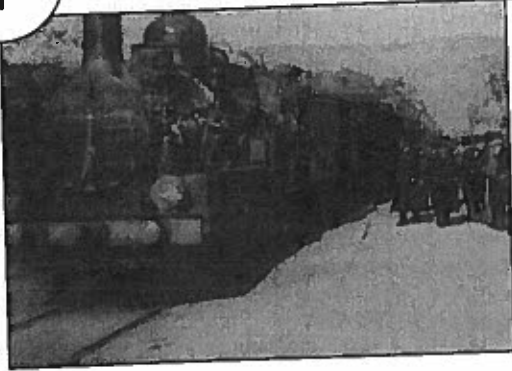


1

IMAGE AND REALITY



IMAGES OF IMAGES

Oliver Stone's violent, hallucinatory film *Natural Born Killers* (1994) contains a scene in which the homicidal Mickey is caught by the police in front of a drugstore. The media are present; television is capturing Mickey's capture. The police get Mickey on the ground and viciously beat him with their clubs. The camera assumes a position at some distance from the action, observing it. Before our eyes, Stone re-creates, in a fictional space, the infamous videotape of the beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles police that took place in 1991. In that event—which, at the time, became a major controversial issue in our society that continues to this day—Rodney King, an African American, was stopped by the police for a traffic violation and brutally beaten. The videotape of the beating, which was shown over and over again on television news, seen by millions of people, was an eloquent example of how a simple image can communicate a violent truth. Or so everybody thought.

When the police who took part in the King beating were first brought to trial, their lawyers used the videotape as evidence against the prosecution. The defense lawyers turned themselves into a parody of film scholars, teaching the jury how they should read the images in a way that was favorable to the defense. They showed the tape in slow motion, backwards and forwards, frame by frame. They instructed the jury in the methods of close visual analysis, and they used their analysis to prove to the members of the jury that they weren't seeing what they thought they were seeing. What was really on the videotape, the



FIGURE 1.1 A still from the videotape of Rodney King being beaten by the police.



FIGURE 1.2 Oliver Stone's re-creation of the beating in his film, *Natural Born Killers* (1994).

defense said, was an offender violently resisting arrest. What the police were doing was actually part of an "escalation of force." The jury, perhaps predisposed against the victim in the first place, believed it.

Ron Shelton's *Dark Blue* (2002), a strong film about police corruption, the Rodney King beating, and the 1991 uprisings in Los Angeles, does not allude to the King footage, as in *Natural Born Killers*. Rather, it re-creates it, in grainy color. No irony is intended as it is in Stone's film, no "double take" at what we are seeing in the film and what we know the actual footage looks like, or, more importantly, means. After a decade, the images become part of a plot line, reality is turned into fiction; fiction is made to take the place of reality. Representation and the thing represented begin to dissolve into each other.

This is taken as a theme in the *Matrix* movies (Wachowski brothers, 1999, 2003), in which a conscious playing with illusion versus reality becomes part of the weave of the worlds of the films. This old literary theme has been brought up to date especially in recent film whose subject is the digital world. Hollywood film-

makers, aware that they create "virtual" worlds anyway—that is, visual representations of things that may or may not exist—are intrigued by that other virtuality: worlds created digitally online, in computer games, and in the very creation of films themselves that use computer graphics to create the environment of their characters. We will talk about this in some more detail later, but for now it's important to know that the overwhelming majority of films, whether or not their subject is digital virtuality, use it for everything from backgrounds, to cityscapes, ocean scenes, crowd scenes. George Lucas, in the most recent *Star Wars* sequels, boasts that relatively little of the films contain "live" action and most of that was photographed against a blue screen, in which the "live" characters perform against a blue background that will be filled by other, digitally made, images later. More and more filmmakers are using more and more digital graphics, while some, like the Wachowski brothers, use digital graphics to warn us about the dangers of virtual worlds. In such cases, the digital itself becomes a



FIGURE 1.3 Ron Shelton's re-creation of the event in *Dark Blue* (2002).

version of the monster in older horror films, cautioning us against the terrors of computers out of control, an idea we'll trace in Chapter 9 when we look at science fiction film.

Where Oliver Stone, in *Natural Born Killers*, plays with the ways that the real and the illusory break down each other's boundaries and seep into one another—thereby creating a complex and ambiguous film—the Wachowskis are marking good and evil rather sharply, by indicating that the false can appear more real than reality and that what we think is reality isn't and must be destroyed before it destroys us. Stone speaks about an everyday world so mediated that "reality" and fiction slide into one another. The *Matrix* films attempt to divide reality from its simulacrum, which is a mock-up of something that looks as if it could exist somewhere else—the Matrix itself. Both are telling us interesting things about the nature of images and the cinematic image in particular. They are not what they seem.

The "Truth" of the Image



There is a curious cliché that says pictures don't lie. It's part of that greater cliché that says seeing is believing. Somehow a thing seen directly—or through a visual representation like a painting, a photograph, or a film—brings us closer to some actual reality. Words are too obviously not things themselves; words are made-up sounds, developed throughout the life of a culture, represented by made-up letters, put together in a contrived grammar that everyone in a culture uses to communicate through a decision that the particular words will refer to particular things. Language is clearly cultural and not natural: it is human made and accepted with some variations throughout a particular culture. Every English speaker understands what the word "food" refers to, even though the particular kind of food that comes to mind to each individual may vary. More abstract words, like "cool," may have a range of meanings that keep changing. But seeing a thing seems to bring us something very close to the thing itself—to

"reality." Things that are *seen* appear to be and even feel as if they are unmediated; that is, they seem to be conveyed directly to us, not conveyed indirectly. Nothing stands in their way. They are true.

But, in fact, an image, whether photographed, painted, or digitized, is not the thing itself. It is a representation of a mediated transmission—composed, lit, pushed through the camera lens, or a computer, and transferred onto film or through binary code onto the computer screen, appearing to be the thing itself, though, in reality, only its image. But even when we acknowledge the intervention of optics, chemistry, computer science, and the human hand and eye of the photographer in the recording and developing of the photographic image, we still haven't considered all the mediation that goes on. An image of the thing is not the thing. The subject of a photograph is not neutral: the subject—a person or a thing—is first chosen to be a subject, and then poses or is posed for the camera, often assuming a camera-ready attitude dictated by the culture (smiling, for example). Even a subject caught unawares by the camera has been changed by the very act of having been caught unawares. In the act of being captured on film, a subject who may be unaware of the presence of a camera is frozen in photographic time and space, turned into an image, made into something she wasn't when the camera snapped her picture. The natural object—a landscape, for example—is marked by the fact of its being chosen, as well as by the time of day during which it is photographed, the way the photographer composes it for shooting, chooses an appropriate lens, and manipulates the quality of light, first with the camera and then in the darkroom or in an image manipulation program on a computer.

Here is a core issue for everything discussed in this book. People wish to perceive "the thing itself," but it is a wish impossible to come true. Whether in a photograph, or the series of photographs that make up a movie, or the electronic scanning of objects that create a television image, or from a computer's binary code; whether on the page, from someone's own mouth, or from a teacher and her textbook; what we hear, see, read, and know is mediated by other things. The Rodney King video, a videographed record of "the thing itself," a man being beaten, was made to mean what various people, in various contexts, decided it should mean.

But the artificiality of the image is a hard concept to accept, because evidence seems to go against it. "Seeing is believing." The image looks too much like the thing. Unlike words, which interpret or mediate experience ("let me describe what happened," we say, and then give a verbal interpretation of what we've seen, sort of like summarizing the plot of a movie), images appear to be present and immediate: there, whole, and real. Of course we know they are not exactly the thing itself. A picture of a cat is no more a cat than the word "cat." It just looks more like a cat than the word cat sounds like one. Animals believe the image—notice how a dog perks up when it sees a dog on television! Even "in reality" when we look at something out in the world, we aren't seeing the thing itself either but an image of it, in fact two images, focused upside down by the lens of each of our eyes onto their retina, righted and merged in the brain to

create the sensation of an object in space. The point is that everything we do is mediated, and everything we see is some kind of representation. We *choose* how close to reality—which is itself something built upon complex, often unconscious, but always learned agreements we have made with our culture—an image might be. Often, having made the choice, we revel in it, because the image seems to be delivering the thing itself to our eyes. Yet, when it comes to special effects movies, we are delighted to learn how the illusion was created to appear so *real*.

Images entrance us because they provide a powerful illusion of owning reality. If we can photograph reality or paint or copy it, we have exercised an important kind of magical power. This power is clear in the linguistic tracings of “image”: “imagination,” “imaginary,” and “imagining” are all related to “image” and indicate how the taking, making, or thinking of a picture is an integral part of understanding. Through the image we can approach, understand, and play with the material of the external world in ways that both humanize it and make it our own. At the same time, the image allows us to maintain a real connection with the external world, a solid, visual connection.

We love to look and see. It’s part of our curiosity about the world and our desire to know. There’s even an erotic component to our desire to see, which films depend on so much that critics have adopted a term for it: *scopophilia*, the love of looking. The term is slightly more benign than “voyeurism,” the act of looking at a person who is unaware of our look, but it is still erotically charged. We love to look and we especially love to look at the pictures of people and things, and often we do it to satisfy a variety of desires. We take and look at photographs, make videos, and create digital images; we do it as amateurs, often allowing the camera to be our intermediary amidst the chaos of real events, or we enjoy the work of professionals. Images are our memory, the basis of our stories, our artistic expression, our advertising, and our journalism. Images have become an integral part of popular music since MTV, and they are, of course, the core of movies.

We so believe in the presence and reality of images that we may take them at face value. They are, we often think, exactly what they are (or what someone tells us they are). Journalism and politics are infamous for doing this: picking out some aspect of an event, editorializing on a public figure by choosing a particularly unflattering pose, and then manipulating and describing it to present only one part, one perspective of the event itself—all the easier now with digital manipulation. Television news, by concentrating endlessly on murder and violence, uses images of a small part of what is in the world, which, in their selection and repetition, may convince some that this is what most of the world is about. In *JFK* (1991), Oliver Stone is at pains to make sure we understand that seeing is *not* believing, that the images given us by the media, molded by politics, make us think that we are seeing what is, but may, actually, may not be.

We invest images with emotion and meaning; we may forget that they are *images*—mediations—and create a kind of short circuit: if the image of a thing is close enough to the thing itself, perhaps we may be in some danger of neglecting

the thing itself—those events actually going on in the world—and merely believe the image. The emotions we attach to an image or to the images that make up a film can be simply set in motion by the images themselves, and we can ignore the origin as well the formal properties—the **composition**, what is chosen to be in the shot and how these elements are arranged in the frame, **editing**, the placement of the shot in relation to others, the **lighting**—all the imaginative things that went into the making of the single image or a motion picture. We can cut ourselves off from the events that made the image possible—the material of the external world, the computer, and various acts of illusion making—and make that short circuit, accepting the cliché that pictures never lie. If pictures never lie and are worth a thousand words, they must be dependable, true, and, if not the thing itself, at least a suitable substitute.

This is what Oliver Stone was thinking about when he imitated the Rodney King videotape in *Natural Born Killers* and what the Wachowski brothers have turned into a theme about those who exist in the flesh and those who create a digital imitation of the flesh. The Rodney King videotape contained an image of an event, taken without the knowledge of those who were participating in it, which is the closest image making can get to objective recording, an argument used by documentary filmmakers, who try to maintain the illusion that their images are closer to objective reality than those made by fiction filmmakers. But, as Stone shows, such footage is not “objective”; it exists because of the economics of video recording, the relative cheapness and ubiquity of amateur equipment; the willingness of an onlooker with a camera to turn it on as the beating was in progress, rather than do something to stop the beating; the willingness of television news programs to show over and over again any kind of novel, violent imagery they can find. The footage exists not merely because there was someone there to tape it, but because on the other end there was a desire of people to watch it and use it. Stone re-creates the image, this time with all the expensive, professional apparatus available to Hollywood filmmaking, and turns it into an ironic commentary. Just as with the original footage, where we felt sympathy for the victim of a vicious beating, here we feel sympathy for the trapped and beaten Mickey. But in the fiction of *Natural Born Killers*, Mickey is a vicious, psychotic killer who needs capturing. He is, at the same time, something of a sympathetic figure. The reference to the “actual” Rodney King footage serves, therefore, to complicate our response and to make us wonder about how objective images can actually be. In many ways, Stone is expanding the experiment he began in *JFK*, a film that is not only about a presidential assassination but also about how images and the history they try to create can be read in multiple ways.

What about the “objectivity” of the image itself? Anyone who took to heart the cliché “seeing is believing” saw, in the King video, a man being beaten by the police, in the fuzzy gray wash of an underexposed, amateur videotape taken at night. The trial lawyers, however, who analyzed the image from their own perspective in their desire to debunk the evidence in order to free their clients, proved to a jury—willing to believe them—that they didn’t quite see a man

being beaten but an aggressive person the police were trying to restrain. The evidence held in those images was a matter of political and racial conviction, not of any self-evident “truth.” In Oliver Stone’s re-creation, the police are brutally restraining a brutal, aggressive person, an unthinking, amoral killer. The image is a complete fabrication, done in the studio or in a carefully controlled location. Most likely the actor, Woody Harrelson, isn’t even in the shot, replaced by a stunt man. There is, in a sense, nothing there, only a studio or location fabrication of an image within a narrative fiction, fully exaggerated as representatives from television news (including Japanese television, with an excited commentator whose remarks are translated through subtitles) look on, make their images, make comments, while the sound track is filled with the music of Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*. The re-creation is, as I said, twisted with irony, begging us to provide a more complex reaction than we might have given to the original King videotape or the trial lawyers’ interpretation of it.

The *Matrix* films, on the other hand, are lacking in irony: they take very seriously the split between the good “real” and the evil digital manipulators of the real. They often try to confuse us as to what is what, who is who; they excite us with their choreographed, digitally and cinematographically enhanced fight sequences. In the end, they don’t so much question the reality of the image, but assure us that all images are carefully crafted mediations of what may or may not exist. The images are so carefully constructed that both real and unreal are made to look equally real. This *should* be ironic commentary, but it all becomes, as the sequels progress, background to spectacle and violence.

Stone asks us to think about the construction of images, something that few films attempt to do because their value is built upon our desire not to ask what images are made of and what they might really mean, or, in the case of special effects movies, to wonder at the realism of the fake. We love to look; movies love to show us things. Maybe we don’t want to know what we’re looking at and want to simply enjoy the illusion, or enjoy the illusion even knowing how it was created. In the case of *Natural Born Killers* Stone’s ironies were lost on many people, who found the film too violent. Unwilling to decipher the complex visual structure of the film and understand what that structure was trying to say—that images of violence are manufactured to play upon our desire to see and enjoy violence at a safe distance—they took the images too literally and were repelled. They believed what they saw.

All of which leads us to the central question of this chapter: When we look at an image, and especially when we look at the images that make up a movie, what do we see? What’s there, what do we think is there, and what do we want to be there? We can begin an answer by turning very briefly to the development of painting and photography, because film is so much an extension of the latter and borrows many effects from the former.

The Urge to Represent “Reality”

People painted before they wrote. Painting is among the earliest artifacts we have of prehistoric civilizations: a hand, a deer, images of the human figure and

the naturalized world, even sculptures of animals, things caught and seen and then, in the case of the deer, eaten. There’s elemental magic in these early images, the kind of magic that says if you own a part of or representation of a thing, you have power over that thing. In this case, the “thing” is nature itself. These early cave paintings show that humans wanted imaginative control over the natural world and wanted to make permanent representations of it. The painted image, in different ways in different cultures, came to express not merely seeing but an interpretation and a desire to own what is seen. Painting, along with story telling, grew from the same urge to interpret and control the world—to give it a human and humanized shape. “Primitive” art is simple and direct. Painting moved from the primitive in interesting ways.

Perspective and the Pleasures of Tricking the Eye

“Primitive” art is never, of course, simple and direct, not even primitive, but seems that way because of the major changes that occurred as painting moved from a desire to capture the world through simple images to a scientific and technology-driven desire to remanufacture images of the world for the viewer’s pleasure. We must understand that, no matter what a painting represents (or, in the case of abstract painting, doesn’t represent), it is an interpretation of something seen that has been executed by the artist’s hand and imagination. A painting is pigment on canvas articulated through a combination of color, shape, volume, and spatial organization. The way space is organized and the subject represented in a painting is very specific to a given culture and time, though it

also bears traces of a particular artist’s style and personality. Perspective, for example—the illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface—is hardly a universal way of organizing space on canvas and did not always exist. Traditional Asian painting has never used it. Western painting didn’t use it until the early fifteenth century. It was developed by the Florentine architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) and the painter Masaccio (1401–1428). Perspective is based on mathematical principles of linear convergence, the way lines can be drawn so they appear to vanish at a single point in space.

People have theorized that perspective was invented for ideological and cultural reasons, because it allowed the wealthy patrons who sponsored artists to be given a privileged place in viewing the canvas. That is, perspective allowed the viewer a

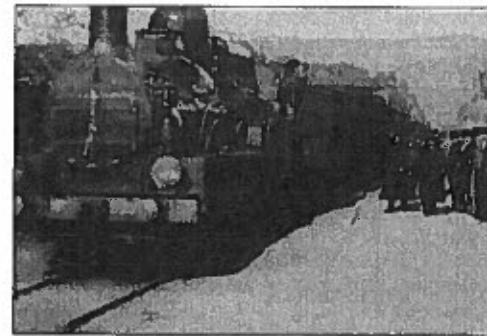


FIGURE 1.4 Perspective was a mathematical invention that allowed a vanishing line to be created on a canvas and thus presented the illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface. Photography and film adopted the principle. Photographers and cinematographers set up their cameras to show the vanishing line, and we can see it at work here, in one of the earliest films we have, the Lumière brothers’ 1895 film of a train arriving at a station.

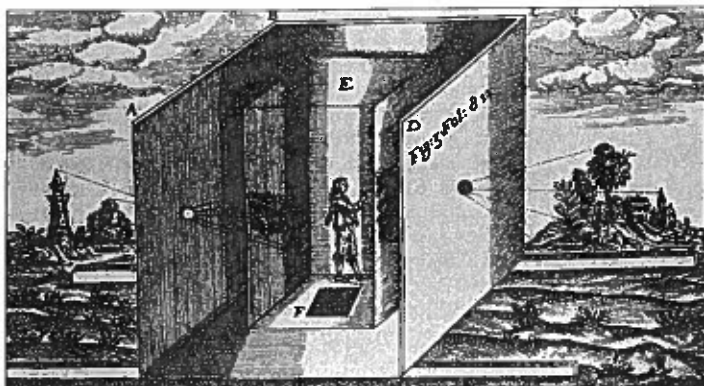


FIGURE 1.5 Drawing of a camera obscura.

sense of ownership, a sense of standing before a space that was made for his gaze. He stood outside the painting, occupying a position that seemed to be at the convergence of an imaginary set of lines that opened into the canvas and then appeared to converge again behind the canvas. These “vanishing lines” created the illusion that the space of the painting completed the patron’s gaze—indeed any viewer’s gaze. The double convergence creates an important effect, for if sight lines converge toward the back of the image on the canvas, they also converge in the imaginary space in front of the canvas, a space that is filled by the controlling look of the spectator. This phenomenon would have tremendous repercussions in the development of film in the twentieth century.

By the neoclassical period (from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries in most of Europe) the ideological thrust of painting was to be as “true” to the natural world as possible. Interpretation and inspiration were, in theory at least, subordinated to imitation and to the capturing of the image, to reproducing it, proclaiming that nature could be taken and owned whole by the imagination. Many artists approached the imitation of nature through technology. The camera obscura came to prominence in the seventeenth century: a box with a pinhole through which light could pass, it projected an upside-down image on its opposite side. A painter would enter the box and literally trace the image of the outside world that was reflected through the pinhole. Another version of this contraption, called a “Claude Glass,” after the admired French landscape painter Claude Lorraine (1600–1682), was also put to use by painters. It had a convex black mirror that concentrated an image of the landscape that could be painted over or copied. The Dutch painter Jan Vermeer (1632–1675) actually reproduced in his paintings the lighting effects that were created by the camera obscura.

Photography and Reality

The camera obscura was a sort of prephotographic device, designed to make possible the urge to capture the real world with as little apparent mediation as possible. Photography was invented in the nineteenth century out of experiments that, like those involving perspective, were both scientific and aesthetic. At its most basic, photography is a chemical process, during which a light-sensitive material is altered when exposed to light. When this altered material is chemically treated, the exposed particles wash away, creating transparent or translucent spaces where the light fell. The negative image (light for dark) is reversed during printing. The chemistry hasn’t changed very much since the middle of the nineteenth century, though the optics have, and faster, more light-sensitive film stock was developed that made nighttime shooting possible. Within the past few years digital imaging has begun to render chemical processing obsolete. The aesthetics and ideology of photographic mediation are a different matter. Photography became a major factor in the ways we observed and perceived the world around us.

The great French film theorist André Bazin speaks about the inevitability of photography. What he means is that art has always been motivated to capture and maintain the reality of the world, to hold its images eternally. Photography is the climax of that desire because, Bazin believes, it is the first art in which, at the exact instant during which the image is transferred to film, the human hand is not involved. For Bazin, the taking of a photograph is a pure, objective act. He puns in French on the word *objectif*, which means both “objective” and “lens.” Bazin was deeply committed to the concept of film and photography as the arts of the real, but he was also aware that the reality of film and photography was “artificial,” made by art. He was intrigued by the paradox. He was well aware that in the seemingly automatic passing of a thing to its image, some human intervention always occurs. So, of course, even though the image passes through the lens to the film in the camera without the intervention of the human hand, that intervention has already occurred: in the crafting of the lens and the chemical manufacture of the light-sensitive film emulsion, by the photographer who chooses a particular lens and a particular film for a particular shot, in the way the photographer lights and composes the shot. Every photographer is a composer: think of the basic, practically universal gesture of an amateur picture taker, waving her arm to signal people in front of the lens to move closer together, to get in the frame. Think of the ramifications if this photographer purposefully moved the camera slightly to the right to remove one member of the party from the frame. The professional photographer and the photographer as artist make more elaborate preparations for a shot and, after the shot is composed and taken, manipulate the image in the darkroom or on the computer screen. They reframe and crop, alter the exposure so the image is darker or lighter. They play with color. They make the image their own.

When photography came along in the nineteenth century, painting was put in crisis. The photograph, it seemed, did the work of imitating nature better than the painter ever could. Some painters made pragmatic use of the invention.

There were Impressionist painters who used a photograph in place of the model or landscape they were painting. But by and large, the photograph was a challenge to painting and was one cause of painting's move away from direct representation and reproduction to the abstract painting of the twentieth century. Since photographs did such a good job representing things as they existed in the world, painters were freed to look inward and represent things as they were in their imagination, rendering emotion in the color, volume, line, and spatial configurations native to the painter's art.

Photography was not wholly responsible for the development of abstract painting, which fit well with other movements both in the world and in the art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, movements that began to call attention to form and away from an apparently simple representation of "reality." The very inventions of the age—photography, movies, railroads, the telephone—along with the coming apart of old political alliances and traditional class and family connections pushed artists to embrace new forms that would speak to the changes in the old concepts of space and time, of religious and political alliances. The important point here is that photography introduced to modern culture another form of image making, of visual representation, one apparently more "real" than painting because it seemed to capture an image of the world out there and bring it—framed, composed, and contained—before our eyes.

It's worth repeating again that the principle of representation (and mediation) is that an image is not the thing itself but a thing in itself with its own formal properties and methods of interpreting something else. This sounds perfectly obvious until we recall the phenomenon of short circuiting we discussed earlier. We tend to look at a representational painting or a photograph as something that uniquely represents another original object and that acts as a trigger mechanism for an appropriate emotional response. The surrealist painter René Magritte made a famous picture, *La Trahison des images* (*The Betrayal of Images*). It's a very "realistic" painting of a pipe, the smoking kind. Magritte paints a title directly onto the canvas: "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" ("This is not a pipe"). Within his own painting, he creates a concise lesson about representation. The image is not the thing. But it remains a hard lesson, harder still when it comes to photography.

When we look at the family photo album, we don't ask how the images were constructed and what the construction is saying about the subject of the photograph. We don't wonder why the photographer chose to be outside the frame, behind the camera, or to time the shutter and leap into the picture; we may not question why one aunt is not smiling, or why some relatives have been cut out of the composition, or why father is way in the back, barely visible. We desire to see and feel something through the image. So we look at the images and feel nostalgia or joy or pain about the family represented in the photographs.

However, when the transparency of the image is closed off, when the photograph is of something unrecognizable, or the painting is abstract, or an avant-garde film denies recognizable plot, our first question is, "What is this about?" We want our images to be transparent, to seem to relate some kind of story that

we understand, to allow us to look through them to the meanings they seem to convey. They exist to transmit the real world to our eyes and to trigger emotional response.

Manipulation of the Image

During its relatively brief existence, photography has taken on many culturally and economically determined forms. In the very early days, in order to overcome a perceived inferiority to painting, photographers adopted a painterly style. Some of them hand-colored their work, after composing a figure or landscape in poses or compositions similar to those used by the Impressionist painters. As photography found its independent path, many other styles emerged, all of them depending upon some kind of manipulation of the image during the picture-making process. These included the creation of "abstract" photographs, images that reveal only patterns, shapes, and volume. This style flourished in the 1920s at the same time that Dadaist and Surrealist artists incorporated the photographic image into their work. During this period, the photographer Man Ray created abstract patterns by putting actual objects directly onto photographic paper and exposing them to light. The resulting "rayograms" parody Bazin's notion of the objective lens. Here there is no lens and the "real" is turned into the abstract.

When, again in the 1920s, photography became more common in journalism and advertising, manipulation of the image became extreme. Removed from the status of art—with all its implications of personal style, subjective vision, and revelation—the photograph became a tool for representing specific commercial and political points of view with the purpose of selling commodities and focusing opinions. Shifting from a cultural realm of style and ideological determination in which individual expression counted strongly, photography became part of another, a corporate style in which the image of a politician making a speech, or a group of strikers in a menacing posture, or a woman assuming a conventional pose of seduction while wearing a particular brand of makeup or clothing has specific designs on the viewer and asks for specific responses, to make a political point or show a hamburger in the best light—especially when the hamburger is painted, sprayed, lit, and in general "styled" to make it look the best it can.

Images like these are obviously determined by external, cultural, economic, and political needs. But the image in the cause of economics and politics is different from the image in the cause of art only in its purpose. All images, all stories, all creations made by people have designs, in all senses of the term. The particular designs of journalism and advertising photography are narrow and focused, wanting the viewer to respond with a political action, hatred for a dictator, putting money into circulation by purchasing a product, in a word, buying into something—an attitude, idea, commodity, or ideology (which subsumes the rest). This kind of photography does not primarily imitate, reveal, or show. Rather, it exhorts, cajoles, and manipulates. It exploits fully the one

abiding reality of representation and mediation: a call for some kind of response from the viewer. Something does indeed come between the thing itself and the image. In the case of the work of art, that "something" is a form and structure that ask of us an emotional and intellectual response meant to help us understand the artist and the way she understands the world. In the case of the journalistic, advertising, or political image, that something is a form and structure that ask us to agree to the general values of our culture and the various commodities it creates, to form an opinion, to spend money or cast a vote. In the case of movies, form and structure ask us to respond to many of these same requests simultaneously.

Reality as Image

The argument of this book is that reality is always a mutually agreed upon social construct, a more or less common consensus about what is out there and what it all means to most people. Our shared ideas of truth, beauty, morality, sexuality, politics, and religion; the ways we interpret the world and make decisions on how we act in it are determined by a complex process of education, assimilation, acculturation, and assent that begins at birth. It is a cliché that human beings are out of touch with nature, and that more than a few of us are out of touch with reality. The fact is, even when we are in touch, it's not with some given natural world or some objective, existing reality. Being in touch with nature means acting upon a learned response to the natural world. In fact, responding with awe in the face of natural beauty dates back only to the eighteenth century and became a major cultural event only in the nineteenth. Before the late seventeenth century, people in Western Europe did not pay much attention to nature's grandeur; they were not moved by it nor did they care much to contemplate it. A mountain range was something in the way. A complex shift in sociological and aesthetic responses occurred in the early eighteenth century and can be traced in its development through travel literature and then in poetry, fiction, and philosophy. By the mid-eighteenth century, wild, mountainous landscapes became the site of grand, overwhelming emotional response. The mountains had not, themselves, changed; cultural response had. The "Sublime," the effect of being transported before nature's wildness and in front of representations of that wildness in painting and poetry, was born. With it came nineteenth-century romanticism and attitudes toward the natural world that remain with us still.

Reality is not an objective, geophysical phenomenon like a mountain. Reality is always something said or understood about the world. The physical world is "there," but reality is always a polymorphous, shifting complex of mediations, a kind of multifaceted lens, constructed by the changing attitudes and desires of a culture. Reality is a complex image of the world that many of us choose to agree to. The photographic and cinematic image is one of the ways we use this "lens" (here in a quite literal sense) to interpret the complexities of the world.

The Wachowski brothers attempt to simplify this complexity. Stone and others represent it with clarity and, paradoxically, all its ambiguities.

Reality becomes a kind of cultural baseline upon which we can build a variety of responses. One response is a feeling of security. We feel safe in front of something that strikes us as "real" or realistic. Another response is to dismiss someone who doesn't seem to be operating from this same base. We bless something (a film, a painting, a novel, a political program, a way of life) with the name of realism if it comforts us with something we desire or are familiar with, or have been told we should desire or be familiar with. We are asked or we ask someone to face reality when we or someone else acts in unfamiliar ways. We say "that's not realistic" to dismiss someone or something that does not fit into our range of beliefs, hopes, or desires. "Get real," we say. "Get a life."

So, when the critic André Bazin said that the history of art is equal to the history of people's desire to save an image of the real world, he quickly modified this idea by saying that the desire to capture reality is in fact the desire "to give significant expression to the world." In that phrase "significant expression" lies the key. It's not the world we see in the image but its significant, mediated expression. For Bazin, such expression becomes very significant in photography and film because of the apparent lack of interference from a human agent. This is a peculiar paradox. The image is a significant expression of the real world; it almost *is* the real world because its image is formed without human interference. Recall Bazin's theory that, at the instant of transferring the image to the film, the photograph occurs without human intervention. As we have seen, this theory has a kernel of truth but is deeply compromised by all the manipulation that goes on before and after the image is actually made (and even while the image is being made, because lenses are not neutral). Out of the paradox come many of our confusions over what the photographic and cinematic image actually is and actually does.

FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHIC TO THE CINEMATIC IMAGE

The alleged reality of the cinematic image is, in reality, a mechanical event. In a sense, film itself is a reality machine. Time and space—the coordinates of Western art, story, and life—are represented by the vertical strip of images that travels through the projector. Twenty-four photographs, or frames, go past the projector lens each second. A simple, very nineteenth-century mechanical process pulls the filmstrip down, one frame at a time, while a shutter in the shape of a Maltese cross opens and closes the lens so that each frame is projected on the screen in its turn. The resulting illusion is extraordinary. Because of the operation of the shutter, the screen is actually dark for a total of almost thirty minutes during an average two-hour film. And because of a cognitive desire to attach the events of one image to the next, and thanks to perceptual optics that cause our eyes to see images fused together above a certain rate of flicker, the



FIGURE 1.6 Reading through the code to see the simulated digital world. *The Matrix* (Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski, 1999).

series of stills projected on the screen is interpreted by our brains as a continuous flow. Space and time appear unified and ongoing. Even on video or DVD the images scan in sequence across the screen. Analog mechanics have become transformed into digital electronics and will soon replace the filmstrip. But the result is still the illusion of a unified and temporally progressive series of spaces, not the thing itself, but its analog representation. Remember the character in the *Matrix* who could actually read the digital stream that made up the simulated world? He—in the fiction of that particular film—was getting close to “reality,” despite the fact that the “reality” created by the code was not reality at all.

Moving Images

The search for “reality” in photographic images moved with some speed in the nineteenth century when it joined with the invention (or, more appropriately, the inventions) of cinema. Before the very late nineteenth century, the moving image and the photograph developed along separate lines. Projections of painted images, sometimes called magic lanterns, had been around since the seventeenth century. Various devices that created an illusion of figures in motion, or the sense of moving images in a large space surrounding the viewer—devices with wonderful names like zoetropes, phenakistoscopes, thaumatropes, cycloramas, and panoramic views—had been around since the eighteenth century and reached their apogee in the nineteenth. These were mostly toys or sideshows that in various ways placed painted images in progressively different positions of movement on the inside of a revolving drum. By peering through slits in the side of the turning drum, or—in the case of cycloramas—standing in front of an unrolling canvas, the figures or painted landscapes seemed to elide into each other in a semblance of continuous motion.

Magic lanterns, zoetropes, and photography intersected in the late nineteenth century in a quasi-scientific way through the work of two photographers,

Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey. Muybridge was born in England and did much of his work in America. Marey was French. In their work, the nineteenth-century curiosity about mechanical invention, industry, and the ways in which both could overcome the limitations of time and space met and pointed to the development of movies—a time and space machine that rivaled the locomotive and the telegraph.

Muybridge and Marey photographed human and animal movements in ways that analyzed the motion into its component parts. Marey actually used a gunlike photographic mechanism to “shoot” his photographs (and the terms “shooting a picture” and a “shot” originate from that machine). With its aura of scientific investigation, their work situates one branch of photography in that tradition of Western culture that seeks to analyze and quantify nature. It very roughly duplicates the discovery and implementation of perspective in painting during the fourteenth century; both are part of the larger movement to comprehend, own, and control the natural world, to become the visual owner of the image, even enter it imaginatively. With the advent of film, science and technology and imagination merged to make the reality machine.

Leland Stanford, a former governor of California who liked both horses and science, invited Eadweard Muybridge to help him settle a wager concerning whether or not at one point in a horse’s gallop all four hoofs leave the ground. Muybridge proved that they do by taking a series of photographs at high speeds. Muybridge and Stanford went on to publish photographs of animals in motion in *Scientific American*, and Muybridge parlayed this into a career of

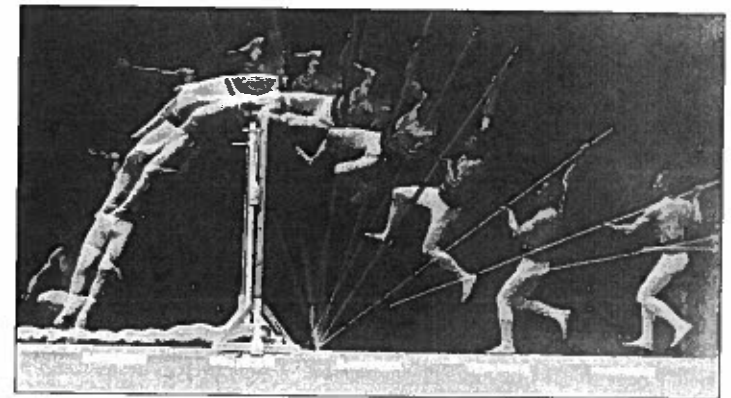


FIGURE 1.7 Before the moving picture, photographers began analyzing motion into its component parts through multiple exposure. One of the most important of these experimenters was Etienne-Jules Marey (1890).

public lectures in which he demonstrated his analytic series of shots of animals—as well as naked people—in motion. He published a version of his work in 1887, the eleven-volume *Animal Locomotion*. (Marey had published his animal locomotion studies, called *La machine animale*, in France in 1873.) Muybridge further combined his analytic photographs with the old kinoscope-zoetrope toy to create an illusion of movement of his animals and people and, by 1881, he was projecting them on a wall to a large audience. Scientific investigation, commerce, and spectacle merged in the projected image.

The image was becoming a commodity. The rapidity of this event was accelerated during the last decade of the nineteenth century when Thomas Alva Edison's employee, William K. L. Dickson, developed a way to record moving images on a Kinetograph and show them on a Kinetoscope. Edison had wanted to make moving images as an accompaniment for his phonograph, but decided to concentrate on the image alone, thereby holding back the development of sound film for almost thirty years. The work of Edison's company in the late nineteenth century led to a slow but steady proliferation of moving images in peep shows, in which "flip cards" or a film loop was viewed through a viewer in a machine; in nickelodeons, where working-class people paid a nickel to go into a small room and see a short film projected on a sheet; and finally by the 1920s in the movie palaces built as part of the successful attempt of moviemakers to create a "respectable" middle-class audience for their images. By the late twenties, in an economic slump, the movie studios revived Edison's original notion of synchronizing image to sound and made "talking pictures" to the delight of audiences and a resulting rise in box office receipts.

The steady progression from the individual photographers, inventors, and entrepreneurs who developed the moving image up to the film studios, which were actually large-scale factory operations that mass-produced these images, may seem, at first, a big leap, but it took less than twenty-five years.

The immediate and almost instantaneous emergence around the world of movies as a popular commercial art was just slightly in advance of the great boom of popular culture that would take place in the 1920s. Film's invention came with the great nineteenth-century technologies that included telegraphy and the railroads. Its beginnings coincided with the growing influence of newspapers. It completed its growth as a mass medium in the twenties, at the same time as radio, and each shared in the other's popularity, radio shows often consisting of spoken versions of film. In the end, film infiltrated the imagination more than any other nineteenth-century invention because it told stories with images. It also made its storytellers rich.

The popularity of movies was so great that, soon after 1900, demand for films exceeded supply. Various theater-owner entrepreneurs on the East Coast, most of them first-generation immigrants from Eastern Europe who had engaged in wholesale and retail selling before entering the business of film exhibition, decided that the best way to supply their theaters with product was to manufacture it themselves. They would make the images they needed to sell. They

fought with Edison, who attempted to control the patents on his motion picture machines and who sometimes employed thugs to beat up the filmmakers and take their equipment away (constituting what film historians call the "patent wars" of 1910 to 1913). The filmmakers went to California to escape Edison's reach, settled in Los Angeles, and rather quickly established their own tightly knit companies that by the 1920s had evolved into the studios that centralized all facets of motion picture production and exist, if only in name, to this day.

In the history of film, the first quarter of the twentieth century was a particularly active period of creativity on all levels and in many countries: the development of film's visual narrative structure; the creation, the buying and the selling of studios and human talent; the invention of the star system; the integration of the entire production and distribution of images through theaters owned by the studios, which guaranteed that the studios had an automatic outlet for their products. This is—in very compressed form that we will open up in the next chapter—the history of production that moved from an individual, director-based activity into a huge industrial operation headed by an executive who delegated individual films to producers and peopled by an enormous in-house staff of writers, directors, composers, designers, electricians, actors, and other craftspeople.

The speed of the process by which moviemaking developed into commerce was driven by the willingness of audiences to look and look and look and want to see more and more. Movies supplied a visual imagination and narrative flow for the culture at large. They extended basic stories of popular culture—stories of sexuality and romance, captivity and release, family and heroism, individualism and community—into visual worlds that were immediately comprehensible, almost tactile, *there*, in front of the viewers' eyes. In the movies, time and space appeared as if intact. Human figures moved and had emotions. Life seemed to be occurring. The moving image was a vibrant, story-generating, meaning-generating thing. More than literature, painting, or the photograph, moving images eloquently expressed what many, almost most, of the people across economic and social classes wanted to hear and see. That what they were hearing and seeing was an illusion in every respect seemed not to matter. It might, in fact, have contributed to film's popularity. Seeing and feeling in the secure knowledge that no obvious consequences are involved is an important aspect of our response to any aesthetic experience. The moving image was a particular attraction to everyone who wanted to see more, feel more, and do it in the safe embrace of an irresistible story. It still is.

In the following chapters, we will analyze the endurance of the desire to see and how the desire is created and maintained. We will examine the elements of image, motion, story, creator, and creation, and the culture they and we inhabit. We will examine how and why moving images work and speculate about why we respond to them. In the course of that examination, we will try to account for a great number of kinds of films and filmmakers, and film viewers, too.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

The Truth of the Image Some of the best analysis of the use of digital imagery in filmmaking is by Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). Basic resources for information on the way we perceive image and reality include Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974) and E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon, 1977).

Perspective and the Pleasures of Tricking the Eye Professor Sharon Gerstel of the University of Maryland supplied information about the history of perspective. Erwin Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991), is a good source for the theory of perspective. Professor Elizabeth Loizeaux of the University of Maryland offered ideas about the camera obscura. Michel Foucault's essay "Las Meninas" argues the theory of perspective as a means of owning the space of a painting. It is in *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 3–16.

Photograph and Reality The references to and quotations from André Bazin are from *What Is Cinema?* vol. I, trans. Hugh Gray (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 12. This is an invaluable book for understanding the theories of reality and the moving image. See also Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981). For an emotional and theoretical discussion of photography, see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). A classic work on the Sublime in literature is M. S. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). In the 1970s and 1980s painters called photorealists took Polaroids of their subjects—a human face, a city street, a diner, a motorcycle. They placed a grid over the photograph and a corresponding grid over the canvas and then copied the photograph, square by corresponding square, onto the canvas. When you look at a photographic reproduction of a photorealist painting, you often can't tell that it's a painting.

Moving Images Material on early movie machines, Marey, Muybridge, and Edison can be found in Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), pp. 15–132. For Etienne-Jules Marey, see Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). David A. Cook's *A History of Narrative Film* 3rd Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996) and Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell's *Film History: An Introduction* 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003) are excellent sources for information about the development of film as art and industry. See also Scott Bukatman, "Gibson's Typewriter," in *Flame*

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