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Looking toward the Future: On the Occasion of the Paris Congress

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The metaphor of cinema as a universal language can be found in the early film-theoretical writings of Béla Balázs, Ricciotto Canudo, Louis Delluc, and Vachel Lindsay, among others. Taking up this metaphor, Fritz Lang here argues that through its "mute speech," film might help facilitate reconciliation among the various nations. Organized by the League of Nations, the first International Film Congress was held in Paris in September 1926 (shortly after the Locarno Treaties were ratified) to explore the uses of film for international understanding.

In the beginning was . . . not the word. Nor was it the deed. In the beginning was motion.¹

Motion is the most basic testament to life. It does not matter whether we are dealing with the dance of the stars or of the mosquitoes. The old "I think, therefore I am" should be translated into "Moving, therefore alive."

Nature has forced our age—the first since the Earth's creation to sense the attraction of movement as the rush of speed—to create the moving picture that we call *film* and to raise it to the level of self-expression. Although it may still seem primitive, this form of expression is following the consequential and logical path to becoming an art form.

Viewed externally, it appeared for a time as if the unprecedented ravenous appetite with which the broad masses gobbled up film would do more to hinder its transition into an art form than to help it. Film's quality could not keep pace with the demands of this appetite. The subtlest creation ever born from imagination and technology risked suffocating irretrievably in the swamp of the most insidious kitsch. Only a very few of those working in film from the beginning possessed a broad perspective not only on film's potentials but also on the unfathomable responsibility that film would assume as a means of nourishing the intellect and the spirit of the people. But imagination and technology saved their own creation. Technology did so by successfully attempting to lend new forms to all-too-familiar realities, and by transforming the depths of the banal into something that could be raised to the heights of an ingenious realization. Imagination worked to master film poetically. I am completely convinced that the rebirth of film can result from this idea alone.

Today the genius of technology remains the dominant presence in film, and it continues to satisfy itself by surprising, baffling, amusing, or gripping us—as when, for example, it uses fast motion to speed things up for us to the point of becoming grotesque or

when it reveals to us the beauty of moving things, right down to the last mystery, through the use of slow motion. But the true greatness of film will be revealed only when, as we hope, tomorrow's film emphasizes the experience of an idea, the genius of the poetic.

Let us be clear about this. Film is the rhapsody of the twentieth century. But it could be much more for humanity; it could be the traveling preacher who speaks before millions. Through the mute speech of its moving images, in a language that is equally comprehensible in all hemispheres, film can make an honest contribution to repairing the chaos that has prevented nations from seeing each other as they really are ever since the Tower of Babel.

As paradoxical as it may sound today, we will begin to use slow motion to record thoughts and feelings in order to show the mystery of their emergence. Or when it is called for, we will use fast motion to vividly portray the chaotic eruption of a nervous breakdown. There are no limits to film's potential. Its task is to bring everything that moves and lives through movement closer to our senses, whether this be the procession of white clouds past a snowy peak or the twitch of the lips between a laugh and a cry—a distant and unseen past or a far-off future.

However, I believe that one of the most wonderful tasks for film will be to better acquaint us with a being we perhaps know least well precisely because it is always far too close to us: the human being.

Did film not reintroduce us to the human face? Should we not also call upon it to rediscover the human soul—this great and adventurous miracle of beauty and ugliness, of lofty and base thought, of nobility and malice, and, to a certain extent, of the touching and the comic?

Film is a moving image of life in motion.

It is technology as the harbinger of the visually poetic.

And what is the final goal?

If the film of tomorrow, graced with poetry, can teach us to recognize more clearly the person beside—and within—us, this will perhaps amount to a step forward on the path to goodness, sympathy, and self-awareness, a step toward an all-redeeming belief in the gifts of the world.

Note

1. A reference to the famous scene in Goethe's *Faust* in which the title character translates the Gospel of John.