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The Mysteries of Cinema

Peter Conrad

Ranging from the late 19th century to the present, this exhilarating survey explores the ways the medium of cinema has changed the way we see the world.

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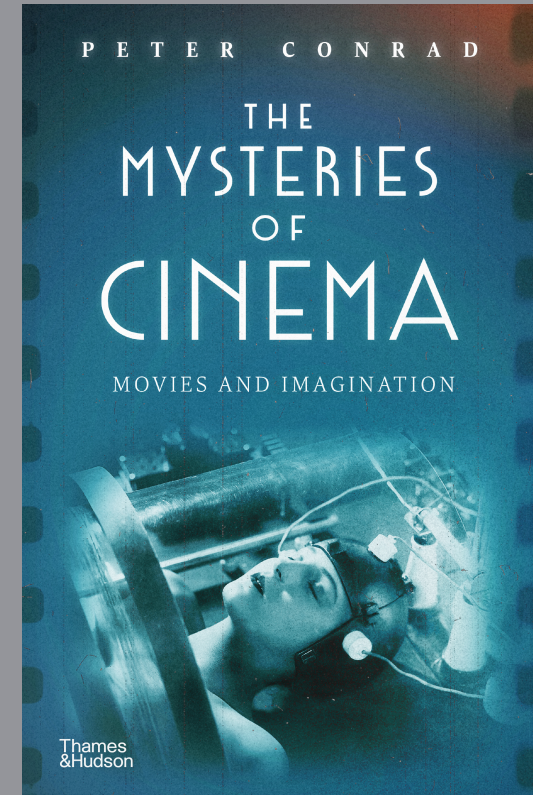
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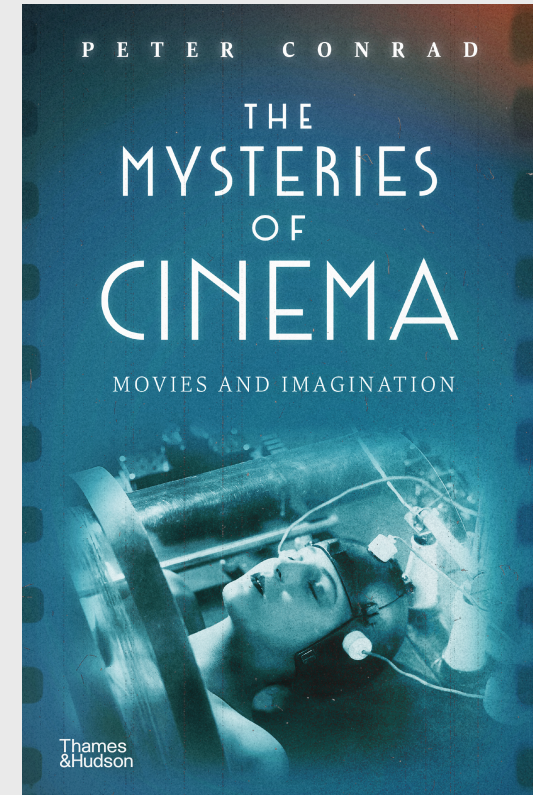


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Book

Key Sales Points

- Author Peter Conrad is one of the most brilliant, knowledgeable and authoritative cultural critics of our era.
- Thematic rather than chronological, the book focuses on cinema's otherworldly, hypnotic and magical qualities.
- International in scope, it features films from across Europe, Asia and North America.



images had to be imports, generated by countries above the equator. What excited me was that films offered access to a larger world, commensurate with the elongation of CinemaScope or the widescreen process called VistaVision. I wanted to be taken, quite literally, out of myself. THE END, even if it was a happy ending for the characters in the story, always depressed me. Expelled into the daylight, I was left to count off the days before the heady experience could happen again.

My Saturday matinees consoled me for a few childish woes, and served as my equivalent to the Sunday mornings of my churchgoing Catholic relatives. It was a fair exchange, because cinema had the capacity to make mysteries visible. On a school outing to see Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* in 1957 we all gaped in amazement when the Red Sea parted, happily unaware that water mixed with gelatin had been dumped into cavernous tanks, then projected back to front and upside down. A year after the Red Sea performed its stunt, I was even more excited when I saw the detonator pressed at the climax of David Lean's *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. An expensive explosion – always one of the cinema's proudest feats, this time blowing up a train full of dignitaries along with the painstakingly fabricated bridge – surely outdid a divine portent.

Once I got past the piety of *The Ten Commandments* and the staunch military stoicism of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, most of what I could discover about sex, crime and other transgressive matters came from films. At the start of the 1960s I was officially debarred from seeing *Some Like It Hot* and *Psycho*, which thanks to their delayed release in our remote location just about coincided with puberty. I sneaked in to see them anyway, and privately balanced their previews of what lay ahead – in one case, snuggled intimacy in a curtained bed on a train as it sped south through the night; in the other, purgative death in a shower and burial in the trunk of a car that is swallowed by a swamp. Perhaps Billy Wilder's wicked farce and Hitchcock's perverse black comedy were not so very different, because they both catered to a curiosity that deliciously mingled desire and fear.

Breton's cinema age coincides with the time of life when imagination is at its most febrile, and I impatiently checked off every

birthday as I came closer to the year when I would be admitted to films labelled AO, meaning ADULTS ONLY. Cinema's offerings had to be scrutinized and graded by the censors because it never subscribed to the ennobling agenda of the classical arts: it aimed instead to ravish the senses and probe the shadier recesses of the mind. In *A Matter of Life and Death*, written and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger in 1946, we glimpse the process at work. Here while David Niven is being readied for brain surgery, the camera looks out from inside his head as he is anaesthetized, and his eyelid draws down a translucent screen lacy flecked with veins and fringed with curly lashes, like a curtain. Is he in an operating theatre or at the cinema? Frank Capra dared to call cinema 'a disease', claiming that it hormonally bullied the enzymes and took charge of the pineal gland. It 'plays Iago to your psyche,' he said – an entirely justifiable remark, although in Shakespeare's play Iago, lacking 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's infidelity, has to fall back on verbal suggestion to mislead Othello. Capra even likened cinema's effect to that of heroin. Among the surrealists, Robert Desnos shamelessly recommended films as 'superior to opium', all the more intoxicating because the drug was administered in the 'perfect night' of a theatre.

In those nocturnal rooms, an invisible border separated light from darkness, fantasy from reality, stardom from anonymity. When Chaplin stepped down from the screen to fraternize with his admirers, he felt diminished as he travelled the wrong way across the frontier. People, he said, were dismayed to discover that he was 'just human'. The appeal of the larger, more exalted cinematic existence that Aragon called superhuman is so irresistible that even characters watching films-within-films sometimes wish that they too could enjoy it. 'Why can't life be more like the movies?' asks a crestfallen actor in Anthony Asquith's *Shooting Stars*, released in 1927, as he sees himself swashbuckling on screen. It is a common complaint, virtually a syndrome. A young man and woman in *People on Sunday*, made in Berlin in 1929, resent having to compete with the gallery of pin-ups on their bathroom wall. As they prepare for a day out, he dabs shaving foam on the dapper Willy Fritsch, and she uses her curling tongs to singe the operetta star Lilian Harvey, to whom

BRAVO FOR DARK ROOMS

A journalist's report on the Lumière brothers, sent back from Paris to New York in 1895, transmitted the good news: cinema offered a cure for mortality, since now that our loved ones could be preserved on film, 'death will no longer be final'. A year later, the novelist Maxim Gorky had a more sobering premonition. At the All-Russian Fair of Industry and Art in Nizhny-Novgorod he saw some Lumière 'actualités', which despite their al fresco setting made Gorky feel that he had descended into what he called 'the kingdom of shadows'. Not wanting to be 'suspected of madness or indulgence in symbolism' – mental ailments that are almost endemic to cinema, which maddens reality by turning objects into symbols – he explained that the films had shown him 'not motion but its soundless spectre', with people 'deprived of all the colours of life', condemned to a grey and dismal muteness. Entire streets had apparently been 'bewitched' by some scheming Merlin. Characters in one snippet laughed as they played cards, but because Gorky could not hear them he found their jollity hollow. Here was a preview of Hades.

The show seemed all the more funereal because Gorky saw it on the premises of a café-concert run by Charles Aumont, a French entrepreneur who expected his staff of chorus girls to entertain clients more intimately in private rooms. The good-humoured exit from the factory in Lyon, representing a life of honest toil, hardly suited these louche surroundings; following his visit, Gorky learned that one of Aumont's employees had attempted to kill herself in shamed despair, and he wrote a story in which a young prostitute commits suicide after she

watches Auguste Lumière and his wife cooing over their baby in an unfallen garden.

As Gorky sensed, the artificial gloom of cinema combined fear and desire. Until recently cameras and projectors had to be fed with film, and what they showed was somehow filmy – gauzy, elusive, sensitive to light but ruined by over-exposure to it. Bodies on screen melt into each other, or expand and contract to make the world look fluid and fungible. Words when filmed can dissolve or turn eerily biomorphic, far from the rationality of print. The title of Dreyer's *Vampyr* materializes like ectoplasm, pulsing and throbbing, with a black embryonic blob behind it; in Murnau's *Nosferatu* an intertitle muses about the Hungarian-Romanian archaism that names the demon, and its crabbed, tentacular Gothic script makes his menace palpable.

In an echo of Gorky's phrase, the Tatra mountains in *Nosferatu* are described as 'the land of the phantoms', and the prospective visitor to the vampire's castle is warned that he must reach his destination before nightfall and told 'Beware that his shadow does not engulf you.' For those of us watching the film, the advice comes too late: we are already spellbound. Our dread of the dark is inborn, and cinema never forgets it. Fritz Lang's films compulsively resort to the kingdom of shadows, in a variety of subterranean locales: the catacomb beneath the futuristic city in *Metropolis*, the lair of the dwarf Alberich in *Die Nibelungen*, the lepers' den in the Indian adventure *The Tiger of Eschnapur*. Even the open-air setting of Lang's Western *Rancho Notorious* is denounced as a morgue, a twilight realm peopled by men who are Marlene Dietrich's bewitched captives.

Inhibitions relaxed in the dark, which is why Edison's Motion Pictures Patents Company advised theatre owners to install ambient lighting to deter misbehaviour. In France, the surrealists disagreed: one of their slogans was 'Bravo pour les salles obscures.' Robert Desnos said in 1927 that cinemas were like bedrooms in which you settled down and hoped to nod off, trusting that the screen would duplicate your dreams. And what if the lights were also dimmed in the grandiose spaces where people worshipped or celebrated the rites of high culture? Writing about Lang's *Metropolis*, Buñuel called cinema a 'monstrous cathedral', like the

'the window in a train passing through your life'. The girl's face remains expressionless, not overjoyed; it guards the fifth-dimensional domain that Dreyer called 'the psychic', the realm of Psyche, which by order of Cupid was also hermetically sealed and guarded against intrusion.

Is this what Octavio Paz envisaged when he said that Buñuel in *Los Olvidados* proves that 'a man with his hands tied can, simply by shutting his eyes, make the world jump'? Not quite: the girl's eyes remain open, the glass does not execute a suicide leap when it gently slips off the table, and apart from these feats of psychokinesis, the scene has a placid pictorial beauty that is entirely natural. The webbed, leafy pattern of the golden shawl the girl wears, the eggshell's combination of fragility and strength, the feather-light spores at their work of germination – when seen by the camera, these become the ingredients of a waking dream.



1 A miracle in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, achieved by special effects: the Red Sea opens at the behest of Charlton Heston's Moses.

2 A happy catastrophe in David Lean's *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, achieved by pyrotechnics: saboteurs detonate the bridge built by inmates of the Japanese prisoner-of-war camp as the first train crosses it.



Geneva to her boyfriend in England, and the red tinge suggests that those wires are blood vessels.

With a more earnestly religious confidence Tarkovsky at the end of *Andrei Rublev* ascends in a jump cut from earth to an incandescent heaven. The narrative concludes with the fifteenth-century icon painter Rublev downcast beside the embers of a burned-out fire in the dirty snow. Then in an epilogue we are allowed to see the cathedral he has filled with his frescoes. The screen slowly flushes red, as if that fire doused by snow has suddenly flared up, and a choir vocalizes ecstatically; we are taken on a tour of Rublev's Nativity scenes, with acts of enraptured obeisance supervised by immense, impassive guardian angels. Examined at length, the face of Rublev's Christ becomes a portrait of the artist, whose unblinking eyes scrutinize us like cameras. The sky is gold, Christ's robe a celestial blue: Tarkovsky's palette is sacred, not therapeutic like Antonioni's in *Red Desert* or ideological like Kieślowski's in the *Trilogy*.

In *Stalker* Tarkovsky's questers inhabit a sullied, corroded city whose tonalities are those of mud and rust, and they return there after their trip to the dazing brightness of the Zone. This is their reality, just as Kieślowski said that Lodz, where he attended film school, could only be represented in black and grey: white had no place in this drab, soiled environment. *Andrei Rublev* resists any such compromise. After our perusal of the paintings, a thunderclap and a downpour return us to ground level for a glimpse of some horses frisking in the rain beside a river. Despite the poised state of grace in the frescoes, cinema is about being alive; although heaven may have a monopoly of blue and gold, here the irrigated earth is green, which signifies growth.

Tarkovsky worried that colour reduced filmmakers to using 'a painter's methods', and he resisted its commercial prettifying of life. 'The black and white image,' he believed, 'comes closer to the psychological, naturalistic truth of art' – the same point made by Mac Orlan in his essay on Atget and by Samuel Fuller in *The State of Things*. But if the truth happens to be spiritual or metaphysical, other resources are necessary. God began the process of creation by calling for light and declaring it to be good. In *Andrei Rublev* Tarkovsky seems to add a second command, which is 'Let there be colour.'

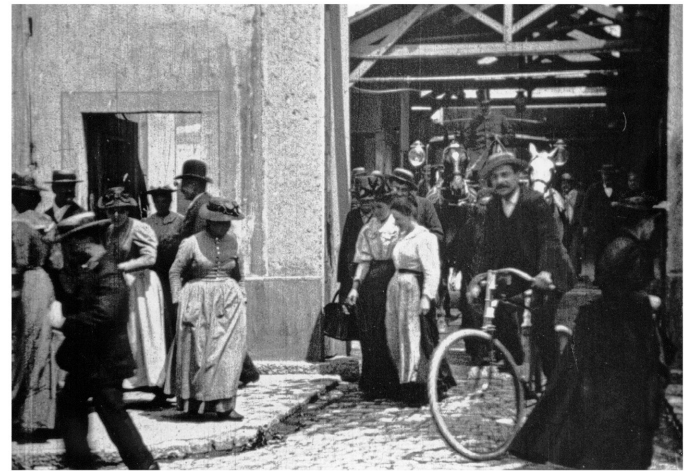
A NEW EYE, AN OLD EAR

In 1929, on 8th Street just off Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, the architect Frederick Kiesler designed a small cinema for the New York Film Guild. Its darkness was pierced by diagonal lines of light on the walls and ceiling; these conducted all eyes towards a screen resembling a larger eye, set inside a curved, black-edged aperture – a circle whose rim opened, like an iris or the shutter of a camera, to disclose the silvery square onto which the films were projected.

Inside such cranial spaces, cinema conducted a course of optical retraining. The agenda was set by an intertitle in Feuillade's *Les Vampires*, where the detective tells one of his helpers 'We must keep our eyes open and stay silent.' Grace Kelly paraphrases the remark in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* when she quizzes James Stewart about his random observations of the courtyard behind his Greenwich Village apartment, where he suspects that a murder has been committed by one of his neighbours. 'Tell me everything you've seen,' she urges, 'and what you think it means.' Between Feuillade's line and Hitchcock's variant, the embargo on speech has relaxed. The change happened slowly after the late 1920s, and Hitchcock never ceased to regret it: as a sign of this nostalgia for the days before talking pictures, the playlets that Stewart photographs across the courtyard in *Rear Window* are dumb shows occasionally accompanied by music – the jazz that Miss Torso plays when doing her undressed callisthenics, the overheard love song that dissuades the spinster Miss Lonelyhearts from killing herself.



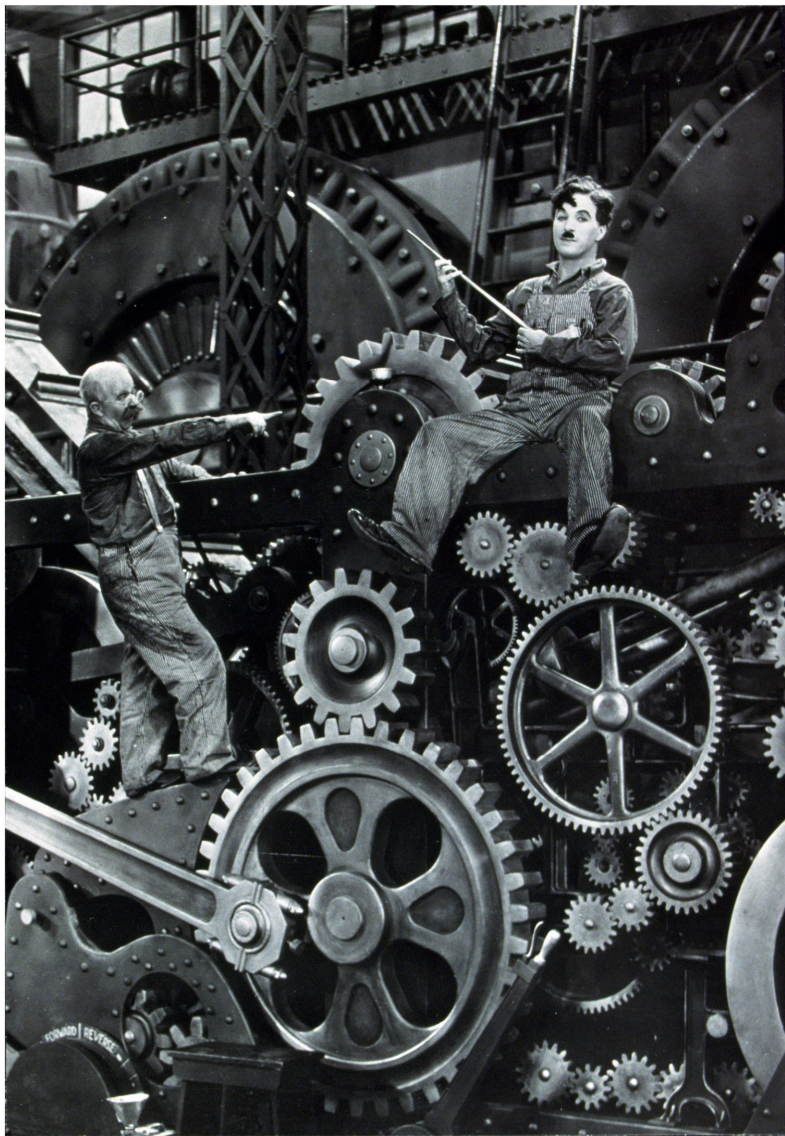
11 Douglas Fairbanks as Ahmed the thief on his flying white horse in Raoul Walsh's *The Thief of Bagdad*.



12 Workers leaving the factory in Lyon, filmed by the Lumière brothers: the building, where the family firm manufactured photographic plates, is now the Institut Lumière, 'hangar du premier film du cinéma'.

13 Jean Marais as the poet in Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*: the mirror, representing the dead end of realism, liquefies to let him cross into a surreal underworld.





30 Charlie Chaplin and Chester Conklin at the reopened mill in *Modern Times*, 'repairing the long idle machinery' (which responds by gobbling Conklin up).



31 Buster Keaton as the engineer Johnnie Gray in *The General*: he has turned his locomotive into a weapon of war for the Confederacy, and rides on the cow-catcher to remove logs that Union agents have dropped on the tracks.

32 John Wayne at the end of John Ford's *The Searchers*, hesitating on the border between a domestic interior and the vacancy of Monument Valley: he turns away and the door closes, shutting him out and obliterating the image.





43 The slashed eye at the start of *Un Chien andalou*, directed by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí: Buñuel himself wields the razor, to mark the change from sight to vision or from reality to dream.

44 The erogenous eye in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*: Anthony Perkins spies on Janet Leigh as she undresses.



45 The battle on the ice in *Alexander Nevsky*: Eisenstein described the patriotic defeat of the Teutonic knights on the frozen lake in 1242 as 'an unexpected, breath-taking miracle'.

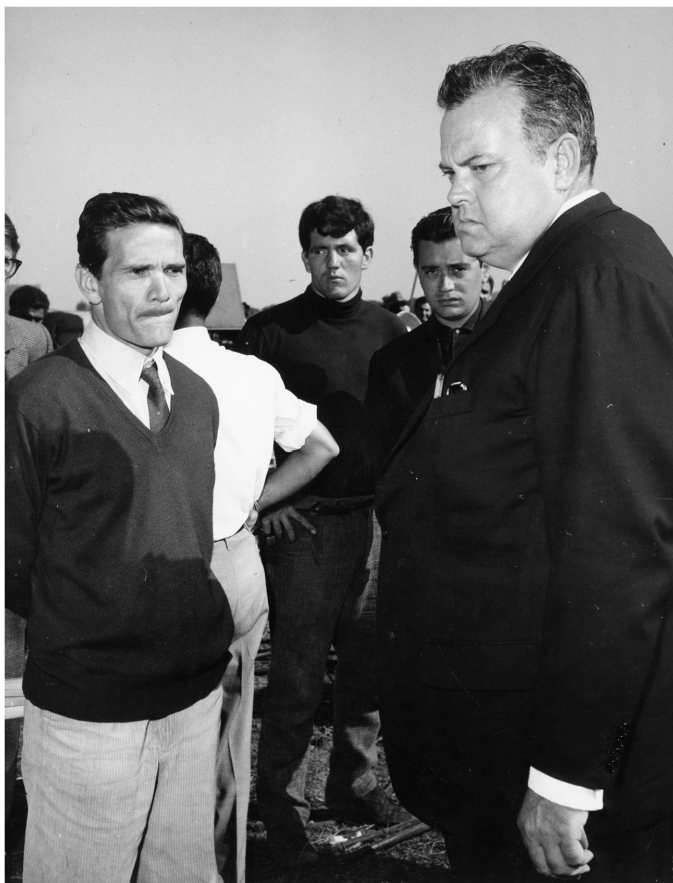
46 Jeremy Irons as the twin gynaecologists in David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*.





47 The bone thrown into the air by the hominid in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which in a jump cut instantaneously mutates into an orbiting spacecraft.

48 Pier Paolo Pasolini directing Orson Welles on the set of *La ricotta*, in which Welles plays an abject, impotent director.



49 Marcello Mastroianni as the director Guido Anselmi in Federico Fellini's *8½*, organizing a final circus parade by the characters in a film he has been unable to make.

50 Alfred Hitchcock's assisted walk-on at the airport in *Topaz*: moments later, he forgets his need for the wheelchair and stands up to greet a friend.

