do, and making things of worth are all part of our specific experience and history. And, as we develop the ability to use wit in imagining the imperceptible, we find that our imaginations can soar to conjure acts of fantasy beyond our immediate and palpable lives. Out of this remarkable ability to combine the practical and the imaginative has come skyscrapers and universities, computers and stock markets, but also armies and death camps. We can imagine and utilize both heavens and hells, and activate the means and ends to bring about great good and great evil.

So, we may assert that the things we imagine are real in the sense that we attribute them some kind of reality, even if it is subjective and private. When we share that “vision” with the world it becomes a datum of social experience, since it is then an action that can transform the world. The thing visualized is seen and shared through our use of the “omnioptic eye” — the “double vision” of the poets that makes it into something more than just imaginary. In various modes of expression, we have exercised our ability to identify and enjoy the imaginative to the extent that we are able to “project” ourselves into temporary visitations of an imaginative world which we can, in some measure, inhabit. The heavens and hells of religious imagination, the utopias and dystopias of political imaginings, the

better world of an imagined past, and the worse world of a dreaded future are all places made real through our participation in imaginative expression; we can envision such “castles in the air” and playfully (imaginatively) inhabit them for a time to see what they are like to live in. Such places are usually termed “heterocosms” — alternative and separate worlds from the quotidian world we inhabit in our ordinary lives; the process is often called “hypotyposis” — a life-like description of a thing or scene, expressed as a vivid and picturesque description of something not present but in some sense imaginable as if it were. Such conjectural imaginings can range from the individual “daydream” or reverie about some state of affairs (e.g. a desirable mate, a better life, or a time of peace) that is imaginable as an exercise in hope, no matter how vain and unlikely such a presumption might be, to the imaginary heterocosms of conceptual structures found in many forms of human expression, such as philosophy (Plato’s fable of the caves), literature, and art forms such as the movies.

In the history of visual art, a related interest through the ages has been the effort to “capture” and depict motion. The famous cave paintings of prehistory still resonate with us through the skill with which artists portrayed animals in motion, to the extent that those who observe the paintings on the cave walls are struck by the sense that the images seem to move. These animals seem to possess a raw natural vitality that expresses a kind of creaturely grace; their vital presence is enhanced by the cave being set apart from the world outside. This in itself contributes to an enhanced sense of a magical place that, even if not for worship as we understand it, may have been used for praise and perhaps festivity. The caves and the art inside them constitute something of an aesthetic heterocosm: a dark hollow of the Earth sometimes populated by cave bears and venerated by emergent humans as a place of sacral observance, perhaps by a select group seeking hunting power and even a vision-quest for a cult (including members of both sexes and youths), trying to understand the symbolic nature of the world and the magic animals of both prey and admiration. The artists, too, were accomplished talents displaying their grasp of what their art was supposed to convey — the dynamic liveliness of their animal subjects in vital motion.

It has often been observed by those familiar with the arts that there is something of a paradox at the center of expression, in which the disappearing moment of experience is the firmest reality. The cave painters clearly sensed that they were trying to capture and convey the dynamic power and majesty of the animals in motion at that moment of maximum beauty and vitality. Their art communicates across the ages the lively animation of their living subjects at the moment of majestic brute power. The cave painters, as Picasso said, “invented everything” and in so doing enjoyed great aesthetic fun through their creative activity. Certainly, the cultural party that was allowed to venture into the darkened caves to see the breathtaking illumination of visual art that we humans created could sense the privilege of being in a cavernous heterocosm related, but not identical, to the mundane world of ordinary experience to which they were accustomed. The *alter mundus* of the inner caverns provided people with something of a portal into another dimension, perhaps inspired not only by their experience with the actual hunt of their livelihood but also by their dream and fantasy experience. This idea gives credence to the surmise that the cave painters were experimenting with physical presentations of another world, to invite awe and perhaps worship, with the imagined animals on the walls serving as spirit guides to the heterocosmic world of their imaginations. In that privileged time within the sacrid environment of the cave shrine, the participants were able to sense the symbolic signification expressed in the art to the extent that, for the brief time they inhabited the heterocosmic world, it conjured up for their benefit and edification. In that way, they were rude pioneers of that great sensibility of dual habitation: being in the ordinary world of daily experience while also being in the extraordinary world of the collective imagination and individual enjoyment.

As we reconstruct and study this remarkable episode long in our past, we have to be struck by the fact that we are witnessing a significant development in the human story. For these cave paintings are primal evidence of our ancestors’ incipient ability to express their experience in complex ways, while trying to make sense of their own lives and the world in which they lived. In other words, they were *learning*.

So what were they learning? They were clearly learning how to learn or, more precisely, they were learning how to express what it

was that they were learning. They had no written language that we know of but they did have burial rites, feasts for festive and solemn occasions, and beliefs about the animism inherent in nature, as seen in the spectacular cave paintings. So, their direct and necessary contact with nature for food, protection, and procreation, became the subject of their interests and their modes of expression. By painting the cavern walls, they were learning how to express themselves about their experience — their concerns, fears, needs, and so on. But, more profoundly, they were expressing themselves through playful and beautiful visual art that conveyed their expressive sense of what was important. Their skilled artistic productions in the caves gave them a medium of aesthetic expression using animate signs, employing the magnificent beasts of their environment as significant external objects bursting with a liveliness that emanates from their magnificent natural being — admirable in life and useful in death. The beasts were, for them, “life-signs” — a central feature of their environment and their habitation in it — vital objects of veneration and celebration in the heterocosmic cavern-temples of their sacred care. Whatever their feelings were about immortality, at least they had created a separate environment that was, in some sense, another world. There is an aesthetic sense that the fleeting images of a moment were so precious that they had to somehow be preserved in elaborate paintings located in an alternative place, set aside as another world of permanence. Although it may remain forever unclear what these early artists and their tribe believed, and exactly who was permitted access to the inner chamber of their art gallery, we may more confidently say that what we are witnessing in this early experience of our remote ancestors is not only incipient religious beliefs and practices, and perhaps the emergence of some kind of cult with magical powers and shamanic leaders, but more broadly the development of the ability to devote time and energy to artistic expression. Furthermore, that expression is placed in a separated space and honored for the presence of cultural animate signs — reserved for some to see their handiwork in a heterocosmic habitude. The long-term and subtle learning connoted here is the emergence of the human ability to exercise a heterocosmic imagination and, in some sense, to inhabit both this world and the imagined one. They were learning how to express their interests pictorially and then, where to put those expressions to both

save and savor them over time. Apparently, that time may well have extended over thousands of years, although there is little way to be sure.

More specifically for our purposes here, they were also learning how to imagine and execute the pictorialization of motion. Even though we are all aware of the omnipresence of motion and the inexorable force of temporal change, we are still mystified by how to adequately understand and express that the disappearing moment of present time is both the most real and the most fragile of knowable qualities in which we invest our attention, and out of which we learn about its unrelenting temporality. In our efforts to keep on living and understand things, as well as attempting to make sense of ourselves in time, we are constantly faced with the constriction of the living present and the expansion of horizons from our past into our future. We try to use our recalled past and our projections of possible futures as we act and react in the present moment, yet it is that moment where the center is, and it is that center we try to capture through expression. The cave artists were familiar with the fleeting nature of the hunted animals at the center of their lives. They realized that their “sight of things” lay with these beings and the activities that brought them to their attention. Their art was an effort to celebrate and venerate the sight of their prey at the center of their lives. So, the “living pictures” on the cavern walls were a primal aesthetic exercise, keeping artistic sight of the central figures in their immediate experience, now enshrined for all time in the heterocosmic temple deep in the bowels of the earth.

Perhaps it is not a stretch to say that Picasso was right. They invented aesthetic excellence in their pursuit of cultural expression that must have included a pragmatic element, perhaps involving some version of shamanic magic for the successful continuation of hunting. It is also difficult to assert that the activity of creating the art, and perhaps the cultural celebration and invocation of it afterwards and periodically, was always a matter of high seriousness. One can imagine the fun these incipient painters had in the concentrated time of creativity, and the enjoyment for those who were allowed into this inner sanctum to see the aesthetic achievement displayed in its awe-inspiring glory in the first art gallery! Thus we see the emergence of three related human abilities, brought together to create the first great human artistic achievement.

We can surmise now that these efforts activated the human senses of ludenic and enlightened expression (*homo ludens*). Secondly, we can retrospectively see the sense of human action — the effort it takes to stay alive and endure as individuals and peoples (*homo faber*); and, throughout the creation and appreciation of the art, the senses aroused in individual and cultural learning that emanated from this shrine (*homo aestheticus*). In this sense, our retrospection of this early and significant episode in human cultural history suggests that we are looking back on perhaps the first evidence of the capacity for expressive play, which speaks to a clear pragmatic concern that utilized the aesthetic resources of artistic depiction and exhibition. They would not have separated these activities, in the spirit of *poiesis*, as actions to transform and continue the world, but would have combed the ability to create things through imaginative play, perhaps regarding the necessity of work as an effort to make the world change and endure, and the power of aesthetic expression as furthering those goals and celebrating the art and beauty of living. Specifically, poetry is often defined as a “speaking picture”, communicating to them (and us) who they were, what they did and where they located the center of things as they knew and valued them. They turned those dark and empty caverns into a heterocosmic habitation; they could enter and participate in the “big light” of existence, illuminated in the darkest cave, signifying the “big play” of what they did in order to survive and prosper. Through their majestic art and accompanying rituals and communal gatherings, they celebrated the creation and enjoyment of their “big school” of life. Our ancestors were, in this way, learning how to learn: how to see and express what they saw, how to celebrate what they did, and how to pass on that learning to the uninitiated and unlearned who wondered about both the beauty and the terror of earthly existence. We are also witness to the human capacity to live in two different worlds: the brute and volatile world of physical existence; and our alternative existence in our imaginative worlds. The cave dwellings served many purposes, but surely were conceived as a big school — the school of learning the art of living as we cope with and imagine it.

It may seem paradoxical that these early people centered things by inhabiting two worlds: an all-too-real one and an idealized, imagined one. Their schooling included learning how to deal with

brute motion in the world of the hunt and the struggle for survival; the world that accompanied them somehow explains and exemplifies the contemporary world by picturing the relentless and dynamic beauty of motion. They realized the importance of learning how to picture motion as an exercise in understanding their world, in both their use and appreciation of motion. Picturing motion helped them to see the location of the center of their sight, what they were viewing there, and how that “sighting vision” defined what they were observing. That cultural vision centered their self-image as a coherent body of people, and distinguished who they were and what they did as important and distinctive. Their schooling involved using the nature they were close to and subject to in their experience of what they wanted and needed to learn. In a rudimentary sense, the world imagined in their art was the visual embodiment of their learning, envisioning the world as they would have liked it to be — alive, plentiful and eternal. They were perhaps projecting and sharing an animated and spirit-filled world of enchantment in which needs would be fulfilled, suffering and death would be absent, and benevolent natural forces would reign. The anxiety they had to live with over safety, nourishment and illness gave them the impetus to learn how to imagine an enchanted place that would expand and reify the present condition towards a world of pragmatic fulfillment, delightful play, and aesthetic beauty. Such a vision, in which the animate signs we live by come to fruition in this ultimate “center of things”, is one we would like to inhabit.

We know that these ancestors could communicate complex messages verbally, create spectacular art, and probably had some kind of religious expression. Burial rites emerged and became elaborate observations, shamanic figures appeared in reference to the celebration of the hunt, and there may have been a cult that observed prosperity rituals in the inner reaches of the sanctified caverns. We may have good reason to surmise that their advancement of expression was accompanied by the appearance and elaboration of a tribal folklore. This might have been the province of an elder sage with the ability to remember tales from the past, as well as conjure up elaborate stories about the origins of major events, to give continuity to the social group; there may have been “tall tales” about the exploits of previous generations of hunters or even battles with competing tribes. Such a folklore can become a defining expression

of group identity and continuity, and might have persisted for a very long time without being written down. Certainly, the sanctuary of the cave paintings would be an appropriate place for the retelling and veneration of tribal lore, a resource “carried” by a sage — the receptacle of group memory and meaning. It appears that these early human groups were unsettled in the sense of living highly mobile lives as a matter of survival, so they didn’t have what we would call a “home.” They may well have been territorial, establishing territories where game was plentiful and rival groups scarce. They were also institutional, in that they seem to have practiced and conserved habits over generations, including familiar cultural forms such as sexual regulation and marriage, divisions of labor, and forms of communication that became more complex over time, until writing and computation finally began to appear.

Throughout the persistence of this way of life, institutional practice does seem to have involved the long-term use of the caverns as a stable place for cultural belief and ritual observation. Perhaps the cave art served as a centering institution that was the font of the common code for identity and habits. Their art focused the visual energy that underscored meaning and purpose, serving as a reminder of the legitimacy and power of what they did by symbolizing their way of life in the chamber of their cultural expression. The group continued to cohere over time, in light of their shared beliefs in the legitimacy and practicality of how they lived and endured. Their art celebrated the heterocosmic imagination that group members could repeatedly view — perhaps periodically at selected times of the year — reanimating them for their tasks in the world. Their worshipful inhabiting of the cavernous shrine helped them to better understand their mundane habitation of this world. The motion they ascribed to the paintings moved them to act against the very real game they needed to hunt. Their aesthetic repository served to keep the myth of the tribe alive: the motives for concerted action and, more abstractly, the concept that we are good and what we do is right. Having a physical place where symbolic sight could be appreciated centered the activities of the group by orienting their daily habits through the common code that it imparted. They learned the value of seeing similar things in two different but related worlds, linking their horizons of what was real and what was possible.

Our retrospection is delimited by the enormous passage of time, but it is vivid enough for us to assert that what was emergent in the cave art, and the human intelligence that created and utilized artistic value, was an early exemplar of the human experience of art. In our time, we are used to thinking of art as something so valuable that it should be safely tucked away in museums for us to visit and admire. For our ancestors, though, and for many societies since, art was (and is) an integral component of experience; a cultural resource to serve as an expression of what was valuable and central to a way of life. We are now returning to the consideration of art as experience — a major expression of that cultural common code we hypothesized above. In this more expansive view, human experience is an art, and the experience of artistic expression one of the major imaginative guides to our participation in social life. Since we are all engaged in learning the art of living, our “living arts” help us to define and direct this experiential artistry through imaginative embodiment and intelligent expression of who we are and what we do. If art is co-extensive with life, it helps us to see, imagine, and know.

## Of the Expansion of the Visual Arts

The visual arts are modes of expression that have their genesis in our early experience as infants seeing things for the first time and, specifically, seeing the sun, which seems to be the “big eye” in the sky. We soon learn the centrality of visual observation and, as we mature, wish to see new things and things anew. We become not only participants but also spectators of our own lives and the life of our social milieu. It is no wonder that when the Greeks developed plays to be enacted, they called the place, *theatron* (i.e. to see). The metaphor of seeing applied to all kinds of experience, undergirding the thought that to see is to learn (“I see” ranges far beyond merely looking). The world both outside and inside us has been made more visible by using the means of communication available to make “speaking pictures,” or metaphorical illustrations that “open our eyes” to reveal what is visible. As Leonardo da Vinci stated, “the eye, [is] the window of the soul [...] the chief means whereby the understanding can most fully and abundantly appreciate the infinite works of Nature [...]” The *sensus communis* (*koine aesthesis*) finds expression for our common codes through the visual intelligence

that is prefigured in our imaginative picturing of the world. The Renaissance painters and sculptors were deeply concerned about making pictures that were lively, in the same spirit as their predecessors in prehistory, who had tried to make the animals they painted seem alive with kinetic energy. The aesthetic eye sees a world of motion which is observable in the dynamic perspectives of proportionality and orderliness, among people and beings in dramatic situations of movement. This could be “captured,” Leonardo thought, in a visible scene of present time elucidating the energy of the events. He also sketched out the movement of sequential views of space and multiple positions in time — an early indication that he grasped the principles of cinematic photography. Similarly, and earlier, Giotto had developed the impression that arranged figures who occupied different positions appeared to be in dramatic relations, just as we would later see in cinematic movement. Romantic era painters such as Tintoretto and Delacroix excelled in depicting the lifelike movement of humans and animals.

In the nineteenth century, popular showmanship introduced many kinds of contrived “virtual realities,” all of which had in common the simulation of motion and the appearance of a lifelike but estranged visual world. One of the most remarkable “toys” of this movement was the phantasmagoria: ghostly figures appeared as spectral apparitions for the benefit of thrill-seeking audiences, who were ready to be awed and frightened by ghostly images conjured up and projected by magic lanterns. Such tricks of attraction became the province of magicians, who eventually became performers who experimented with projecting illusions of motion for audiences, leading to such transitory devices as the “optical theater” and the “peep show” kinesiograph. Such tinkering eventually led to the discovery and use of “nitrate magic” — films that could be projected onto a screen to be viewed by audiences. The first “movies” ranged from the mundane (people walking in a park, arriving by train, and so on) to the fantastic (going to the moon) but, in a dazzlingly short period time, the collaboration of moviemakers and moviegoers began to establish a symbiosis between what could be seen and what people wanted to see. Contrived motion was incorporated into action; imagery transformed into the imaginative; and the succession of images on screen were amalgamated into story form and then, quickly, into recurrent types of stories, actors, and the full range of

tricks termed “cinema photography.” This startling new medium of communication soon proliferated and diversified into related cinema photographic media, such as television, satellite, and the bewildering variety of portable devices that absorb much watching time for a vast population worldwide. Although many antecedents and precedents contributed to the ascendance of moving pictures, there is something about them that audiences have always found decidedly *sui generis*, imbuing them with a mystique of “generic originality” and unique incomparability. This singular status has led many seasoned observers of this remarkable cultural innovation to wonder if our long use and enjoyment of visual media is no longer seen as an illusion but rather as something real. The “magic industry” may then be an instrument not of entertaining and diverting “natural magic,” but rather of a more powerful and absorbing “black magic” that defines, for us, what is real and good, who we are and what we can do with our lives.

If this hypothesis is correct, then we are confronted with the interplay of medium and humankind. We invent and devise our media and eventually, in ways we often do not understand or are even aware of, our media then makes us. From this perspective, our exposure to moving pictures over time not only teaches us how to see, what to view, and why to observe our filmic experience in retrospect, but also teaches us a cinematic perspective on what to seek in the “double vision” that lets us play with the relational comparison between the empirically real and the imaginative surreal.

So, if moving pictures enjoy the status of a cultural enthymeme, it is because they create and share the contemporary world of heterocosmic simultaneity. Participation in the imaginative life experienced in this expanded horizon is not confined or complete without complementing our centering with telling. The center is where the sight is, but participation must include the translation of common codes into narratives which give the imagery a forum for aesthetic development. Sighting is primarily a matter of ludenic play, while telling is the province of aesthetic interplay with imaginings and narratives. In this way, learning the art of living is connected to the learning we see being told in the cinematic heterocosm that complements our experience. This storied connection offers the combination of the suggestive magic of our native imagery and the structural myths of narrative tradition, adapted to the nature of the

cinematic medium. The play form is integrated into the story form, sketching out an objectively defined perspective on living experience. In that sense, movies are an extension of life and, trans-actively, life is an extension of the movies! The world of moving pictures is an adjunctive accompaniment to our lived experience, serving us in many ways but surely acting as a school of popular learning. Thus, the movies have enriched our prehensile grasp of the imaginative center, but also informed and enhanced the connectivity between our mundane world and the imaginative world of moving pictures.

There is a third aspect of this process that made the cinematic heterocosm into a cultural resource of widespread importance and persistence. We noted that the appeal of this “centering sight” is that it exists for us to exercise our penchant for ludenic play through a continued focus on screen life as if it were real. Our immersion in cinematic life has been possible because we learned the art of viewing what was unfolding in front of us on the screen. But what makes the movies truly worth seeing is enjoying what there is to view, and what we retain and learn from our experience of movie-going. In other words, we all have our own “mix” of learning from our lifelong experience with movie-going, but the movies have acquired an independent existence as a powerful cultural force. This force has introduced and developed an “objective reality of perspectives” that have become common knowledge and common sense for many of those actively in contact with and influenced by its omnipresence. If it is the case that the omnipresent (and perhaps omnivorous) institution of moving pictures does not compose and communicate with a presumption of legitimacy and even a modicum of authority, it thereby enjoys the status of a major cultural enthymeme whose presence includes being “taken for granted.” So, paradoxically, we see the movies as the firmest and most instructive of mediums even though we experience them as tacit social knowledge gleaned from the most mercurial and passing presents which are truly disappearing moments. Yet, the cumulative learning acquired from these disappearing moments informs a presence that never goes away; we retain and use this familiar and reliable source of knowing as a kind of cinematic *verstehen* which is always there as definitive experience that centers our seeing, shapes our imagery, and guides our knowing. Our vast corpus of moving pictures exists in an expanded present which somehow transcends and unites

appearance and disappearance while remaining influential. Movies not only center our cultural sight and prompt us to participate in cinematic play, but also give us an extensive and intensive access to a cultural complex that we not only visit but inhabit. We are now living in dual and related worlds: our mundane and corporeal world of finite and physical limitation; and a infinite and non-corporeal world which we habitually enter to such an extent that many of us can be said to inhabit it even more than we do our “usual” existence. Our usual world is an experience of life which the heterocosm complements as a life-like experience — many of us prefer to spend as much time as possible inhabiting the heterocosm, rather than the murky and less steady world that does not enjoy the same kinds of controlled patterns. We have a number of motives for inhabiting that alternative world: a ludenic habitation allows us to become enthralled by the available ludic possibilities, ranging from sporting events to documentaries, and always the movies. It is also the case that play-learning is not confined to the distracting and frivolous, but extends into quite pragmatic concerns that exist for us in our mundane lives, which can be witnessed in the parallel universe at our command, for our edification and application “back home.” The ludenic and pragmatic motives imply an aesthetic which can be observed and recalled in our own lives, expanding our capacities for both fun and problem-solving. The aesthetic dimension completes the experience, especially since it expands our imaginative life as we observe and recollect the cinematic heterocosm over time. Thus we are schooled in the virtue of fun, the utility of solutions, and the beauty of our two worlds, respectively.

### **Inhabiting the Moving Picture Heterocosm**

In London, there is a venerable library known as the Warburg Institute, founded by a wealthy philanthropist. It holds an ambitious collection of art and art studies and is dedicated to examining art history and artifacts as evidence of “visual serendipity” in the “iconography” of works of art. The scholars who study there are interested in the unity across the ages of the symbolic images that have been given visible shape by artists. They attempt not only to see the history of art as a passing procession of symbolic images that characterize different times and places, but also to discover and

analyze the iconic patterns (such as repeated figures and poses) that can be found in that tradition. This would include, for example, the Florentine Renaissance painting that could be linked to precursors in ancient images and personages. These iconic figures include “Nympha”, a young woman who symbolizes beauty and poise in dance, going back to at least the three Graces of ancient Greece. We can easily extend this observation of recurring mythic images to folk art, including folklore and the art that flows from popular experience. The Warburg Institute put together a “Mnemosyne Atlas” of these important images: it survives and is still studied. In our popular age of cinema, we have our own atlas, in the form of moving pictures.

Here, we are obviously interested in studying and understanding the iconography of the movies: those recurrent figures and poses that populate the movie screen. Film artistry includes the development of acting styles, ranging from the histrionics of notables such as Laurence Olivier and Bette Davis, to the naturalistic “streetwise” actors such as James Cagney and Faye Dunaway. In a broader sense, inquiry is a focus on the question of why certain kinds of social roles and settings enjoy perennial popular interest. Movie genres seem to inspire the appearance of visually serendipitous styles such as the Western hero, the private detective, the wise and long-suffering mother, and so on. One of the key figures at Warburg was Erwin Panofsky, who pioneered the academic study of film iconography, pondering why it was that certain kinds of iconic figures could be observed in certain kinds of movies and, by extension, what the appeal is of these movie “genres.” Why do these types (musicals, domestic comedy, espionage intrigues, star-crossed romance, and so on) persist, albeit with some modifications, over long periods of time? Panofsky wrote seminal essays on the new art form of cinema, maintaining that this new medium was a “product of genuine folk art” characterized by “primordial archetypes” that were made palpable by the “dynamization of space” and the “spatialization of time” that is a unique quality of film art. The aesthetic power of moving pictures stems from the fact that the viewer is enthralled by seeing a “picture that moves [...] substance remains a series of visual sequences held together by an uninterrupted flow of movement in space.” The “fixed iconography of popular movies contributed to the enactment of the folklorish concept of plot construction.”

Panofsky thus envisions the moving picture as visually-based and reliant on dynamic motion, but is also aware that the form of the new medium must be complemented by the enactment of films that are not only congenial to kinescopic demands but also to the popular expectations of audiences. For that reason, he understands that the medium is suited to folk art, or in more modern terms, popular art, originating in the narrative traditions of storytelling, including faerie tales, folklore, parables and jokes that can be traced to ancient sources. Just as literature emerged from these popular traditions rooted in bardic traditions, the maturing art of the cinema exercised the right of narrative serendipity, purloining a wide variety of popular expression to utilize in film stories. At the outset, popular literature such as the Western dime novel and popular theater such as the stage melodrama were fair game as the new medium “felt its way” towards finding what worked best. Soon, though, through use and then familiarity, the conventions and myths of inherited story forms were transformed by use and familiarity into cinematic narratives that were peculiar to the medium. It was not only the visual basis but also the various “tricks of the trade” (close-ups, quick and parallel cutting, musical accompaniments and then spoken dialogue, and the use of lighting and shadows and color) that made a story readable or performable. Visible images and characterization being transformed into moving picture shows — a new and singular medium of expression in its own right — quickly created its own identity as art, popular experience, and the purveyor of a heterocosmic imagination unparalleled in human history. In this way, we can trace the development over time of narrative style and technique that we came to recognize as patently cinematic — a new mode not only of seeing things but also of telling things.

Since movie “telling” involved aiming for popular appeal and remembrance, this invited the creation of cinematic fare that was not only credible and plausible but also “spoke to” people’s interests. Through reliance on various popular traditions such as folk tales, human interest stories in the news, and parables, characters and situations could be introduced which people could identify with and learn from. The American frontier tale of conflict and conquest in a wild country and the aboriginal peoples who originally lived there; the French stories of the ascendance of a corrupt aristocracy eventually violently overthrown by a rude but virtuous populace; and

the Japanese folktale about the recrudescence of medieval structures and traditions, have all become useful settings and stories translatable into popular movies. The simple story patterns of such films provide some of the essential components of movie screenplays discernable in common, run-of-the mill movies, but they can also be found in some great ones (see *The Searchers*) which explore the complexities of cultural conflict in the settlement of the West: *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, which continues the criticism of the rich and highly placed strata of society as they lead opulent but meaningless lives; and *The Seven Samurai*, which examines the archaic status of a warrior caste relegated to the social margins and only useful for protecting a virtuous peasant class from the brigandage of roving bandits, themselves likely unemployed samurai.

For another Warburg figure, E.H. Gombrich, one did not have to look for vacuous ephemera such as a “collective unconscious” or a “racial memory,” but rather seek out traditions and habits of presentation based in cultural conventions and historical precedents. In this view, imagery and story circulate throughout cultural milieu over time and are even manifest and applicable in new modes of expression — in our time, the moving picture. By now, we are so immersed in the popular art form of the visualizable — a heritage that has developed so well — that we are now looking at the latest utilization of Mnemosyne’s “screens” in terms of how they appear on-screen in movie theaters and on television screens. The aesthetic patterns in movies are not any more “real” than any other kind of cultural creation, since they are products of movie-makers who are learning how to use them in making a movie. This is complemented by the movie-goers, who are learning how to respond to them when they watch the film. In the process of making and watching, what we respond to is the clever use of iconography (the imagery we see) and indexicality (the heterogeneous combination of factors — the roles, plot, dialogue, and symbols we view unfolding in the story or narrative). Cinema is now a major cultural site of the use of visual serendipity (“show ’em what you got”) in tandem with dramatic heterogeneity (“tell ’em what you know”) to get audiences to keep watching the imagistic dazzle and the imaginative circumstances situated in and treated by the medium of visualizable dramaturgy. We inhabit this heterogenetic world through the combined powers of the serendipitous presentation of visual intelligence simultaneously

and concomitantly with dramatic discernment in an eclectic mix that the movie-makers hope will find acceptance among the movie-going folk.

Those folks constitute a populace that has acquired, over time, a considerable degree of visual intelligence — or what we might say call “media savvy” — when it comes to processing and understanding (through “active selectivity”) what we visualize through mediums such as moving pictures. They intuitively understand the form of what they see moving and doing, but they also grasp the content of what is being presented. These skills give a media form like the movies a high measure of communicability when it comes to adapting to the variety of contents offered to the viewer. Seasoned populaces develop an “omnioptic eye,” using vision as the primary medium of thought in order to center sight for ludenic enjoyment of dramatic connectivity, as viewed during “movie time” concentration. This learned ability for continuous response to moving picture environments helps define and characterize the widespread inhabiting of the movie world we have observed through considerable experience, both as a personal habit and as a cultural enthymeme of high value.

It is perhaps not too far-fetched to suggest that this identity of self with movies stems from the broad cultural habit of acting out the folktale of our lives concomitantly with a considerable viewing and observational recall of the folktale of the movies. The mutual “crossings” between our own stories and movie stories provide indications of a popular identity in what we learn to do with our lives and what the movies depict (and thus suggest what we can do with our lives). Like a good bit of play-learning, its effects and results may condition attitudes in immediate reactions to events, but the long-term consequences of learning from moving pictures are subtler and more profound, since it involves a more comprehensive sensibility towards the coherence and legitimacy of cultural myths and rhetoric. In this way, the folktale of our own lives shares narrative form and content with the inclusive story of we the people in all our heterogeneity. It is thus helpful for the conduct of our lives to have an omnipresent heterocosm readily available as an accessible forum for the enactment of living in an alternative, but not alien, universe. In such contexts, the movies aid us in what we see at the center and on the margins of things, assist us in learning how and what to view

in the panorama that passes through our viewpoint, and teach us the power of observing things in their full meaning and recalling how they may be used in subsequent situations. Long ago, the art critic Parker Tyler saw that the movies were valuable as a site that exalted the “classic human image in our age [...] where man is his own spectacle.” But, he asked if “it is necessary for man to be his own spectacle?”

Although it may seem paradoxical, the imaginative creation and immersion in a heterocosm expands our horizons into an enchanted accompaniment, but in so doing gives credence and power to the central spectacle of our shared cultural experience. The cinematic heterocosm offers us a dynamic artistic composition that treats and enhances our human self-awareness and sense of aesthetic centrality. As a ludenic surreality, we can play out our concerns about our abiding concerns through an immersion in the “eternal present,” in the disappearing cinematic moments in which our abiding realities can be played out for our edification. A heterocosmic symbolic world such as moving pictures enjoys the status of a “supreme fiction” that exists nowhere and everywhere in the warp and woof of popular experience. It both celebrates and criticizes our passing real-world concerns and interests and, although it is a world of created ludenics, it has a permanence that outlasts the tremors and turbulences of the moment. If our lifelong anxiety and quest is one of identity, then our self-identification is augmented by the learning we glean and assimilate through our cinematic play. For us, the movies are not only a site of ludenic creativity but also a source of ludenic discovery, showing us avatars of human traits and actions, from the exemplary to the despicable. These potent symbolic depictions and characterizations orient us as to our expectations and actions in the world of human beings we encounter and transact with.

For this reason, we learn much from the movies about patterns of behavior, categorized in the human iconography that we learn. We can see this unfolding in the movies. The movies present numerous types of people, many of which are popular stereotypes and all of which serve as animated guides to other people. We “know” what coaches, gangsters, prostitutes, ministers, and so on are like by endlessly seeing repeated depictions of them on-screen. They are recognizable because they were viewed as living in a cultural context: the red light district; the parsonage; or the nightclub. They are not