Rectangle-Film [25x19] (1918)

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PART I

Archeology and History
I made an observation nearly as important as a discovery.¹ Which is: a blind person does not attend moving picture shows. Such is a highly important observation, since – to my knowledge – it has so far never been stated before. Yet, it should be the basic axiom for the technic and artistic evolution of cinematography.

Thomas Alva Edison, who was deaf, brought the gramophone to the highest level of perfection. A blind Thomas Alva Edison would have not been able to fit together even the most embryonic cinematographic device.

Hence, cinematography cannot set aside the organ of the visual sense: namely, the eye – and, more precisely, the human eye.

When, by means of a new scientific miracle, the blind will be able to see – and their vision will be mechanical – a contrast shall disappear, at least for them. That is, the one existing at present between the human eye and the cinematographic eye. All the movie enterprises agree in producing this contrast, and such an agreement feels miraculous in the quarrelsome film world – so much that it could even be possible to gather all the countless movie enterprises under a single name: RECTANGLE-FILM.

Despite the differences in their programs, their company names, their constitutive legal form, their capital – from the humblest Pygmy sums to the most dazzlingly Rotschildian ones – as for their commercial and artistic means, all enterprises agree on the photogram’s format: the rectangle. Thus, even when there was no war yet, no parties’ agreement, no unified bread, there was already a unified format: 25 x 19.

Still, no pupil – not even in the filmic world – was ever rectangular: none is 25 x 19 nor of any dimensions proportional to these. All eyes, along the whole chromatic spectrum, from the palest – like those of Diana Karenne – to the darkest – like Francesca Bertini’s – have a round vision, and round alone.

This geometrical difference is quite serious for an instrument that shall be rigidly considered as an agent of the eye. The objective goes where the spectator’s gaze cannot directly go. Therefore, just like the agent that was characterized – in the volumes of a dusty university memory – as the longa manus of the principal, the cinematograph can be understood as the longus oculus of the spectator.
The constructor of the first “film camera” kept this well in mind, since he tried to repeat, with a more rigid material, what the Creator par excellence had done in Eden, when making the very first pair of eyes for our late Father Adam.

Hence, he shaped in real crystal a perfect imitation of the “crystalline lens” to be his objective, and made his diaphragm by carefully molding the “iris” in metal, so as to reproduce the variable opening width of an actual “pupil.”

As for the “retina,” things were pretty complicated: the aforementioned Adam had been provided by his Creator with enough “negative film” to keep him and his descendants safe from all worries concerning any possible celluloid crisis. It is pointless to think of an imitation of the previous kind, for, while the continuous development and renewal of the “negative film” is providential as far as the human eye is concerned, its benefits are such for the eye’s owner only, and are way distant from any commercial possibility. After putting down some animals, the last images they had seen were observed on their retina. However, the cruel scientists that proceeded to such an experience did not come up with anything very significant apropos of this interesting phenomenon’s role in vision.

Indeed, no other way was left than substituting an always renewing retina with a fixed retina: there came the film – along with all the, by now, too well-known concerns.

Once the eye had been adequately imitated in the film camera, a heterogeneous element was suddenly introduced: namely, the rectangular shaping of the photogram of 25 x 19 mm. In the human eye everything is set according to a curve line, and everybody knows by experience that nothing is as annoying as a foreign body in the eye.

Practical needs?

Of course. Yet, are they as draconian as that?

No matter on what market, the film we find – when we find it – is always 35 millimeters wide. The holes, which are indispensable for the gear, use up their own space: exactly one centimeter – hence, only a width of 25 millimeters remains to be used. Alright. Additional practical needs (photogram, turning, meshing, alternate obscuration) also impose the maximum height for each shot: 19 millimeters.

Alright again: it is pythagorically elementary for all film operators that the maximum usable space for each photogram, due to technical reasons, cannot be but 25 x 19.

It is impossible to overcome one of these two dimensions, even by a single millimeter, unless one means to radically transform all film cameras, all development, printing, and projection machines, as well as the cinematographic screens themselves. This latter measure would have some...hygienic benefits, but all the others would be so serious that the censorship would be the first to oppose to a propaganda so Bolshevistically-harmful for the national industry.
In fact, it would not be worth the effort. Actually, the ukase draconically forbidding – for technical reasons – to spill over the rigidly established rectangle does not impose to use the whole of it.

Monsieur della Casa and a laundress’s economy suggest not putting more food on our plates than can be contained in its circumference. Yet, this does not mean we have to completely fill it, and the bit of the dish to be filled will vary... according to the kind of food.

Generally, among the scenes of a film there is more variety than among the courses in a menu, especially in war time. It is not good manners, then, to oblige the spectator to have an equal amount of each course: 25 x 19, again and again.

This ends up being boring, especially since such a format is – as shown above in our physio-filmic demonstration – absolutely irrational. Even a circular projection would bore – although the circle, as well as being the perfect geometrical form, is the natural form of the visual field.

The gaze embraces whatever is included in a cone whose center is what the physiologists call “the center of the eye” and whose directrix is the pupil. During a cinematographic show, this visual field is mutilated in a rectangular pyramid, many rectangular pyramids even – as many as the frames of the projected film – and each pyramid is equal, equal, equal to the others (25 x 19).

Even in the remote times of far Egypt less pyramids were built: only eighty are left. Still, we usually admire only three of these, and each is different in size. Sometimes a peculiar light effect providentially intervenes, eliminating a broad part of the photogram. Some American Company has recently found a rather smart trick, which may be called a “mobile diaphragm.” It is an external “mask” with smoky edges whose diameter can be adjusted, and which can localize the vision in a single part of the canvas.

What about the rest of it? Of course, this remains black.

Besides, is the rest of the hall not black? And is the color we do not see that important, after all? What is the color, right now, of what is behind you? It is colorless, and the absence of all colors is indeed black.

This limitation of the visual field also has a physiological explanation: we “look straight” at an object, which is why it is the only one that is perfectly focused and perfectly seen. Even a close object can disappear, no matter if it is included in the visual field.

Here is a schematic experience: close your left eye, keep your right eye focused on point A, and then gradually move it away from the sheet; at a certain distance point B disappears, although a blurry vision of the whole page persists. Physiologists explain this with the “blind spot” in which the optic nerve gets into the eyeball, they quote Mariotte and some of his colleagues – yet this has little relevance. Also, in reality, there are some areas of our visual field that we do not find optically interesting.

The cinematograph – longus oculus – definitely has to consider this.
Indeed, it has to consider all the bizarre geometry of the eye. The visual field is round, yet movable: in its movements, it describes weird geometrical shapes, which are not always modeled according to Euclid’s diagrams.

For a gaze following a car driving on a winding road, only the road itself and the close surroundings exist: all the rest is negative. Is it worthwhile to distract even a fraction of that attention – which is also aesthetic – only to spread it on a fixed 25 x 19 panorama rectangle?

In a film, the good shaping of a frame can reveal a metteur en scène’s attitude as a fine psychologist. The perimeter he outlines for a certain scene can already be an interpretation in this sense.

Each regular geometrical shape has its own features, and hence a signification of its own. Maybe there is a close connection between psychology and geometry. Maybe, by means of theorems and axioms (axioms rather than theorems) one could demonstrate that to each and every state of mind corresponds a particular geometrical shape: joy is quite polygonal, wonder is round, envy is isosceles...

Who knows what corresponds to the rectangle – maybe only laziness: a base larger than its height.

Besides psycho-geometry, indeed the rectangle is not the most agile of framings, at least in the position it occupies within the photogram. On the contrary, an erected rectangle can sometimes frame a scene pretty well. In fact, it seems to me the only possible shape for framing the view of a staircase, of a thin tower, of a flame, or of a feminine slenderness... To cage the eye between the rigid 25 x 19 squares is hence a crime against aesthetics, against logics, against physiology.

A machine – a despotic machine – draconically delimits boundaries: if smuggling is not possible, then why not try to provide at least the illusion – after all, the eye is the easiest organ to be deceived – that such an imprisonment does not exist.

All one has to do is to avoid getting to the four border signs.

One may just freely – and most of all aesthetically – camp on the left or the right, on the top or at the bottom, and even express one’s self by means of the various framed polygons.

There are frames for which the screen is a melancholic Saharan vastness, while for others it is narrow: the former mean to be held by a little intimate frame, while the latter would want to project themselves beyond the walls of the hall, or to descend down to the spectator’s feet.

They would have to stop, when bumping into the orchestra.

Translated by Marta Nijhuis