Preface

When I first started writing about cinema, in the early 1970s, films had always been seen in darkened rooms, projected at 24 (or thereabouts) frames a second. Only professionals, directors and editors had easy access to the flatbed editing tables that broke down the speed needed to create the illusion of 'natural' movement. By the end of the twentieth century ways of consuming cinema had multiplied and the regulation of its speed had been widely extended. Then, in the 1970s, I was preoccupied by Hollywood's ability to construct the female star as ultimate spectacle, the emblem and guarantee of its fascination and power. Now, I am more interested in the way that those moments of spectacle were also moments of narrative halt, hinting at the stillness of the single celluloid frame. Then, I was concerned with the way Hollywood eroticized the pleasure of looking, inscribing a sanitized voyeurism into its style and narrative conventions. Now, I am more interested in the representations of time that can be discovered in the relation between movement and stillness in cinema. Then, I was absorbed in Hollywood cinema, turning to the avant-garde as its binary opposite. Now, I think that the aesthetics of cinema have a greater coherence across its historic body in the face of new media technologies and the new ways of watching films that they have generated.

These contrasts between 'then' and 'now' are not intended to indicate a detachment from the past but rather to emphasize that my engagement with the cinema of the past has been changed by passing time. In the first chapter of this book, I discuss ways of

looking back to the past but through an altered perspective, informed by the problems and possibilities of the present. My point of departure is an obvious, everyday reality: that video and digital media have opened up new ways of seeing old movies. The unexpected encounters that emerge out of this meeting of technologies are familiar to anyone who has experimented with them, from film scholar to film fan. But behind this initial engagement between present and past lies a more rhetorical one. A return to the cinema's past constitutes a gesture towards a truncated history, to those aspects of modernist thought, politics and aesthetics that seemed to end prematurely before their use or relevance could be internalized or exhausted. These histories have been deeply interwoven with the history of cinema. Such a return to the past through cinema is paradoxically facilitated by the kind of spectatorship that has developed with the use of new technologies, with the possibility of returning to and repeating a specific film fragment. Return and repetition necessarily involve interrupting the flow of film, delaying its progress, and, in the process, discovering the cinema's complex relation to time. Needless to say, there is nothing fundamentally new here. To see cinema through delay is to discover a cinema that has always been there, either overtly in the experiments of the avant-garde or more covertly in the great range of fiction film.

In this sense, this book is about a changed perspective, the way that my perception of cinema has changed between 'then' and 'now' and the way that, within the context of the present, the representation of time has taken on new significance. My examples and discussion of, for instance, stillness are drawn as much from the cinema of the past as they are drawn from new mechanisms of delay. Delayed cinema works on two levels: first of all it refers to the actual act of slowing down the flow of film. Secondly it refers to the delay in time during which some detail has lain dormant, as it were, waiting to be noticed. There is a loose parallel here with Freud's concept of deferred action (*nachtraglichkeit*), the way the unconscious preserves a specific experience, while its traumatic effect might only be realized by another, later but associated, event.

Freud developed his thoughts on deferred action out of his analyses of the problem of sexuality in human development. A small child might well not understand the significance of a sexual encounter or witnessed event. Later, however, after the onset of sexual maturity, a similar experience may reactivate the significance of this memory, forgotten and stored in the unconscious. The cinema (like photography) has a privileged relation to time, preserving the moment at which the image is registered, inscribing an unprecedented reality into its representation of the past. This, as it were, storage function may be compared to the memory left in the unconscious by an incident lost to consciousness. Both have the attributes of the indexical sign, the mark of trauma or the mark of light, and both need to be deciphered retrospectively across delayed time.

In common with other film theory today, this book is heavily marked by the image of, and the questions raised by, the photographic index. While technology never simply determines, it cannot but affect the context in which ideas are formed. Inevitably, the arrival of digital technology has given a new significance to the representation of reality and precipitated a return to the semiotic theory of the index. In the semiotic system elaborated by C. S. Peirce, an icon is a recognizable sign. It refers to the 'thing' it represents through similarity. A symbol is a decipherable sign; it refers to the 'thing' it represents by means of conventions or codes. An index, however, is a sign produced by the 'thing' it represents. An indexical sign might be recognizable through similarity, as, for instance, in a footprint, and thus have shared qualities with the icon. Or it might be decipherable through a code, as, for instance, in the shadow cast by a sundial, and thus have shared qualities with the symbol. But something must leave, or have left, a mark or trace of its physical presence. Whether it persists, as in the then-ness of a preserved fingerprint, or not, as in the now-ness of a sundial's shadow, the 'thing' inscribes its sign at a specific moment of time. Thus, the index has a privileged relation to time, to the moment and duration of its inscription; it also has a physical relation to the original of which it is the sign. While the photographic

image, in semiotic terms, usually includes the iconic and often includes symbolic aspects of the sign, its aesthetic specificity is grounded on the index. The photograph cannot generalize. While written (symbolic) or graphic (iconic) representations can evoke a class of things, a photographic image is always of one specific and unique, although, of course, endlessly reproducible, thing. A return to the index and to the real of the photographic medium is not a return to realism's aspiration to certainty. Rather, the trace of the past in the present is a document, or a fact, that is preserved in but also bears witness to the elusive nature of reality and its representations. It is here that the reality of the photograph as index becomes entwined with the problem of time.

These semiotic terms recur across this book as I try to reformulate my thoughts on spectatorship through the perspective of time and the varying temporalities inherent in film itself. At certain points in my argument these questions lead to those associated with modes of address that locate verbal exchange in time and place. These words (called 'shifters' by Roman Jakobson) indicate a speaker's own specific point of utterance in space and time, so, for instance, 'now' can refer only to the moment at which it is spoken. Due to this exact reference to an exact position, these words function as 'indicators' and share the indexical sign's embedding in time and place. But as part of a symbolic system, language, they are infinitely flexible and transferable, so that one person's 'here' becomes another person's 'there'. These ideas are central to the chapter 'The Index and the Uncanny' but are further elaborated in the last three chapters of the book in the context of 'The Possessive Spectator' and 'The Pensive Spectator'. But more generally, the context for the thoughts reflected in this book is located across the space between the shifter words 'then' and 'now', with which I began this Preface.

As an index, cinema necessarily fixes a real image of reality across time. As I hope to establish in the first three chapters of this book, however, the very reality of the index creates uncertainty. First of all, any factual raw material arouses, or should arouse, a practical sense of uncertainty in terms of its

interpretability. The index is a material trace of something and as it depends for meaning, by and large, on secondary iconic and symbolic signs, it is easily overwhelmed or betrayed. But an amorphous, more intangible, difficulty arises out of the presence of preserved time. The cinema combines, perhaps more perfectly than any other medium, two human fascinations: one with the boundary between life and death and the other with the mechanical animation of the inanimate, particularly the human, figure. These porous boundaries introduce the concept of the uncanny and Freud's debate with Jentsch about the power of the old over the new and the hold that irrational belief has over the human mind. The first part of the book discusses these kinds of ways in which reality cannot escape the human unconscious. Necessarily embedded in passing time, these images come to be more redolent of death than of life. These themes recur throughout the book's central section and are discussed in the context of the three central case histories.

In the final section of the book I discuss the pensive and possessive spectators that emerge from a delayed cinema. The pensive spectator is more engaged with reflection on the visibility of time in the cinema; the possessive spectator is more fetishistically absorbed by the image of the human body. But this differentiation is deceptive and recalls Christian Metz's observation that the intellectual spectator cannot be detached from fetishism. In his analysis of the cinema fetishist ('the person enchanted by what the cinema is capable of', its technological equipment), Metz points out:

> Indeed, the equipment is not just physical (= the fetish proper); it also has its discursive imprints, its extensions into the very text of the film. Here is revealed the specific movement of theory: when it shifts from a fascination with technique to the critical study of the different codes that this equipment authorises. Concern for the signifier in the cinema derives from a fetishism that has taken up its position as far as possible along its cognitive flank. To adapt the formula by which Octave Mannoni defines disavowal (= 'I know very well but all the same'), the study of the signifier is a libidinal position

> which consists in weakening the 'but all the same' and profiting from this saving of energy to dig deeper into the 'I know very well' which then becomes 'I know nothing at all, but I desire to know'.[1]

The fetishistic spectator and the libidinal student of the signifier may well be one, but, at a certain point, a desire to know comes to the fore, if only to fold back into its previous position. The deferred look may be unexpectedly overwhelmed by images of time that stop individual desires in their tracks as they stumble across the 'I know nothing at all, but I desire to know'.

Cinema, as it ages, has become more and more the object of 'I desire to know', most obviously in the expansion of film and related studies over the last 25 years, but also through the new availability of old cinema through new technology. At the same time, cinema's aesthetic polarities, debated throughout its critical history, seem to become less important in their differences and more important in their dialectical relations with each other. Rather than diverging into an either/or, for instance, specificity of the filmstrip versus illusion of movement, fiction versus document, grounding in reality versus potential for fantasy, these aspects of the celluloid-based medium move closer together. Passing time, in and of itself, shifts perception of relations and aesthetic patterns and these shifts are, in turn, accentuated by the new horizons formed by new technologies. As a result, a new kind of ontology may emerge, in which ambivalence, impurity and uncertainty displace the traditional oppositions. Above all, it is essential to emphasize that these shifts in theory and criticism are the result of a displaced perspective and deferred action. The cinema has always found ways to reflect on its central paradox: the co-presence of movement and stillness, continuity and discontinuity.[2] To look back into the cinema's history, out of passing time and refracted through new technology, is to discover a medium in which these kinds of uncertainties have constantly recurred. In the aesthetic of delay, the cinema's protean nature finds visibility, its capacity to create uncertainty that is, at the same time, certainty because its magic works without recourse to deception or dissimulation. The cinema renders, in Dziga Vertov's words, 'uncertainty more certain'.

I would like to conclude this Preface with a reflection on a well-known section of Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, which has been, throughout the writing of this book, a constant companion and source of visual pleasure for me. The sequence begins as the cameraman films a carriage drawn by a white horse as it canters down a Moscow street, ferrying passengers from the railway station to their home. At a moment when the horse fills the frame, the film freezes into a still 'photograph'. The build-up to this moment, the spectator realizes retrospectively, had been geared around movement. The sequence had been prefigured by a shot of a train taken from track level that concentrated the energy of the machine leading into the rapid movement of the carriage, and the horse in particular. This accumulation of movement had carried forward the movement of the film and of time itself, so when the image froze another temporal dimension suddenly emerged. While movement tends to assert the presence of a continuous 'now', stillness brings a resonance of 'then' to the surface. Here, Vertov manages to switch these registers with a single image. The sequence also leads on to a consideration of the relation and difference between the stilled image and the filmstrip.

Despite the fact that *Man with a Movie Camera* is a documentary, recording the streets of Moscow in 1929, and despite the fact that any filmed image has the same indexical status as the image stilled, the sense of temporality attached to film and to photography differ. This is not simply a matter of movement and stillness, but of the single image as opposed to the filmstrip, the instant rather than the continuum. The reality recorded by the photograph relates exclusively to its moment of registration; that is, it represents a moment extracted from the continuity of historical time. However historical the moving image might be, it is bound into an order of continuity and pattern, literally unfolding into an aesthetic structure that (almost always) has a temporal dynamic imposed on it ultimately by editing. The still photograph represents an unattached instant, unequivocally grounded in its indexical relation to the moment of registration. The moving image, on the contrary, cannot escape from duration, or from beginnings and ends, or from the

The film freezes into a still 'photograph', from *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929).

The film frame: singularity and sequence.

Two kinds of time blend together.

patterns that lie between them. The still image of the horse suggests a photograph. It asserts the moment at which that one frame was recorded, even as it is duplicated to create a freeze effect. But the sequence continues and explores the single frame's place in the sequence rather than in isolation.

Vertov takes this exposition further. The sequence moves to other freeze frames (the surrounding streets, faces of women and children from this and other sequences) and then introduces the celluloid strip itself. When the image of a child is shown repeated in the individual frames of a fragment of film the sequence seems to touch the point between the aesthetic of photography and the cinema. In their stillness, the repeated images belong to the photograph, to the moment of registration, but in their sequence they signify poignantly the indivisibility of these individual moments from a larger whole, an integral part of the shift into movement. They represent the individual moments of registration, the underpinning of film's indexicality. In Jean-Luc Godard's film of 1960, *Le Petit Soldat*, the answer to the question 'what is cinema?' is 'truth 24 times a second'. But these frames as individual photographs are also a testament to cinema's uncanny. So the answer to the question 'what is cinema?' should also be 'death 24 times a second'. The photograph's freezing of reality, truth in Godard's definition, marks a transition from the animate to the inanimate, from life to death. The cinema reverses the process, by means of an illusion that animates the inanimate frames of its origin. The shots of filmstrips lead into the editing room where Elizaveta Svilova is working on *Man with a Movie Camera*. She holds the inert filmstrip in her hands; she winds it on the editing table; she cuts out certain frames. The inanimate frames come back to life; people from very different sections of the movie look, react, tellingly including the faces of children who will be found much later watching a magic show. Finally the continuum of the film is reestablished with its own temporal logic, in which the question of time constantly occurs, but within its own unfolding structure. In this sequence, the editor's work personifies the reordering and transforming of raw material. As she sets the filmstrip back into

motion on the editing table the moving image gradually reintegrates the sequence back into the course of the film. But the spectator is brought back with a heightened consciousness of the blending of two kinds of time.

Vertov concentrates concisely and elegantly into a few minutes many of the ideas that I have tried to articulate in this book. This reflection on two kinds of time explores the relations between movement and stillness in the cinema long before new technology made them easily accessible. But Vertov's delayed cinema is a reminder across time, across the decades of the twentieth century, of the aesthetic and political relation between film and modernity. With a repetition of deferred action, the return to the cinema of the 1920s that was so influential in the 'then' of the 1960s and '70s has, perhaps, even more relevance in the present climate of political and aesthetic dilemma.