1915-1925 – Shoot! – The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator

Evocative image for *Shoot! – The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator*, showing Serafino Gubbio beside an early motion-picture camera on a film set, with a historic English edition of *Shoot!* in the foreground. English edition on PirandelloWeb.

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Luigi Pirandello's *Shoot!* is one of the earliest major novels to confront

cinema, technology and the transformation of human beings into functions of the modern machine. Through the notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, a cinematograph operator who records the world while gradually withdrawing from it, Pirandello explores identity, alienation, spectacle and the disturbing power of the mechanical eye.

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Novel information

Author
Luigi Pirandello [1867-1936].

Original title
Si gira..., later published in its definitive form as *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*.

Publication
First published in book form in 1916 after earlier serialization; revised and republished in 1925 under the definitive Italian title *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*.

Structure
Seven books presented as the notebooks of Serafino Gubbio.

English translation
Translated from the Italian by C. K. Scott Moncrieff [1889-1930].

Other languages

▶ **In Italiano – Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore**
The complete Italian edition on PirandelloWeb.

Shoot! - Books Index

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Introduction

Shoot! occupies a remarkable place in Pirandello’s fiction. Written during the rapid expansion of early cinema, the novel does not merely use a film studio as an unusual setting. Cinema becomes the instrument through which Pirandello examines a broader transformation of modern life: the growing power of machines, the conversion of experience into reproducible images and the reduction of human

beings to specialized functions.

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The narrator, Serafino Gubbio, works as a cinematograph operator. His task is apparently simple: he turns the handle of the camera. Yet this mechanical gesture gradually becomes an image of his entire existence. Serafino watches other people act, desire, suffer and destroy themselves while he remains behind the camera, recording everything with increasing emotional detachment.

His notebooks are therefore both narrative and diagnosis. Serafino records the people around him, but he also records the progressive separation between himself and ordinary human participation. His profession requires him to become an impassive eye, and the novel asks what remains of a person when observation replaces action.

The world of the Kosmograph film company is filled with actors, technicians, producers and reconstructed realities. Everything may be transformed into spectacle. Human passions do not disappear inside this artificial environment; instead they become entangled with the machinery that records and reproduces them.

Pirandello’s treatment of cinema is deliberately ambivalent. The camera has extraordinary power because it can preserve movement and reproduce

appearances, but this preservation also removes the living event from its original moment. Life is converted into an image that can be repeated after the people who produced it have changed or disappeared.

For this reason *Shoot!* anticipates many later debates about technology, mass media and mediated reality. The novel asks what happens when machines cease to be merely tools and begin to determine the way human beings perceive themselves and one another.

From *Si gira…* to *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*

The novel first appeared under the title *Si gira…*, an expression associated with the command to begin filming. The title immediately placed the work inside the new technological world of the cinema.

Pirandello later revised the novel and published it under the definitive title *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*. The change shifts the emphasis from the act of filming to the narrator himself and to the notebook form through which he records his experience.

The two titles illuminate different aspects of the same work. *Si gira…* stresses the machine, production and the artificial creation of spectacle; *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* stresses consciousness, writing and the observer who attempts to understand what the mechanical world is doing to human life.

This double perspective is fundamental to the novel. Serafino is simultaneously a camera operator and a writer. During the working day he records without intervention; in his notebooks he tries to interpret what he has seen.

C. K. Scott Moncrieff’s English translation

The historic English translation by **C. K. Scott Moncrieff** appeared under the striking title *Shoot!*, followed by the explanatory subtitle *The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator*.

The choice of *Shoot!* preserves the direct connection with cinema while giving the English title an additional ambiguity. The word refers naturally to filming, but in the context of the novel it also carries the suggestion of violence — a resonance that becomes increasingly significant as the story approaches its conclusion.

For this PirandelloWeb edition, *Shoot!* is therefore retained as the principal English title, while *The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator* identifies the work more fully and preserves its connection with Pirandello’s definitive Italian title.

Summary

Serafino Gubbio works as a camera operator for the Kosmograph film company. He describes himself increasingly as little more than the hand required to turn the handle of the cinematograph while the machine records the lives unfolding before it.

Through his notebooks Serafino reconstructs the complicated relationships among the people who inhabit the world of the studio. At the centre of these relationships is the actress Varia Nestoroff, a fascinating and destructive figure whose past is connected with the painter Giorgio Mirelli and with Aldo Nuti.

Giorgio’s history casts a shadow over the later events. His relationship with Varia,

and the suffering associated with it, remains part of the emotional network that eventually draws Aldo Nuti toward the actress.

Serafino watches these relationships with a peculiar combination of sympathy and detachment. His profession encourages him to observe rather than intervene, and the camera gradually becomes a model for his psychological position toward the world.

The Kosmograph studio itself is a place in which reality is continuously reconstructed for the camera. Artificial landscapes, costumes, performances and human emotions are organized so that they can be transformed into film.

Among the studio’s attractions is a real tiger destined to appear in a spectacular scene. The animal represents something radically alive and dangerous inside an environment otherwise devoted to converting life into mechanical reproduction.

As the emotional tension among the characters intensifies, the planned tiger sequence becomes inseparable from the personal drama involving Nuti and Nestoroff.

During the filming of the decisive scene, violence erupts before Serafino’s camera. Bound by his role as operator, he continues turning the handle and records the catastrophe instead of intervening.

The experience completes Serafino’s transformation. The machine has captured the event perfectly, but the human being behind it is profoundly altered.

What remains is the paradox that has governed the novel from the beginning: the camera preserves an image of life precisely by separating the operator from living

participation in it.

Analysis

Shoot! is one of Pirandello's most striking explorations of modernity because the crisis of identity, so central to his work, is here inseparable from technology. Serafino Gubbio does not merely suffer from uncertainty about who he is: his profession steadily reduces him to a function. He is the operator behind the cinematograph, the man whose task is to turn the handle while the machine records what happens before it. The more perfectly he performs this task, the less his own personality seems to matter.

The camera therefore becomes much more than an object within the story. It is a mechanical eye, capable of preserving appearances without participating in the life it records. Serafino gradually adopts the same position. He watches, registers and reflects, but increasingly withdraws from direct involvement. His famous reduction of himself to a hand turning a handle expresses the danger at the centre of the novel: modern technology does not simply serve human beings; it can reorganize their behaviour until they begin to resemble the machines they operate.

Cinema, spectacle and the transformation of life

The Kosmograph film company provides Pirandello with an ideal setting for examining the difference between living experience and reproduced appearance. Inside the studio, landscapes are reconstructed, emotions are performed, identities are assumed and events are arranged so that the camera can capture them. Reality enters the machinery of cinema and emerges as spectacle.

This process fascinates Pirandello because it intensifies a problem already present

throughout his fiction. Human beings never coincide completely with the images through which others perceive them. Cinema makes that separation visible and material: an actor performs before the camera, but the filmed image then acquires an existence of its own. It can be projected repeatedly, detached from the living person who produced it.

In this sense, the cinematograph gives technological form to the Pirandellian conflict between *life* and *form*. Life moves, changes and contradicts itself; the image fixes it. Yet the paradox is that cinema creates the impression of movement precisely from something that has already been captured and removed from the living present.

The English title *Shoot!* is especially effective because of its double resonance. It is the command associated with filming, but it also suggests an act of violence. As the novel moves toward its catastrophe, those meanings begin to overlap: the act of mechanically recording an event becomes inseparable from real destruction.

Serafino Gubbio: observer, writer and machine

Serafino’s notebooks complicate his apparent transformation into a machine. During filming he is expected to observe without reacting; when he writes, however, he interprets what he has seen. The notebooks become the place where consciousness resists complete mechanization.

This creates a fundamental division within Serafino. As cinematograph operator he tends toward impersonality; as narrator he remains intensely aware of the contradictions, suffering and absurdity around him. His writing proves that the human being has not yet disappeared behind the apparatus, even when Serafino himself repeatedly claims that little remains of him beyond the hand required by

the camera.

His detachment is therefore never simple indifference. Serafino feels deeply, but he increasingly experiences feeling as something that must be hidden behind observation. He sees the complicated relationships surrounding Varia Nestoroff, Aldo Nuti and the other figures of the Kosmograph world with unusual clarity precisely because he occupies a marginal position among them.

Varia Nestoroff is particularly important in this respect. No single interpretation can contain her. To different characters she appears seductive, destructive, wounded, guilty or mysterious. Pirandello refuses to reduce her to one stable psychological definition. She exists through a series of conflicting perspectives, just as the cinema itself multiplies and fixes images without necessarily revealing an ultimate truth behind them.

The tiger and the return of uncontrollable life

The tiger introduces something radically different into the artificial world of the studio. Actors can rehearse, scenery can be constructed and the camera can be positioned according to a plan; the tiger remains a living force that cannot fully understand or submit to the logic of representation.

Its presence therefore exposes the fragility of the distinction between simulated danger and actual danger. The cinema wants to appropriate the animal as spectacle, turning its vitality into another image for consumption. But genuine life cannot always be controlled by the mechanism designed to reproduce it.

The final catastrophe brings together the novel’s principal tensions: machine and body, representation and reality, observation and intervention. At the decisive

moment Serafino continues filming. Professionally, this is the perfect execution of his function: the camera does not stop, and the event is recorded completely. Humanly, however, the same perfection is horrifying.

The machine triumphs because it receives exactly what it requires — an uninterrupted sequence of images — while the operator is traumatized by the experience of having remained behind the camera. Serafino's final condition is thus the extreme consequence of the process already announced at the beginning of the novel.

Modern identity and the meaning of Serafino's silence

Serafino's silence at the end should not be understood merely as the physical consequence of shock. It completes the trajectory of the entire novel. The man who increasingly defined himself as an impersonal observer finally loses ordinary speech and becomes almost perfectly adapted to his mechanical function.

There is a bitter irony in this outcome. Modern technology promises to expand human possibilities: the camera can preserve events, overcome distance and reproduce life for countless spectators. Yet Serafino's experience suggests that this expansion may be accompanied by an impoverishment of direct human participation. The more efficiently reality is recorded, the more the person recording it risks becoming detached from the reality itself.

For this reason *Shoot!* extends far beyond the historical world of silent cinema. Pirandello anticipates a culture increasingly dominated by images, screens and mediated experience, in which people may become spectators of their own lives and may even begin to shape experience according to the demands of its reproduction.

The novel does not offer a simple condemnation of technology. The camera is neither evil nor conscious; the deeper problem lies in the relationship human beings establish with the mechanisms they create. Serafino's tragedy begins when a useful instrument ceases to remain merely an instrument and becomes the model according to which his own existence is organized.

This is what gives the novel its continuing force. Behind the cinematograph of the early twentieth century lies a much broader question: whether a human being can preserve a living, changing and responsible self in a world increasingly organized through machines, images and functions.

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Gavriel Moses – Introduction

Professor Emeritus. Department of Italian Studies, Department of Film & Media, University of California, Berkeley CA

from the book *"The Nickel Was for the Movies"*, University of California Press

Originally published in Italian in 1915, *Shoot!* is one of the first novels to take as its subject the heady world of early motion pictures.

Based on the absurdist journals of fictional Italian camera operator Serafino Gubbio, Shoot! documents the infancy of film in Europe-complete with proto-divas, laughable production schedules, and cost-cutting measures with priceless effects-and offers a glimpse of the modern world through the camera's lens. Shoot! is a classic example of Nobel Prize-winning Sicilian playwright Luigi Pirandello's (1867-1936) literary talent and genius for blurring the line between art and reality. From the film studio Kosmograph, Pirandello's Gubbio steadily winds the crank of his camera by day and scribbles with his pen by night, revealing the world both mundane and melodramatic that unfolds in front of his camera.

Through Gubbio's narrative-saturated with fantasy and folly-Pirandello grapples with the philosophical implications of modernity. Like much of Pirandello's work, Shoot! parodies human weaknesses, drawing attention to the themes of isolation and madness as emerging tendencies in the modern world. Enhanced by new critical

commentaries, Shoot! is an entertaining caricature, capturing early twentieth-century Italian filmmaking and revealing its truths as only a parody can.

Pirandello's *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio Operatore*, is not just a novel that happens to choose a new and original mimetic context (the world of film-making) for the unfolding of its plot.

Nor is it enough to consider the presence in its structure of what has come to be called the cinematic apparatus a mere metonimy for the emerging industrial complex.

The novel is, rather, the prototype of a narrative sub-genre one might call the Film Novel in which film is at the center and in which the epistemological and existential repercussions of this new twentieth century medium are explored through the means of narrative. It is a narrative type that displays distinct thematic, formal and mimetic features peculiar to itself.

What is more, Pirandello's notions of cinema as an art form are an integral part not only of the narrative texture but also of the genre characteristics (literary) of the Film Novel.

There is, in the studies that have looked at film theory in Pirandello's work, a tendency to abstract film theory and other conceptual areas from Quaderni or to assume that its representation of film, rather than a central element of its meaning, simply stands for something else (machines… progress…).

This approach tends to sift out the elements of film-theory from the full range of narrative functions within which they exist and encourages one to "read" this theory according to the external sequence of its history and/or to internal

hierarchies of theoretical coherence. What gets lost, in this way, is attention to the stress such topics receive within the narrative structure itself; attention, that is, to their full meaning.

Yet what Pirandello says specifically about the film medium, and what he does with it, is given context and perspective by such elements as what may be happening in the narrative, who may be present in the scene, or in what way metaphoric extensions sparked off by the film medium extend to the literary context.

Pirandello and film theory

Take for instance the meeting between what is a transparent self-portrait of himself and Gubbio. To this curious and questioning gentleman (his face, like indeed Pirandello's, is "*delicate, pale, with thin, fair hair; keen, blue eyes; a pointed yellowish beard, behind which there lurked a faint smile*") Gubbio talks about the necessity of retaining absolute "*impassivity*," and about the fact that the operator is reduced to a mere "*hand that turns the handle.*"

This contradicts the pride with which he also states his conviction that one cannot find "*a machine that can regulate its movements according to the action that is going on in front of the camera*."

He says: "*I, my dear Sir, do not always turn the handle at the same speed, but faster or slower as may be required*" (I:11-12 E:8).

We have here, that is, a very specific technical peculiarity of silent film (the variable cranking of the camera in accordance to the feeling one wants to give to the scene).

This feature of film technique, moreover, turns out to be functional to our

understanding of the character.

It is this delicate balance between a specific character and notions of film theory, that provides the reader with an early hint that Gubbio, despite claims to the contrary, seeks involvement with the action in front of the camera and even lays claim to a measure of creative control. In other words, film-theory and the technological reality of the medium are an integral part of the narrative texture in which who is present, their narrative interaction, as well as the place this episode has in the interpretation of the action as a whole are important factors.

I would also give greater weight than is usual to the famous (and single) positive statement about the medium of film voiced by Gubbio and in which he yearns for a cinematography that is truthful and instructive (I:86 E:151).

By separating film-theory from the narrative context, one may arrive at a skewed evaluation of what is said about the medium. When seen in context, however, it is clear that we have here an encapsulated summa about what the medium could be in its essence: its ability to concretize for the first time in the history of culture (into a concrete image, onto a visible screen) notions of ironic perspective such as the ones outlined in Pirandello's *L'umorismo*.

These, as I have argued, in the absence of cinema, had previously been dependent on inner vision and thus inaccessible to most. But whether Gubbio's outburst be an anticipation (as some have argued) of the principles of neo-realism, or whether it be (as *I maintain*) the attribution of "*visible*" ironic insight to the cinematic image, the full narrative context of the novel lends this statement greater weight than its isolated status in the text might suggest.

For it is spoken by the very character who more than most goes on to betray these

positive possibilities of the medium by ignoring the evidence of a crime despite his claim to special insight.

Even Pirandello's use of film-mimetic style takes us beyond a merely chronological reading of film theory.

This is so, for one thing, with his precocious extension of the principle of "*montage*" from image to sound.

He seems able to catch the synaesthetic reflex often triggered by silent film much as we find it later, for instance, in the "*musical*" sequence of Dziga Vertov's 1929 *The Man with a Movie Camera*. He is also able to anticipate the place of sound as co-equal partner with the other codes of cinematography, much as was done (also in 1929) by Walter Ruttman in his film *Melodie der Welt*. The significance of Pirandello's "*narrative*" anticipation of film theory becomes evident when we remember that it is in 1929 that Pirandello coins the term "*cinemelografia*" for the ideal kind of film he plans to make. The project came into being in 1933 with the film *Acciaio*, filmed with no other than the same Ruttman.

Similarly with Pirandello's views at the time of Marcel L'Herbier's filming of his novel *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1925).

It is then that the writer discovers "*a cinema not anymore just mimetic, but fantastic*" and which is "*a place linguistically autonomous … independent of the necessary link with the reproduction of objects*" (Puppa'78:228).

This too is anticipated by the film-mimetic texture of *Quaderni*: in the cinematic projections of horrifically expressionist shadows appear on the wall of the hallucinating Nuti, for instance, or in the rush of cinematically rapid images and

memories that is triggered by Gubbio's slide towards insanity in the train that returns him from his visit to Sorrento.

These film-mimetic passages illustrate well what Pirandello was to describe in 1924: films able to represent "*dream, memory, hallucination, madness, and the splitting of personality*" (Puppa'78:227).

Pirandello's film theory, thus, must be seen as part of the narrative texture of his novel. It moves the story forward, conditions the experiences and evolution of the characters, and defines the mimetic context. It also provides a clue to the film-mimetic distortions that occur from time to time in the normal progression of the literary style. Finally, a theoretical perspective on film is also, on a narrative level, integral to the way in which the text involves the reader.

There is a theoretical coherence to what the novel has to say about film, therefore, not so much because it conforms more or less to the state of the art in film-theory at the time, nor necessarily because it anticipates one or other subsequent theory. Quaderni has such coherence because Pirandello turns into narrative the full range of what might be called the "*functions*" of this new art form.

This goes beyond the mere "*coverage*" of all the aspects of cinematography as they existed in 1916.

It involves a full consideration of the interrelatedness of aspects of production (cameraman, director, scriptwriter, producer, actors with all their intentions, experiences and techniques but also the film-making apparatus), aspect of reception (audiences "*professional*" and not, but also the structuring of the viewing situation itself), and all the elements in between (the world that is represented, the nature the representation, the means of representation, the linguistic codes

peculiar to the medium, the text-embedded elements that provide information, contact, context and other forms of "*guidance*"). The novel also goes beyond the mere use of technical film terminology and talk about film.

Discourse on film

Most prominent at first in *Quaderni* is the presence of a consistent discursive level that is about film as a medium.

It involves considerations on the nature of the medium as such, as well as awareness of the issues raised by it, be they aesthetic, ethical, psychological, philosophical and so on. This kind of discourse can be recognized at different levels of the narrative structure such as Gubbio's inner monologue, and the discussions among some of the characters. It is also implicit (another kind of discourse, this one) in the actions and reactions of characters. What this discourse first engages, as it winds its way through the narrative, are the two poles of human interaction with artifacts that have always defined the aesthetic horizon: those of production and reception.

At the point where the text and the human agencies that generate it intersect (production) interaction with the medium of film is shown to raise especially issues of initiative and control. Take, for instance, characters such as Gubbio's director Cocò Polacco in the context of a "*utopistic*" theory of film. In general, because of who s/he is or thanks to an allegiance to the "*correct*" kind of aesthetics, the director is the individual who may control all dimensions of vision; the agent whose initiative brings distance, time, memory, cause and effect under control.

Yet these initiatives and this control are not without their shades, and *Quaderni* qualifies artistic creation in film with a subtlety that anticipates later film theory.

Pirandello's specific director bullies and cajoles crew and actors to come up with what he wants, yet his mastery is hemmed in on all sides by limitations he can't ignore: actors "*act out*" rather than act; personal currents interfere with the fictional interaction he tries to stage; the viewing public decides what stories he may or may not film; and finally his own cameraman "stages" by default his own ending of the film.

Gubbio for his part yearns for ideal directors (those that would use the medium for the truth it can show) yet does not recognize for what he is the one character who clearly is such a guide (even if strictly speaking not a "*film*" director): the philosophical Simone Pau who "*stages*" and retells parables full of truth drawn directly from the visible and commonplace reality that surrounds us (the flop-house that some have recognized as a perfect setting for "*realist*" socio-political film discourse).

The other major technicians of the creative act of film (Gubbio now in his function as cameraman and Cavalena as scriptwriter) illustrate how little the two "*texts*" of film (the verbal foreshadowing outlined in the written scenario and the filmed images that implement it) have to do with anything other than the artist's personal obsessions. Rather than extolling the creative omnipotence that the medium allows, then, this novel stresses the obstacles that film production places in the way of creative freedom and the personal limitations to which it lends brilliant technological support.

It also starts to hint at the extent to which the director's freedom depends on the spectator's acquiescence as well as upon the spectator's active contribution.

When it comes to reception, *Quaderni* is notable for its extensive narrative development of theoretical issues that concern the spectator; narrative instances

that are especially cogent since it is the same characters who produce the work and then stand by to view the result. This allows for a subtle exploration of the diaphanous membrane that separates the two sides of the screen.

Aldo Nuti most notably (but also Varia Nestoroff and even Gubbio himself) find themselves at one and the same time actors and spectators. While this novel does not yet deal (as subsequent ones will) with the phenomenology of sheer spectatorship, these characters already experience the opposing tugs of "*aspects of production*" and "*aspects of reception*" that characterize this art form more intensely then most because in the film experience the "*productive*" aspect of spectatorship is so vivid.

One distinctive motif, then, of this new type of novel is the narrative exploration of the area of awareness that recent film theory has insisted must be fostered in film viewers, lest the overwhelming illusion of the medium rob them of critical distance. In this particular novel such moments are always used to define in a succint and thematically focused way topics (human perception, narrative reliability, reality, illusion, human and instrumental mediation, subjectivity) that take us beyond the trivial level of movie-making.

It is at moments such as the one that finds Nuti simultaneously aware of the two sides of his presence on film (as actor he IS image, as audience he *PERCEIVES* it) that the significance of the image to the actor and to the audience starts to transcend the individual narrative instance. This doubled awareness leads, as we saw, to onsiderations that embrace an individual's sense of time on earth, relationship to family, and awareness of death.

Nest or off too reaches a painful and special insight into her own nature when she finds herself in the double role of performer and spectator and may well represent

the first example in contemporary narrative of a woman rebelling against the way in which film turns her body into a fetish. Similar moments will become central in novels such as these, allowing thus a genre-specific exploration of a particular range of human experiences that are given a characteristic kind of emphasis by the special type of awareness fostered through “critical” film viewing.

The compulsive thrust of personal obsessions such as those exemplified by the script-writer Cavalena and the overwhelming control of memory over images such as that experienced by Gubbio, but also the exploitative opportunism of directors such as Polacco raise further issues that link the two ends of this communicative tension: the power that film puts in the hands of those who control it, the transgressions that film can perpetrate upon the privacies and sensibilities of those it “*captures*” in its net, and the vicarious thrills (free of all responsibility) it can provide to its audiences.

It appears that people will submit to indignities, suffering and even danger in order to be included in the director’s project. This places at least some responsibility on the film-maker for, as Pirandello underlines, participation in the “*fictional*” reality of the movies compromises and alters actuality to a point where actors and technicians find themselves diminished as total human beings.

Some of them (Ferro, Nuti) even put themselves in actual physical danger. Tacit exploitation by the artist of such interaction between two very different kinds of reality raises a moral question in the case of film more than in any other kind of art because film draws its fascination from an ambiguous claim to realism. As Gubbio himself points out, the medium lends itself to a “*hybrid game*” in which the greatest unrealities are presented through most real-seeming means. Pirandello finds narrative strategies to take such a dilemma (a major point of theoretical discussion

in later film theory) to its extreme. His cameraman (despite his claim to be sensitive to such issues) ultimately compromises himself by committing the most severe moral transgression in the trade: the deliberate filming of what amounts to a “snuff” movie.Gubbio is actually proud of this and feels that the film company can thank him if the film is guaranteed to attract droves to its screenings; spectators who know that *THIS* fiction *IS* reality.

The medium of film at its broadest, then, is seen to illustrate a specific instance of the illusion of technological control, of the two-edged sword such control represents, and of the human shortcomings that undermine it. In this narratized instance (the world of film-making) they happen to be the shortcomings of producers, the interferences of viewers as well as the shifting grasp within either camp (film-makers and spectators) on what is to be controlled. That these issues are of wider import than the isolated case of film-making is clear from Pirandello’s allusion to other (but related) areas of modern technological progress concerned with “*vision*,” such as electric lighting and the telescope. All of these provide an illusion of greater clarity that in the end turns against its users. This kind of extrapolation from cinematography tends to be typical in subsequent Film Novels too.

If there is something in Pirandello’s novel that underlines such dilemmas with even greater immediacy, it is what might be called the “*discourse of film.*” In the mimesis of it that Pirandello gives us (in his textual attempts to render the flow of film upon a screen) he makes it clear that be it at the source (who produces, how, and why) or be it at the receiving end (spectators variously disposed to subjection, to rebellion, or just to have a jolly good time) it is most of all the discourse of film that escapes control and interpretation.

Central to the discourse of film is the image itself, and much that happens in *Quaderni* has to do with the status of the image and its relation to the perceiving subject. But here lies a difficulty noted by film theorists, whose later theoretical "*dialogue*" is foreshadowed in the pages of Quaderni. Does reality actually imprint itself upon the emulsion, and do therefore film makers owe the audience a special resposibilty (Bazin/Kracauer)?

Or is the "*impression*" of imprint merely another level of what remains in essence a rhetorical apparatus (Metz)?

Be this as it may (and practitioners of the Film Novel have no stake in adjudicating the puzzles of subsequent film theory) Pirandello's narrative explores these tensions. He displays the point were film images intersect with the human mind, with imagination, with memory, with wishes and thus gives rise to an intricate narrative interplay that demontrates sensitivity (long before the formulations of film theory) to the paradox of this art form in which the most concrete and the most general dissolve into the most abstract and personal.

As much recent film theory has stressed, that which is seen through the medium of film may mislead as to its sufficient "*fit*" with reality. Yet it is not just that mimetic verisimilitude (so overwhelming in film) tends to mislead viewers into taking images at face value. Even the most stylized stereotypes tend to have such an effect, connecting as they do with the generalized stereotypes that lie well below the surface of individual critical self-examination. Again, long before its explicit appearance in theoretical discourse about film, this is a theoretical subtlety of which Pirandello is aware. He makes it into an important element in the psychological motivation of his characters and the evolution of his plot in such instances as the reductive scenarios that transform Gubbio's world into a veritable gallery of film

cut-outs (the reliance on film-like stereotyping of people is positively de-humanizing) or Nuti's way of conducting himself. Even the movie clichés that are used as mechanisms of narrative resolution owe their power to the collective recognition by spectators of their subliminal power.

Awareness of these aspects of cinematography culminates, of course, in Pirandello's stress on the reduction by film technology of even the most individualized of human beings into a mechanical stop-motion shadow… a mechanical hybrid of camera and person. Such "*robot*" as Gubbio becomes at one point (or the stylized one that is Nuti throughout) produces a mere illusion of real life and is in itself a brilliant metaphor for film's own mechanical reproduction of life.

These dehumanizing transformations, as is well known, are at the core of Pirandello's critique of the mechanical nature of the film medium, suggesting as they do the futility of any attempt either to control reality or to affect it through the technology of this new medium. All of this happens, one must note as Pirandello does too, despite the fact that the medium itself labors to suggest otherwise.

Since questions about the reality-status of the image are so central in this novel, the parsing out of the different levels of interaction between the image and the individual leads Pirandello to a more philosophical plane than one might expect of anecdotal accounts about the fascinating world of movies.

Film images come to be treated as analogous to images in the mind and acquire some of the same attributes assigned to mental images by philosophers such as Sartre. Here Pirandello touches upon some of the most evocative and unsettling topics of contemporary thought, and manages again to flesh out in brilliant and concrete detail abstract ideas such as the paradoxical impression of presence triggered by an experience of absence. He gives them human life through the

multiplicity and idiosyncrasy of individual experience. It is through concrete human experience, thus, that Pirandello defines the essence of the film image, a central task of much subsequent film theory.

In linking this notion of image with the resonances of irony (be it in its rhetorical manifestation, be it in the more telling guise of a special kind of insight) he contributes to this discussion early and with originality. Just as he does with his anticipations of such topics as the heuristic power of film, its truth-value well beyond the rhetorical slights of hand of hacks, and especially with questions about the extent to which what the image represents is actually there.

These are topics broached much later by film theory, where their specific details turn out to be as contradictory as the broader opposition between a formative and a realist view of the medium that underlies much of Pirandello's novel.

In Gubbio's claim for the cinema one may hear anticipations of Bazin's view that the image on the emulsion is, as I hinted above, a veritable "*imprint*" made by the world upon the medium; a presence within the medium of the actuality of the world which cancels the mediation that is inevitable in all other art forms (Bazin(45)'67:9-16).

One may also hear in it Kracauer's realist claim, in fact just as immanentist as Bazin's, as well as his views on the limits of this presence.

One may find implicit in Gubbio as well as in Kracauer, moreover, such recent views as that of film as pure mediation; as "*sign*," even if this sign is admittedly the most "*motivated*" sign we have-a veritable multisensory onomatopoeia. "*Cinematic films-says Kracauer-evoke a reality more inclusive than the one they actually picture*."

Since images "*evoke a reality which may fittingly be called 'life,'*"- he continues – "*they fail to give us the fullness of life, while teasing us with the illusion that they do.*"

Kracauer feels, as other theorists indeed do too, that such a dilemma is central to a typically modern malaise; but so did Serafino Gubbio before him. Gubbio's denunciation of the cheating "*reality effect*" of film-fantasies is only one example of the narrative exploration of film theory that characterizes Pirandello's novel. No less evocative of its dilemmas is, for instance, the cameraman's intense involvement with the production of Nestoroff's dancing image, utterly deluded as he is about being the real focus of her intense erotic excitement. His cinematic preview leaves him with the heightened sense of desire and of loss quite typical of that produced (recent film theory assures us) by the film viewing situation as a whole. Similar, if more explicit, is Nuti's prediction of a false experience of presence that will assail the viewers of his own screen image. But the most complex variation on this theme is found in the novel's grand finale, in which the genre "*contract*" agreed upon by all (film-makers and audience alike) about a specific fictional reality suitable to the film representation of a tiger hunt, flips over to reveal itself a sham-a void-for all to see.

It is because of the narrative exploration of the cinematic "*effect of reality*" and of the inevitable existential void which it elicits, that Pirandello manages to anticipate and surpass in subtlety some recent theoretical developments.

Jean-Louis Baudry may be right in theory when he states that "*almost exclusively, it is the technique and content of film which have retained attention…in complete ignorance of the fact that the impression of reality is dependent first of all on a subject-effect, and that it might be necessary to examine the position of the subject*

facing the image in order to determine the need for cinema-effect."

Yet Pirandello's narrative exploration of the experience of several "*viewers*" of film demonstrates in practice a subtle awareness precisely of the dimension that Baudry maintains is neglected. We read in this novel about real and convincing experiences of the "*subject-effect.*" Questions at the core of film theory are extensively explored in Pirandello's novel and their "*narrative*" unwinding stresses the fact that the distinction between theoretical treatment and fictional elaboration amounts to an opposition between lived experience and abstraction.

The answers don't always come out the same in fiction and in the mouths of theorists (this will tend to be true of the genre as a whole) but, if one may say so, those derived from the narrative exploration of characters actually "*living the question through*" often are more relevant and alive than those obtained in the absence of such imaginative existential test-bench.

This is so, for instance, with the similarity between film viewing and the experience of dreaming (another area of interest to recent film theory). For Mitry the similarity exists since the flow of cinematic images approximates easily (like a memory of an act we have not lived) the immediacy of dreaming, and parallels its absence of reality.

For Bazin it is the very situation in the movie-house that appears as "*the night of our waking dreams.*" More recently, Baudry encapsulates the effects of such a situation where "*no exchange, no circulation, no communication with the outside*" occurs so that "*projection and reflection take place in a closed space and those who remain there… find themselves chained, captured, or captivated*" (Baudry(70)'74-75:44).

But most detailed of all on this subject is Metz. In his view it is in their "*flux*," as Metz calls it, that film and dream resemble each other most; in the way, that is, that "*signifiers*" in both situations (in both cases images accompanied by sound and movement) have an affinity. "*'Imaged' expression*"- pictorial means that carry within themselves the meaning-are at the core of both experiences, according to Metz (Metz(75)'76:90).

The elements of this theoretical dialogue are anticipated with great, almost tactile, immediacy in the "*syntax*" of dreaming that renders the hallucinations and nightmares of Pirandello's characters. Such moments as Nuti's illness or Gubbio's train ride, moreover, are the very occasions at which the text indulges in sudden diplays of "*cinematic*" formal-mimetics. Quaderni, furthermore, offers narrative versions of the differing and idiosyncratic ways in which spectators do or do not acquiesce to oeneiric subjection. Such episodes as Nestoroff's rebellious reaction to her image on screen and Gubbio's ready submission to the film-like images that assail him in the train intimate some of the most recent developments in film theory. The range of attitudes explored by Pirandello thus starts to sketch the outline of the very "*socioanalytic typology*" of spectatorship proposed by Metz, inaugurating what will become a major strand in subsequent novels in this tradition (Metz(75)'76:77).

More extensively and in greater detail than with other theoretical issues, the film-mimetic passages in *Quaderni* anticipate recent thinking on the syntax of film. It is at points where the texture of Pirandello's writing tries to capture the stylistics of film that vision is trasformed to suggest a new view of the world, that matters of existential and philosophical import come to the fore, and that key points in the narrative are advanced by the use of cinematic syntax. While some of the devices that I and others have pointed out are relatively obvious, some of the more

sophisticated film tropes used by Pirandello (cinematic progressions from long-shot to detail; retrogression mediated by flashback montage; tracking shots combined with alternating points of view oriented in opposite directions) are surprising in their complexity and in the extent to which they are functionally integrated into several levels of the narrative. It is thus again that Pirandello equals (and at times refines) our contemporary insight into the texture of this medium. At times he can be as technically astute as Vertov, Jakobson and Metz about the process of selection from reality and combination into an invented one; about organization of materials by syntagmatic continuity and paradigmatic similarity; about the interraction of metaphor and metonymy; about the paradoxes of losing reality in the very act of creating its closest possible approximation. In all these passages one is made aware of the strict interrelatedness of the texturally minute and the experiencially universal.

While the typical settings that seem to attract the medium (city, streets, public places) are important just as Kracauer would suggest if these novels be cinematic, the peculiar way in which the medium tends to distort raw, vivid realism (a notion stressed by Arnheim) emerges from the very same passages. In other words, both a realist and a formative emphasis is accommodated at the textual level just as we saw that it is at the conceptual one.

The flow of city life, the glitter and excitement of the streets (in Kracauer's view a "*natural center for a cinematic perspective on the world*") figure prominently and in fact become occasions for the display of film-mimetic writing; as if to confirm that indeed subject matter and form are cinematic in these instances. Film-specific devices too, therefore, start to be plumbed imaginatively by Pirandello for their meaningful application to plot, to narrative progression, to ideas, to feelings in ways that anticipate and "*confirm*" the insights of film-makers and theoreticians.

Furthermore, as my pages on the novel clearly show, creative applications of such devices and topoi allow them to "*say things*" (from expressive effects to philosophical insights) that in later years will become part of film repertory; allow them to mirror, in fact, the characteristics (formal and thematic) of a "*sister art*" very much like the polemical use of the "paragone" topos did in the late Renaissance. This is the kind of awareness of the "*guts*" of the film medium that, as is well known, recent film theory puts at the center of the creative potential of film.

Theory

Beyond what we can extrapolate from *Quaderni* in the realms of a "*discourse on film*" and of a "*discourse of film*" (and precisely because so often what Pirandello enacts speaks in detail to the later concerns of film theory) a third area emerges from the novel: what one might well term "*discourse on film theory.*" Also at the level of this type of discourse *Quaderni* manages to be quite sophisticated.8 We don't find, of course, a consistent and especially in Serafino Gubbio, a cameraman drawn to the surface excitement and vitality of reality so readily captured by the film image.

He is, in fact, a "*cameraman-philosopher*" whose fascination with the medium leads to an apocalyptic synthesis quite similar to Kracauer's pessimistic conclusion to his book, or Benjamin's to his essay. But also Arnheim's observation that the director in silent movies is able to correct even "*the shape of motion*" is anticipated by Gubbio's boast that he can "*regulate… movements*" according to the speed at which he turns the handle.

In fact, Gubbio's inability to perceive reality in any way other than that dictated by the aesthetic peculiarities of a medium that takes over his sensibility amounts to a grotesque "*personification*" of what was to become Arnheim's fundamental

assumption about the formative nature of film.

Gubbio echoes most closely Kracauer, on the other hand, about the "*formative*" power of film settings that cut up and absorb human protagonists who thus lend their body to cinematic enactments. It is Kracauer also who, like Gubbio, insists on the estrangements produced by cinematic distancing: his example of Proust's photographer echoes here the fictional cameraman in his plea that cinema be carefully controlled in what it is "*allowed*" to show.

Pirandello, it turns out, anticipates fundamental points of film theory in such a way as to underline inherent agreements between views that later will tend to be seen as opposites. Where film theorists and characters differ, however, is in drawing some of the consequences: Kracauer, very much like Gubbio, recognizes the formative potential of film as a threat to one's peace of mind and recommends tight control; Arnheim, as would any aesthetic opponent of Gubbio's (one such, as we saw, is the figure of Nabokov's Axel Rex) is interested in understanding and exploring the aesthetic foundation of the medium, without the imposition of a priori strictures.

Pirandello, as we saw, also anticipates Kracauer who addresses himself to the fact that the peculiar syntax of meaning allowed by the new technologies (optical, photographic, cinematographic) amounts to a philosophical topos that characterizes our cultural period.

Kracauer calls it a "*period topic*" to do with the relativity of viewpoint and the instability of moving perspectives (Kracauer'60:8-9). The "*moving camera*" view that Gubbio provides in order to cope with the fast moving car that overtakes him, therefore, is destined to become a new cultural archetype.

In the literature of cinematic perspective it represents one of the most important devices, be it (as we have seen happens in the car accident that is the turning point of Albinus's story in Laughter in the Dark) as a way of articulating the narrative, or be it (as it is used elsewhere by Nabokov, but also, we shall see, by Isherwood, Percy, or Puig) to capture the me aphysical suggestiveness of the medium. In all such instances (literary as well as cinematic) a tension is always found with the "*problematic*" implications of the scenes, despite the almost pure cinematic surface of the device. Such form-specific topoi (it is these, after all, that Kracauer regards as "*inherent affinities*" of medium and situations… these that Arnheim considers the elements in reality that the medium best at foregrounding…) turn out to be only apparently devoid of much "*content*."

Even such an abstract element as "movement" soon becomes (we have seen the passage in Nabokov's autobiographical Speak Memory in which an openly cinematic evocation of childhood birthday parties culminates in the slow helical descent of a floating Samara) a way to intimate the concretized sensation of time in a way that is typical of film-technique.

All of these often become meaningful in a conceptual way just as the film-specific topoi in Pirandello (progression from long-shot to close up for instance) are functionally intertwined with the narrative progression of the story.

The role of film theory within Pirandello's novel thus indicates an attempt to depict the spectator's experience in the movie-house seat through the technical means of literature (fundamental feature of this genre and interesting in and of itself) yet leads to more ambitious ends. This "*more*" has a great deal to do with what Baudry describes as a cinematic instinct that precedes the mechanical means of its fulfillment. It is the instinct to take a wider look at things from the perceptually

self-conscious stance provided by rhetorical and philosophical irony; the very stance (and definition of film image) we have found in Pirandello.

He is the first to suggests implicitly (and to dramatize quite explicitly) that a link exists between a particular kind of "*epistemological lust*" and the emerging technologies of perception, film among them.

In this, as we have seen, he anticipates theorists of this new art form who similarly claim for it synoptic insights, revelatory of "*a boundless, indeterminate, unfathomable world,*" a world that captures the Romantic image through the means of photographic realism (Arnheim'66:183); or who attribute to the medium (the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty and film theorists heavily indebted to him do this) a view of the world as "an object endowed with meaning" (Merleau-Ponty'64:57-58. Baudry'(70)74-75:43), and a presentation of "*objects...in their signifying guise*" (Mitry'63-65:I,128). It is also because of the intense human effect produced by the fact that the film experience tends, as Kracauer puts it, to "*evoke a reality which may fittingly be called 'life',*" and especially because in the end it fails to deliver (Kracauer'60:70) that what Pirandello was moved to write became the prototype of a narrative genre in which such intensities remain central. For the contemporary descendants of Gubbio (the characters of Manuel Puig are the most recent ones) film may indeed be the only available locus forpassionate involvement.

The film theory implicit in what Pirandello produced generates a "*kind*" of novel especially suited to explore the individual existential repercussions of the central art form of our time.

Gavriel Moses

▶ Pirandello in English

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