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The Open-Air Effect: Pictorial Lighting in Early Film

Abstract:

In her study of the American cinema of the transitional period, Eileen Bowser points out that improvement in lighting and special lighting effects were among the first effects that began to preoccupy producers in the newly structured motion-picture industry of 1909. The consolidation of major firms and studios in European countries strong on story films, like France, Italy, Denmark and Sweden, inspired a similar interest in the development of selective lighting to heighten psychological mood or expression (through figure lighting, shadow play, lamp lighting, hand-held light, and general low-key atmosphere), an interest manifested in the construction of enclosed studios and the installation of lighting equipment in the period between 1906 (France) and 1911 (Denmark). Barry Salt has found that Italian films lagged somewhat behind in the use of studio arc-lighting but were first in exploiting open-air effects using unfiltered sunlight. The silhouette shots against open door, window, cave mouth, skyline or seascape achieved in productions from the Cines, Aquila and Itala companies were early indications of a new aspiration to pictorial effect. Similarly aestheticized open-air images can be found in isolated American instances from 1909-1910, but appear with great gusto and expressive force from 1911 onwards in films from Gaumont and Northern companies like Nordisk and Svenska Biografteatern. I am interested in tracing the transnational development of these silhouette shots less as mood-setters or emotional conductors than as indication of the medium's new painterly ambitions. I will discuss two types of silhouette shot, both types exploiting strong contrast without artificial light: 1) figures posed inside an open door, open window or cave mouth looking out onto a bright exterior; 2) figures posed 'contre-jour' against seashore or skyline settings. I also want to concretize and contextualize the suggestion made by Bowser, Salt and others that beautiful images in the films of this period were drawn from nineteenth-century painting, by looking at probable sources from romantic, realist, 'luminist' and 'plein-air' painting.

CV:

Tom Paulus teaches film studies (emphasis on film history and film aesthetics) and is a member of the research group on Visual Poetics at the University of Antwerp. He has published on issues of genre and film style in such journals as *Film International*. His essays on pictorial style in the films of John Ford were published in three edited collections, *John Ford in Focus* (Stoehr & Connolly eds.) from McFarland, *Westerns: Movies from Hollywood and Paperback Westerns* (Paul Varner ed.) from Cambridge Scholars Press, and *New Perspectives on The Quiet Man* (forthcoming from Irish Academic Press). His edited collection *Slapstick Symposium: Essays on Silent Comedy* (with Rob King) has been accepted for publication in the American Film Institute Film Readers series. His research interests include the evolution of film style, film and painting, silent cinema, auteurism, classical American cinema. He has been employed by the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp and by the Antwerp Film Museum.