

R. J. CARDULLO *

Alexander Bakshy on Film

Abstract: A Russian émigré who spent most of his life in Britain and America, Alexander Bakshy (1885-1949) began writing on film in English in 1913 and was the first movie critic for the *Nation* (1927-33). He was known during his lifetime for his prescience as, in 1929, he stood up for the future of sound cinema. Bakshy, then, was one of the more progressive cultural critics of the years between the world wars, who did his part in easing the movies toward acceptance as an art form. He was also an innovative theorist who applied to cinema the discourse of self-reflexive modernism. In sum, Bakshy's work deserves far more attention that it has received—attention hitherto reserved for the work of another significant early American critic, James Agee, who himself began writing movie reviews for the *Nation* in 1942.

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Alexander Bakshy (1885-1949) wrestled with major problems of the drama and the motion picture at significant moments of their evolutions, and he had a sound understanding of general aesthetics as well. Very little is known about him as a personality—the prominent New York drama critic Joseph Wood Krutch (who reviewed theater for the *Nation* from 1924 to 1952) remembered him only as a name. Born in Kerch on the Black Sea, he immigrated to England sometime before 1912 and subsequently became the corresponding London art critic for several Russian periodicals. Bakshy's confessed lack of scholarly credentials or practical knowledge of the stage did not prevent him from writing perceptive essays on the drama, in addition to the cinema; they are collected in his two major books, both published in London: *The Path of the Modern Russian Stage* (1916) and *The Theatre Unbound* (1923). Between these two volumes, in 1919, he tried unsuccessfully to establish a journal in English for the serious study of the theater, but, as he lamented, his tiny craft titled *Proscenium* “foundered immediately it came out into the open sea” (*Theatre Unbound*, 9).

Applications on file in the U.S. Copyright Office indicate that Bakshy was an American citizen as early as April 7, 1938 (having come to the United States sometime between 1923 and 1927), and as late as February 25, 1949, and that he maintained a New York City address. But even before this, he contributed seventy-nine articles as movie critic for the

* PhD, University of Kurdistan-Hewler, Iraq; e-mail: robertjcardullo@gmail.com,

Nation from 1927 to 1933, in addition to writing theoretical essays for the film page of the *New York Sun* (collected in Herman G. Weinberg's *Scrapbook*, Volumes I-III, which is housed in the Weinberg Collection at the New York Public Library). From 1913 to 1945 he also free-lanced on the subjects of cinema, drama, painting, even history and ballet, in such publications as *American Mercury*, *Current History*, *The Dial*, *The Drama*, *English Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Saturday Review*, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, *The Burlington Magazine*, and *The New York Times*. At the same time, Bakshy was translating work by Russians like Bunin, Erenburg, Gogol, Gorky, Kuprin, Lopatin, Soloviev, and Meyerhold .

When he wrote about film, Bakshy lent a voice of maturity to the current of enthusiasm for the new art among the intelligentsia. In his first American essay, for example, written for *Theatre Arts Monthly* in April 1927, he cautioned the youthful enthusiasts against too readily shouting "masterpiece!" Only in the past few years, he maintained, had the moving picture realized its potential as an art form. Bakshy spoke from experience. His essay "The Cinematograph as Art," written in England in 1913 (and first published in the United States in 1916 in *The Drama*), was one of the earliest perceptive critical pieces written on the nature of cinema. In this essay Bakshy called for an end to vulgar realism, to the mechanical reproduction on screen of the stage play. The motion picture must overcome the grotesque gestures and facial distortions of the filmed stage play. To assume a more graceful naturalness was the responsibility of a different corps of actors; the cinema must replace the stilted performers from the traditional drama with harlequins, mimes, and ballet dancers who made a living as "students of motion" (Jacobs, 63).

Writing in 1928, in a prefatory note to the reprinting of "The Artistic Possibilities of the Cinema," Bakshy expressed embarrassment at the immaturity of some of his earlier remarks, for the film medium had evolved far beyond pantomime as the sole method of cinematic acting (3). In spite of his altered view of pantomime, Bakshy's critical theory remained distinctly opposed to the moving picture viewed as a realistic art. He inveighed against the obsession with realism, against those who imagined the cinema as a conglomeration of irrelevant, pedestrian details without emphasis or unity ("Road to Art," 457-458). For Bakshy, the essentials of aesthetic appreciation would always remain the same:

The work of art is something that is endowed with a peculiar life of its own, and that asserts its identity against our effort to grasp and absorb it into the complex whole which constitutes our own identity. This life is a form of functioning of the material in which the work of art finds its expression, and the keener our appreciation is of the nature of the material, the more attuned we are to

its inner resonance—the more profound and exhilarating is the aesthetic thrill we experience in the presence of genuine works of art. (“New Art,” 279).

If the moving picture had progressed beyond the natural gracefulness of pantomime, what was the unique nature of the film medium? For Bakshy, the cinema might be classified into three distinct types of drama. First, there was the “realist drama,” which ignored the necessity of form and which proceeded without spectator involvement, limiting the audience to the role of observer. Second, the “semi-independent drama,” which remained unrelated to the medium’s dynamics, but did appeal to the spectator’s imagination by selection and style within the individual frame. Third, there existed the “dependent drama,” which daringly neglected to disguise the nature of the medium, placing complete emphasis on the presence of the audience (“Road to Art,” 455).

Alone among the important contributors to early American film criticism, Bakshy most consistently advocated, in “dependent drama,” direct contact with the audience. While other critics discussed the art of masking art, Bakshy described an aesthetic future where the visible mechanics of the motion picture would provide sensual thrills. In his more theoretical pieces, he objected that the screen itself had not been utilized as an arena of dramatic—nay, *visual*—movement (“Future of the Movies,” 362). He imagined a vast screen where images might “leap” from one corner of the theater to another, “flitting” laterally before the viewer (“New Dimensions in the Talkies,” 703), or where separate pictures might be flashed onto the screen to reveal a simultaneous number of subjects (“Road to Art,” 460). In other words, the cinema might exhibit the thrill of “personality” once thought to be the province of the vaudeville stage. Only in this instance the personality would derive, not from the delightful antics of an individual actor, but rather from the continuous play of dynamically related images (“Movie Scene,” 102).

Bakshy’s remarks provide the most radical statement of an assumption underlying much of the theoretical writing on film in the late 1920s: that technique, based upon a sophisticated knowledge of the medium, might provide aesthetic pleasure divorced from any considerations of theme or subject matter. And cinematic technique, for him, included acting—specifically, presentational acting, which acknowledges the audience, whether directly by addressing them or indirectly through the use of words, looks, gestures, or other signs that indicate that the character/actor is aware of the audience’s presence. When Bakshy began seriously to examine the cinema, he was in a state of excitement about a possible presentational revival for all of the arts, not just for the theater,

which for centuries (until the advent of realism in the nineteenth century) had been the natural home of presentationalism.

Because he was bruited the virtues of presentationalism, Bakshy considered the silent film (which he thought of as presentational) more promising than the early “talkies” (which appeared to him ludicrous attempts to imitate stage representationalism). Indeed, for a number of years sound appeared to be merely a gratuitous intrusion on the purely visual experimentation of the silent picture, as evidenced by such techniques as double exposure (to round out the presentation of character more imaginatively than flashback) and the split screen (to present simultaneous actions), to mention only two of the formal innovations that Bakshy encouraged during his tenure as movie critic for the *Nation*. From his point of view, representational films and realistic theatrical productions were thus two heads of the same ogre, which only popular audiences could keep alive in their unthinking obeisance to Hollywood and Broadway.

Representational films appeared less menacing to Bakshy, however, when photographic and sound technology improved. He then conceded that, if the controlling producers and directors allow, sound cinema could develop its own potentialities as a representational medium distinct from silent pictures—which could then be given more freedom to explore presentational expressiveness—and also distinct from its counterpart of representational drama, since the “material of the screen [unlike the kind found in the theater] consists not of actual objects but images fixed on the film,” and the very fact that they have their being on film “endows these images with properties that are never found in actual objects” (“Talkies,” 238). If these differences of form are observed, representational sound pictures would have the capacity of dealing more directly with the real world, provided they became as truly representational in sound as they could be in visual imagery. Moreover, the images that penetrate into the visual substance of the human world can attain greater realism through natural colors and stereoscopic effects (“Talkies and Dummies,” 562-563). Such a cinema would outdo and even instruct the drama in representational possibilities, since movies have “greater technical resources for creating that very illusion of life existing outside the theater” (“Future of the Movies,” 360).

Bakshy’s tendency to think of talkies as representational and silent films as presentational disappeared when he began to see presentational possibilities in the use of sound, such as auditory fade-outs and “separating the voice from the image of its owner” (“Year of Talkies,” 773). Speech, sound, and image, he then suggested, could be inflected in an infinite number of ways, and film form might combine presentational with

representational devices, even if (as he suspected) representationalism was going to predominate in the new industry. That Bakshy's optimism about the movies waned, however, becomes increasingly clear in his reviews for the *Nation*. His last one was a virulent attack against Hollywood for its failure to develop either presentational *or* representational cinema effectively ("More Celluloid," 76).

But before he became disillusioned with traditional moviemaking, Bakshy intelligently probed the evolving techniques of the new medium. For him the most distinctive attribute of the camera, the most formative component, is its freedom of movement in time and space, since these dimensions are relative in cinema and not absolute, as they tend to be in the theater. Motion pictures can mold time by "rearranging its natural sequences, compressing it into a single moment, or expanding it into an infinity" ("New Art," 280). Some of the possibilities of emancipated spatial movement, in Bakshy's loving elaboration, are: movement in the position of photographed objects, through a change in the position of the camera (as in close-ups or high-angle shots), or movement in perception of these objects through a change in their lighting and coloring; movement of images through acceleration or retardation; and movement through "the joint functioning of the projector and the screen—the movement of a small picture growing large, or of a picture traversing the screen from one end to another" ("New Art," 281). It is the responsibility of the director, according to Bakshy, to integrate all movement and all sound into a single dramatic pattern whose rhythm creates "an independent ideal world, entirely self-sustained and coherently compact, which has its own life and its own emotional logic" ("Miracle of *Arsenal*," 640).

That the screen (as well as the camera) is a mechanical device does not preclude its development for artistic expression, since, as Bakshy writes, "all mechanisms must be controlled by human power at one moment or another" ("Cinematograph as Art," 272). The screen, if used representationally, "is merely an inert surface playing no part in molding the form of the picture" ("New Dimensions in the Talkies," 703). But a presentational cinema could have the performance emanate from the godlike presence of the screen, which "must become a physical reality in the eyes of the audience, a part of the theater building that provides the graphic frame of reference for the very being of characters in space, as well as for the form in which they are presented to view" ("Screen Musical Comedy," 160). The presentational screen of the future, therefore, should "be the most important part of the building. It will occupy the largest area architecturally possible in the theater, and it will be used for the effects of movement obtained by changing the position of the picture, by changing its size, and, finally, by employing simultaneously a number of separate [visual]

subjects that are organized to form a single dramatically dynamic pattern” (“Future of the Movies,” 362). It is then that a “direct physical contact” of screen with spectator could be established (“Movie Scene,” 107).

Bakshy’s changing ideas about the film actor show his attempts to adjust his thinking about the cinema in general as it evolved. At first, in silent movies, the actor was an image *presented* through moving form and color (if only the colors black and white)—and because of this presentational status, Bakshy considered it “irrelevant whether the acting . . . is performed by living persons, by dolls, or by cinematographic shadows” (“Cinematograph as Art,” 275). The genius of Charlie Chaplin, for example, lay in his ability to adjust what he had learned from the presentational art of vaudeville to the nature of cinematic art—hence his ability to convey an emotion by “a movement of the body, a twist of the head, or a doll-like fixedness of expression” (“Knight-Errant,” 413; “Charlie Chaplin,” 247-248). Chaplin’s genius also lay in his sense of dramatic composition through “the use of emphasis in a portrait-like portrayal, the appreciation of rhythmic pattern, the knowledge of the exact location for the dramatic accent” (“Knight-Errant,” 413; “Charlie Chaplin,” 247-248).

But with the coming of sound and the introduction of dialogue, the actor ceased to be a shadow and became a person. As a result, the movie spectator’s aesthetic distance became more difficult to maintain than was the case during the showing of silent pictures, let alone the performance of “straight” plays in a theater auditorium; the inevitable intimacy and realism of the human voice at close range induce the film audience to see the actor as a character. And as the actor becomes character, character becomes bound to a setting of natural surroundings, thus making representationalism an important mode for the cinema. Representational dialogue, however, is different in the cinema from what it is in the drama, where dialogue must perform a duty “for a great deal of human conduct that is essentially wordless” and that in a movie can simply be conveyed visually, photographically (“Hollywood Tries ‘Ideas,’” 708). For this reason, “unlike the stage actor, the film actor appears best when he acts least. All he needs is personality, character, for this is enough to make his acting both natural and convincing” (“The Shrinking of Personality,” 590).

In spite of his recognition of how congenial the cinema is to representational acting, Bakshy occasionally ventured the hope (before giving up on Hollywood) that presentational acting and non-realistic speech could be employed in motion pictures. Yet he knew that the film actor in either mode—representational or presentational—would never be the active agent he is in the drama (“Talkies and Dummies,” 562-563), in part because of the reduced role of the spectator. That is to say, though the presence of a spectator is assumed in the cinema in order to justify the joint efforts of

actor, screen, and camera, his role is less indispensable than it is in the theater because of the ultimate impersonality of the newer medium. No frankly or self-consciously acknowledged screen in a presentational picture could create the intimacy of a presentational actor playing to his viewers in the theater; and no representational picture could evidence an awareness of an audience as does the theater performer as he paces his lines, in a representational drama, in response to audience response—particularly laughter. Nonetheless, Bakshy once suggested that the movie spectator, in surrendering himself to the rhythmic pattern of a film and its impact upon his emotional sensibility, would not only experience the freedom of transcending worldly time and space but could also undergo a sort of Aristotelian catharsis (“Future of the Movies,” 360).

Because of the commonalities between the stage and screen—one of them being that, as discussed, both feature people acting (whether presentationally or representationally) a story within a frame before your eyes—most early movie critics made little distinction between the two art forms. Not Bakshy, however. “Analogies between the stage and the screen assume that they deal with the same material. But they don’t,” he wrote in the *Nation* in 1929:

For instance, on the stage the actor moves in real space and time. He cannot even cross the room without performing a definite number of movements. On the screen an action may be shown only in terminal points with all its intervening moments left out. In watching a performance on the stage, the spectator [like the theater actor] is governed by the actual conditions of space and time. Not so in the case of the movie spectator. Thanks to the moving camera he is able to view the scene from all kinds of angles, leaping from a long-distance view to a close-range inspection of every detail. It is obvious that with this extraordinary power of handling space and time—by elimination and emphasis, according to its dramatic needs—the motion picture can never be content with modeling itself after the stage. (“Talkies,” 238)

Bakshy’s importance as a critic wasn’t lost on Harry Alan Potamkin, another early film critic. Pointing to Bakshy’s early writings about movie pantomime as a kind of cinematic rhythm and the medium’s use of color *tones* before the appearance of flashy color processes, Potamkin declared the following in 1927: “No American has captured in the written word the qualities of cinema so well as has Alexander Bakshy” (Potamkin, 4). As one of the more progressive cultural critics of the years between the world wars, Bakshy did his part, then, in easing the movies toward acceptance as an art form. In his application to cinema of the discourse of self-reflexive modernism (prizing anti-illusionist medium-awareness)—a discourse that

had emerged in theater criticism in the early 1900s—he was also an innovative theorist.

Nonetheless, Alexander Bakshy quit film criticism in 1933, fed up with the low quality of the movies. As he wrote in his final column for the *Nation*:

Not only are there woefully few [movies] that are worthy of serious consideration, but if you happen to be a film critic you are obliged to stop and analyze the incessant flow of bilge issuing from the film factories of Hollywood and elsewhere as if it were really to be measured by the standards of intellectual and artistic achievement. The whole procedure becomes unspeakably grotesque, resembling in a way what the Russians describe as shooting sparrows with cannon balls. Worse still, it becomes wearisomely repetitious, for in the films originality is found in virtues, not, as in real life, in sins. (“More Celluloid,” 76).

Bakshy managed to deal with the bilge by approaching each piece of film criticism as the occasion for some larger essayistic rumination, say, on the topic of theater vs. cinema. In addition to the reviews of bilge, one gets from Bakshy’s film writings thoughtful commentary on such important motion pictures as Chaplin’s *City Lights*, Eisenstein’s *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Dreyer’s *Passion of Joan of Arc*, Clair’s *Under the Roofs of Paris*, Pabst’s *Comradeship*, Kinugasa’s *Slums of Tokyo*, Lubitsch’s *Trouble in Paradise*, Dovzhenko’s *Earth*, and Milestone’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*. One also is the beneficiary of penetrating insight into such important directors as Alfred Hitchcock, Frank Capra, Jean Renoir, F. W. Murnau, George Cukor, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Howard Hawks. Moreover, the reader treated to evidence of Bakshy’s penchant for “theoretizing” in essays on such subjects as film acting, experimental or art-house movie theaters, and sound vs. silent cinema.

In sum, not only was Bakshy one of America’s first full-time professional film critics (and perhaps the best of this incipient lot), he was in addition one of the nation’s first film theorists, even being hailed, in his own lifetime, as “the father of film aesthetics” (Stern, 19). His work richly deserves to receive some of the attention heretofore reserved for the work of other significant early American film critics such as James Agee, who himself began writing movie reviews for the *Nation* in 1942; Otis Ferguson, the critic of the *New Republic* during the mid-1930s and early 1940s; Robert Warshaw, who wrote about cinema for the *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* in the late 1940s and early 1950s; and Bakshy’s admirer Harry Alan Potamkin, the film critic of the *New Masses* during the same years Bakshy was writing for the *Nation*: 1927 to 1933. Gentlemen, move over.

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