



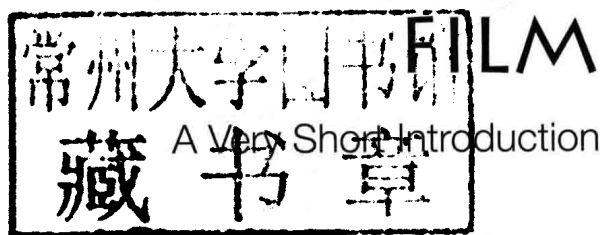
Michael Wood

FILM

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

Michael Wood



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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford ox2 6dp

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Published in the United States  
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First published 2012

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Data available

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India  
Printed in Great Britain  
on acid-free paper by  
Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

ISBN 978-0-19-280353-5

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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# Before the titles

I should like to apologize for two kinds of absence from this book. First, that of all the films, directors, writers, stories, thoughts, facts I have loved and couldn't find a place for – because I was too busy finding a place for something else. The pragmatic justification for such an exclusion, of course, is that life is short and so are very short introductions. But pragmatism doesn't exclude a little sadness.

I have taken my examples chiefly from Europe, North America, and Japan. This is because these places are the homes of the films I know best and have lived with longest, and the advantage of this approach is a certain security of description and consistency of thought. But since there is scarcely a country in the world where films have not been made, the limitations of this strategy are obvious, and create the second, larger absence I have in mind. Or part of it, since there are also plenty of European, North American, and Japanese works I haven't seen. This absence is that of all the films, directors, writers, stories, thoughts, facts, and doubtless many other ingredients that I don't know or didn't think of. Some of these elements are probably crucial and would have altered my whole view of film if I had been able to take them into account. I miss them on principle. But as one of the themes of this book suggests, you can know what you can't see but you can't see what you don't know.

Of course, it is impossible to survey or summarize the world of film, and I have not tried. But I hope it is possible to open up questions about what has been happening to the medium and through the medium, about what it is like to have learned to take for granted what once seemed to be a miracle: images of life possessing the movement of life itself. We must be seeing things.

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# Chapter 1

## Moving pictures

### Still waters

A man stands before a grave in a country cemetery. He doesn't move, nothing moves; no birds, a still world. But this is a man in a motion picture, we have seen him move, and he will move again in a moment when his spell of meditation and memory is over. The film is John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln* (1939). The man is Henry Fonda playing a grieving Lincoln as he lingers over Ann Rutledge's grave.

You like the shot and its framing, so you pause the film. Now it looks and feels quite different. How can it? What could be the difference between a stilled and a moving picture of a scene where there is no movement? You start the film again, and pause it again. Yes, quite different. Then you realize. There is a river at the back of the image, and in the motion picture it flows, there are pieces of ice drifting down the dark surface. In the still, it doesn't even look like a river, it looks like a piece of cloth, you would know it was a river only by induction.

For a long time, film studios all over the world were in the habit of advertising their wares not through actual images from their movies, but by means of publicity photographs: still pictures of stationary actors, often posed to look as if they were in a scene



## 1. Still waters

Film

from a film, but also often posed for scenes that didn't appear in any film at all. Large posters for movies didn't display photographs but lurid graphic representations, high-colour, lavishly stylized images from the world of commercial painting. Both practices suggested that a piece of a film couldn't announce a film in an adequate way, as indeed it couldn't, and can't. A stopped frame of a movie isn't part of the movie, unless the movie is using this frame as part of its design. A stopped frame outside of a movie isn't anything, not even a photograph. If nothing else moves in *Young Mr Lincoln*, the water in the river does; and if the water doesn't move, it isn't a movie.

And yet it doesn't move, as Galileo didn't quite say. A film is made up of precisely those stills that aren't anything – that aren't anything until they are projected at the right speed, 24 frames a second (or once upon a time, 18 frames). Then we see the real river not behind the simulated Abraham Lincoln but behind the



real Henry Fonda. There's more. We not only see movement where there is none, we fail to see, or our brains skilfully occlude from us, the swift patches of darkness between the frames. 'This temporal continuity', Mary Ann Doane says, referring to so-called 'real time' on screen, 'is in fact haunted by absence, by the lost time represented by the division between frames. During the projection of a film, the spectator is sitting in an unperceived darkness for almost 40 percent of the running time.'

I'm not sure the experience of light and motion is really haunted by any absence at all for most viewers of most films. We see what we see: motion. The effect became fully available to us only in 1895, soon after we learned how to get horseless carriages to move by means of an internal combustion engine, and shortly before we learned how to get aeroplanes to stay in the air. Still, it's intriguing to recall the actual make-up of what we are seeing when we see a movie. It's worth remembering too that all perception of movement, even that of the real world, is illusory as regards continuity. The brain constantly receives and makes sense of stimuli, combines them into what look like pictures of a steadily moving or stationary world. Reality is recorded by the eyes, so to speak, and composed by the brain. 'Each eye movement gives the retina a "snapshot" of some part of the visual scene, but the brain must put these still pictures together to create the illusion of a continuous world. Even neuroscientists don't have much of an idea about how this complicated process works.' Where there is movement, the brain doesn't watch a movie, it makes a movie; it is producer and director and movie theatre all in one.

Moving pictures both capture and make motion, and they do it by means of the magic I've just described: a mixture of speed and light. This magic remains magic even if we understand how it works and call it technology. What is still remains still and also moves. But then we have to remind ourselves that what we are seeing is not an illusion in the most frequently used sense of the term: 'Something that deceives or deludes by producing a false