Research Article

Marthe Statius*

"The Hum of the Conversing Audience": Ordinary Criticism and Film Culture in American Early Film Theory

https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0251
received March 30, 2023; accepted July 6, 2023

Abstract: This article seeks to explore the early stages of American film theory, where *cinephilia* became a site of aesthetic interest and criticism thanks to the theorization of cinema as a conversational medium. Following Stanley Cavell's analysis of a distinct form of moviegoing in America, based on the casual conversation about movies, I argue that a reinterpretation of Emerson's ordinary aesthetics has been at the core of early film theory, especially in Vachel Lindsay's writings. In order to illustrate the relation between the defence of a new medium and the attempt to define a quintessentially American art form, this article focuses on the concept of "conversation" that Lindsay uses to describe film spectatorship and to provide a new critical apparatus to grasp the specificity of film aesthetics.

Keywords: history of criticism, early film theory, film aesthetics, silent film, modernism

1 Introduction: Words for a Conversation

When Stanley Cavell writes about ordinary aesthetics, he has in mind the playful, witty, and fast-paced dialogues of what he calls the Hollywood comedy of remarriage,[1] in which two enamoured characters demonstrate their suitability for each other by spending time together. He also argues that the constant and enthusiastic conversation moviegoers have after having seen a film shows how much cinema matters to us. Through the philosophy of ordinary language, he explains that our passionate attachment to movies is a way to both acknowledge and fight against our natural tendency towards an endemic scepticism.[2] In other words, the *importance* of cinema is a self-evident fact in American culture, such that he does not feel the need to justify his ontological approach to movies. In *The World Viewed,* he writes:

> *Why are movies important? I take it for granted that they are. That this can be taken for granted is the first fact I pose for consideration; it is, or was, a distinctive fact about the movies.*[3]

Cavell's argument about the relationship between movies and conversation is based on two assumptions: first, that the talkies of the 1930s and 1940s are the most striking example of the role of language in ordinary aesthetics; second, that the conversation about movies is so entangled with our *forms of life* that the movie culture is undeniably specific to the classical Hollywood era. By claiming the affinity between popular movies

1 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness, The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*.
2 Domenach, *Stanley Cavell, le Cinéma et le Scepticisme.*
3 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, *Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 4.

* **Corresponding author: Marthe Statius,** LISAA, Université Gustave Eiffel, Paris, France, e-mail: marthe.statius@gmail.com

and philosophical writings, Cavell escapes the old-fashioned question of cinema's artistic legitimacy and instead places the *conversation*, the words we use to describe our filmic experiences, at the heart of any critical inquiry about film. He shares this belief with a whole generation of prolific film critics and movie buffs of his time (Robert Warshow, James Agee, Manny Farber, etc.) as seen in the introduction of Warshow's *The Immediate Experience*:

> *[Those popular forms of cultural experience in American life] were not yet assimilated to the world of traditional art, but whose meanings were so central to our contemporary life that the serious critic had a special responsibility to deal with them, as seriously and as truthfully as he knew how.*[4]

At the end of the 1960s, the role of film criticism in American culture was often identified with cultural criticism, philosophically rooted in the debates of the 1930s about the necessity to overcome the boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow culture, as Lawrence W. Levine[5] famously explained it. The agonistic structure of film criticism and the liveliness of conversations about movies that Cavell and his contemporaries observed can be historically explained by an extraordinary theoretical investment right after the birth of cinema. More precisely, Cavell's statements about the importance of movies in our ordinary lives, and the function of conversation as an extension of the cinematic experience, were previously formalized by early film critics and theorists whose ambition was to define the aesthetic, political, and ethical possibilities of the medium, and to envision the future of cinema. My aim is to investigate how theoretically and critically the definition of cinema as a conversational art form emerged in the 1910s, as the narrative film form was first developing. The historian's perspective on American movie culture and moviegoing can bring further evidence to film's central role in the American reflection about art and ordinary aesthetics, and its relevance to political thinking. Returning to the specificity of American film discourse, I argue that the first acknowledgement of the key function of cinema in building ordinary aesthetics occurred in the early American film theory, which founded itself on a broader philosophical tradition that restored the scope of aesthetics. Cavell shows how Classical Hollywood inherited a philosophical tradition represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. By tracing the origins of ordinary criticism in early film theory, we see that the attentiveness to daily life, to popular entertainments, and above all to cinema's integration in our conversations were arguments used even before Classical Hollywood, by early critics and theorists, to define cinema not just as art but as a quintessentially American art form. Such an approach requires us to identify how Emerson's and Whitman's writings were considered in the 1910s and 1920s, and to what extent these early film theorists share a preoccupation with transcendentalism.[6] To allow close scrutiny of a number of texts, I have restricted my work here to Vachel Lindsay's writings, since he is often considered to be the first film theorist, and because he refers to both Whitman and Emerson.

In the domain of film studies, ordinary aesthetics seems to only apply to a Cavellian or a Cavellian-inspired corpus, as if the acknowledgment of the importance of film came only with the beginning of Classical Hollywood. However, by inquiring about early film theory and criticism, we are going to focus on silent film and especially its reception in a time defined by the transition from moving pictures as a novelty to moving pictures as the most popular art form of the time.

Early film theory does not often raise academic curiosity, except in anthological and rather outdated works about early American criticism[7] or in historical studies of early American cinema's reception.[8] Therefore, our knowledge of this American film culture and film philosophy might be fragmented, partial, and almost exclusively mediated by Cavell's own philosophy of film, inspired not by the first theorists, but by Bazin and Panofsky. In order to put the centrality of ordinary aesthetics into perspective, I will focus my

4 Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, 9.

5 Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow. The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*.

6 Lounsbury. *The Origins of American Film Criticism*.

7 Kauffman, *American Film Criticism, from the Beginnings to Citizen Kane*. A more recent analysis can be found in: Marcus, *The Tenth Muse. Writing about the Cinema in the Modernist Period*.

8 Two brilliant contributions to the study of the American Silent Era: Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*; Askari, *Making Movies into Art*.

analysis on the very first book of film criticism that appeared in the United States, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, published in 1915 and written by the bohemian poet Vachel Lindsay, whose ambition was to describe the aesthetic potential of film, its artistic future, and its social mission in semiotic terms. Lindsay's contribution to film theory shows his messianic wish for an art to come, like Emerson's optative description of a democratic art form that would foster the "upbuilding of a man." The difference is that Emerson dreams of an art form that does not exist yet because neither poetry nor photography can take on this role, as François Brunet[9] explained. For Lindsay, however, the meaning of cinema in a democratic culture is a pressing contemporary issue that requires an ambitious political plan. Foreseeing film culture, film education, and the Hollywood system, Lindsay invents renewed aesthetic categories to support the development of film criticism and the rise of American film. For him, this task can only be accomplished if a theoretical input gives structure to the erratic conversation about films that exist in the context of cultural effervescence, and of a contagious enthusiasm for the Nickelodeon. My analysis consists of investigating some of his discursive strategies and theoretical foundations that sketch the outlines of an aesthetic program, partly inspired by transcendentalism, which will be later reconsidered by cultural criticism and the revolution of the ordinary. I will draw attention to Lindsay's description of cinema as a collective and socially inclusive experience, freed from the narrow standards of taste imposed by an elite. Finally, I would like to investigate Lindsay's idea of the continuity between filmic experience and ordinary life, following his statements about cinema as a universal language, or "American hieroglyphics," in the tradition of Emerson and Whitman.

2 Vachel Lindsay's Practice of Criticism

A few pieces of context are necessary to understand the specificity of the emerging American film culture in the 1910s. Even if film criticism had already begun in 1909 with Frank Woods' pioneering reviews in *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture* is considered to be the first book ever written about film theory, and to have transformed film criticism into an independent discourse, distinct from theatre criticism. Long forgotten until it was reedited in 2000 with an introduction by Stanley Kauffman,[10] who highlights the boldness of this first contribution to film aesthetics, *The Art of the Moving Picture* pursues two central objectives. Lindsay received a visual education at the Art Institute of Chicago and discovered there the experimentations of the Ashcan School – which took inspiration from Whitman's poetry (e.g. Mannahatta, in which Whitman calls for new words to capture the image, essence, and spirit of New York). The Ashcan School aimed to promote a visual revolution in the United States. Where Whitman called the United States "the greatest poem" in his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Lindsay states, "my general proposition [is] that the United States is a great movie… All American history past, present and to come, is a gigantic movie with a Pilgrim's Progress or hurdle race plot."[11] Lindsay also endeavoured to provide aesthetic standards to appreciate and classify films by inventing a new language to qualify this new medium in the absence of any reliable body of aesthetics. Therefore, what characterizes his approach to film is a mix of an original reevaluation of European aesthetics and a populist reappropriation of Whitman's and Emerson's statements. To Lindsay, film criticism was primarily a crusade against censorship[12] and film sceptics, who were reluctant to acknowledge the film medium's artistic ambition, as they considered it to be a mass entertainment that would cause the moral decay of the Victorian culture. In 1915, the Supreme Court qualified the motion picture as a business rather than an artistic practice, hence the stakes of early film theory and criticism were very high. Contrary to the sceptics, however, at the beginning of the twentieth century, movie-goers like Lindsay, Hugo von Münsterberg, and

9 Brunet, *La Naissance de l'idée de Photographie*.

10 Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture, [1915]*.

11 Quoted by Goldstein in a condensed version of her book: *The American Poet at the Movies*. http://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-3-classics-re-runs/an-american-millenium-vachel-lindsay-and-the-poetics-of-stargazing/ - _edn18.

12 The National Board of Censorship of Motion Picture was created in 1909.

Victor O. Freeburg believed that this new medium had the potential to create a moral and intellectual reform of American culture, a reform that would rescue the country from crass commercialism and uplift its artistic expression to equal the level of European film productions.

Right after his book's publication, Lindsay was hired as a film critic at *The New Republic*, where he found an opportunity to assess the theoretical adequacy of his theses in the context of contemporary films. He also began to lecture on film aesthetics and supervised the reedition of his book initially in 1916, and then in 1922 with additional comments. Hugo von Münsterberg and Victor O. Freeburg pursued Lindsay's ideas in their own writings about film, feeling the same intellectual need to engage with the new medium. *The Photoplay*, published in 1916, outlines a theory of spectatorship by using arguments from experimental psychology; 1918's *The Art of Photoplay Making*, along with 1923's *Pictorial Beauty On Screen*, measure the artistic value of cinema through a comparison with painting. Münsterberg and Freeburg (as well as filmmaker D.W. Griffith) praise Lindsay's visionary poetics of film and support his hope for an institutional acknowledgment of cinema as the symbol of what Miriam Hansen calls the "vernacular modernism,"[13] a democratic and accessible interpretation of modernity presented in visual forms. A few years before his death, Lindsay was working on his second book of film criticism, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, in which he called for an independent film culture to interrogate the hegemonic nature of Hollywood and the standardization of taste.

Between 1915 and 1925, the motion picture had achieved artistic respectability, and the apparent awkwardness of mechanical reproduction was no longer an issue, to such an extent that specialized periodicals about films had already begun to appear.[14] Film criticism had become a distinct profession. That being said, Lindsay's film criticism consisted of both analysis and vision, from a careful and empirical observation of a distinct filmography (Lindsay is mostly enthusiastic about Griffith, Pastrone, and Walsh), to prophetic statements about the glorious future of the motion picture, in the new promised land of California, as suggested by the last chapters entitled *California and America* (ch.16) or *The Prophet-Wizard* (ch.20). His religious belief in the power of movies to uplift the masses and rebuild a uniquely American culture led him to envision criticism as a way to help the motion picture assume its place among the arts. This populist sensibility, torn between the demand for high art and a fear of crowd psychology (after Le Bon's study of the popular mind), is characteristic of the writing about cinema in the modernist period. Lindsay's approach is not an exception, and oscillates between these two preoccupations, referring sometimes to a prescriptive definition of art and sometimes to a modern conception of popular taste. Because the new medium provoked a frenzied reaction among lower social classes and freshly arrived immigrants, the film critic was responsible for establishing basic principles of interpretation and aesthetic apprehension, and to "bring to bear the same simple standards of form, composition, mood and motive… the standards which are taken for granted in art histories and schools, radical or conservative, anywhere[…]."[15] The need for standardization can of course be understood as a populist tendency in Lindsay's writings in the context of the Progressive Era, but early film theory also pertains to a vision, an ambition to shape the destiny of the motion picture by organizing the spectatorial experience and educating the audience. Lindsay wished for his book to become a theoretical canon in film studies and to contribute to the emergence of a critical discourse about film. Victor O. Freeburg's film courses at Columbia University fulfilled this dream of glory by referring to Lindsay's writings (and Sargent's *Technique of the Photoplay*) as the touchstones of film theory. The categories introduced by Lindsay provide a critical framework for the average spectator. Dreaming of an institutional awareness, Lindsay is firstly committed to building a high-level film culture that will influence the preferences of the public, such that the establishment of meaningful criteria will later contribute to the development of the aesthetic and technical improvement of American cinema. This intellectual urge to legitimize the artistic status of the medium has also to do with a historical need to redefine the uniqueness of the American experience, since cinema emerged as an

13 This notion is introduced by Hansen in the context of Greenberg's definition of high modernism: Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses."

14 One of the first periodicals exclusively devoted to film is *Exceptional Photoplays*, published from 1922 by The National Board of Review of Motion Pictures.

15 Haberski, *It's Only a Movie! Films and Critics in American Culture*, 24.

international and universally acclaimed art, about which intellectual avant-gardes in every country could argue. In this context, the most popular entertainment was supposed to bring fresh ideas, concepts, and art into the lives of the ordinary people.

The Art of the Moving Picture was conceived as a guidebook for filmic experience, which explains why Lindsay addresses the spectator directly at the beginning of every chapter: "Let us assume, friendly reader, that it is eight o'clock in the evening when you make yourself comfortable in your den, to peruse this chapter."[16] Based on a fairly simple taxonomy that establishes the relationship between cinema and fine arts, Lindsay's approach presents itself as a didactic panorama of the American cinema, in which films are analysed in terms of spectatorial reception. Exposing his method in chapter one of the second edition, he writes: "In short, by my hypothesis, *Action Pictures* are sculpture-in-motion, *Intimate Pictures* are paintings-in-motion, *Splendor Pictures* are architecture-in-motion."[17] One of the most surprising elements of his approach is the generic perspective on cinema, which will later lead to the structuralist reading of Classical Hollywood. To him, film criticism requires above all classification, and an artistic foresight shaped by a solid knowledge of the history of art.

The three identified film genres and their counterparts in the hierarchy of fine arts are supposed to help the audience understand and process the filmic experience, in order to escape the amazement of the spectacle and to engage intellectually with a film as a work of art. Unlike some of his contemporaries like Walter Prichard Eaton, for example, Lindsay does not interpret the cinematic experience as a morally dangerous one, as if a fully passive spectator were overwhelmed by the projective mechanism and brutally taken away from ordinary life to be placed in a situation of *epoché*. On the contrary, Lindsay believes that moviegoing will become a civic ritual, a collective activity, where ordinary conversations and preoccupations will not be suspended but encouraged and shared with the others. Elsewhere, Lindsay explains that the motion picture deserves a public rather than a mob, an educated and invested audience rather than a formless mass of spectators, making a distinction between an uneducated, random gathering of people, and an informed audience. The distinction is implied in early film theory's discourse about the transformative power of cinema, conceived as an educational medium. But it also reflects a common feature of the American film theory in the 1910s: Lindsay's thinking alternates between an archaic condemnation of popular taste and insights into its political strength, between an attachment to past forms and an intuition of forms to come. This uncertainty explains the fragmentary nature of his writing and his eclectic references. According to him, the progress of the movies can be achieved, the production can be improved, the filmmakers will be galvanized by the crowd, and film criticism itself will become a serious intellectual activity which supports a vivid artistic debate. In his view, ordinary criticism can only be achieved through cinema, and will be a way to overcome the obsolete distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture only if two conditions are fulfilled: on one hand, the improvement of screenwriting, on the other hand the refinement of taste. As Stanley Kauffman explains, Lindsay was interested in opening up powers, in showing possibilities to filmmakers by encouraging movie fans to demand valuable artistic works with ingenious narratives, formal experimentation, and audacious performances. To escape the danger of standardization, Lindsay recommends defining a method of judgement based on the three generic categories he introduced, as well as on analysis of the film itself. In addition to the theoretical dimension of film education, *The Art of the Moving Picture* entails practical advice and lays the foundations for an initiation to filmmaking. In chapter 13, entitled *Sculpture-in-motion*, Lindsay, drawing a comparison between fine arts and the action film, suggests studying the compositional rules of sculpture in a sequence by doing an exercise which consists of buying motion picture magazines, choosing illustrations in high relief, and comparing them to famous examples of sculpture in the history of art. Lindsay's recurrent descriptions of workshop-like experiments suggest that film education and criticism should take the form of a playful discovery of cinema's plastic possibilities, a free exploration of artistic forms.

In the longest section of *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, he also introduces the method of shot-by-shot analysis of sequences when describing Douglas Fairbanks' *The Thief of Bagdad*, released in 1924, and

16 Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 52.
17 Ibid., 4.

considered by Lindsay to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration for future filmmakers. Arguing about narrative continuity and the symbolic function of inanimate objects and landscapes on screen,[18] he explains how to analyse a cinematic metaphor by identifying its occurrences. In some of his most brilliant analysis, Lindsay asks himself how cinema creates meaning, as if anticipating Christian Metz' reflection about cinema and language and the interpretation of a "language without a code." Moreover, Lindsay considers that film analysis and film criticism require a new and specific vocabulary, since a broader transformation of the link between a literacy-based culture and a visually oriented one has happened in the United States and will subjugate European elites. As he puts it:

> What are the American arts? The skyscrapers, most of them prohibited by law on European soil, and yet our first masterpieces, the motion pictures, the flying machine, billboards, and comic strips like Pat Sullivan's Felix the Cat. Pictures and enterprises like these we take with such childlike simplicity. We do not realize that a thousand years hence we will remember these things then as we remember the Parthenon now. Amusing new things, produced with such ease on American soil that we think they are second rate.[19]

This broad and monumental definition of American culture, from its most popular artefacts to its architectural identity, is at the core of the reflection about popular culture and its meaning for ordinary aesthetics in the 1930s, from John Dewey to Gilbert Seldes. Reflecting upon the potential dangers of popular culture which could lead to an instrumentalization of the medium, and a tendency to please the masses, Lindsay wanted to support the development of critical filmgoers and citizens. Because moviegoing could become a civic ritual, a shared experience accessible to anyone, film criticism had to indicate how movies should be shown, collected by universities and museums, and understood. In chapter 14, *The Orchestra, Conversation and Censorship*, Lindsay compares the film critic to a "custodian of arts," as if film criticism had to play a protective role against the threat of crowd psychology. Furthermore, for Lindsay, who seems to sometimes regress towards a Victorian approach to entertainment, the democratic space of film culture should be defined by circumscribed norms, following the model of an eighteenth-century literary salon:

> The photoplay reporters can then take the enthusiasts in hand and lead them to a realization of the finer points in awarding praise and blame. Even the sporting pages have their expert opinions with due influence on the betting odds. Out of the work of the photoplay reporters *let* a superstructure of art criticism be reared in periodicals like The Century, Harper's, Scribner's, The Atlantic, The Craftsman, and the architectural magazines.[20]

Ideas, opinions, and conversations had to be exchanged in accordance with a superstructure of art criticism shaped by the specialized press and public institutions and improved by teaching programs. This Enlightenment approach to the filmgoing audience is described by Lindsay in an almost sociological study of film spectatorship that would determine the common representation of moviegoing in America and its significance for ordinary aesthetics. His focus on the importance of the *conversation*, however, foreshadows Cavell's philosophical concern for the ordinary words we use to convey the meaning of filmic experience, as if Lindsay understood that the specificity of our attachment to movies lay in the fact that movies are a continuing matter of discussion, a kind of background hum.

3 Early Spectatorship and the Shaping of Moviegoing

Even if *The Art of the Moving Picture* does not aim to describe the medium in terms of experimental psychology, Lindsay develops a reception theory in the context of a political reflection about the function of

18 In an astonishing premonition of the storyboarding process, Lindsay analyses the symbolical significance of inanimate objects on screen by drawing a parallel to Chinese shadow puppet shows.

19 Quoted in Wolfe, *Vachel Lindsay*, 58.

20 Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 201.

cinema in a democratic culture. His attempt to identify the sociological background of film audiences indicates his interest in the prevailing opinion about the mass-entertainment character of the cinematographic show. As Miriam Hansen recalls:

> It has been a long-cherished assumption in survey histories and journalistic views of Hollywood that the first motion picture audiences were mainly immigrant and working-class and that this was the single most important factor in shaping American cinema as an institution.[21]

Lindsay's progressive ideas of a movie theatre that would be an all-inclusive space for debate and universal consensus are not unique and perpetuate the myth about Hollywood's origin in which a genuinely democratic popular culture is finally born. His theorization of the role played by conversation in the shaping of early American moviegoing, however, expresses a hope for the formulation of ordinary aesthetics before film becomes synonymous with mass culture and before its institutionalization as a cultural heritage. His vision of film culture not only provides a legitimating strategy of cinema's cultural respectability but also revives Emerson's and Whitman's dream of an intrinsically democratic art form, one that would be "practical and moral …, in connection with the conscience," so that "the poor and uncultivated feel that it addresses them with a voice of lofty cheer."[22] In his commentary on the chapter entitled "The Practice of Criticism" from Lindsay's unpublished book, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, the film historian Myron Lounsbury summarizes the reference to Emerson and Whitman:

> In 1915, the boundless energy of Whitman had inspired Lindsay's imaginative gifts. Ten years later, the "brooding courage" of Emerson and the melancholic humor of an aging Twain strike a responsive chord, reminding him that there are still practical matters to be negotiated.[23]

As Lounsbury argues, Lindsay is primarily inspired by Whitman's passionate defence of democracy and America's artistic expression because of their poetic nature. In other words, Lindsay's claim for a national consensus about cinema's significance stems from a belief that cinema would play the role of poetry in modern time. This dream has to do with an opportunity, a promising coincidence of a technical innovation that could finally establish America's artistic dignity. This wish for a representative, quintessentially American art that would express the democratic state of mind reminds him explicitly of Whitman's prophetic statements:

> We must have Whitmanesque scenarios, based on moods akin to that of the poem *By Blue Ontario's Shore*. The possibility of showing the entire American population its own face in the Mirror Screen has at last come. Whitman brought the idea of democracy to our sophisticated literati but did not persuade the democracy itself to read his democratic poems. Sooner or later the kinetoscope will do what he could not, bring the nobler side of the equality idea to the people who are so crassly equal.[24]

Lindsay's description suggests that cinema can be interpreted as the mirror stage of the American ego: in film, a culture that has been obsessively concerned with "the exertions of mechanical skills,"[25] as Emerson puts it when he calls for a cultural and intellectual revolution, comes to recognize and identify itself with great works of art, thanks to a reflection effect. What he means by "Whitmanesque scenarios" remains unclear, but one can assume that he has specific examples in mind, especially if we remember Griffith's evocation of Whitman's poem *"Out of the cradle endlessly rocking"* as the key image of the Eternal Mother rocking the cradle, which unites the four narratives in *Intolerance*.

The comparison to Whitman occurs in the context of Lindsay's analysis of "the picture of crowd splendor," which refers to epics and, more precisely, to Griffith's majestic group scenes in *Birth of a Nation* and in

21 Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 60.

22 Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 455.

23 Lindsay, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies: A Second Book of Film Criticism*, edited and with commentary by Lounsbury, 408.

24 Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 97.

25 Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 82.

Intolerance, which inspire patriotic feelings in the spectator. Griffith himself is sympathetic to a certain nationalism, or nation-building ambition, which Lindsay admires despite its inherent racism and embrace of slavery and segregation. However, this kind of film shares with architecture the power of suggesting the greatness of a political idea – in this case, that of the American nation. But what Lindsay intends here by "democratic poems" refers more to the depiction of equality, to show that "the passion for equality," considered by Tocqueville as a more fundamental trait of American democracy than the passion for freedom, can actually give birth to representative works of art without sacrificing the genius of artistic creation to a desperate desire for conformity.

For Lindsay, America's self-acknowledgement has already happened, since cinema plays a social function, especially for the masses, in fostering man's spiritual awareness, as shown by the continual hubbub in movie theatres. Furthermore, the film theorist is enthralled by the popular reaction to film, by the conversations that emerge all over the country. In chapter 14, *The Orchestra, the Conversation and Censorship*, he describes the nickelodeon as a "conversational theatre" where film should be accompanied by the "buzzing commentary of the audience" rather than music, which also explains his strong opposition to the talkies. His defence of silent film and his suspicious feeling towards musical accompaniments during the screenings are distinct from the common views about the artistic superiority of silent film. Unlike Chaplin's famous attacks against the talkies at the end of the 1920s, Lindsay is not opposed to the introduction of sound technology and believes in the necessity to express the human voice on screen. What he rejects, though, is the disappearance of the casual conversation not only after the screening and outside of the theatre but during the screening too. The musical accompaniment or any other distraction from the perpetuation of small talk – which would nowadays be seen as an annoyance for the serious spectator – must be prohibited. This includes the use of inter-titles, which for Lindsay are a sign of the filmmaker's laziness and lack of belief in the meaning of cinematic language.

In the same chapter, Lindsay compares the future of the nickelodeon in public life to that of the saloon – a smoked-filled and crowded room where ideas come from all sides: "The perfect photoplay gathering-place would have no sound but the hum of the conversing audience."[26] Miriam Hansen describes the sociological context of spectatorship in early cinema in analogous terms:

> The neighborhood character of many nickelodeons – the egalitarian seating, continuous admission, and variety format, non-filmic activities like illustrated songs, live acts, and occasional amateur nights-fostered a casual, sociable if not boisterous, atmosphere. It made moviegoing an interactive rather than merely passive experience.[27]

The casual, social atmosphere of the nickelodeon creates the setting for an aesthetic experience described as interactive and cathartic, in order to satisfy Lindsay's dream of a democratic film culture. But the simple observation of the moviegoing crowd also indicates that *cinephilia* will require a generation change, because movies cannot be judged by the traditional stage audience and by aesthetes with purist ideas. Previous generations are too influenced by a Victorian-era ethos, and therefore incapable of praising the new medium's potential without condemning its vulgar appeal to the lower classes. In *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, Lindsay asks what constitutes the model critic of film and culture, and which ideological routines must be abandoned to acknowledge the specificity of film aesthetics. Commenting on audience reactions to Douglas Fairbanks' *The Thief of Bagdad*, released in 1924, he writes:

> Yet every newsboy in the audience understood it, and every person who followed the movies from early youth understood it, and over and over I have heard youngsters nine years of age discussing and explaining with perfect intelligence to their grandparents the finest points of the movies before them, while those same grandparents, with hard, fixed, unadjustable eyes, understand none of the language they were trying to read. It literally requires a completely new generation of eyes to appraise the motion picture. It will probably be ten more years, just about the time Fairbanks is due to be broken by the great powers of America, that the young men and women who have a real motion picture education from childhood will be in command in America.[28]

26 Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 193.

27 Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 61.

28 Lounsbury, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies. A Second Book of Film Criticism*, 266.

This model of "discussing and explaining … the finest points of the movies" corresponds to a recreative form of *cinephilia* that extends the pleasure of the screening itself and desacralizes the movie theatre, rejecting the notion of "picture palaces," which were built in the 1920s to infuse moviegoing with the prestige of middle and high cultural venues more often associated with theatre and opera. In his study of the legitimization process of cinema in early Hollywood, Peter Decherney[29] argues that Lindsay's model for the film audience is inspired by eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking about the rise of press and public opinion. But we could also understand Lindsay's thematization of conversation in an emerging film culture as an Emersonian inheritance, since Lindsay refers to Emerson in his second book of criticism. Commenting upon the significance of *Intolerance* and *The Thief of Bagdad*, he writes:

> Both productions are having the same effect on our minds, dear friends, as Emerson's Address on the American Scholar was said to have had on certain New England people, a great turning point.

By quoting *The American Scholar*, in which Emerson first thematizes, in the form of a list of new artistic objects, a physiognomy of the ordinary, Lindsay invokes a broad philosophical tradition. This quotation allows us to have a closer look at the concept of conversation in Emerson's essay entitled *Art,* in which he describes an aesthetic experience he had when traveling to Rome:

> I found that genius left to novices the gay and fantastic and ostentatious, and itself pierced directly to the simple and true; that it was familiar and sincere; that it was the old, eternal fact I had met already in so many forms—unto which I lived; that it was the plain you and me I knew so well—had left at home in so many conversations.[30]

Elaborating on some of his most famous theses about the ordinary and the feeling of familiarity, of nearness to reality, that we desperately seek in art, he explains that an intense and ecstatic confrontation with beauty brought him paradoxically back home, to the memory of conversations he had had. In front of "the great, the remote, the romantic," Emerson finds himself returned to the ordinary stuff of life, the intimacy of relationships he left behind. Analogously, the entanglement between conversation and ordinary aesthetics is fundamental in Lindsay's argument that the conversation about film maintains a continuity of experience and political debate. He envisions "the hum of the conversing audience" as a sign of cinema's key role in renewing the conditions of aesthetic experience and as a prolonging of this experience outside the movie theatre. The compartmentalization of art from life and the elitist definition of taste hindered the development of artistic culture and made Emerson's ordinary aesthetics appear to be an illusion. To Lindsay, an understanding of the new medium requires a more global reading of America's feeling of shame towards European standards and the denigration of the value of common lived experiences, which is also at the core of Emerson's argument. Or, as Laurence Goldstein, commenting on the specificity of Lindsay's criticism, phrases it:

> By upbringing and temperament Lindsay disdained the eastern seaboard and elite Old-World standards of taste. His populist sensibility led him to embrace not only the astonishing innovations of modern technology; the flying machine, the automobile, the skyscraper; but vulgate forms like the billboard and the comic strip as eruptions of the common language into a moribund world of refined discourse. He was attracted on the visceral level to movies, and on an intellectual level to the claims of filmmakers that film constituted a revolutionary art.[31]

To support the educational virtue of film culture, Lindsay believes in the necessity of understanding the specific character of movie fans and the value of their casual conversation. Also in chapter 14, he explains:

> The fan at the photoplay, as at the baseball grounds, is neither a low-brow nor a high-brow. He is an enthusiast who is as stirred by the charge of the photographic cavalry as by the home runs that he watches from the bleachers. In both places he

29 Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite – How the Movies Became American*.

30 Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 454.

31 Goldstein, *The American Poet at the Movies*.

> has the privilege of comment while the game goes on. In the photoplay theatre it is not so vociferous, but as keenly felt. Each person roots by himself. He has his own judgment, and roasts the umpire.[32]

The comparison between the movie buff and the baseball fan, also used by Freeburg in the 1930s, shows how undisciplined, loud, and profane the film audience could be. To Lindsay, the only legitimate way to use the primitive pleasure provided by the cinematic show is to foster the democratic power of these aesthetic experiences by encouraging spectators to vote, by ballot, for the films to be projected, in order to make them directly participate in the elaboration of film culture, and to decide whether or not a movie should become a classic. Again, in his Emersonian thought about the destiny of films and the need for criticism to establish them as classics of an American art to come, he writes:

> The first-class films perish so rapidly from the general public eye that not even the conscientious critics have time to put their heads together and say "Yes, that was a good film". Films have been almost as evanescent as yesterday's newspaper. ... To speak in the modest manner of a movie press-sheet: anything I can say that will keep productions like *The Thief of Bagdad* constantly before the American people will be a service. Let us make them classics indeed.[33]

The system would transform every movie theatre into a kind of art gallery, functioning as a polling station where works of art are no longer worshiped like idols but constantly submitted for approval to a cheering and demanding crowd. This vision is of course a populist one, addressed specifically to the working-class and recent immigrants, and has to be replaced in the context of the Progressive Era, so that Lindsay suggests answering four simple questions to guide the judgement about a film:

> What play or part of a play given in this theatre did you like most today? What the least? What is the best picture you have ever seen anywhere? What pictures, seen here this month, shall we bring back? [34]

Along with the critical framework of genre conventions, audiences would use this kind of satisfaction questionnaire to analyse their judgements. The voting system was also designed to solve the problem of censorship. Lindsay's idea was for audiences to impose the control and selection of film production so as to avoid the closure of nickelodeons, which were considered by the gatekeepers of high culture to be immoral and unhealthy. Because movies could become a vibrant force in American politics, Lindsay wanted the nickelodeon to provide a space in which working-class and middle-class communities meet and converse with each other.

4 "The Secret of Democratic Beauty"

Lindsay's belief in what he calls "the primitive appeal of the movies" is based on a theoretical attempt to understand the power of cinematic language. According to him, cinema must be understood as both a new language and a new paradigm, and film theory should reach back to ancient patterns, which means in his case to Whitman and Emerson's depiction of a future art, in order to describe the medium's possibilities. He famously uses hieroglyphics as a model to understand film language and to describe how cinema communicates to the viewer through a system of allegories. What has been sometimes forgotten, though, is that Lindsay, like other film theorists, is concerned about the impoverishment of modern language, which seems to be condemned to arbitrariness and imprecision – that is, unless the moving picture saves it and restores "an original relationship to the universe"[35] in Emersonian terms. Two simple facts reassure the poet: first, film language is comprehensible, instinctively striking; second, even the uneducated, illiterate spectator reacts to the moving pictures and feels the need to process it through language after the screening. In other words,

32 Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 200.
33 Lindsay, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, 172.
34 Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 199.
35 Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 22.

Lindsay's dream of the invention of a universal language is closely related to an almost empirical inquiry into the terms of a conversation about movies, as Laura Marcus puts it:

> Conversation, for Lindsay, was thus a reference to the running commentary of the film spectator as explainer and the explanatory discourse of the film critic and theoretician. It was also connected to the 'hieroglyphic' language of the film.[36]

The hieroglyphic language of the film refers to its iconicity and its capacity to create symbols, which become understandable in a shared network of primal, natural, and essential meanings. Filmic communication reestablishes a genuine relationship to language as a unity of pictures and words, a kind of occulted knowledge, that becomes accessible again. Moreover, the hieroglyphic model, inspired by the American Transcendentalist fascination with hieroglyphics and the doctrine of emblematic correspondences (from Poe to Whitman[37]) in the context of the American Renaissance, suggests that the power of film lies in its visual clarity. Words and statements become meaningful again since they can be defined and pictured in the reality of film, because cinema speaks the picture-language. Returning to the idea of a "democratic poem," Lindsay's description of film as a universal language connotes egalitarianism and the progress of civilization, or rather, the upbuilding of man through technology. The nonverbal mode of signification that both Lindsay and Freeburg link to the pictorial quality of film explains their fascination with the new art, which is based on a direct appeal to the imagination.

The universal language myth has to do with what Miriam Hansen calls the "Babelistic tradition" and the millennialist thought, which combine cinema and language theology in the American discourse on the legitimization of cinema. But it also means, from a transcendentalist perspective, that in cinema the contact to reality is regained, that the filmic experience is immediate and consists of an emotional and imaginative absorption that does not require any artistic education. Rachel O. Moore, drawing a parallel between Bela Balaz's *Theory of Film* and Lindsay's writings, and analysing the specific meaning of this heuristic tool in an American context, writes:

> The people for whom the lack of distance was altogether new, for whom this nearness, whether an emotional absorption or a tactile hit, for whom contact with the work of art was a shock rather than a thrill, were those people who were acculturated to European aesthetics and art philosophy. Americans, women, children, and primitives, never so schooled, on the other hand, approach cinema with curiosity and readily accede to this immediate form.[38]

Lindsay's metaphor is of course simplistic and must be understood in the context of a comparison between religion and moviegoing, but it also recalls Emerson's call for the foundation of an American art, as Moore argues: "America, with no significant artistic tradition of its own, according to Lindsay, effectively skips developing its own art history and turns directly to cinema, thus putting it ahead, for once, of the Old World."[39]

Generally speaking, early American theory tackles the issue of defining a new medium that could give birth to a self-reliant artistic tradition, and faces the challenge of becoming an inherently democratic art. Because Lindsay perceives the urgency of redeeming a national art form, his contribution to film theory resonates with Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, especially when he explains that he found in film the "secret of democratic beauty," which proves that "America is a hieroglyphic civilization, closer to Egypt than to England," hence breaking the link with European tutelage. Based on the proliferation of uncoded and transparent images, cinema shares with advertisements, magazines, newspapers, and cartoons a faith in the magical power of pictures, allegories, and metaphors. In other words, for Lindsay, cinema becomes the first democratic art form also because it has the power of re-enchanting modernity and making Americans aware of the flashy beauty of their hectic city life – audiences enjoy cinematic "splendor and speed" because "such spectacles gratify the incipient or rampant speed-mania in every American."[40] Movies had to play the role of showing to audiences how dazzling and symbolically rich modern life could be, telling the story of technical

36 Marcus, *The Tenth Muse. Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period*, 193.
37 Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 22: "Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic [...]".
38 Moore, *Savage Theory*, 51.
39 Ibid., 58.
40 Quoted by Moore, *Savage Theory*, 57.

innovations from a fairytale perspective. Under these circumstances, anyone could recognize the irrefutable evidence of cinema's manifest destiny and its key role in unifying the national imagination. The defence of film also serves to justify the Americanness of a growing culture industry.

Like Griffith later, and theoreticians of the 1930s, Lindsay has undoubtedly nationalist motivations when he claims that film is a new medium for universal democracy. The Emersonian and Whitmanian subtext plays the role of an intellectual foundation to defend the necessity of inventing a policy of support for the cinematic art. Lindsay does not only describe an eccentric and hallucinatory dream about Los Angeles becoming "the Boston of the photoplay …, the Florence … of the United States,"[41] he also outlines a political program to encourage film collection and preservation inside of dedicated museums, archiving and studying processes, thus describing the transformation of cinema into a civic ritual, a national institution.

As Peter Decherney explains, "Lindsay's book – and American film theory generally – accompanied the vertical integration of the film industry and the standardization of the filmgoing experience"[42] by defining the role of film criticism and encouraging the emergence of film culture. Even if his intention was not to contribute to the systematization of film connoisseurship because the artistic status of cinema was not yet established, his vision helped to define the scope of film studies at Columbia University and later the Museum of Modern Art's Film Library, which was created in 1935, one year before the opening of the Cinémathèque. According to Decherney and Hansen, Lindsay's metaphor of the universal language has two other significant consequences: first, the genre codification of filmmaking during Classical Hollywood thanks to a homogenization of representations; second, the formulation of a mass-cultural base of motion pictures in accordance with middle-class sensibilities. Is it fair, though, to treat Lindsay as an instigator of policies and debates that simply do not exist in the context of early American film and will first appear when the question of popular culture's respectability will be raised? Considering Lindsay's definition as a preconception of mass-entertainment can be reductive and misses the importance of ordinary conversation as the basis for film criticism. Ordinary conversation, inside and outside the movie theatre, during and after the screening, about the quality of the film itself, becomes a site for thinking and judging works of art.

The nationalist dimension of Lindsay's film theory has more to do with Emerson's and Whitman's literary battle for the depiction of American life in an American art than with an anachronistic defence of American superiority in film production. Again, Lindsay, like Griffith, considers himself a disciple of transcendentalism, which justifies his comparison between the apparatus of cinema and the writing and oratory of Emerson and Whitman in his celebration of the iconic nature of filmic language. His advocacy for the democratic power of the medium stands out from two types of writings about cinema in the Modernist period: on one hand, the fan magazine type of discourse that appears in publications like *The Photoplay;* on the other hand, the scholarly discourse that considers the new art form from a conceptual and abstract point of view. In Lindsay's perspective, these two types of writings engage neither with the democratic potential of film nor with the challenge to rebuild art criticism on the basis of the ordinary. In his text, Lindsay presents himself as an arbiter of taste, proposing to advise both Hollywood's moguls and the academic system towards producing and promoting an art worthy of posterity's applause, one that would become a consensual frame of reference for mass American culture. He also wants to be seen as a savvy moviegoer, sharing his spontaneous impressions concerning the movies with a "friendly reader," as if in a casual conversation.

5 Conclusion: The Seriousness of Film

Lindsay's model of conversation refers to two different levels of reality: first, the casual conversation as a distinctive feature of an aesthetic experience that fully belongs to ordinary life; second, the conversation as a structured, impactful, and serious debate about movies. His contribution to film theory comes precisely from a

41 Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 217.
42 Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite*, 31.

desire to invent this type of conversation which will support the emergence of moviegoing as a new democratic activity, accompany the birth of a new public sphere, ethnically and socially more inclusive and less gender-segregated, where the definition of American culture is at stake. In this sense, the rise of film culture suggests a new hope for the formulation of ordinary aesthetics and criticism, before cinema would become a spectre of mass-cultural consumption. Lindsay's writings are of course part of the general discourse about the cinema's artistic status and its cultural respectability and belong to the common strategies of legitimation that overload the debate about cinema before the birth of the talkies. But he also calls for the birth of the American artist (the poet, the American Scholar for Emerson; the prophet-wizard for Lindsay), who would adequately summarize the spiritual hopes of his own culture and those of the new medium.

However, the institutional recognition of cinema in the United States is a slow process and required first the acknowledgment of cinema as a fundamentally American expression, which was promoted by cultural criticism on one hand, and by individual initiatives on the other. The tradition of cultural criticism, represented by Gilbert Seldes in the 1930s, who worked as the editor of *The Dial* – which also served as the chief publication for Transcendentalists – focused its defence of the medium by claiming the cultural richness and the persuasive power of popular culture. Along with Otis Ferguson and later Robert Warshow, Seldes uses the marketing of cinema as a democratic art and identifies tutelary figures of modern culture in his most significant book, *The Seven Lively Arts*, first published in 1924. While Seldes reuses some of Lindsay's theses to redefine intelligent criticism applied to denigrated culture, Victor O. Freeburg and his successor at Columbia, Frances T. Patterson, invent film scholarship through a Photoplay Composition course. They offer vocational training and provide practical instruction by teaching the mechanics of screenwriting. But Patterson also believes in the importance of critical evaluation of the movies, and she wants to redefine the principles of aesthetic judgement in order to improve the quality of films. In *Cinema Craftmanship* (1920) and *Scenario and Screen* (1928), she campaigns for a film education based on a conversation about cinematic value which would encourage audiences to demand higher quality motion pictures. In other words, film scholarship and film criticism could create a virtuous circle and guide the development of the film industry.

Driven by the same faith in the power of movies as a way to consolidate a shared American culture and identity, the gifted film critic Iris Barry would later become the most significant contributor to national film promotion in the 1930s. As Peter Decherney and Dana Polan[43] explain, Barry's work at the MoMA is directly related to the early stages of American film theory. Born in England, Barry arrived in the United States with the firm intention to create a sanctuary for American cinema based on the model of the Film Society of London, founded in 1925. Her goal is to create a class of film experts who would guide the reception of film in the United States and abroad, because in her view the American film culture was still characterized by amateurism and incompetence. *The Art of the Moving Picture* was an essential text for theorists of film collection and education, to such an extent that Barry mentions Lindsay in her manifesto *Let's Go to the Movies*, published in 1926[44]. Like Lindsay, she believes in the necessity of acknowledging the seriousness of film culture and its cohesive force in identifying the essential traits by which the American culture should define itself. In 1935, the MoMA Film Library was created to raise the level of film appreciation, and thus production, because unless the better films of the past were preserved, no standards would be possible. Along with Alfred Hamilton Barr Jr, who was an art historian and the first director of the MoMA, she defends the project of tracing, cataloguing, assembling, preserving, exhibiting, and circulating all types of films. Together, they achieved Lindsay's dream of establishing the first permanent collection of movies in a museum and thus contributing to the general redefinition of American art. However, Barr's project was fully dedicated to the American self-acknowledgment of its artistic expression, such that he claims "that the only great art peculiar to the twentieth century is practically unknown to the American public most capable of appreciating it."[45] While the Little Cinema Movement had evolved as a response to the trend of mass marketing in the late 1920s by attempting to reach an audience open to experimental filmmaking and avant-garde cinema, the MoMA believed that aspects of mass culture such as movies could be art, and that popular taste could shape artistic standards. In the outline of the Film

43 Polan. *Scenes of Instruction, The Beginning of the US Film Study.*

44 Barry. *Let's Go to the Movies.*

45 Haberski, *It's Only a Movie! Films and Critics in American Culture*, 83.

Library's project, Barry explains: "There is no body of reference available, no 'sources' to inspire, no heritage other than the most accidental and fragmentary. Makers of films and audiences alike should be enabled to formulate a constructively critical point of view, and to discriminate between what is valid and what is shoddy and corrupt."[46]

The museumification of cinema does not coincide with the disappearance of what Lindsay found so fundamental and so fruitful in the American moviegoing. It seems that the model of a conversational theatre, of an undisciplined and spontaneous audience, is not a fantasy or an idealistic definition of what film culture should become, but rather an observable fact. In the reports about MoMA's filmgoers, it is said that movie buffs of the time were "talk[ing] loudly during screenings, argu[ing] aggressively over seats, laugh[ing] at tragic heroes and weeping women, cackling with abandon at the sight of violent deaths."[47] Audience members were behaving like participants in saloon-style conflicts.

Therefore, when Cavell recalls a time during which movies mattered and moviegoing was an everyday and collective activity, he expresses a profound sense of loss – the loss of a cultural consensus. More than a nostalgic opinion[48] about a glorious time, he describes "ordinary moviegoing in America,"[49] sustained and extended by ordinary film criticism that was shaped in early American film theory by its first generation of thinkers: Vachel Lindsay, Hugo von Münsterberg, and Victor O. Freeeburg[50]. This type of criticism gave birth to a specific discourse about film in the context of the reconsideration of popular culture and of the attempt to define an intrinsically American artistic expression. Rooted in ordinary language criticism and inspired by Emerson's quest for a democratic art form, the American film culture primarily relies upon a common experience: movies generate endless conversations about stars and directors, such that they are at the core of public debates about aesthetic issues and render obsolete the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture. Hence, early film criticism gave an intellectual validity to the conviction that cinema was "an art unlike any other, quintessentially modern; distinctively accessible; poetic and mysterious and erotic and moral,"[51] as Sontag writes. During the period of American modernism, filmgoers and film critics worked hand in hand to shape the conversations we naturally had about the movies that mattered to us, and transformed those conversations into what today we call *cinephilia* – a democratic and self-elected elite that participates in the constant reshaping of the aesthetic experience.

Funding information: Publishing costs have been covered from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 834759).

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

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46 Ibid., 85.
47 Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 2.
48 Cavell, *The World Viewed*: "What broke my natural relation to movies? What was that relation, that its loss seemed to demand repairing, or commemorating, by taking thought?", 19.
49 Ibid., 19.
50 Freeburg. *Pictorial Beauty on the Screen.*
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