

not be the film maker he is did he not try to restore the environment to the role it plays in the novel. He incorporates the agricultural fair and continually reverts to the country road; nor does he forget the street singer or the meetings in theater and cathedral. Due to their transfer from book to screen, however, these settings and incidents undergo a change of function. In the novel they are fully integrated into the epic flow of the whole, while in the adaptation they serve either to fill a gap between the units of the intrigue or to sustain its patterns of meanings. The first alternative is illustrated by the fair scenes, which affect one as sheer background motion; the second by the repeatedly shown country road which in its capacity as a meaningful story motif loses its reality character. The intrigue abstracted from the novel prevails throughout and drains it of life.

About the same might also be said of *Camar Expectations*, *The Heiress*, *Rouge et Noir*, etc. [Illus. 46] In his comment on the latter—an outright theatrical dialogue film which even goes so far as to verbalize the hero's thoughts—Gabriel Marcel poignantly epitomizes the detrimental consequences for adaptations of any original whose universe extends beyond the reach of the camera. Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Marcel remarks, "was the very type . . . of novel which should not have been brought to the screen." Why? Because all that counts with Julien Sorel, its protagonist, is "a certain interior life very little of which can, by definition, be exteriorized; I should almost say, it is the deviation of his appearance from his reality [which counts]. The novelist is quite in a position to reveal to us this reality . . . whereas the film maker must stick to the appearances; and only by his recourse, fraudulent in a way, to the text, will he be able to render intelligible—incidentally, in an inevitably schematic manner—the interior world which is Julien Sorel's. . . . In consequence, the substance of Stendhal's masterwork becomes terribly thin, and what constitutes the interest of the book is not really retained."²³

Siegfried Kracauer,

Theory of Film: The Description of Physical Reality

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960)

The Found Story and the Episode

LIKE THE NOVEL, the short story may dwell on unadaptable aspects of inner life. There are no genuinely cinematic literary forms.

Yet, of course, this does not exclude the possibility of cinematic story forms which assert themselves independently of the established literary genres. Now note that such story types are only rarely referred to in the literature on film; in fact, they do not even carry names by which to recognize them. Is one to infer from this that they are actually nonexistent? By no means. Rather, there is evidence that the prevailing unconcern for them stems from a widespread and deep-rooted bias. Most critics have thought of film as an art in the traditional sense, and, as a result, they have not seriously tried to trace and identify cinematic story forms. So why not proceed from the perfectly sound assumption that they do exist after all? In the following, an attempt will be made to drag these story forms out from their undeserved anonymity. Obviously they must be definable in terms which bear on the preferences of film. And they must by their very nature permit or indeed stimulate the representation of camera-reality on the screen.

THE FOUND STORY

Definitions

The term "found story" covers all stories found in the material of actual physical reality. When you have watched for long enough the surface of a river or a lake you will detect certain patterns in the water which may have been produced by a breeze or some eddy. Found stories are in

the nature of such patterns. Being discovered rather than contrived, they are inseparable from films animated by documentary intentions. Accordingly, they come closest to satisfying that demand for the story which "re-emerges within the womb of the non-story film."¹

Since the found story is part and parcel of the raw material in which it lies dormant, it cannot possibly develop into a self-contained whole—which means that it is almost the opposite of the theatrical story. Finally, due to its symbiosis with documentary, it tends to render incidents typical of the world around us. Perhaps the earliest example of a story film of this kind is Lumière's *Teasing the Gardener*, whose action, a chance constellation of comic happenings, seems to be drawn straight from unstaged everyday life.

Found stories differ from each other by their degree of compactness or distinctness. They may be arranged along a continuum which extends from embryonic story patterns at one pole to fairly well-contoured stories, often packed with dramatic action, at the other. Somewhere in-between lies Flaherty's "slight narrative."

Types

EMBRYONIC PATTERNS

Many a documentary includes found stories in a pupa state—"stories" which hardly detach themselves from the flow of environmental impressions. Thus Arne Sucksdorff's *People in the City*, a "city symphony" picturing Stockholm street life in documentary fashion, evolves three such storylike textures: (1) A young man who has sought shelter from the rain in a doorway follows a young girl standing beside him after the rain has ceased. (2) Schoolchildren in a church, awed by the organ music and the sanctity of the place, search stealthily for a marble which one of them believes he has dropped. (3) A fisherman spreads his small haul on the river bank and then busies himself with other things; suddenly he discovers that sea gulls have taken advantage of his negligence and now are flying away with the fish. [Illus. 47] These "most fascinating news stories of the week," as *The New Yorker* would call them—but what is wrong in literature is often the right thing for film—are just articulate enough to convey a shade of human interest apt to lend color to the juxtaposed documentary shots, and they are sufficiently sketchy and inconsequential to dissolve again into the general city life within which they accidentally

* See p. 213.

crystallized. Whether their elusiveness proves entirely satisfactory to the spectator is another question; he may feel he is being let down by suggestions and promises which invariably fail to come true.

FLAHERTY'S "SLIGHT NARRATIVE"

The term "slight narrative" originates with Rotha, who says of Flaherty that "he prefers the inclusion of a slight narrative, not fictional incident or interpolated 'cameos,' but the daily routine of his native people."² Rotha's observation amplifies part of a summary key statement by Flaherty himself: "A story must come out of the life of a people, not from the actions of individuals."³ Out of the life of a primitive people, Flaherty should have added, in order to present to the full the formula underlying his major films. This formula was of a piece with his passions and visions. Besides enabling him to satisfy his explorer instincts, it was rooted in his Rousseauian conviction that primitive cultures are the last vestiges of unspoiled human nature and in his sustained desire to show "the former majesty and the character of these people, while it is still possible."⁴ [Illus. 48]

Flaherty has been called a romantic and indicted for escapist leanings, because of his withdrawal from our modern world, with its pressing needs.⁵ To be sure, he was the thapsodist of backward areas in a sense, but this does not impinge on the integrity of his films. Their inherent romanticism notwithstanding, they are cinematic documents of the highest order. Hence the general significance of Flaherty's formula. Now what matters here is exclusively his conception of a cinematic story, as defined in his programmatic statement quoted just above. This statement carries four important implications.

First, in immediately raising the issue of the story, Flaherty seems to take it for granted that a story is desirable for documentary. His own work bears witness to this belief; there is practically no Flaherty film that would lack structured sequences in the nature of an empathic narrative. Moreover, his films show an increasing tendency toward distinct story patterns. While *Nanook* still confines itself to a thoroughly coherent and understanding representation of the Eskimo way of life, *LOUISIANA STORY* narrates the encounter between a Cajun boy and an oil derrick in terms which almost transcend Flaherty's program; one further step in this direction and the documentary would turn into an outright story film.

Second, a story must come out of the life of a people, says Flaherty, whereby it is understood that he means primitive people. Now primitive life unfolds in a natural setting and plays up bodily movements as well as events close to nature; in other words, one of its relevant features is its

affinity for photography. Accordingly, if this part of Flaherty's statement is extended, it can be applied to stories which cover human reality as it manifests itself significantly in the physical world. So the narrative may not only grow out of primitive people but take its cue from crowds, street scenes, and what not.

Third, the story must not come from the actions of individuals. That this was tremendously important to Flaherty is corroborated by a biographical fact. Even though he was known to be "one of the greatest yarn-spinners of our times,"⁸ he never displayed his brilliant gifts as a story-teller on the screen. His refusal to yield to this temptation, if temptation it was, is completely incomprehensible unless one assumes that he believed individual actions to be inconsistent with the spirit of his medium. Generally speaking, he shunned the full-fledged intrigue which traditionally features the individual. As a film maker he certainly felt the need for a story, but he seems to have been afraid lest fully developed, rounded-out stories, which often have very pronounced patterns of meanings, prevent the camera from having its say. This helps explain why he preferred the "slight narrative," which sticks to the typical.

Fourth, the deliberate use of the verb "come out" in Flaherty's statement testifies to his insistence on eliciting the story from the raw material of life rather than subjecting the raw material to its pre-established demands. "There is a kernel of greatness in all peoples," says he, "and it is up to the film maker to . . . find the one incident or even the one movement that makes it clear."⁹ His idea of "discovering the essential human story from within" led him to evolve it during an incubation period in which he assimilated the life of the people he wanted to picture.⁸ And he was so averse to letting story requirements interfere with the experiences thus gathered and with his concurrent camera explorations that, in shooting the story, he used a working outline which could always be changed as he proceeded. It is as if the medium itself invited this kind of approach: in any case, Flaherty is not the only one to rely on improvisation in immediate contact with the material. When shooting *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*, D. W. Griffith "improvised freely as he went along"; by the way, Lewis Jacobs who mentions this adds that Griffith's confidence in his intuition also accounts for many an absurdity in his films.⁹ Similarly, the Rossellini of *OPEN CITY*, *PAISAN*, and *GERMAN YEAR ZERO* develops his scenes on the local, with only a rudimentary story serving him as a guide.¹⁰ Nor does Fellini want to be incommode by a well-written story: "If I know everything from the start, I would no longer be interested in doing it. So that when I begin a picture, I am not yet sure of the location or the actors. Because for me, to do a picture is like leaving for a trip. And the most in-

teresting part of a trip is what you discover on the way."¹¹ And did not Eisenstein undergo a change of mind when he saw the Odessa steps?

If put into words, Flaherty's "slight narrative" would be something like an interpretative account bordering on poetry. The unavoidable consequence of his solution is that it does not involve the audience as intensely as might a more outspoken story film. To the extent that his films evade the individual, the individual may not feel urged to surrender to them.

DRAMATIZED ACTUALITY

The limitations of films about the world around us have long since stirred documentary makers to cross the boundaries which Flaherty respected. Rotha, who already in the 'thirties advocated documentaries which "embrace individuals,"¹² declares over twenty years later that in his opinion "socially and aesthetically the so-called story film and the true documentary are growing closer and closer together."¹³ Whether or not this will happen, there are numbers of documentary-like films with stories which go beyond the "slight narrative." To be sure, they still are found in reality and do highlight events typical of it, but at the same time they are almost as compact and distinct as many a contrived intrigue. *POTEMKIN*, *MORNEA*, and other Russian films of the Revolution may well belong here, or think of Cavalcanti-Walt's *NORTH SEA*, one of the first British documentaries to dramatize actuality. In these films compositional aspirations merge, or rival, with the underlying documentary intentions, and fictional elaborations tend to complement and intensify the given incidents. Clearly, films like *NORTH SEA* or *FAREBYGUE* or *TOCERNER* lie in the border region that separates documentary from feature film, especially the episode film.

Hence the difficulty of classifying them. "Where does fiction begin in the dialogue and action of *North Sea* . . . ?" asks Roger Manvell, who then immediately raises the corresponding question: "Where does documentary begin . . . in *The Grapes of Wrath* . . . ?"¹⁴ If dramatic documentaries picture a found story which seems constantly to dissolve into the environment from which it is being distilled, they must certainly be considered true to type. This is how Rotha conceives of *NORTH SEA*; he defines it as a documentary "on the verge of being a story-film."¹⁴ Georges Rouquier's *FAREBYGUE*, which renders the life of a French farm family

* James Agee in *Agee on Film*, p. 40, quotes the film director John Huston as saying: "In a given scene I have an idea what should happen, but I don't tell the actors. Instead I tell them to go ahead and do it. Sometimes they do it better. Sometimes they do something accidentally which is effective and true. I jump on the accident."

** See p. 212.

throughout a year and, along with it, the farm itself and the seasonal changes of nature, might be entered under the same title. It delicately molds the rural life cycle it self-forgetfully records; and its invented incidents enhance rather than belie its "reverence for unaltered reality."¹⁸

If, on the other hand, the found story of films in that border region attains to such a solidity that it threatens to obscure their non-story character and their primary concern for actuality, these films give the impression of episode films on the verge of being documentaries. A case in point in Lionel Rogosin's *ON THE BOWERY*, an admirable report on the flophouses and bums in downtown New York. [Illus. 49] It is as if its story—a spun-out anecdote centering on the protagonist—involved the environment instead of being part of it; like a magnet, the film's fictional core attracts its reportorial elements which group themselves accordingly. The Russian films of the Revolution dramatize re-enacted actuality in a similar way, with the difference that in them Marxist argumentation substitutes for the story proper.

FINIS TERRAE

All these attempts at a fusion of the story film and documentary are faced with a problem which Flaherty avoided. Since he found, or believed to find, his story by exploring, with the assistance of his camera, the life of the people in whose midst he lived, his documentary account and his "slight narrative" interpenetrate each other from the outset. What the task of effecting this kind of interpenetration amounts to once the "slight narrative" yields to a story which encompasses individuals—or an ideology, for that matter—is drastically demonstrated by an extreme case: Jean Epstein's *FINIS TERRAE*. In this film Epstein tries to blend a full-grown documentary on Breton fishermen with an equally full-grown story found in the reality covered—at least found in the sense that it was drawn from the columns of a local newspaper.

The story features a rescue action: a wounded young fisherman staying with his three companions on a lonely island would be lost were it not for the old village doctor who braves the storm to come to his aid; the documentary on its part records the story island, the Breton village community, the lighthouse, the ocean. Now the point is that, in spite of the fact that a documentary and a story require different styles of representation—the latter consuming the very raw material which the former is supposed to bare—Epstein aims at a reconciliation between these styles without apparently being willing to sacrifice any of the specific virtues of either. He goes the limit in embroidering his tale and he never refrains from elaborating on depictions in documentary fashion. So of course he does not succeed in closing the gap between the two forms of narration

involved. Far from achieving their fusion, *FINIS TERRAE* is, all in all, a mechanical and rather clumsy mixture of actuality and fiction. But as such it offers great interest for laying open the difficulty against which film makers run who want to weave some highly distinct found story into a non-story texture of factual shots. Immense tact is required on their part to fuse these divergent modes of continuity of which a dramatic documentary necessarily consists.

That approximate solutions are possible is evidenced, for instance, by Lorenza Mazzetti's *TOOTNER*, a movie about two deaf-mute London dock workers in which long passages devoted to their dreary everyday existence alternate with sequences in a feature-film vein. [Illus. 50] One of the deaf-mutes indulges in a dream of love-making; at the end playing children push him into the Thames, as if he were a plaything, and he drowns in silence, unseen by the crew of a near-by barge. Thanks to the wise selection of story motifs, all of which are potential implications of deaf-muteness, the balance between drama and reportage is nearly perfect. And the two kinds of continuities would indeed jell into a unified flow of pictures were it not for the difference between the concepts of time in the film's story and documentary parts. The emphasis, within the latter, on the limbo enveloping the deaf-mutes results in repetitions scenes which denote an indefinite span of time markedly at variance with the short and well-defined time periods in which the story episodes take their course.

THE EPISODE

Definitions

Webster defines "episode" as a "set of events having distinctness and moment in a larger series, as in one's life, in history or in creation." Accordingly, this term will be applied to stories whose common property it is to emerge from, and again disappear in, the flow of life, as suggested by the camera. It is their bearing on camera-life which accounts for their adequacy to the medium. This implies that otherwise episodic films become problematic aesthetically, if they feature some unadaptable inner conflict or thought instead of that life; their uncinematic content threatens to overshadow their cinematic form. Such an episode film is, for instance, *THE DEVIANT ONES*, which pictures the escape from a Southern prison camp of a white man and a Negro who are chained to each other, their desperate, if futile, attempts to reach safety, and their inevitable capture at the end.

This episode in the convicts' lives is plainly told with a view to dividing home the change of mind they are undergoing during their flight: the white man learns to accept the Negro as a human being worthy of his friendship, while the Negro sheds off distrust and repays loyalty with confidence. Now it would be easy to show that the ideology behind the film does not grow out of the reality depicted but, conversely, assumes the role of a prime mover; the inner change of the two runaways is a foregone conclusion which predetermines the order and meaning of the successive scenes. Hence the impression that the film is a tale of human dignity, a sermon against the evil of race bias. By the same token its episodic story ceases to point up the flow of life and turns instead into a theatrical morality play whose realism strikes one as simulated.

In the border region between episode films and documentaries dramatizing actuality, transitions are so fluid that there is no purpose in trying to arrive at clear-cut distinctions. Any documentary with a found story of high compactness, such as *NORTH SEA* or *TOGETHER*, may also be considered an episode film; and numbers of movies in a palpably episodic vein—e.g. *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG*, *THE QUIET ONE*, *LITTLE FUGITIVE*, *OPEN CITY*, etc.—have a marked documentary quality. [Illus. 51] Yet their overlaps notwithstanding, the two genres differ in two respects. First, unlike the found story, the episode may be a contrived intrigue, as illustrated by *BAUER ENCOUNTER*, *CAVALCADE*, the Roman story of *PAISAN*, etc. Similarly, the old *avant-garde* films *FLEURE*, *EN RADE*, and *MENUMONTANT* narrate fictitious incidents embedded in poetized actuality; or remember the ingenious episodes of silent comedy, tangles in a topsy-turvy world in flux not identical with documentary reality either. Second, unlike the found story, the episode is by no means bound to render events and situations typical of the environmental life to which it refers. The fantastic stories of *DEAD OF NIGHT* run true to type; and the episode with the lady high-diver in *ENCORE* is as genuine as that of the old dancer in the mask of a youth in *LE PLAISIR*.

Types

Episode films may consist of a single episodic unit—an episode, that is, which resembles a monad or cell in that it resists further division—or be composed of a number of such units. To begin with the first alternative, it does not occur frequently because it makes for shorts rather than feature-length films. *THE RED BALLOON*, a weak 34-minute fairy-tale about a miraculous balloon befriending a Paris urchin, figures among the exceptions. In order nevertheless to profit by this effective—and cinematic—

story form, the film industry has fallen on the device of assembling, anthology fashion, several short units under a common heading. The just-mentioned films *LE PLAISIR* and *ENCORE* are nothing but mechanical packages of self-sufficient episodes. True, all the episodes are adapted from Maupassant and Maugham respectively, but this does not confer on either package a semblance of unity. What appears here and there is not so much a film as an expedient collection of independent little movies. (Incidentally, the fact that many episodic units are drawn from short stories should not blind one to the cinematically neutral character of this literary form.)

The second alternative comprises episode films built from a series of episodic units. These units may be relatively autonomous entities which are strung together like beads so that they attain to a degree of cohesion. Or they may relinquish their independence and, often hardly distinguishable from each other, become parts of a story into which they are integrated like the cells of a living organism.

THE UNITS ARE STRUNG TOGETHER

Sometimes a minimum of unity is achieved in terms of space, different stories being laid in one and the same locality. In *GOLD OF NAPLES* and *IT HAPPENED IN THE PARK* it is the *genius loci* of Naples and the Borghese Gardens respectively which provides a fragile bond between otherwise separate units. Instead of a place, the common denominator may also be an identical period of time. Thus all the six episodes of *PAISAN* are set against the common background of war—a diffuse and very cinematic frame of reference.

Or the uniting link is a story of a sort. Such stories as silent film comedy advances have merely the function of interrelating somehow their gags or monad-like units of gags. What matters is that the units follow each other uninterrupted, not that their succession implements a plot. To be sure, they frequently happen to develop into a halfway plausible intrigue, yet the intrigue is never of so exacting a nature that its significance would encroach on that of the pieces composing it. Even though *THE GOLD RUSH* and *CRY LIGHTS* transcend the genre, they climax in episodes like the dance with the fork or the misdeemeanor of the swallowed whistle, gag clusters which, for meaning and effect, depend so little on the narrative in which they appear that they can easily be isolated without becoming less intelligible or losing any of their flavor. For the rest, film comedy indulges in absurdity, as if to make it unmistakably clear that no action is intended to be of consequence. The nonsensical frolics of Mack

Sennett's bathing girls smother the tender beginnings of comprehensible plots.

Once a story is used to string episodic units together, the idea of giving it more scope suggests itself immediately. There are films which mark a transition between an aggregate and a coherent whole. If Mr. Hurst's *HORRAY*, this amazing late offspring of silent comedy, lacks a real intrigue, yet it carries a message which unifies the colorful diversity of its incidents and seeming impromptus: all of them denounce the melancholy void pervading middle-class life in a state of relaxation. The framing story of *Dead or Night* almost matches in impact the several episodes it threads. Does *CAVALCADE* belong here? Its over-all story assumes such proportions that it not only connects the war, drawing-room, and street episodes of which it consists but determines their emotional content, their course.

THE UNITS ARE INTEGRATED INTO A STORY

In fact, *CAVALCADE* might as well be called an integrated episode film. Complex products of this type are fairly frequent. Some of them—for instance, *CABRIA* and *PATHE PANCHALOT*—resemble *CAVALCADE* in that their episodic units preserve a certain distinctness, while at the same time constituting a perfectly consistent sequence of events. In others, such as *The Bicycle Thief*, *Brave Encounter*, *La Règle du Jeu*, the units tend to fuse so that it is as if each film they make up were a single episode. Not that this structural difference would matter much. All that counts is, rather, that the units form part and parcel of an open-ended narrative—open-ended in the sense that it relates in its entirety to the flow of life. Sensitivity to this flow seems to be an inherent feature of Italian neorealism. To Rossellini, De Sica, and Fellini life that concerns us is essentially the kind of life which only the camera is capable of revealing. Their films time and again probe into significant aspects of it.

Structure

PERMEABILITY

An episode is all the more in character if it is permeable to the flow of life out of which it rises. This means that its cinematic quality varies in direct ratio to the degree of its permeability, any increase of the latter being tantamount to an increasing influx of camera-reality. Take *Brave Encounter*: one of the reasons why it is good cinema lies in the fact that it is punctuated by references to the physical world from which its story stems—references which help characterize the story as an episode. Further-

more, because of its permanent movement, the inflowing environment itself figures among the cinematic subjects. *Brave Encounter*, says the French critic Albert Laffay, "practically confines itself to two or three sets, not more. . . . Yet these settings are 'open'; people circulate in them; one is constantly aware that they are replaceable any moment. They send you away because they are being penetrated by movements or the vibration of trains."¹⁶

Railway stations belong in the orbit of the "street,"* that province of reality where transient life manifests itself most conspicuously. Hence the affinity of episode films for places with accidental, ever-changing patterns. *Fever* incessantly reverts to the customers in the bar; in *L'Avant* the street-like river is virtually omnipresent; *Unser Fall* would cease to breathe without its reiterated shots of desolate streets and dilapidated houses. And what about the great Italian films? From *Open City* to *Cabiria*, *The Bicycle Thief* to *La Strada*, they are literally soaked in the street world; they not only begin and end in it but are transparent to it throughout. Fellini once expressed to an interviewer his preference for nocturnal scenery and the solitude of empty streets.¹⁷ One of his main themes is indeed human loneliness, as experienced in streets, empty or not.¹⁸

Permeability calls for loose composition. Renoir's insistence on it, as manifest in his *La Règle du Jeu* or *La Grande Illusion*, is all the more noteworthy since his stories, their episodic tenor notwithstanding, come close to rounded-out fiction. It almost is as if he wanted to get away from his story while narrating it; as if, in a state of absent-mindedness, he constantly permitted unrelated incidents to slip in and blur the story patterns proper. His aversion to straight story construction has given rise to critical comment. Yet, as Henri Agel judiciously remarks, the "conservative critics who wonder at the extreme liberty and indeed negligence which Renoir displays with respect to the course of his stories . . . do not understand that for Renoir all is moving . . . and that it is this process of molting [*mue*] . . . which must be communicated by an absolutely disengaged and dilated style."¹⁹ The true film artist may be imagined as a man who sets out to tell a story but, in shooting it, is so overwhelmed by his innate desire to cover all of physical reality—and also by a feeling that he must cover it in order to tell the story, any story, in cinematic terms—that he ventures ever deeper into the jungle of material phenomena in which he risks becoming irretrievably lost if he does not, by virtue of great efforts, get back to the highways he has left. Renoir has traits of this type of artist.

The episode film, then, is full of gaps into which environmental life

* See pp. 62-3, 71-3.

may stream. This raises the question as to how the elements of an episodic unit and, in a complex episode, the units themselves are interrelated. Sure enough, they do not implement pre-established story patterns or else there would be no air between them. The story they narrate is inherent in their succession. So we inevitably get the impression that they follow a course strangely devoid of purpose and direction; it is as if they drifted along, moved by unaccountable currents. Only a few critics—foremost among them Henri Agel—have recognized, let alone endorsed, this process of drifting, which runs counter to the cherished conceptions of traditional aesthetics. Referring to Fellini's *I VITELLONI*, Agel says: "The whole film is composed of instants whose only *raison d'être* is their instantaneousness; the thunderstorm which bursts during the election of the beauty queen, the billiard game, the gloomy walk in the nocturnal streets. These are the facts which glide into each other and join one another with no other linkage than the circumstances: . . . all appears to be interlinked at random, without any logic, any necessity."²⁰ (Perhaps the Fellini films, with their relatively distinct episodic parts, demonstrate best the kind of loose construction inseparable from permeability; but it is understood that all other episode films, say, *PAISAN* or *UMBERTO D.* or Jean Vigo's beautiful *L'AVANTAGE*, proceed in similar ways.) Agel supplements his description of the drifting and gliding processes by contrasting the episode, which he calls "chronicle," with films conveying a tragedy or a philosophy; unlike the latter, he declares, the chronicle has "the style of a proposition; it permits us to entertain imperfect notions [of the things we see]."²¹

But what about the flow of life which is supposed to permeate the episodic story? It is both suggested and represented within its framework. Suggested: the random way in which the elements of the story succeed each other stirs us to imagine, however confusedly, the circumstances responsible for their succession—circumstances which must be traced to that flow. Represented: diffuse physical reality as a rule enters the scene in the form of incidents which are drawn from the wider environment. These incidents may extend the episode into the material world at large, or be related to it at all. In the Italian neorealistic films—not in them alone, of course—they are sometimes so selected and inserted that they take on the function of ideograms. Here is where Rossellini's remark on Fellini acquires a specific meaning. Fellini, he said, "is at once imprecise and precise"²²—an observation which presumably holds true also of De Sica and Rossellini himself. In any case, all of them are, or appear to be, imprecise in that they fail to connect the elements or units of their narratives in a rational manner. A straight line seems unimaginable to them; nothing really dovetails in their films. At the same time, however, it is as if they possessed a

divining rod enabling them to spot, on their journey through the maze of physical existence, phenomena and occurrences which strike us as being tremendously significant.

The lone horse passing by the abandoned Celomina at dawn and the sick child with the eyes of a scared small animal which has never left its cave (*LA STRADA*); the street invading the rooming house and the rows of Roman façades, as seen from a moving streetcar (*UMBERTO D.*); the group of German-speaking priests in the rain (*THE BICYCLE THIEF*); the Naples marionette theater where the drunken American Negro soldier mistakes the puppets for real warriors and joins in the battle (*PAISAN*)—these scenes and images, found in the world around the story proper, are singled out with unrivaled precision. Selected from among the many incidents with which the environment teems, they are very special samples indeed. They are beckoning us with great urgency, like the three trees in the Proust novel.

Looking at the lone horse, the group of priests, the puppet show, we feel that they desperately want to impart to us an important message. (The same may be said, for instance, of the appearance of the candy man in *PATHER PANCHAI*, or the shots of the populous Paris market quarter in the silent film *THE LOVE OF JEANNE NEX*, whose tendency toward the episodic grew out of G. W. Pabst's then marked preference for camera realism.) Is the message decipherable? Any attempt at an allegorical interpretation would drain these ideograms of their substance. They are propositions rather than rebuses. Snatched from transient life, they not only challenge the spectator to penetrate their secret but, perhaps even more insistently, request him to preserve them as the irreplaceable images they are.

THE DANGER OF SELF-CONTAINMENT

Since the cinematic quality of an episode depends upon its permeability, it is bound to deteriorate if it shuts out the flow of life from which it emerges. If its pores are closed, the episode becomes self-contained; there is nothing that would prevent it from turning into a theatrical intrigue pure and simple.

No doubt the Roman story of *PAISAN* is a war story like all the other episodes of this film, but you cannot help noticing that it has a peculiar cachet: it is a highly contrived story, not the kind of sketchy and nervous reportage in which most of *PAISAN* excels. A tipsy American soldier, picked up by a prostitute, tells her about Francesca, the girl he met when he arrived in Rome with the army half a year before, riding in a tank which happened to stop just before Francesca's house. [Illus. 52] Flashback: we see the soldier enter the house and then watch the charming and innocent

beginnings of a love story which never develops into one, for the soldier is called back to his tank and all his later attempts to find the house with Francesca in it prove abortive. This he tells the prostitute in a mood of disillusionment over the virtue of the Roman girls; they are no good anymore. The prostitute says she knows Francesca and the house he is talking about; she also says that many girls have remained decent in their struggle for survival; and she asks the soldier to come to Francesca's house where Francesca will be waiting for him tomorrow. He succumbs to his stupor and falls asleep. Francesca withdraws, leaving instructions behind that he be given her address upon awakening. Next day she waits in vain for the soldier—the hours are passing and he does not come. Along with other soldiers, he lingers about near the Colosseum, on the point of leaving the city. Their army outfit is moving on into the war.

Now this negative love story with the Maupassant touch is anything but the war episode it pretends to be. And what does prevent it from being one? Its indulgence in fictitious events? Certainly not. Think of *Brave Encounter*, which clearly shows that films with a contrived intrigue may well be episodic in spirit. The non-episodic character of the Roman story must be traced to its lack of porosity, which is all the more striking since the story simulates a genuine episode. In fact, it claims special interest for conveying an anti-episodic attitude with the aid of thoroughly episodic material. The American soldier meets Francesca in the turmoil of the Liberation; loses sight of her; finds her unexpectedly; leaves her for the front—these incidents all of which are characteristic of the flow of life in times of war, times of chronic instability, thread the story, so that at first glance it is as if the story were permeated by that flow.

But what really happens is just the reverse. Instead of illustrating free-flowing life, the incidents contingent on it are made to figure as elements of a forcedly significant composition. The Roman story is not so much a suggestive flow as a closed system: its accidents are premeditated, its random coincidences a matter of sophisticated choice. All these chance occurrences defy chance; they seem expressly assembled to implement the idea that under the duress of war nothing that is tender, human, and beautiful is permitted to grow and subsist.

The story is a self-contained whole rather than an open-ended episode. This follows conclusively from the way in which we are made to conceive of the final scene. The American soldier appears in a group of G.I.'s near the Colosseum. They are standing in the rain. He negligently drops the slip of paper with Francesca's address and then boards the bus or jeep come to fetch him and his comrades. The paper floats in a puddle. If the story were an authentic episode, these magnificent last shots would make it look like a bubble dissolving into the elegiac life from which it

rose a moment before. For an episode thus to disintegrate is a fully adequate ending. Actually, however, this ending impresses us not as the natural submersion of an episodic story in environmental currents but as the contrived conclusion and very climax of the narrative itself. The Roman story is palpably calculated to demonstrate the decay of humanity in a period of war. So it is inevitable that the image of Francesca's address floating in the puddle should turn from a real-life shot for its own sake into the ultimate symbol of the all-pervading idea of that decay.

A number of semi-documentaries belongs here also. One of the reasons for the rise of this genre after World War II was presumably the desire of the film industry to cash in on the success of the war documentaries and neorealistic films. Why not exploit the trend in their favor and produce movies along similar lines? Semi-documentaries are films of fiction which try to let in life in the raw and preferably center on topical issues, because of their inherent concern with actuality, they have, or ought to have, an affinity for the episode. Note that, due to its hybrid character, the genre requires a fusion of story and non-story elements difficult to reconcile with each other. Among the best solutions so far is Louis de Rochemont's *Boomerang*, directed by Elia Kazan; an almost improbable blend of episodic action and factual account; it gives the impression of rendering, newsreel fashion, real-life events which jell into a dramatic sequence of their own accord. *Boomerang* is good cinema.

Yet compared with this product of ingenuity and opportunity, most so-called semi-documentaries are outright sham. What is wrong with them? They miss something essential to the genre—the episodic story form. Instead they fall back on the self-contained intrigue which, as a more or less closed entity proves impermeable to camera-reality, fitting the theater rather than the screen. Semi-documentaries mingle fiction and fact mechanically; to be precise, their plot, with its exacting patterns of meanings, unavoidably dominates their documentary contributions. Thus *The Seagull*, a typical semi-documentary, is nothing but a regular feature film, with some documentary material thrown into the bargain.

Much as such films play up *prima-facie* takes in the documentary sections, these takes never assume any vital function. Far from penetrating the story so that the flow of life begins to assert itself, they remain inserts which represent at most an attempt to adjust the story to the medium. To be sure, they may seem to add a whiff of fresh air, thereby acting as a stimulant, but then again they may, by way of contrast, increase our awareness that the intrigue they are seasoning is a construction indifferent to documentary truth. This is what Flaherty means when he declares

that "you can not superimpose studio-fabricated plots on an actual setting without finding that the reality of the background will show up the artificiality of your story."²³

A framing device

Further evidence that the episode film is more in keeping with the cinematic approach than the theatrical story film may be found in a device which has been occasionally used to mitigate the uncinematic character of the theatrical story. The device consists in framing the theatrical film by scenes which are apt to divert our attention from its staginess and indeed pass it off as an episode. These surrounding scenes usually establish a real-life situation in such a way that the action in between them seems to grow out of it. *An Ideal Husband*, for instance, opens with a prelude in documentary style which affords a glimpse of Victorian splendor in Hyde Park. Dowagers in their carriages exchange greetings with men on horseback, and groups of well-to-do people are leisurely bandying small talk. Then some of these people, already recognizable as members of the cast, come increasingly into focus. The environment recedes and the Wilde comedy, a sheer drawing-room affair, takes its pre-ordained course. It concludes as it began: Hyde Park with its cavalcades, carriages, and chance gatherings re-emerges. The idea is naturally to create the illusion that the comedy itself is not so much a theatrical job as an episode involving the Victorian smart set on display—an episode expressly marked as such by the fact that it issues from, and eventually rejoins, the glittering flow of life in the street-like Park. Does the magic work? The spell which the framing documentary shots cast over the spectator is likely to be destroyed by the penetrant theatricality of the bulk of the film.

Similarly, the opening scenes of Olivier's *HENRY V* show the London Globe Theatre in the times of Shakespeare, with the audience waiting for the curtain to rise; and when the performance is over, an appended finale reverts to the theme of the beginning. This frame is clearly intended to make the play appear as an episode in the everyday life of contemporary London. The whole arrangement does credit to Olivier's film sense. It is an attempt to put the theatrical spectacle in brackets and offset the effect of its stylizations by a touch of camera-reality.²⁴

A striking counter-example is the Italian film *SIDE STREET STORY* (*Napoli Milionaria*), which features a number of people in a small and crowded Naples street and casually relates their destinies before, during,

and after World War II. Nobody would believe this film, with its loosely connected episodic units, was adapted from a stage play were it not for its theatrical framing scenes. At the beginning and end the two protagonists converse about the questionable state of the world, which in their opinion remains invariably the same, wars and revolutions notwithstanding. [Illus. 53] In other words, they tell us what should be considered the moral of the film, thus imposing a meaning on it which threatens to obscure the inherent multiple meanings of the pictures themselves. Hence the nuisance character of the framing scenes: they reduce the film to an illustration; they force it to illustrate the very message you would expect it to convey on its own account. These scenes transform the film from a cinematic communication into a whole with an ideological center.