Reading the City, Reading the Film: Remarks on a Theme in Balázs, Kracauer and Benjamin

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True stories

«A Russian friend told me the following true story», writes Béla Balázs, the Hungarian filmmaker and film theorist, in *Der Geist des Films*, 1930 (Balázs, 1984):[1]

> Somewhere in the Ukrainian countryside, hundreds of kilometers from the last railway station, there lived a man who formerly owned and after the revolution managed an estate. For fifteen years he had not been to a city. He had kept up with world history, but he had never seen a film. A highly educated intellectual who sent for all new books, newspapers, journals, who owned a good radio set, who was in continuous contact with the world and up to date with all things intellectual. Only he had not yet been to a cinema (Balázs, 1984:52).

Then he visits Kiev and sees his first movie, «a very simple, naive Fairbanks story». The cinema is full of children enjoying themselves. Our man is concentrated, shaking with excitement and effort. All in vain:

[1] My translations.

> He had not understood the film. He had not grasped the *story* which children could follow without difficulty. For it had been a new language which all town-dwellers mastered with ease, and which he, the highly educated intellectual had not yet understood (Balázs, 1984).

Almost twenty years after *Der Geist des Films* Balázs summed up his views on film culture in a book published in English under the title *Theory of the Film* (Balázs, 1948)[2]. Large parts of the book consist of excerpts from his earlier works, but at the place where one would expect the Russian steward to appear there is a story about an English colonial administrator «who, during the first world war and for some time after it, lived in a backward community» (Balázs, 1972:34). He «knew of films, and had seen pictures of the stars and had read film reviews and film stories; but he had never seen a motion picture» (Balázs, 1972:34).

Then he finally comes to a city, he goes to the movies, sits down among interested children, watches a very simple film - and the story of the Russian steward is repeated: The Englishman did not understand the film, «because he did not understand the form-language in which the story of the film was told, a form-language every town-dweller already knew at that time» (Balázs, 1972:34).

The colonial administrator has company: A Russian friends has told Balázs about a certain cousin who arrived in Moscow «on a visit from a Siberian collective farm - an intelligent girl, with a good education, but who had never seen a motion picture (this of course was many years ago)» (Balázs, 1972:34-35).

Then, of course, they send her to the movies, she sits down, watches «a burlesque», and does not understand a thing. She is indignant and agitated. «I can't understand why they allow such dreadful things to be shown here in Moscow!», she says. But what was so horrible then? «Human beings were torn to pieces and the heads thrown one way and the bodies the other and the hands somewhere else again» (Balázs, 1972:35).

A Ukrainian steward, an English colonial administrator, a girl from Siberia: three people who did not know how to read a film. They did not understand «the form-language in which the story of the film was told». In order to understand «the new picture language», Balázs writes, you must be able to «make visual associations of ideas», you must «integrate single disjointed pictures into a coherent scene» (Balázs, 1972:35). The steward, the colonial administrator, and the girl from the Siberian kolkhoz had not learned to do that.

[2] A German translation, *Der Film. Werden und Wesen einer neuen Kunst*, came out in 1949; quotations below from (Balázs, 1976). The English version is quoted from (Balázs, 1972). Thanks to Melinda Szaloky for sorting out the intricate relations between the Hungarian original and the two other versions.

A Founding Myth

Are these stories true? Probably not. There are enough oddities here to make you suspicious - the steward's transformation into a colonial officer, the sudden appearance of a Siberian cousin, not to mention some peculiar discrepancies between the German and the English versions of *Theory of the Film*.[3] Obviously, the stories are constructions, three almost identical, carefully organized sequences of events, three variations of the one and the same narrative: First Balázs presents some hazy information about how he learned about these incidents - a «true story» told by «a Russian friend»; another one told «by a friend in Moscow»; «there is a story about an English colonial administrator» ... Then he laboriously explains why these people happened to be so isolated - hundreds of kilometers from the last railway station; a world war, chance circumstances; the incident lies many years back. Then the accounts of their unsuccessful visits to the cinema. And finally the punch-line: They did not understand what they saw.

The interesting thing here is not whether the incidents are true or not, but the textuality of the stories, the mirror patterns, the repetitions etc., and first and foremost the figure of thought which is articulated by means of this very textuality. These stories are not only three variations of the same narrative, they are three variants of one and the same myth – which happens to be one of the founding myths of film studies.

If one only read the story about the Ukrainian steward one might perhaps miss the point, but as the steward is replaced by the English/Siberian duo in the *Theory of the Film* version, the myth is stabilized. Here are two stories constructed in such a way that when read together they suspend all the usual distinctions regarding gender, age, nationality, and social status: A male British government official living in a foreign colony reacts just like a young peasant girl from a Siberian kolkhoz. Only one crucial distinction, common to all three stories, remains: that between urban and rural areas.

The steward lived «in the Ukrainian countryside», «had not been to a city» for fifteen years, and had to go to Kiev in order to see his first film. The Englishman «lived in a backward community». Therefore he did not understand the «form-language every town-dweller already knew at that time». The cousin came «from a Siberian collective farm» and was horrified of what she saw «in Moscow».

[3] According to the German translation (Balázs, 1976:23f), the colonial officer was stationed, not «in a backward community», but *auf einer zentralafrikanischen Farm*, i.e. on a farm in Central Africa, and the Siberian girl was actually not a cousin but a new *Hausangestellte*, i.e. new maid who had come to work for Balázs' friend (which seems rather strange considering that the incident is supposed to have taken place some time after the revolution - she did after all come to Moscow from a kolkhoz).

Film in the City, Film and the City

Balázs' three stories are stories about cities. Films belong to the city, they say. But what exactly does that mean? What, for example, is a city in this context? A town in Africa, a large city like Kiev or Moscow. Or perhaps simply «a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals», as the American anthropologist Louis Wirth defined it, back in 1938, in his seminal essay on «Urbanism as a Way of Life» (Wirth, 1964). If we use this quite broad definition - permanence, size, density, heterogeneity - it is obvious that Balázs had a point, at least seen in a historical perspective: Within the time frame of these stories - «during the first world war and for some time after it» - film was an urban phenomenon in many important respects.

First of all it was an urban *institution* in terms of social space, audience, and function: In these first decades of the 20th century most films were shown in urban movie theatres, not necessarily in large cities, but in cities nevertheless. As soon as film production became industrialized movies were aimed at mass distribution with the socially heterogeneous urban audiences as their prime target. From the very start movies were designed to cut across cultural and educational barriers in the modern metropolis.

Furthermore most of these films were city films in terms of *narrative material*. With their representations of life in the big city they became powerful socialization agencies, indirectly educating their audiences in the ways of the world, emphasizing the rules and norms of urban life, showing them model situations, model forms of behavior etc.

Thus, film comprehension is obviously something you learn, not on an estate in Ukraine, not on a farm in Central Africa, not on a kolkhoz in Siberia, but in a city. This was the point of Balázs' story, this was how his contemporaries saw it, and this has been a common theme in film studies for most of the 20th century. However, according to the most radical, and also most influential, versions of this theme film comprehension has to be learned not only *in a city*, but *by living in the city* - not just because movie theatres happen to be located in cities for technical and financial reasons, or because most movies try to catch city audiences by telling them stories about city life, but because movies, on a more fundamental level, are constructed to match basic urban *forms of perception and experience*. The language spoken by the film is not just a new «form-language», as Balázs' stories suggest, but the language *of* the city. In order to read the film, you must be able to read the city.

Urban Experiences

What is urban experience? Sociologists give rather abstract and general answers to this question. In the essay quoted above Louis Wirth argues that the defining characteristics of an urban population - size, density, and heterogeneity - affect how individual members experience their social world, how they deal with each other etc. The mere size of the population prevents people from establishing close social relationships and leads to a rational, calculating view of social interaction, he writes. People also tend to orient themselves from visual cues as a result of the population density, and furthermore the social heterogeneity leads to psychological instability and insecurity, and also to a certain blasé attitude.

In Wirth's formulations there are clear echoes of the German sociologist Georg Simmel's famous essay on «Metropolis and mental life» from 1903 (Simmel, 1903)[4]. Money economy and intellectualism are closely connected phenomena, Simmel argued, and because large cities are the very centers of modern market economy, urban life will necessarily be characterized by a high degree of rationalism which in turn will express itself in a multitude of phenomena - in how people organize their personal life, how they react to each other, which aesthetic preferences they develop etc.

An argument about the connection between film comprehension and urban experience based on general observations like Simmel's and Wirth's, might go like this: In order to read a film the spectator must to be able to connect dissociated images into a unified and continuous narrative whole, or, in Balázs' words, to «integrate single disjointed pictures into a coherent scene». This kind of mental activity presupposes a distanciated attitude to the sequence of images and an ability to perform logical, rationalist operations generally associated with urban life.

Arguments like this appear in many variations and disguises in early writings on film and film theory. Such writings may be inspired to some degree by sociologists like Simmel or by contemporary sociological studies of urbanity and modernity, but usually they are first and foremost based on personal experiences and observations, and intimately connected with radical political visions and expectations. One example is the writings of Siegfried Kracauer.

New Configurations

Siegfried Kracauer, a former student of Simmel's, was Germany's leading film critic in the 1920s and early 1930s. In addition to an impressive output of about

[4] English translation; see (Simmel, 1950).

one thousand film reviews he also wrote a series of general essays on film and film culture, among them «The Cult of Distraction», a short, pointed text from 1926 in which he discusses Berlin's new movie theaters and their spectacular presentations of films and revues ((Frankfurter Zeitung, 1926) quoted in (Kracauer, 1995a)). These shows, the leading attractions in Berlin of this period, were clearly aimed at the urban masses, a fact which prompts Kracauer to discuss the conditions of life in the provinces and in a metropolis like Berlin:

> It cannot be overlooked that there are four million people in Berlin. The sheer necessity of their circulation transforms the life of the street into the ineluctable street of life, giving rise to configurations that invade even domestic space (Kracauer, 1995a:325).

Using the complex traffic situation as an example Kracauer here suggests that quantity may be transformed into quality: The density of the urban population leads to the emergence of new «configurations», just as, more generally, the physical and psychological demands of life in a big city lead to new social conventions and new patterns of action which in turn produce a new mentality, new patterns of thought.

Bourgeois cultural critics reproach the Berliners for being addicted to distraction, and, certainly,

> the addiction to distraction is greater in Berlin than in the provinces, but the tension to which the working masses are subjected is also greater and more tangible; it is an essentially formal tension, which fills their day fully without making it fulfilling (Kracauer, 1995a:325).

In Kracauer's view it is quite understandable why people shun the «anachronistic forms» of so-called high art: the Berlin audiences «act truthfully» when they prefer

> the surface glamour of the stars, films, revues, and spectacular shows. Here, in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions. Were this reality to remain hidden from the viewers, they could neither attack nor change it; its disclosure in distraction is therefore of moral significance (Kracauer, 1995a:326).

Thus, according to Kracauer, mass culture not only serves as a compensation for difficult conditions of life, it has a progressive potential as well. The distracted audiences who follow «the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions» gain valuable insights in their own conditions. Going to the movies is a way of preparing oneself for things to come:

> the fact that these shows convey precisely and openly to thousands of eyes and ears the disorder of society - this is precisely what would enable

> them to evoke and maintain the tension that must precede the inevitable and radical change (Kracauer, 1995a:327).

At the end of the essay Kracauer writes:

> In the streets of Berlin, one is often struck by the momentary insight that someday all this will suddenly burst apart. The entertainment to which the general public throngs ought to produce the same effect (Kracauer, 1995a:327).

However, he continues, «Most of the time it does not» (Kracauer, 1995a:327). Mass culture cannot redeem its promise of a radical change because the distraction is robbed of its meaning, because «the wile range of effects» is forced into an «'artistic' unity» (Kracauer, 1995a:327).

The need for replacing traditional «unity» with an alternative form of artistic organization is a recurrent theme in Kracauer. In a series of complex arguments about the workings of contemporary mass culture, he repeatedly emphasizes the progressive potentials of cinematic *fragmentation*. However, while fragmentation may be a first and necessary step in the creation of an adequate artistic expression of modernity, it is not a sufficient one. Creating a «fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions» will not in itself produce the necessary «radical change». In a review of German films produced in 1928 Kracauer writes about the montage film *Berlin - Die Symphonie einer Grossstadt.* Walter Ruttman, its director,

> attempts to allow the metropolis to arise out of a sequence of microscopic individual traits. But does it convey the reality of Berlin? No: it is just as blind to reality as any other feature film, and this is due to its lack of a political stance [...] Ruttmann leaves the thousands of details unconnected, one next to the other, inserting at most some arbitrarily conceived transitions that are meaningless [...] There is nothing to see in this symphony, because it has not exposed a single meaningful relationship (Kracauer, 1995b:318)[5].

The following year, in a review of Dziga Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera*, he writes that Ruttmann's «associations are purely formal». Vertov, on the other hand, uses *montage* to extract «a meaning from the collection of reality splinters. Ruttman offers a side-by-side without explaining it; Vertov interprets it by presenting it» (Kracauer, 1974a:90).[6] The shots with their «reality splinters» must be organized in meaningful patterns; if they are not subjected to an interpretative montage, the result is the one known from illustrated newspapers: a mere juxtaposition of elements, the world presented as disarray, as confusion, a simple «disorder of the detritus», as he puts it in a contemporary essay on «Photography» ((Frankfurter Zeitung, 1927) quoted in (Kracauer, 1995c:62)).

[5] Originally published as (Frankfurter Zeitung, 1928).
[6] Almost twenty years later Kracauer elaborates this argument in (Kracauer, 1974b:181-189).

The technique of montage makes it possible to assemble the detritus and create new configurations, but as his remarks on Ruttmann's film suggest, a mere juxtaposition of images based on superficial formal analogies was not what Kracauer had in mind. Certainly, filmmakers can combine «parts and segments to create strange constructs» and «play with the pieces of disjointed nature», thereby advancing the disorder, showing that «the valid organization of things remains unknown» - and in the current situation it is «incumbent on consciousness to establish the *provisional status* of all given configurations». However, film also has the power to foreshadow, to «awaken an inkling of the right order of the inventory of nature» (Kracauer, 1995c:62f).

Kracauer's view of fragmentation and montage as central cinematic devices is in many ways similar to that of Balázs'. Summing up his views on film culture in *Theory of the Film*, Balázs emphasizes that montage is more than a mere assembly of shots in which «whole scene follows whole scene», true montage means fragmentation of the scene: «pictures of smallest details are given, so that the whole scene is composed of a mosaic of frames aligned as it were in chronological sequence». By means of this procedure spectators are able to see «the very atoms of life and their innermost secrets revealed at close quarters» (Balázs, 1972:31). However, true montage is also a means of giving the fragments a decisive interpretation:

> A good film director does not permit the spectator to look at a scene at random. He leads our eye inexorably from detail to detail along the line of his montage. By means of such a sequence the director is enabled to place emphasis where he sees fits and thus not only show but at the same time interpret the picture (Balázs, 1972:31f).

Urban Spectatorship

Kracauer's general discussion of the city/film-theme was in some ways inspired by his former teacher Georg Simmel. There are also echoes of Simmel's views in Walter Benjamin's few, but highly influential writings on film. One obvious example is the so-called Artwork Essay with its emphasis on the audience's distanciated attitude toward the film, a close parallel to Simmel's core argument about the connection between urban life and rationality ((Benjamin, 1936) quoted in (Benjamin, 1977))[7]. On the other hand, Benjamin's discussion of urban forms of experience have a much more concrete character than Simmel's. While Simmel's short essay is a series of generalizations based on very few examples, Benjamin's descriptions of urban experiences consist mostly of examples. Using Clifford Geertz'

[7] My translation.

formulation one might say that Benjamin is writing «thick descriptions» of urban spectatorship.

The point of departure of the Artwork Essay is a condensed version of the history of art in which the transition from traditional to modern, or from «auratic» to «non-auratic», art forms is the crucial watershed, a transition described both an answer to and as a result of the change in modes of perception triggered off by the development of new reproduction media like photography and film. The implied audience of traditional, auratic art forms like painting or literature is presented as thoughtful, *contemplative* recipients who let themselves be «absorbed» by the work of art in question, while the audience for non-auratic art forms, particularly for films, is described as *distracted* spectators watching coercive sequences of images with constantly changing points of view. For Benjamin, as for Balázs, the uncontrollable temporal sequence is of prime importance. Films «jerkily assail the spectator», they demand to be read and understood in passing. A film is a series of imperative directives: «the understanding of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones» (Benjamin, 1977:148).

The point is that the film audience is capable of handling this new experience precisely because the spectators are city-people, metropolitans, used to a hectic lifestyle, to rapidly changing perceptions, heavy traffic etc.:

> Film is the art form which corresponds with the heightened danger which the people of today have to look into the eyes. The need to expose oneself to chock effects is people's adjustment to the dangers that threaten them. The film corresponds with profound changes in the perception apparatus - changes like those everyone experience within the framework of their private existence as they act in the metropolitan traffic, and like every contemporary citizen experience them within a historical framework (Benjamin, 1977:165).

In Benjamin, as in Kracauer and Balázs, fragmentation and montage are central issues. Fragmentation produces new knowledge: When the cameraman focuses on isolated details, he makes hidden things visible, thereby extending «our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives» (Benjamin, 1977:165). And when in turn the fragments are organized «scientifically» according to «a new law» during the montage, the enchantment of the world is broken. Films are capable of assuring us

> of an immense and unexpected field of action! Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of seconds, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling (Benjamin, 1977:161).

In an essay on Baudelaire written in 1939, Benjamin adds another dimension

to the image of the audience:

> Technology subjected the human sensorium to a training of a highly complex sort [...] There came the day when film corresponded to a new and urgent need for stimulation. This shock-like perception comes into play as a formal principle in film. That which determines the rhythm of production at the assembly line, is the basis of reception in film ([Benjamin, 1939 #34] quoted in (Benjamin, 1977:208)).[8]

Modern urban life forms and new working conditions have prepared the audience for a new kind of aesthetic experience. The phrasing about the «shock-like perception» being the «formal principle in film» echoes an argument in the Artwork Essay where Benjamin writes that the auratic image

> invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed [...]. This constitutes the shock effect of the film (Larsen, 1993:164f).

Defending themselves against this shock effect, the spectators develop a «heightened presence of mind» (Larsen, 1993:164f). They are not absorbed into the work, they do not identify themselves with the characters on the screen, and they try to shield themselves by *distanciating* themselves from what they see. This is precisely why they are able to watch a film with a critical attitude, or in Benjamin's words: The film experience is characterized by «the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the attitude of a critical expert». The distracted, distanciated film experience is both *enjoyment* and *critique* (Larsen, 1993:159).

Cinematic languages

As it appears, film is coupled with several forms of urban experience in Kracauer and Benjamin. They both argue that film is a social institution, which answers new and urgent needs for stimulation created by the monotony and physical exhaustion in the industrial workplace and by the general psychological stress of urban life. They describe film as a duality of sensuous attraction and compensation. Viewed as popular attraction and entertainment it is the negative expression, the reverse side of the repetitive, monotonous work processes; viewed as compensation for a difficult life situation it is formed in the image of the workplace for, as Benjamin argues, the same social forces which determine the rhythm of production at the assembly line, form the basis of the audience's reception. The film speaks the *Language of the Factory*, one might say. What the spectators hear is always, in the

[8] My translation.

last instance, His Master's Voice, the voice of Capital.

However, film also functions as criticism of the very same urban conditions. Both Kracauer and Benjamin argue that the film medium can be used as an aesthetic means of developing and organizing knowledge of the contradictions of modernity, and that it can indicate how the social situation can be changed. With its duality of fragmentation and montage the medium offers aesthetic expressions of urban mass existence which are more adequate than most traditional art forms: One the one hand, the cinematic sequence of shots presents a fragmented view of the world which matches the actual disorder of urban reality as well as the audience's experience of that reality; on the other hand, the disorder may be solved by means of an interpretative montage producing insights into the historical situation and preparing the spectators for the inevitable, radical change. For Kracauer the film *could* produce the insight that «all this will suddenly burst apart», but as he concludes: «Most of the time it does not». Benjamin is more optimistic: he is certain that film by virtue of its fragmentation has the redeeming power necessary to help the urban masses break the spell of modernity, to blow up «our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories». Thus, the film speaks the *Language of Utopia*.

However, in Benjamin film is, first and foremost, an aesthetic expression of and an answer to profound changes in the perception apparatus of the urban masses. As Benjamin argues, the same perceptual techniques are needed in the cinema as in the metropolitan traffic. The film speaks the *Language of the City*, and should be read just like one reads the city. Here we are relatively close to Simmel's general argument as sketched above. In order to cope with the city as well as with the film, one has to shield oneself, to adopt a distanciated, blasé attitude, and to perform certain conscious, rationalist processes.

Observations like these remain inspiring and thought-provoking to this very day. On the other hand, it is hard to deny that in spite of Kracauer's sociological imagination and Benjamin's many thick descriptions, some of the basic arguments have a rather tentative and speculative character. Reading these texts today one gets the feeling that they are to a large extent based on local and personal experiences and impressions, and that the connections they suggest between film and urbanity are ideological constructions shaped by predominant political and artistic notions of urbanity, modernity, and avant-garde aesthetics.

It is true that the invention of moving pictures coincided historically with the explosive urbanization in the last decades of the 19th century, and as indicated above there is a whole range of obvious connections between the new medium and urban modernity, especially in terms of narrative material, and with regard to film experience as compensation for and critique of urban conditions. Thus, it is probably correct to say that films spoke the *Language of the Factory*, and in some cases even the *Language of Utopia*, in the early decades of the 20th century. The connection between film language and basic forms of urban perception is, however, another

matter. Did the films then - or do films in general - speak the *Language of the City?* Benjamin's answer to this question is particularly problematic, based as it is on a series of textual analogies between cinematic montage and random urban phenomena like traffic, offices, railway stations etc.[9]

Learning Processes

At about the same time as Kracauer and Benjamin wrote about going to the movies in Berlin, the Soviet psychologist A.R. Luria traveled from Moscow to Central Asia. The account of his observations throws an interesting light on Benjamin's argument about the connection between film and urban experiences. It may also be read as an indirect commentary to Balázs and the anecdote about the Siberian girl who is said to have traveled in the opposite direction.

In 1931-32, in a period of radical restructuring and social change in the Soviet Union, Luria performed a series of psychological tests on peasant populations in remote villages in Uzbekistan and Kirghizia (Luria, 1976). The intention was to study the historical shaping of cognitive processes.

During their stay Luria and his staff were able to make comparative studies of «underdeveloped illiterate groups (living in villages)» on the one hand, and «groups already involved in modern life» on the other (Luria, 1976:14). Among the latter were women who attended short-term courses in the teaching of kindergarteners, active kolkhoz workers who had taken short courses, and women students admitted to a teachers' school after two or three years of study.

The study indicated substantial differences between these two sections of the rural population. The groups «involved in modern life» scored significantly higher in all test concerning perception, conceptualization, logical reasoning, self-awareness etc., a fact which, according to Luria, indicates that changes in the social and practical forms of activity, and especially the introduction of formal schooling, even in the form of short-term courses, produce «changes in the basic structure of cognitive processes and result in an enormous expansion of experience and in the construction of a vastly broader world in which human beings begin to live» (Luria, 1976:163).

As it appears, the decisive feature in Luria's study was the difference within the rural community itself between a traditional life-style and what he calls «modern life», meaning a life situation characterized by complex, collective work processes, new forms of social relations, and the acquisition of rudimentary theoretical knowledge. Luria's findings are quite in line with innumerable later studies in the tradition of Jean Piaget showing that basic cognitive abilities with regard to conceptualization, logical reasoning etc. are developed by all individuals at a certain,

[9] For a more detailed discussion of Benjamin's Artwork Essay, see (Larsen, 1993) and (Larsen, 1997).

relatively precisely defined stage in their life, given the right conditions, i.e. provided these abilities are needed in order for the individual to function adequately within the given social context, be it urban or rural.[10]

Applied to the film/urbanity question Luria's study strongly suggests that the mental processes characteristic of film comprehension are not necessarily associated with or developed within an urban context: People in rural areas do not have to go to the big city in order to learn the distanciated attitude necessary for making generalizations and abstractions, the ability to perform logical, rationalist operations etc. A «modern life» situation including formal training programs and participation in complex work processes is sufficient.

Visual Literacy

This leads us back to Balázs and his *Theory of the Film*. Immediately after the stories about the Englishman and the girl from Siberia he recalls the situation twenty years ago «when we ourselves would probably not have understood films which are quite obvious to spectators to-day» (Balázs, 1972:35). He remembers seeing a film in which a man is hurrying to a railway station to take leave of his beloved. She has already boarded the train, and the scene ends with a close-up of the man's face, showing his changing expressions as light and shadows crosses his face more and more quickly. Balázs writes:

> When I first saw this film in Berlin, I did not at once understand the end of this scene. Soon, however, everyone knew what had happened: the train had started and it was the lamps in its compartment which had thrown their light on the man's face as they glided past ever faster and faster (Balázs, 1972:36).

By introducing this new anecdote Balázs in a way neutralizes the city/country distinction which the two previous ones have served to articulate: At some earlier point in time he and his fellow Berliners were actually just like the English administrator and the Siberian girl, it turns out. The Berlin audience who understood the language of the city were not able to understand the language of the film. Balázs' heading to this part of the text is «We have learned to see», emphasizing the most obvious point of the two previous anecdotes, namely that film comprehension is something you have to learn. Benjamin thought that people learned how to adjust themselves to the dangers of everyday life in a modern city by going to the cinema. Balázs suggests that the most important thing people learn in the cinema is how to watch movies. «We have learned to see»: The old audiences learned to master the new language.

[10] For an overview of Piaget's work, see (Flavell, 1970). A series of Piaget-inspired anthropological studies of «primitive thought» comparable to Luria's work in Central Asia are discussed in (Hallpike, 1979).

Thus, the English/Siberian duo and the film/city equation notwithstanding, the real point of Balázs' anecdotes seems to be that understanding the language of the film is a question of time and of basic learning processes - a point which obviously places him in a less radical position than both Kracauer and Benjamin on the question of film and urban experience.

However, even this position may be a bit too radical. At least several later studies suggest that it is doubtful whether film comprehension *per se* is something you have to learn at all. In an overview of the available literature on the question Paul Messaris discusses Balázs' story of the colonial administrator several times (Messaris, 1993). Each time he tries to take it at face value, but he has to conclude that in the light of current empirical and theoretical knowledge the Englishman seems to have reacted in a highly unlikely way.

First, there is no reason to believe that a person unfamiliar with the medium should have problems in understanding moving images *as images*, i.e. as visual representations. On the contrary, most studies support the view that there is a significant connection between perception of images and the ordinary use of the faculty of vision in real-life situations. These studies further indicate that the very movement of moving images actually makes them easier to understand for an inexperienced spectator than ordinary still photos.

Second, it seems highly unlikely that an inexperienced spectator should be unable to understand what Balázs calls «the new picture language», i.e. be unable to make «visual associations of ideas», to «integrate single disjointed pictures into a coherent scene» etc. It is true that most early filmmakers doubted their audiences' visual reading skills, and that most of the classical editing procedures were developed with the purpose of helping untrained spectators understand the narrative - which means that if Balázs' Englishman actually went to a movie theater in the mid-1920s he would probably have seen a film in which every possible precaution had been taken in order to make the story intelligible. Whether such precautions were really needed is, however, an open question. Recent studies of first-time television viewers in Kenya and studies of children's understanding of basic editing practices indicate the opposite, namely that inexperienced spectators are perfectly able to understand a story even if it presented in a fragmented, unedited format.[11] On the basis of such studies and other available literature Messaris argues that it is not a spectator's prior experience with the medium, but his or her general cognitive development which determines if a film is understood or not.

It is probably a bit unfair to introduce psychological and anthropological studies of this kind into what started as a discussion of the film/city theme in early film theory. Obviously, the cognitive fundamentals of film comprehension were not the main point for radicals like Kracauer and Benjamin when they wrote their utopian visions about the connections between film language and urban modernity.

[11] For a report on the Kenya-study, see (Hobbs, 1988).

Neither was it a decisive point for Balázs. Although he repeatedly stressed that film is a new «form-language» which has to be learned, his prime interest was film aesthetics and his prime concern was to study and discuss what makes film «a specific independent art employing methods sharply differing from those of the theatre and using a totally different form-language» (Balázs, 1972:30).

Nevertheless, it is hard to resist reading Balázs' stories against the grain, interpreting them in the light of Luria's work or later empirical studies. Take for example the cousin of his Russian friend: If she actually was «an intelligent girl, with a good education», if she actually came «from a Siberian collective farm», she would probably have reacted just like Luria's women students «already involved in modern life» or like the first-time television viewers in Kenya discussed by Messaris, i.e. she would had no difficulties at all understanding the film they sent her to see - even if this was the first film she ever saw. But she might have had a hard time finding her bearings in Moscow and coping with the metropolitan traffic. Reading a city is probably harder than reading a film.