

MALCOLM LOWRY AND THE CINEMA

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LOWRY'S THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE and appreciation of cinematic technique came from his sustained, intense interest in the world of the film, a world in which he participated as viewer, critic and writer. His own words express best his ardent enthusiasm as a viewer, even while he was living outside the urban area of Vancouver:

I think I have seen nearly all the great German films, since the days of *Caligari*, some of them many times, risking my neck even when at school (where movies were forbidden) to see . . . Conrad Veidt in *The Student of Prague*, and Murnau's wonderful things, all the films of the great Ufa days, and other later masterpieces. . . and it is an enthusiasm that has not deserted me, for only recently we [Lowry and his wife Margerie] have trekked through the snow, (still risking our neck — physically on these occasions because of the ice) just to keep up with the times, to see Murnau's *Last Laugh*, Fritz Lang's *Destiny* (a pioneer piece if there ever was one) and other contemporary films and Klangfilms at the local Vancouver Film Society.¹

This exuberant reaction to the great German films had already been expressed in Chapter One of *Under the Volcano*, where M. Laruelle, a former film director, nostalgically recalling his past, reflects Lowry's personal interest in

the old days of the cinema. . . his own delayed student days, the days of the *Student of Prague*, and Wiene and Werner Krauss and Karl Gruene, the Ufa days when a defeated Germany was winning the respect of the cultured world by the pictures she was making.

The life-long relationship between Lowry and the cinema reveals itself everywhere in his work. Lowry himself was not unaware of the pervasive influence of the cinema, particularly that of Germany, upon his own work:

Nor has anything I have read influenced my own writing personally more than the first twenty minutes of Murnau's *Sonnenaufgang* or the first and the last shots of Karl Gruene's *The Street*.²

As film-writer, Lowry first spent an unhappy period of time working in Hollywood, shortly before beginning his original short-story version of *Under the Volcano* in 1936:

He worked on several movie scripts, with John [Davenport], a friend from Cambridge days and others. He was always interested in the cinema . . . but he was unhappy in Hollywood; he didn't like their methods of working, or much of their results, and he found it difficult to work in tandem with several other writers on the same script. So as soon as possible he left Hollywood and went to Mexico.³

In a comment referring to *Las Manos de Orlac*, the film which is of symbolic significance in his novel, *Under the Volcano*, Lowry's mock-praise of Hollywood's version of that movie — "a remake . . . of truly awe-inspiring badness"⁴ — wryly records his reaction to the American movie factory. However, the Hollywood experience did provide Lowry with the opportunity of becoming directly involved in the practical application of cinema technique. Later, his work — particularly his two unpublished screen scripts and his main novel — was to provide evidence of his interests in and experience with the cinema.

One of the two unpublished film scripts, "The Bravest Boat", is a delicate screen adaption of his own beautifully and sensitively woven short-story of the same title. However, his much more significant contribution to film art — "by no means an ordinary kind of script"⁵ — is his "Tender is the Night", a 455-page movie version of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel. Lowry worked on this great cinema-piece in 1949 and 1950 in collaboration with his wife Margerie. Frank Taylor's assessment of the work is certainly valid. In a letter to Lowry he observed:

I have read many scripts and seen many pictures, but never before have I seen writing so purely cinematic. The impact of your work was much, much greater than that of the novel. It goes devastatingly deep, and its direct filmic evocation of life's complexities is magic and miraculous.⁶

In his arrangement of concrete visual images chosen specifically for the camera-eye, Lowry employs many devices analogous to those which he uses in his novel,

Under the Volcano. Thus, the critical commentary which Lowry interspersed throughout the massive manuscript expands the reader's understanding of Lowry's techniques not only in the film-script but also in his novel.

A few years after the publication of *Under the Volcano*, Lowry considered the possibility of doing a screen adaptation of the novel. His insistence that it be done in Germany was his greatest personal compliment to the film art of that country:

Nothing could make us happier — happy is not the word, in fact — and what an opportunity it is! — than for a film to be made of the *Volcano* in Germany, providing it were done in the best tradition of your great films.⁷

In typically buoyant letter-writing style, Lowry modestly recommends himself and his wife as writers who might be exceptionally eligible for such an undertaking:

I would myself very much wish to make a treatment of the *Volcano* for the film, and I would be very anxious to work on that and the scenario with my wife, who not only was a movie actress for years, but has collaborated on one film with me . . . and who . . . knows the *Volcano* backwards . . . : so, incidentally do I, though I say it myself, and we are a first class team, the like of which is scarcely to be found, I dare say, even in Germany or anywhere else. . . .⁸

Even though Lowry did not write the projected scenario, the cinematic idiom which he had already used in the novel would have made the problem of transposition relatively simple.

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N ANY CINEMATIC SCRIPT the role played by the concrete pictorial images is of primary concern. The camera itself is used to write the visual poetry. Other elements take their cue from the visual image. In *Under the Volcano*, to make the reader consciously aware of the primary role of visual idiom in the work, Lowry intermittently draws attention by implication or direct reference to the nature of the camera itself as a medium of perception.

During the bus-ride of Chapter Eight, for example, the bus's windows mechanically define the margins of the scene outside the bus, as if the "movement" of the countryside and the volcano is being held within the margins of a rectangular movie screen. A quick visual rhythm is created by the ominous recurrence of the changing shapes of the volcano. Long-shots alternate with close-ups:

as, descending, they circled round and round, Popocatepetl slid in and out of view continually, never appearing the same twice, now far away, then vastly near at hand, incalculably distant at one moment, at the next looming round the corner. . . .

The circular movement of the bus imitates the panning motion of a mobilized motion picture camera. The successively alternating views of the central space-object, the volcano, provides an effect analogous to that produced by film montage, in which "discontinuous" visual fragments of spatial reality are edited and juxtaposed.

As the novel proceeds and the Consul literally moves closer and closer to the threatening form of the volcano and to death, a much heavier visual rhythm is established by the insistently regular, temporal reappearance of Popocatepetl, of whose nearing presence the reader is constantly kept aware. First the volcano is reflected within the frame of Yvonne's mirror which, again mimicking movie-making apparatus, mechanically manipulates her view so that she sees only the one volcano. Popocatepetl now was "nearer, looking over her shoulder. . . . [But] however she moved the mirror she couldn't get poor Ixta in." Thus, mechanical devices preclude the visual reunion of the legendary lovers, Ixta and Popocatepetl. Some time later, as the Consul cries, "I love hell," and (rejecting life with Yvonne) flees toward death in the *barranca*, it seems as if a camera is shooting a close-up to emphasize the fact that his destruction is already upon him:

Before him the volcanoes, precipitous, seemed to have drawn nearer. They towered up over the jungle, into the lowering sky—massive interests moving up in the background.

The seething rhythm, beating out the rushing approach of inevitable death, does not cease; and several pages later another, closer shot, taken at a sharp angle, imposes itself upon the eye of the reader's imagination:

. . . the whole precipitous bulk of Popocatepetl seemed to be coming towards them . . . leaning forward over the valley.

Finally the intense visual rhythm stops. It strikes its final resounding note above the head of the Consul, who is being meagrely sustained in the end by nothing but two death-laden mescals:

Popocatepetl towered through the window, its immense flanks partly hidden by rolling thunderheads; its peak blocking the sky, it appeared almost right overhead, [the Consul] directly beneath it. Under the volcano!

The immense mass of the volcano spreads across the screen, which is here defined by the window of the bar. That a static landscape has been imbued with a sense of flux in which temporal form is given to the visual death-rhythm of the volcano is essentially cinematic. "In the cinema," it has been said, "space loses its static quality and acquires a time-charged dynamic quality. Parts of space are arranged in a temporal order and become part of a temporal structure with a temporal rhythm."⁹

The first four paragraphs of *Under the Volcano* demonstrate a method of introduction which also is analogous to a traditionally conventional camera technique in the film medium itself: the camera varies its range from long-shots to close-ups, from the universal to the intimate. Indeed, this is the method which Lowry uses in his two film scripts as well. To introduce "Tender is the Night":

The picture opens in dead silence with a tremendous shot of the night sky, the stars blazing. . . .

The camera seems to be bearing down upon us, so that the sensation we have is of receding downwards from the sky and the moon, and from this rhythm, to the earth.

The next instant the clouds become smoke coming out of a tunnel from which we see a train emerging into morning sunlight; the next we are in this train . . . with Rosemary Hoyt and her mother, watching the landscape of the French Riviera out of the window. Immediately we draw almost to a stop before a sign standing in a field. . . .

Meantime, as the camera comes closer, we see as much as is necessary . . . of the sign itself. . . :

Touriste Americaine! Vous vous approchez maintenant de la ville ancienne d'ANTIBES. . . . Everything for the American tourist at popular prices!

The cheap commercial seediness here emphasized by the final close-up contrasts with an overwhelming sense of awe inspired by the initial long-shot.

In Lowry's first paragraph of the film script, "The Bravest Boat," the relationship between the camera movement there — from long-shot to close-up — and that of *Under the Volcano* is at once self-evident:

In long shot we see the rip-teeth of the winter-white mountains across the bay; closer in, the combers riding in toward shore; and close-up, what was there all along: the single flare of a rain-drenched blossom on a flowering tree. . . .

In *Under the Volcano*, first Mexico — associated by latitude with Hawaii and India — is the subject for the camera's bird's-eye view; for in Mexico Lowry has found a visual image for the expression of universal truth. Then the camera

seems to zero in first on the whole town, Quauhnhuac, and then on the Hotel Casino de la Selva. Finally, a close-up of two men in white flannels introduces the reader particularly to M. Laruelle, the former film-producer, who will present to the reader a "re-run" of the story of death which took place one year before.

Another cinematic technique, one which the cinema may, in fact, have borrowed from literary art, is the mechanical use of typographical details which function with the same visual directness whether caught by a movie camera and reflected on a screen or whether figuratively caught by a camera and typographically reproduced on the pages of the novel. For example, the reader's visual sense is literally stimulated near the end of Chapter Eleven by the pictorial reproduction of the black hand, ominously confirming the direction of the Consul's plunge toward death. An extension of such visual, typographical detail is Lowry's use of foreign phrases or the words from posters, advertisements, post cards and newspaper headlines — always ironically informative, never thematically incongruous or artistically irritating. Speaking critically of a similar use of "signs, words, advertisements" in "Tender is the Night," Lowry says:

... all contributes to what one might call the subconscious life of the movie itself, thereby rendering it the more organic. More than that, such attention to detail, philosophically speaking, gives the film a sort of solipsistic world of its own which, if expressed in accordance with strict realism that in turn is in accordance with the actual historical facts, will inevitably increase our response to it by appealing to facets of the consciousness not usually called into play. . . . And since, finally, there have to be some signs, etc., why not, without overdoing it, some (as there are in life) significant ones?

In *Under the Volcano*, the choice of signs by the camera-eye, as it were, also provides visual landmarks which recurrently draw attention to the deep, spiritual currents of the novel.

Finally, concrete, visual images are used to create montage. Because the novel moves across a landscape of pictorial imagery which is depictable in terms of camera-perception, Lowry is provided with material to follow, at least in the figurative sense, Eisenstein's dictum: "Cinematography is, first and foremost, montage. . . . By the combination of two 'depictables' is achieved the representation of something that is graphically undepictable."¹⁰ Throughout *Under the Volcano*, Lowry's subtle combination of a multiplicity of visual images creates a complexity of montage "explosions". Because visual details which are repeatedly associated with particular characters or occurrences in the novel are

frequently juxtaposed by Lowry's camera-eye, the montage, by translating the themes of the novel into cinematic idiom, contributes to the tightly integrated structure of the novel. Deriving visual, emotional and conceptual depth from all aspects of the novel with which the visual images or image-clusters are associated, the montage in turn dynamically confers dimensions of increased significance to those parts. Frequently, for example, the conjunction of visual images exposes the tension of the emotional undercurrents which prevent real union and fellowship among the characters of the novel. The montage, in such instances, is an instrument of irony. The juxtaposed images are brought into contrast with the hypocritical, surface-dialogue which attempts to realize at least an illusion of propriety and brotherhood. For example, in Chapter Four, while the Consul sleeps, Hugh, his half-brother, who has already once betrayed the Consul by seducing Yvonne, persuades Yvonne to ride with him on horseback. As they move along, Lowry's camera-eye, selecting minute visual detail, informs the reader that "a lizard vanished into the bougainvillea growing along the road-bank, wild bougainvillea now, an overflux, followed by a second lizard." No explanation is required by the narrator. Nothing is spoken by Yvonne and Hugh. The "camera" alone, in its creation of montage while exploring the landscape, has graphically symbolized the passions beneath the decorous surface, as thoughts of adultery with Yvonne (bougainvillea) again creep into the mind of Hugh (lizard; reptile). Hugh's pictorial association with symbols of temptation and betrayal, with the "future-corruptive serpent," is graphically reinforced for the reader as "Hugh actually did ride over a garter snake." In Chapter Five, upon waking, the Consul sees his wife and Hugh standing together, and he realizes that they have met once again while he was sleeping. "Yvonne's arms were full of bougainvillea. . . ;" and the Consul shouts to her companion, "Hi there, Hugh, you old snake in the grass!" Vivid images of Yvonne, bougainvillea, Hugh and the serpent merge and explode to underline the unspoken fears and tensions lying beneath the surface of the dialogue.

Thus, Lowry selects, as the film-maker would, external objects which add dimension to the dialogue of his novel. Through the juxtapositioning of pictorial objects which, outside the context of his novel, would be emotionally "neutral," Lowry achieves a subtle means for expressing deepfelt, complex emotions. Indeed, in many instances, a rapid succession of externally depictable images provides Lowry with the best means for the surrealistic expression of the tormented inner world of the alcoholic. A vivid example of the combining of images to reveal the hallucinatory phantasmagoria of the inner world of the Consul also

affects the reader's visual imagination: "the thin shadows of isolated nails, the stains of murdered mosquitoes, the very scars and cracks of the wall, had begun to swarm, so that, wherever he looked, another insect was born, wriggling instantly toward his heart."

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N *Under the Volcano*, man has relegated the control of his own fate to the arbitrary relentlessness of inhuman forces. These forces, whether within man or external to man but created by him, come together in the image of the *máquina infernal*, the Infernal Machine. It is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Lowry's preoccupation with film technique that he uses images from the cinematic process itself — particularly the image of the motion picture reel, with its fragmented rendering of reality — to establish metaphors which will express the mechanized certainty of man's spiritual death.

The identification of the image of the motion picture reel with the image of other revolving wheels, particularly those of the Ferris wheel and the carrousel, is explicitly evident at several points in the novel. At the close of Chapter One, for example, a movie reel in a forebodingly darkened room seems to transport the reader to a passage of time which has already begun and ended exactly one year before, and of which the ending is known to be death: "in the dark tempestuous night, backwards revolved the luminous wheel." Chapters Two to Twelve, unrolling like a strip of celluloid mechanically fixed with its immutable sequence of images, mercilessly record that death. Like the frequent use of flash-backs in the novel, these eleven chapters emphasize Lowry's anxious concern with time past. Thus, like the image of the motion picture reel, the form of the novel itself is circular, Chapter One being both prologue and epilogue. Form merges with theme, then, as the pattern of inevitable death becomes tightly locked into the novel's spiral descent of soulless rotation. The mechanical circularity seems to preclude the admittance of love, trust, life. That the present cannot escape the past, that the impotence of man's present merges with the guilt of his past, is symbolically best expressed in a cinematic style where the circularity of the form, imitating the circular motion of the reel, can manipulate the overlapping and merging of time. Thus, while the novel, in Lowry's own words, must be accepted as "a prophecy, a political warning, a cryptogram, a crazy film, . . . [it also] can be thought of as a kind of machine."¹¹ The novel's rush downhill toward death unrolls with macabre and machine-like efficiency. Damnation is

the only end. The blind, brutal wheel/reel of fortune, of fate, of time catches man on its circumference merely to crush him; just as the series of images on the celluloid strip permanently determines the course of the actor's — man's, Mexico's — jerky attempts to mimic life. Quite conscious of his own destruction, but too impotent to prevent it, man feels caught in “the spoked shadow of [a] wheel, enormous, insolent. . . .”

Lowry's graphic description of another attraction found at the midway further emphasizes his central preoccupation with the mechanized, circular image of the movie reel:

The huge carrousel . . . was thronged by peculiar long-nosed wooden horses mounted on whorled pipes, dipping majestically as they revolved with a slow piston-like circulation. . . . Jacques was pointing to the pictures on the panels running entirely around the inner wheel that was set horizontally and attached to the top of the central revolving pillar.

The construction and movement of this machine are remarkably similar to those of the innumerable forerunners of the modern movie reel itself. One such machine, for example, was simply a toy,

. . . consisting of a peculiar circular receptacle on a wooden stand. . . . You could tuck inside the rim [of the receptacle] . . . a series of small pictures depicting such images as a rider and horse jumping a fence. . . . In the centre of the receptacle was a [revolving] polygon of mirror faces. . . . If you kept your eyes fixed on only one of the faces of the mirror polygon, the riders appeared to jump.²²

This toy, called a Praxinoscope, and many similar toys depending on the rotating circle for the effect of continuous movement and flux, inflexibly reiterated a mechanically predetermined illusion of life held within the futility of circular motion.

In Chapter Seven, still a third mechanical analogue to the movie reel provides Lowry with an image for the fullest and most vivid expression of a theme which involves the tyranny of the soulless machine. Here the Consul, who is now drunk and is trying hard to avoid involvement with the begging children who surround him, escapes confrontation with reality and life by merging himself literally with the blind reeling motion of the Infernal Machine. The Consul, who has lost all inner spirit of his own, crawls into the machine and, passively gives himself up to this “huge evil spirit, screaming in its lonely hell, its limbs writhing.” Crowds watch passively too: it seems as if “no one could stop the machine, . . . the monster,” which has taken control of the hapless man.

Thus, "trembling in every limb under [the] weight of the past," destitute, guilty man has acquiesced to the mechanized heartlessness of the machine, the wheel, the reel; and he has the feeling of being on the edge of a "drunken madly revolving world." But even the circular image of the motion picture reel — the novel's visual point of thematic reference — is but a parody of the organic unity and perfection usually associated with the circle. For while the celluloid, looping through the projector from the reel of the motion picture apparatus, attempts to affirm organic life and movement and flux, its unrolling can portray only a succession or series of static, inanimate, inorganic, fragmented still shots or frames. Each frame is separated by a dark temporal gap, a void, an abyss, a *barranca* — a "frightful cleft," where it is "too dark to see the bottom. . . . finality indeed, and cleavage!" As the *barranca*, or ravine, rending the Mexican landscape provides a concrete, visual image of the fragmentation of the community of man, so the separation between the frames provides a metaphor for disunity within mankind. Because this metaphor is also associated with the image of the motion picture reel, it reinforces the warning already implied by that image. The isolated, static frames of the mechanized monster, which man has set in motion and to which he has acquiesced, can provide only a lifeless travesty of real life; and in such a grip, man can "wait only for the ratification of death." He can wait only for the darkness, for the *barranca* between the frames, to swallow him up when his jerky movement ceases.

Just as Lowry draws attention to the image of the motion picture reel, he emphasizes the fragmentary quality of the film's attempts to reconstruct life. He stresses particularly the darkness of the temporal gap which precludes the possibility of organic life in the film. For example, the "illuminated news aloft travelling around the Times Building. . . . snapped off into darkness, into the end of a world. . . . And everywhere, that darkness, the darkness of a world without meaning, a world without aim." In another instance, the mutual isolation of each panel in the "procession of queer pictures" which circles the great carousel emphasizes a mechanical fragmentation which apes life. Similarly, in his descriptions of a number of murals in *Under the Volcano*, Lowry stresses the disjointedness of each consecutive panel of the different murals. While the visual content of each mural brings into focus the themes of the novel, the medium itself suggests static fragmentation rather than organic life. In the *cantina* El Bosque, for example, a series of identical pictures illustrates a pack of wolves pursuing a sleigh "at intervals right round the room, though neither sleigh nor wolves budged an inch in the process." Here, not only the discontinuity between

the pictures, but also the pictures themselves provide only static illusion of movement and life. Several such murals suggest the false impression of organic movement in film, where continuity is really being disintegrated by the darkness which interrupts the illusory persistence of light. Thus the machine which controls man is merely mimicing life while driving man toward death. Mechanically reiterated flashes of light, representing only superficial efforts to achieve organic unity, parallel man's superficial efforts to maintain the forms of brotherhood without love. The montage in the following example merges the theme, the technique and the controlling metaphor of the novel: "the lights of Quauhnahuac's one cinema . . . suddenly came on, flicked off, came on again. '*No se puede vivir sin amar*'."

Unable to love, unable to accept love in a world full of social deception and mechanical guise, the Consul, in his drunken stupor, experiences more fully than all the other characters the finality and darkness and horrors of the *barranca* which keeps man lonely and alone. The metaphor of the *barranca*, while providing an analogue for the Consul's fragmented, uncontrolled perception, also points to the technique which Lowry uses. The flashback, with its dislocation of chronological time, and the camera-eye's juxtapositioning of disparate external objects to create montage, provide mechanical or stylistic parallels for the kind of incongruities which attract the Consul's attention. It seems as if a *barranca* slashes across his sense of sight to disintegrate its continuity into a "continual twitching and hopping within his field of vision," just as moments of darkness create the ultimate fragmentation of the motion picture.

Under the Volcano, then, is a coherent and integrated artistic expression of an incoherent and fragmented world. The images of the *barranca* and the wheel are of central importance. Both point to the synthesis of form and content at which Lowry arrives in the novel. There is a fusion of visual metaphor, theme, characterization and technique. The visual metaphors — wheels and *barranca* — draw much of their strength from their association with the cinematic process, in which mechanical fragmentation underlies the apparent continuity of the motion picture. In cinema technique, Lowry finds not only a method but also a metaphor to express the tormented, surrealistic world of his characters.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Malcolm Lowry, unpublished letter, October 31, 1951; addressed to Herr Clenens ten Holder, German translator of *Under the Volcano*.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ Margerie Lowry, "Malcolm Lowry's Life," unpublished biographical sketch.
- ⁴ Malcolm Lowry, *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*. Edited by Harvey Breit and Margerie Lowry (Philadelphia, 1965), 251.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 309.
- ⁶ Frank Taylor, *Selected Letters*, 441.
- ⁷ Malcolm Lowry, unpublished letters, October 31, 1951.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Ralph Stephenson and J. R. Debrix, *The Cinema as Art* (Harmondsworth, 1967), 133.
- ¹⁰ Sergei Eisenstein. *Film Form*, in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory and The Film Sense*. Edited and translated by Jay Leyda (Cleveland and New York, 1967), 28, 30.
- ¹¹ Malcolm Lowry, "Preface to a Novel," translated from French to English by George Woodcock. *Canadian Literature*, IX (Summer, 1961). Clarisse Francillon's original French version, published in 1948, was based on a conversation with Lowry.
- ¹² Ivor Montagu. *Film World* (Harmondsworth, 1964), 18.