Eliot’s Legacy to Cinema

Manju Jain

IN this chapter I explore Eliot’s legacy to cinema in terms of developments in film theory, as well as some cinematic techniques, issues, and themes as they relate to Eliot’s poetry. I shall not attempt to trace direct influences, but will tentatively discuss some linkages, connections, and filiations. Although film developed as an art only towards the end of the nineteenth century, with the Lumière brothers and Meliès, as Eisenstein pointed out, ‘cinema is not entirely without an ancestry and a pedigree, a past and traditions, or a rich cultural heritage from earlier epochs’.1 Eisenstein singled out in particular the contribution of literature to film. From its earliest beginnings, in fact, film has owed a great deal to literature, engaging deeply, as does literature, with issues of representation, telling and showing, viewing and seeing, visuality and textuality, narrativity and language, image production, point of view, identification, form, genre, authorship. From the very beginning of the birth of the cinema the relationship of film and literature has been symbiotic as well as contestatory, with film attempting to establish its independent status as the seventh art. And although a product of the industrial revolution, the underpinnings of cinema are also deeply philosophical.

In fact, Eliot’s interest in cinema goes back at least as far as the time when he was a graduate student of philosophy at Harvard. One of his teachers there was the philosopher and psychologist Hugo Münsterberg, whose The Photoplay: A Psychological Study (1916) is considered to be the first comprehensive study of the film medium.2 Münsterberg was an experimental psychologist as well as an idealist philosopher. His study of film therefore combines both these dimensions of his thought. Relying on a very small corpus of films, Münsterberg makes out a case for film as a new art, with its own aesthetic independence, requiring an examination

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of the aesthetic as well as the psychological factors which would give independent rights to the new art. His stated aim is ‘to study the right of the photoplay, hitherto ignored by esthetics, to be classed as an art in itself under entirely new mental life conditions’. Münsterberg argues that unlike the drama, the reality of the action in the film lacks objective independence. The film caters to the ‘subjective play of attention’, and we must understand the cinema through the mind’s organisation and not the laws of the outer world. The cinema transcends time and space through such techniques as the close-up, special effects, and quick changes of scene through editing. In so doing, it obeys the laws of the mind rather than those of the outer world, making the spectator omnipresent. As he explains, ‘it is as if that outer world were woven into our mind and were shaped not through its own laws but by the acts of our attention’. Münsterberg thus addresses several issues that are pertinent to the aesthetics, techniques, psychology, and organisational principles of film. He relates film to the age-old philosophical concerns of the relationship of time and space as well as to the contemporary issue of the place of film in an industrial civilisation. He also points forward to later developments in film theory such as theories of spectatorship and reception theory. As Robert Stam indicates, ‘as a trained philosopher turning his attention to the cinema, Münsterberg anticipates such later figures as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze’. Although Eliot was to become quite acerbic about the academic jargon used by Münsterberg and his colleagues to which he had been subjected while a student at Harvard, the issues that Münsterberg raised in his work on film no doubt made a strong impact on his poetic practice and literary theorising.

Münsterberg’s work on film relates in very interesting ways to that of Eisenstein, although I have not been able to establish any direct connection between the two. Münsterberg anticipates Eisenstein’s theory of montage and the importance given to the active role of the spectator. Montage, of course, denotes editing in Russian and the Romance languages. Cinema, Eisenstein declared emphatically, ‘is first and foremost montage’. In their 1928 manifesto on sound, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov asserted that montage ‘has become the indisputable axiom on which the
worldwide culture of the cinema has been built’. Eisenstein emphasised however that ‘the juxtaposition of two separate shots by splicing them together resembles not so much a simple sum of one shot plus another shot – as it does a creation. It resembles a creation – rather than a sum of its parts – from the circumstance that in every such juxtaposition the result is qualitatively distinguishable from each component element viewed separately’. Eisenstein goes on to say that ‘the strength of montage resides in this, that it includes in the creative process the emotions and mind of the spectator’. Further, ‘it is precisely the montage principle, as distinguished from that of representation, which obliges spectators themselves to create …’. This, indeed, is reminiscent of Münsterberg’s emphasis on the active and creative role of the spectator. Eisenstein considered *Paradise Lost* to be ‘a first-rate school in which to study montage’. And he wrote at length on Griffith’s indebtedness to Dickens for the use of such techniques as parallel scenes, intercuts, inserts, and dissolves. He may or may not have been familiar with Eliot’s *Waste Land*. But surely the techniques of montage used by Eisenstein in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1928) are reminiscent of the cinematic techniques of montage used in *The Waste Land*, with its shifting perspectives, multiple points of view, sharp transitions, and sudden juxtapositions – techniques that are a common reservoir of Modernism. Eliot and Eisenstein belong to the Modernist moment.

Eisenstein participated in the avant-garde movements of theatre and the arts in the Soviet Union. He commented on the works of Picasso ‘both in his cubist and more recent periods, where a face or a figure is presented from multiple viewpoints, and at varying stages of an action’. Montage in fact can be considered to be a temporalisation of the multiple planes of cubism. Eisenstein also wished to make an adaptation of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Interestingly, he commented on Eliot’s associative use of the colour yellow in the early poems in ‘Preludes’, ‘A Portrait of a Lady’, ‘Prufrock’, ‘Sweeney Among the Nightingales’, and ‘Mr. Appolinax’. This makes it evident that he was familiar with Eliot’s work. Eisenstein’s interview with Alfred Richman, ‘Serge M. Eisenstein’, given in 1926, was published in *The Dial* in April 1929, and his ‘The Cinematographic Principle and Japanese Culture; with a Digression on Montage and the Shot’, translated by Ivor Montagu...
and S.S. Nolbandov, was published in Transition (Paris) in 1930. There is therefore every likelihood that Eliot and Eisenstein knew of each other’s work. If Eisenstein acknowledged his debt to his literary predecessors, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to speculate that Eliot’s poetic innovations also cross-fertilised his cinematic techniques and cine-poetics.

Another interesting point of interconnection between Eliot and Eisenstein is the notion of artistic unity and the relationship between the fragment and the whole. Eliot, it may be recalled, described his method of working as ‘doing things separately and then seeing the possibility of fusing them together, altering them, and making a kind of whole of them’. As is well known, some of Eliot’s major poems were put together out of fragments, or sections, and had existed in different combinations: ‘Prufrock’, The Waste Land, ‘The Hollow Men’, Ash-Wednesday, ‘Burnt Norton’. Poetic originality, Eliot wrote, ‘is largely an original method of assembling the most disparate and unlikely material to make a new whole’. Montage, too, is a form of bricolage, or assemblage of the different shots. The filmic shot, for Eisenstein and the Soviet theorists, did not have any intrinsic meaning prior to its being placed within a montage structure. And yet both Eliot and Eisenstein emphasise that the fragments form a new whole, which is more than the sum of its parts. Eliot defended the long poem because it was only in a poem of some length that a variety of moods could be expressed; for a variety of moods required several different themes or subjects, ‘related either in themselves or in the mind of the poet’. These parts, Eliot goes on to say, ‘can form a whole which is more than the sum of the parts; a whole such that the pleasure we derive from the reading of any part is enhanced by our grasp of the whole’. Eisenstein, with his dialectical theory of the conflict and collision of fragments, claimed that ‘we reassemble the disintegrated phenomena into a single whole but from our own perspective, in the light of our own orientation toward the phenomena’. Also, ‘montage is not an idea composed of successive shots composed together but an idea that derives from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another’. Montage, for Eisenstein, is not just the fragments assembled together but the whole film, just as for Eliot, the long poem is not just an
assemblage of fragments but a new whole.

I hope that I have been able to show some interconnections between the philosophical theory of Münsterberg, the cine-poetics of Eisenstein, Eliot’s theory of poetic unity and of the relationship between the fragment and the whole, and the techniques and innovations of both Eliot and Eisenstein.22

However, it is to Bergson and to Eliot’s study of Bergson that we should turn in order to understand the deep philosophical underpinnings of cinema, and to Eliot’s place in this conjuncture between philosophy, cinema and poetry. In recent years, it is Gilles Deleuze who has stressed what he terms ‘the profound Bergsonism’ of cinema, especially in relation to cinema’s deployment of the movement image and the time image. Briefly to summarise Bergson’s philosophy of movement and time, being and becoming, matter and flux: for Bergson, reality is a ceaseless process, pure duration (durée réelle) or pure time, an endless process of becoming. We perceive only the past, ‘the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future’. The intellect presents this flux of pure time as stable perceptions and static conceptions demarcating the flux into the discrete time of the clocks and calendars. Also, perception, according to Bergson, is ‘never a contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it’.23 In Creative Evolution (1907), Bergson directly refers, albeit dismissively, to cinema in order to describe the process whereby we perceive the pure flux of time: ‘We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, and, as these are characteristics of the reality, we have only to string them on a becoming abstract, uniform and invisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge…. Perception, intellection, language so proceed in general. Whether we would think of becoming, or express it, or even perceive it, we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us’.24 Deleuze, however, contends that it was ten years earlier, in Matter and Memory (1896) that Bergson prefigured the future or the essence of cinema: ‘(1) there are not only instantaneous images, that is, immobile sections of movement; (2) there are movement-images which are mobile sections of duration; (3) there are, finally, time images, that is
duration images, change-images, relation-images, volume-images which are beyond movement itself...’. Cinema therefore does not give us ‘an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us a movement image’, for movement will always occur in a concrete duration, or durée, no matter how much time is divided or subdivided. Although it does give a section, it is ‘a section which is mobile, not an immobile section + abstract movement’. The point remains, however, that the movement image or the time image, remain images, or representations, ‘cinematographic illusions’ not movement or time itself especially since montage, editing, assembling, and projection through the cinematic apparatus play such a pivotal role in the production of a film. Reality may be flux, pure time, or duration, but it can only be represented indirectly.

Eliot himself was deeply skeptical about Bergson’s philosophy of the durée réelle, as I have argued elsewhere. He had declared emphatically in his unpublished essay on Bergson, written while he was a student of philosophy at Harvard, that the durée réelle was not final. Moreover, he had raised the paradoxical question that ‘pure movement’ could generate quality, or ‘pure movement’, only to a consciousness that could immobilize it. There is, therefore, a gap between pure movement, and the perception of it; what we perceive is not the durée réelle but our perception of it. I find Eliot’s position closer here to the Bergson of Creative Evolution with his emphasis on the cinematographic illusion and the snapshots that we take of reality than to the Deleuzian Bergson of Matter and Memory with the emphasis on images of pure movement. I also find Eliot’s position closer to those of Münsterberg and Eisenstein with their respective emphases on cinema as an artifice, a construct, both in its mode of creation and production as well as in the importance given to the active role of the spectator in the process of generating meaning.

What I find fascinating in the relationship of Eliot, Bergson, and Deleuze with respect to film is their engagement with the concept of ‘pure time’ or what I would like to term an ‘aesthetics of transcendence’. Bergson had argued that it is only through a mystic moment of intuition or pure perception that the mind could get a glimpse of ‘pure time’, the undivided unity of the durée réelle. Eliot was scathing in his critique of what he
termed Bergson’s mysticism, which ‘sees eternity in a single moment’. Yet in his poetry, right up to *Four Quartets*, he continued to be preoccupied with questions of flux and stability, transience and eternity, being and becoming, and the rendering of the timeless through time. Deleuze is at his most eloquent in fact when he discusses cinematic attempts to render these Bergsonian ‘crystal images’, ‘sheets of time’ or ‘peaks of present’. This raises a paradox. For if ‘Words move, music moves / Only in time …’, then so do the images in a film, for movement is intrinsic to film. In the crystal image, according to Deleuze, ‘there is this mutual search – blind and halting – of matter and spirit: beyond the movement image’.

How, then, do the moving images in a film, as opposed to the words on the page, capture this sense of time and timelessness, flux and stability, ‘the moment in and out of time’, the spiritual dimension beyond the boundedness and materiality of the cinematic frame? The crystal image, according to Deleuze, ‘reveals a direct time-image, and no longer an indirect image of time deriving from movement…. What the crystal reveals or makes visible is the hidden ground of time, that is, its differentiation into two flows, that of the presents which pass and that of pasts which are preserved. Time simultaneously makes the present pass and preserves the past in itself’. The paradoxical characteristics of a non-chronological time are ‘the pre-existence of a past in general; the coexistence of all the sheets of the past; and the existence of a most contracted degree’. Deleuze quotes St Augustine: ‘there is a present of the future, a present of the present and a present of the past, all implicated in the event, and thus simultaneous and inexplicable’. The event is made from the simultaneity of these three implicated presents, from these de-actualised ‘peaks of present’ (‘Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past’). Thus in a film such as *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, as Deleuze says, ‘the confrontation between sheets of past take place directly, Hiroshima will be the present for Nevers, but for the man, Nevers will be the present of Hiroshima’. ‘Undecidable alternatives’ are thereby created between sheets of past.

The ‘aesthetics of transcendence’ raises the interesting issue of belief
and its representation in literature as well as in film. Deleuze makes the cogent point that, from the outset, cinema had a special relationship with belief, for the cinematographic image, in contrast to the theatre, showed ‘the link between the man and the world’: ‘Hence it developed either in the direction of a transformation of the world by man, or in the discovery of an internal and higher world than man himself was’. An instance of this would be Dreyer’s Joan, constantly looking beyond the cinematic frame into an off-screen spiritual space while being interrogated by the jury in an oppressive and claustrophobic court room, creating a fourth dimension – the spiritual.

In a similar vein, Eliot also wrote of this imperative to reach beyond words, of the aim to write ‘poetry standing naked in its bare bones…. to get beyond poetry, as Beethoven in his later works, strove to get beyond music’. Eliot’s asceticism is fascinatingly close to that of Bresson. Kumar Shahani, who had worked closely with Bresson, recalls that Bresson ‘used to take forty takes for every shot until he found the sign of God in a certain performative act, in an act’s performative being, which was not already defined in his mind’. As Jean-Louis Schefer, discussing how cinema is concerned with ‘a thought whose essential character is not yet to be’, puts it: ‘the cinematographic image carries out a suspension of the world’, and it is this, rather than movement, ‘which gives the visible to thought, not as its object, but as an act which is constantly arising and being revealed in thought’. What we get then is, according to Deleuze, ‘a little time in the pure state’.

Besides an aesthetics of transcendence, Eliot also bequeaths an aesthetics of violence to later cinema. This violence, especially the sexual violence and antifeminism which, according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, is characteristic of Modernism, is recurrent in Eliot’s work from the earlier poems about diabolical mysticism, such as ‘The Burnt Dancer’, ‘The Love Song of Saint Sebastian’, ‘The Death of St Narcissus’ on to the Sweeney poems which explore the complex and intricate relationship between salvation and damnation, religion and eroticism. The capacity for damnation, for Eliot, implies the capacity for salvation. This is a thematic that can be discerned in the films of Kubrick and Tarantino,

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such as *A Clockwork Orange*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*, and *Kill Bill*. Sweeney’s matter-of-fact sadism, ‘Any man might do a girl in / Any man has to, needs to, wants to / Once in a lifetime, do a girl in’ is not a far cry from Bill’s sado-masochistic question in *Kill Bill II* to the Bride, or Beatrix: ‘Do you find me sadistic? I bet I could fry an egg on your head about now, if I wanted to. No Kiddo, I’d like to believe, even now, you’re aware enough to know there isn’t a trace of sadism in my actions…. No Kiddo, at this moment… this is me at my most masochistic’. Nor is it far removed from the revolting Virgin dialogue at the beginning of *Reservoir Dogs*. Artaud maintained that it was a matter ‘of bringing cinema together with the innermost reality of the brain’, but according to Deleuze, ‘this innermost reality is not the Whole, but on the contrary a fissure, a crack’. Schizophrenia and fragmentation, therefore, the two themes that, according to Frederic Jameson, characterise the post-modernist milieu, point to the continuity between the Modernism of Eliot and the post-modernist anxieties of Kubrick and Tarantino.

What is explored in Eliot, as well as in Kubrick and Tarantino, is the polyvalent desire, which Deleuze and Guittari see as being repressed by and in excess of patriarchal capitalism. Schizophrenia is therefore seen ‘not as pathology but as a subversive dis ordering of bourgeois thought processes’. Tarantino, for instance, claimed that in his films, he aimed to shake and shock a culture that has seen everything. As Robin Gleason writes, ‘the cool gaze’ is Tarantino’s way of shocking and undermining social conventions; of making his audiences reassess their personal values. *Kill Bill*, for instance, is ‘an elegy on the impossibility of making a difference in a culture that has not – without Tarantino’s help – perfected the ability to incorporate and appropriate everything’. Similarly, in *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex’s insane violence is appropriated and controlled by the psychiatric establishment and by the Welfare State for the purpose of state propaganda and manipulation. As Alex, the narrator, ironically tells the audience at the end, ‘I was indeed cured’. Consequently, there is the sense of the futility of subversion as well as the search for salvation.

The shock effect, of course, is evoked precisely because of the casualness, ‘the cool gaze’, with which so much of the violence is perpetrated. As
Adorno said, writing about the seeming normalisation of crime in the mass media such as television:

the way the spectator is made to look at apparently everyday items, such as a night club, and to take as hints of possible crime common settings of his daily life, induces him to look at life itself as though it and its conflicts could generally be understood in such terms…. this atmosphere of the normality of crime, its presentation in terms of an average expectation based on life situations, is never expressed in so many words but is established by the overwhelming wealth of material…. What matters is not the importance of crime as a symbolic aggression of otherwise uncontrolled sexual or aggressive impulses, but a confusion of this symbolism with a pedantically maintained realism in all matters of sense perception.45

Adorno’s critique is as relevant to the settings of the Sweeney poems as to the mise-en-scènes of Tarantino’s films – the diners, the coffee shops, the restaurants.

The final issue that I wish to take up is the debate about mass culture. Eliot, as is well known, was extremely critical about mass culture and mechanisation. In a letter of 17 November 1914 to Eleanor Hinkley, he wrote facetiously about his opposition to a debate at Merton College on the subject of the ‘threatened Americanisation of Oxford’. He had pointed out how much they owed to ‘Amurrrican culcher in the drayma [sic] (including the movies) in music, in the cocktail, and in the dance’ (Letters, 70). He also sent her instalments of his ‘great ten-reel cinema drama’, ‘EFFIE THE WAIF’, which has several stereotypes of Hollywood film lore, such as Dancing Bear, the chief of Pottawottobottommies; Spike Cassidy, the reformed gambler; Seedy Sam, the blackmailer; Lady Chumleyumley, whose husband and one-year-old daughter Effie had been abducted by her wicked brother-in-law when her husband was posted in ‘Kashmeer’. The script is replete with Orientalist exotica – monkeys, cobras, man-eating tigers, faquirs, sheikhs, and purloined jewels.46 However, like his contemporary, Georg Lukàcs, Eliot made a distinction between popular and mass culture. In his tribute to Marie Lloyd (1923), Eliot lauded the music hall comedians because the working classes found the expression and dignity of their own lives in their performances. They joined in the chorus and were themselves performing part of the act, thereby
collaborating with the artist. However, with the ‘encroachment of cheap and rapid-breeding cinema’, Eliot laments, the working man ‘will now go to the cinema, where his mind is lulled by continuous senseless music and continuous action too rapid for the brain to act upon’.  

Unlike Walter Benjamin a decade later, therefore, Eliot did not celebrate cinema and the mechanisation of art for the democratisation of art. Eliot’s position, in this respect, is closer to that of Adorno and Horkheimer than to that of Benjamin, for Adorno and Horkheimer saw cinema as a potent instrument of the culture industry, as a means of mass deception, of crushing subordination, and of integrating the masses into the capitalist system. 

In conclusion, although Eliot’s poetic theory and practice point forward to several later developments in the theory and practice of film, and despite his fascination with cinema, he foresaw, even before Adorno, the trajectory that the culture industry as exemplified by cinema would take and the threat and challenges that it would pose.

Notes
4 Ibid., p. 20.
5 Stam, op. cit., p.31.
7 Münsterberg, op. cit., pp. 8-9. Münsterberg makes an interesting reference here to the assassination scene in Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation as an illustration: ‘Suddenly we see not Booth himself as he seeks to assassinate the president, but only his hand holding the revolver and the play of his excited fingers filling the whole field of vision’.
8 Sergei Eisenstein, ‘Film Form’, in Braudy and Cohen, op. cit., p.15.
9 Quoted in Stam, op. cit., p.38.
11 Ibid., p. 54.
13 The Film Sense, op. cit., p.86.
14 Stam, op. cit., p.43.
15 The Film Sense, op. cit., pp.98-99.
16 Ibid., pp. 211-12.
19 Stam, op. cit., p.38.
20 To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings (1965; Faber and Faber, London, 1978), p.34.
21 Eisenstein, in Braudy and Cohen, op. cit., pp.19, 28.
22 See Anne Bolgan for a discussion of the dialectical method and spatial form in Eisenstein’s theories of montage and Eliot’s as well as Joyce’s poetic practice in The Waste Land and Ulysses respectively, with Flaubert as their common literary progenitor: ‘Joyce’s method in Ulysses and Flaubert’s in Madame Bovary are identical in principle with that formulated by Eisenstein in his book Film Form. Both, that is, use collision, or juxtaposition without copula, as the creative device which, of itself and progressively, generates the thematic idea or vision to which the reader is led by it. In The Waste Land Eliot provides us with yet another instance of that principle at work…’ What the Thunder Really Said: A Retrospective Essay on the Making of ‘The Waste Land’ (McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal and London, 1973), pp.70-71. Chapter 3 of her book, ‘dialectical form’, is a discussion of Eisenstein’s theories of montage and Eliot’s poetic theories and practice (pp.55-72). I am grateful to Professor Shyamal Bagchee for drawing my attention to her discussion.
28 Matter and Memory, op. cit., pp.73, 84.
30 Cinema I, op. cit., p.75.
32 Ibid., pp.116-17.
33 Ibid., p.171.
37 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Volume 1: The War of the Words (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1988).
40 Cinema 2, op. cit., p.167.

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43 Stam, op. cit., p. 257.

44 Gleason, op. cit.


47 Selected Essays, op. cit., p. 420.