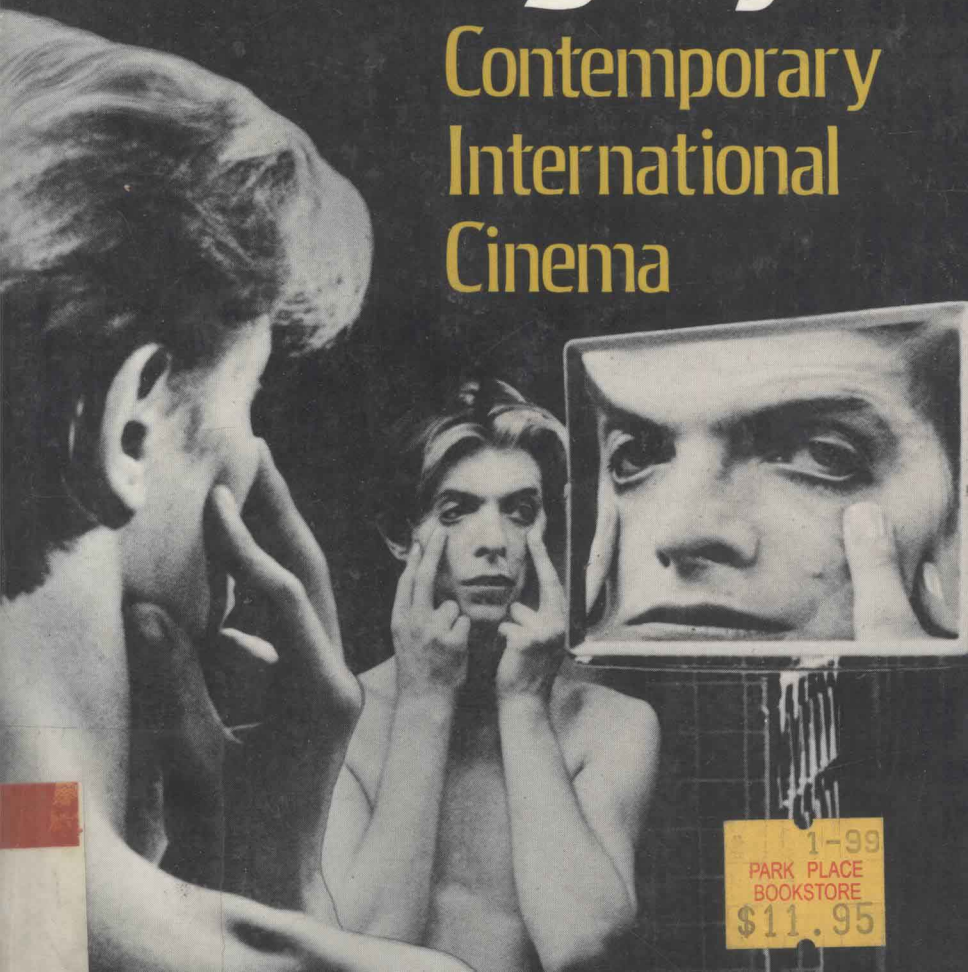


Robert Phillip Kolker

# The Altering Eye

Contemporary  
International  
Cinema



1-99  
PARK PLACE  
BOOKSTORE  
\$11.95

# THE ALTERING EYE

---

*Contemporary  
International Cinema*

ROBERT PHILLIP KOLKER

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Oxford New York Toronto Melbourne  
1983

*Oxford University Press*

Oxford London Glasgow  
New York Toronto Melbourne Auckland  
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo  
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town  
and associate companies in  
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City Nicosia

Copyright © 1983 by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
First published by Oxford University Press, New York, 1983  
First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1983

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Kolker, Robert Phillip.

The altering eye.

Bibliography: p.

1. Moving-picture plays—History and criticism.

2. Moving-pictures—Philosophy. I. Title.

PN1995.K66 791.43'09'046 81-22488

ISBN 0-19-503126-1 AACR2

ISBN 0-19-503302-7 (pbk.)

Acknowledgment is made to the following  
for permission to use copyright material:

The table "Dramatic Theatre—Epic Theatre" from *Brecht on Theatre*, edited and translated by John Willett. Copyright © 1957, 1963, 1964 by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main. This translation and notes © 1964 by John Willett. Reprinted by permission of Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., and Methuen London.

From "To Posterity" in *Selected Poems*, copyright 1947 by Bertolt Brecht and H. R. Hays; copyright 1975 by Stefan S. Brecht and H. R. Hays. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., and Ann Elmo Agency, Inc.

Printing (last digit): 9 8 7 6 5  
Printed in the United States of America

## *The Altering Eye*

*For*  
**LINDA**  
*and*  
*in Memory of*  
**GLAUBER ROCHA**  
*and*  
**RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER**

---

## **PREFACE**

Narrative film can set out to please its audience, soothe it, meet and reinforce its expectations. Or it can challenge, question and probe, inquire about itself, its audience, and the world that both inhabit and reflect. This is the kind of film that is my subject: film made in a spirit of resistance, rebellion, and refusal; made with desire. These films are made all over the world; they were made in America at one time—in the forties, in the late sixties and early seventies—and I have spoken about them in another book. Here I am concerned with the same periods, but with films made in Europe and Latin America, made in reaction to American cinema, often to America itself, yet dependent upon America, upon the conventions and attitudes of American film and culture, feeding upon them and sometimes spitting them out. These films are part of the modernist movement in twentieth-century art, a movement whose diversity has a common location in the desire to challenge attitudes about the work and place of art, to attack conventions and complacency, to reorder the relationship of the work and the spectator.

The modernist endeavor as a whole does not follow a simple chronological path, but in commercial cinema it concentrates in the movement that started in postwar Italian neo-realism, climaxed in the work of the French New Wave, and extends into the films of the

## PREFACE

new German cinema. It is various in its manifestations, complex in its forms, and demanding upon its audience. It is, therefore, not very popular. These films run contrary to everything popular cinema has trained us to expect, and present the added difficulty of being spoken in foreign languages, translated with words printed on the screen that distract our attention.

But popularity is a relative thing. In the sixties, when the movement was at its peak, it caused great excitement, much critical and even commercial attention. That attention has now dwindled, as the creative drive of cinema world wide has slackened. Therefore a central function of this book is to attempt both to recapture and re-evaluate that excitement by means of tracing the modernist movement in cinema using the critical apparatus that has been explaining it and that is in fact part of it. (For a key to understanding modernist film is an awareness that the work of imagination is simultaneously a work of criticism and vice versa.) In the course of this study I will examine films of great intellectual and emotional energy, engaged in a struggle to negate traditional cinema while drawing sustenance from that cinema in the process. In fact process itself is my major concern, and while I will look closely at representative works and figures, I will concentrate upon movement and the changing perceptions of the work of cinema.

What follows is a critical progress through progressive film, through a cinema that asks to be taken seriously and assumes that complexity is not a quality that diminishes entertainment. This is a cinema that invites emotional response and intellectual participation, that is committed to history and politics and an examination of culture, that asks for the commitment of its audience; a cinema that offers ways to change, if not the world, at least the way we see it.

*Columbia, Md.*  
*June 1982*

R.P.K.

---

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Although distribution of European and Latin American films in the United States has fallen off in recent years, there are a number of small distributors who still acquire new material, add it to their collection of older films, and help keep the tradition alive. I wish to thank the following distributors who supplied the films that made the writing of this book possible: Cinema Five, Corinth Films, Films Inc.—Audio Brandon, New Line Cinema, New Yorker Films, Uni-film.

The motion picture division of the Library of Congress was, as always, of great help, and the theater division of the American Film Institute gave special assistance.

A number of people assisted me with ideas, research, and technical help, by reading parts of the manuscript, and with good conversation. Thanks especially to Peter Beicken, Maria Coughlin, Douglas Gomery, Danusia Meson, Joe Miller, J. Douglas Ousley, David Parker, Stephen Prince, Adam Reilly, Harvey W. Thompson, Jr., and Katherine S. Woodward, and to many students who worked with me in courses and seminars in contemporary European cinema at the University of Maryland. A Faculty Research Grant from the University of Maryland allowed me a semester off to do the major writing.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sheldon Meyer and Stephanie Golden at Oxford University Press supplied their support and knowledge in giving this book shape and direction.

While it is an easy matter to thank and acknowledge those whose personal intervention aided my work, it is less easy when it comes to the great number of scholars and critics whose writing has been influential in forming my ideas. The notes to the text indicate some of the debt and the bibliography widens the range of acknowledgment, but can never complete it.

*For the Eye altering alters all.*

William Blake,  
"The Mental Traveller"

*The screen's white eyelid would only need to be able to reflect the light that is its own, and it would blow up the Universe.*

Luis Buñuel

*We often went to the movies. The screen lit up and we trembled. . . . But more often than not Madeleine and I were disappointed. The pictures were dated, they flickered. And Marilyn Monroe had aged terribly. It made us sad. This wasn't the film we'd dreamed of. This wasn't the total film that each of us had carried within himself . . . the film we wanted to make, or, more secretly, no doubt, that we wanted to live.*

Paul, in Jean-Luc Godard's  
*Masculin-féminin*

*My father said, "film is the art of seeing." That's why I can't show these films which are mere exploitations of all that can be exploited in human heads and eyes. . . . I won't be forced to show films where people stagger out stunned and rigid with stupidity . . . that kill any joy of life inside them, destroying any feeling for themselves and the world. . . . The way it is now it is better there's no cinema than a cinema the way it is now.*

A provincial theater owner in  
Wim Wenders's *Kings of the Road*

---

## **CONTENTS**

Introduction, 3

ONE The Validity of the Image, 15

TWO The Substance of Form, 121

THREE Politics, Psychology, and Memory, 269

Notes, 393

Bibliography, 405

Index, 417

*The Altering Eye*



---

## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Tout va bien* (1972), a voice announces: "I want to make a film." Another voice responds: "That costs money." And for many minutes the screen is filled with the image of a checkbook as, one after the other, checks are signed and torn off: makeup, sets, bit players, editing, electricians, sound, the communal apparatus of filmmaking enumerated by cost, deglamorized, and placed in a material context. It is a clear announcement of the state and the problem of contemporary film. Films cost money. And there is a second part to the equation. Films cost money; the people who spend the money want to see it back, with a profit.

The results of this equation are becoming too clear. In cinema world wide those films that do not promise large returns remain unmade or unseen. In the past, particularly in America, the great studio system provided such a large turnover for such a large audience that there was some room for exploration, for the occasional "non-commercial" work. Now every film must stand on its own in the circuit of exchange. It must make money. But European cinema never had quite the kind of studio system that existed in America, which was in fact something unique in history—the mass production of narratives; an assembly line for products of the imagination; art inte-

grated with and often subdued by commerce. America had (and has still) the world for its market, while most European filmmakers have, with rare exceptions, only their own countries. Therefore, the art-commerce tension that existed throughout the history of American movie-making—with commerce now subordinating art—was never as extreme in other countries. The difference must not be exaggerated; there was—and certainly now is—no absolute freedom in filmmaking outside America, just as there neither was nor is absolute tyranny within it. In fact much European filmmaking involves the production of “quota quickies,” sex comedies and the like made fast and cheap to satisfy government demand for a certain amount of indigenous product before the more profitable American films can be exhibited. Outside Europe, India and Japan have had entertainment factories almost on the scale of Hollywood.

However, because most countries cannot compete with Hollywood, other opportunities arise for their filmmakers. Instead of trying to compete they have the opportunity to make films quite unlike the standard American product. This opportunity is often supported by the fact that in Europe and elsewhere there is a greater respect for film as an intellectual, imaginative activity, a greater willingness on the part of a producer to allow the filmmaker to work on his or her own, to write, direct, and even edit a film, to release it in the form the filmmaker desires. In recent years, this respect has been demonstrated through state support (particularly through television) for new filmmakers, or for established ones who cannot find commercial distribution. Certainly state support brings with it the problems of state control; but overriding this is the fact that it permits films to get made that otherwise could not. The rebirth of German cinema came about through the patronage of the German government and its television subsidiaries. British cinema is promising to show some signs of life through the support of Regional Arts Councils and the British Film Institute Film Production Board. In past years a variety of films from many countries—the late works of Roberto Rossellini; Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem* (1970); the Taviani brothers' *Padre Padrone* (1977); Ermanno Olmi's *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978);

## INTRODUCTION

Peter Watkins' *Edvard Munch* (1976); Eric Rohmer's *Perceval* (1978), to name only a few—have owed their existence to the support of state-run television.

Even before television and the state stepped in, there were independent producers—such as Georges de Beauregard, who supported Godard and others of the New Wave in the sixties—willing to risk small gains on little-known filmmakers who would make unusual films. Throughout the history of European film, its makers found funding for experimental work and integrated their work with the rest of the imaginative work of the culture. In the teens and twenties, for example, the avant-garde played an active role in film, giving it, through the works of such as Abel Gance, Walter Ruttmann, Fernand Léger, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Jean Renoir, Jean Epstein, intellectual respectability. In fact most of the formal advances made in cinema originated in Europe and Russia. D. W. Griffith established the basic forms of film narrative that became the norm world wide; most of the experiments performed upon this structure, the challenges to it, the questions raised about it, came from abroad. And when they came, they were often absorbed back into the mother lode of American film. An entire history could be written about the influences of European styles and their originators on American film, a history that, depending on one's perspective, would show Hollywood as either enriching itself or perpetually homogenizing world cinema.

Thus, while European and American cinema both function on an economic base which determines what can and cannot be made, this base has been wider outside America, more ready to support financing on something other than a profit basis, thereby enabling films to be made that question or defy cinematic conventions. But in fact no direct split between filmmaking in America and elsewhere exists. There is rather an interplay in which the dominant style (or styles) of American movies are always present to be denied, expanded upon, embraced, and rejected, only to be embraced again. The presence of American cinema is a constant, and there is no filmmaker I know of, even the most revolutionary, who hates American film. Intellectual



arguments are marshaled against it; the emotions always respond to it. It is an attitude I share, and it colors the arguments in this book. I have set up American cinema as a model, often an invidious one, always an overgeneralized one, in order to examine its relationship to the work of individuals in Europe and in Latin America and their reactions to it. Melodrama, for example, is a narrative form that I often contrast to the modernist endeavor. Melodrama demands a great emotional response from its audience, an identification with the central characters of a film (whose personal problems are foregrounded without being linked to a defined social context that may determine them), and insists that conventional attitudes and gestures be accepted as unique components of a character's psychology. Melodrama is a form of assurance and security; as a structuring device in American film and its European derivatives, it all but guarantees that what is experienced in one film will not be very different from what has been experienced in most others. Just such forms of repetition, emotional safety, and reinforcement are what the modernists oppose with forms of question and surprise. But without melodrama, the modernists would not have a form to react against or, in some cases, incorporate. Despite my affection and admiration for American film (at least through the mid-seventies), I sometimes portray it as a kind of monolith that various figures have done battle with and look at it with something of the attitude of the filmmakers who were trying to deal with it.

What gives the American tradition the appearance of a monolith is the structure of repetition that I just noted. Since the early teens, when it began organizing itself to reach the widest possible audience, American film began to adopt a number of conventions in content and form that it has repeated, albeit with many variations, to the present day, always proclaiming that these conventions fulfilled audience desires. But in fact popular film does not so much fulfill or reflect the desires of its audience as create them through a complicated ideological process in which cultural and social attitudes are enhanced, given form, and reinforced in a circuit of exchange between the producers and consumers of cultural artifacts. The decades-long attitude of