

A LECTURE

PLEASE turn out the lights.

As long as we're going to talk about films, we might as well do it in the dark.

We have all been here before. By the time we are eighteen years old, say the statisticians, we have been here five hundred times.

No, not in this very room, but in this generic darkness, the only place left in our culture intended entirely for concentrated exercise of one, or at most two, of our senses.

We are, shall we say, comfortably seated. We may remove our shoes, if that will help us to remove our bodies. Failing that, the management permits us small oral distractions. The oral distractions concession is in the lobby.

So we are suspended in a null space, bringing with us a certain habit of the affections. We have come to do work that we enjoy. We have come to watch *this*.

The projector is turned on.

So and so many watts of energy, spread over a few square yards of featureless white screen in the shape of a carefully standardized rectangle, three units high by four units wide.

The performance is flawless. The performer is a precision machine. It sits behind us, out of sight usually. Its range of action may be limited, but within that range it is, like an animal, infallible.

It reads, so to speak, from a score that is both the notation and the substance of the piece.

It can and does repeat the performance, endlessly, with utter exactitude.

Our rectangle of white light is eternal. Only *we* come and go; we say: This is where I came in. The rectangle was here before we came, and it will be here after we have gone.

So it seems that a film is, first, a confined space, at which you and I, we, a great many people, are staring.

It is only a rectangle of white light. But it is all films. We can never see *more* within our rectangle, only *less*.

A red filter is placed before the lens at the word 'red.'

If we were seeing a film that is *red*, if it were only a film of the color red, would we not be seeing more?

No.

A red film would *subtract* green and blue from the white light of our rectangle.

So if we do not like this particular film, we should not say: There is not enough here, I want to see more. We should say: There is too much here, I want to see less.

The red filter is withdrawn.

Our white rectangle is not 'nothing at all.' In fact it is, in the end, all we have. That is one of the limits of the art of film.

So if we want to see what we call *more*, which is actually *less*, we must devise ways of subtracting, of removing, one thing and another, more or less, from our white rectangle.

The rectangle is generated by our performer, the projector, so whatever we devise must fit into it.

Then the art of making films consists in devising things to put into our projector.

The simplest thing to devise, though perhaps not the easiest, is nothing at all, which fits conveniently into the machine.

Such is the film we are now watching. It was devised several years ago by the Japanese composer Takehisa Kosugi.

Such films offer certain economic advantages to the film-maker.

But aside from that, we must agree that this one is, from an aesthetic point of view, incomparably superior to a large proportion of all films that have ever been made.

But we have decided that we want to see *less* than this.

Very well.

A hand blocks all light from the screen.

We can hold a hand before the lens. This warms the hand while we deliberate on *how much less* we want to see.

Not so much less, we decide, that we are deprived of our rectangle, a shape as familiar and nourishing to us as that of a spoon.

The hand is withdrawn.

Let us say that we desire to *modulate* the general information with which the projector bombards our screen. Perhaps this will do.

A pipe cleaner is inserted into the projector's gate.

That's better.

It may not absorb our whole attention for long, but we still have our rectangle, and we can always leave where we came in.

The pipe cleaner is withdrawn.

Already we have devised four things to put into our projector.

We have made four films.

It seems that a film is anything that may be put into a projector, that

will modulate the emerging beam of light.

For the sake of variety in our modulations, for the sake of more precise control of what and how much we remove from our rectangle, however, we most often use a specially devised material called: *film*.

Film is a narrow transparent ribbon of any length you please, uniformly perforated with small holes along its edges so that it may be transported handily by sprocket wheels. At one time, it was sensitive to light.

Now, preserving a faithful record of where that light was, and was not, it modulates our light beam, subtracts from it, makes a vacancy, that looks to us like, say, Lana Turner.

Furthermore, that vacancy is doing something: it seems to be moving.

But if we take our ribbon of film in hand and examine it, we find that it consists of a long row of small pictures which do not move at all.

We are told that the explanation is simple: *All* explanations are.

The projector accelerates the small still pictures into movement. The single pictures, or frames, are invisible to our failing sense of sight, and nothing that happens on any *one* of them will strike our eye.

And this is true, so long as all the frames are essentially similar. But if we punch a hole in only one frame of our film, we will surely see it.

And if we put together many dissimilar frames, we will just as surely see all of them separately. Or at least we can *learn* to see them.

We learned long ago to see our rectangle, to hold all of it in focus simultaneously. If films consist of consecutive frames, we can learn to see *them* also.

Sight itself is learned. A newborn baby not only sees poorly – it sees upside down.

At any rate, in some of our frames we found, as we thought, Lana Turner. Of course she was but a fleeting shadow – but we had hold of something. She was what the film was *about*.

Perhaps we can agree that the film was about *her* because she appeared oftener than anything else.

Certainly a film must be about whatever appears most often in it.

Now, suppose Lana Turner is not always on the screen.

Suppose further that we take an instrument and scratch the ribbon of film along its whole length.

Then the scratch is more often visible than Miss Turner, and the film is about the scratch.

Now suppose that we project all films. What are they about, in their great numbers?

At one time and another, we shall have seen, as we think, very many things.

But only one thing has *always* been in the projector.

Film.

That is what we have seen.

Then that is what all films are about.

If we find that hard to accept, we should recall what we once believed about mathematics.

We believed it was about the number of apples or peaches owned by George and Harry.

But having accepted that much, we find it easier to understand what a film-maker does.

He makes films.

Now, we remember that a film is a ribbon of physical material, wound up in a roll: a row of small unmoving pictures.

He makes the ribbon by joining large or small bits of film together.

It may seem like pitiless and dull work to us, but he enjoys it, this splicing of small bits of anonymous stuff.

But where is the romance of movie-making? the exotic locations? the stars?

The film artist is an absolute imperialist over his ribbon of pictures. But films are made out of footage, not out of the world at large.

Again: Film, we say, is supposed to be a powerful means of com-

munication. We use it to influence the minds and hearts of men.

But the artist in film simply goes on building his ribbon of pictures, which is at least something he understands a little about.

The pioneer brain surgeon, Harvey Cushing, asked his apprentices: Why had they taken up medicine?

To help the sick.

But don't you enjoy cutting flesh and bone? he asked them. I can't teach men who don't enjoy their work.

But if films are made of footage, we must use the camera. What about the romance of the camera?

And the film artist replies: A camera is a machine for making footage. It provides me with a third eye, an acutely penetrating extension of my vision.

But it is also operated with my hands, with my body, and keeps them busy, so that I amputate one faculty in heightening another.

Anyway, I needn't really make my own footage. One of the chief virtues in so doing is that it keeps me out of my own films.

We wonder whether that interferes with his search for self expression.

If we dared ask, he would probably reply that self expression interests him very little.

He is more interested in recovering the fundamental conditions and limits of his art.

After all, he would say, self expression was only a separable issue for a very brief time in history, in the arts or anywhere else. And that time is about over.

Now, finally, we must recognize that the man who wrote the text we are hearing read, has more than a passing acquaintance and sympathy with the film-maker we have been questioning.

For the sake of precision and repeatability, he has substituted a tape recorder for his personal presence – a mechanical performer as infallible as the projector behind us.

And to exemplify his conviction that nothing in art is as expendable as the artist himself, he has arranged to have his text recorded by a different film-maker, whose voice we are hearing now.

Since the speaker is also a film-maker, he is fully equipped to talk about the only activity the writer is willing to discuss at present.

There is still time for us to watch our rectangle awhile.

Perhaps its sheer presence has as much to tell us as any particular thing we might find inside it.

We can invent ways of our own to change it.

But this is where we came in.

Please turn on the lights.

New York City, 1968