Academia meets Hollywood: Professor Karl Waugh, dean of arts and sciences at the University of Southern California, tests the emotionometer on the Great Stone Face, Buster Keaton, while Gwen Lee looks on, ca. 1920. (From the USC Moving Image Archive.)

Scenes of Instruction

The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film

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5 Politics as Pedagogy, Pedagogy as Politics

The Rather Brief Moment in Time of Harry Alan Potamkin

> Art has always been a victory against odds.
> HARRY ALAN POTAMKIN,
> "Motion Picture Criticism" (1931)

Ironically, one of the most legendary of early film curricula was never actually put into effect. In the papers of the influential film critic Harry Alan Potamkin—who died tragically of abdominal hemorrhaging at age thirty-three in 1933—there was found "A Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture," and this project has garnered an important reputation over the years.[1] Potamkin appears to have drafted the proposal, as Lewis Jacobs (the editor of the posthumously published volume of Potamkin's writings) explains, "when it was considered possible that a large university was interested in establishing a separate college to be instructed by a faculty of specialists, similar to existing music, medical, architecture, and business schools" (587). The proposal was published posthumously in the arts journal *Hound and Horn* and has come to symbolize a great opportunity lost through the death of the man who devised it.

In the 1940s, for example, filmmaker and writer Jay Leyda cited Potamkin's course idea as virtually the only example of worthy training in film in the U.S. context. For a series of articles by various authors on film education worldwide, Leyda was reporting on the advanced training that could be found in the Soviet Union's film schools. Against the rigor of the Soviet enterprise, Leyda lamented the fact that in America there had been no attempts by the film industry to support serious academic training about film. He had "found no evidence that any connection or mutual responsibility exists between the film teachers and the film industry." Leyda could cite the case of isolated film courses here and there in the United States—for example, he mentioned Sawyer Falk's cinema course at Syracuse University which will be treated in the next chapter—but he could find no systematic, sustained training. In this context, Leyda presented Potamkin's thwarted ambition for a film school as

at best an inspiring memory: "[T]he soundest American program for a film institute has not yet been tried, thirteen years after its formulation by Harry Alan Potamkin. His 'Proposal for a School of the Motion Pictures,' though little more than a sketch, has a balance and emphasis, based on American needs, that any planner would do well to consult."[2]

That Potamkin never got to put his curriculum into practice has contributed in large part to its mythic status. Its resonance is as an opportunity missed, a potential unrealized. It is, then, an additional twist in the ironies of his case to discover that in fact Potamkin did teach a course on film, one that seems not to have been noted by the historians. In the winter of 1932, around the same time that he appears to have drafted the "Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture," Potamkin offered a course at the New School for Social Research called Lands, Films and Critics. It ran from October 3 to December 19 and was reported on, after its first session, in the *National Board of Review* magazine, to which Potamkin had been a sometime contributor. A few months after the course's end, the same journal would be running Potamkin's obituary.

To be precise, we do not absolutely know that Potamkin made it to the end of the course, but we do know that he started teaching it, and we have a description of his intended pedagogy for it. In most accounts of his demise, it is said that his illness began to take its toll in June 1933, so there is every possibility that Potamkin brought his New School lecture series to its announced close that previous December.

The National Board report offered an overview of the course and a breakdown of its scheduled topics. In its words,

> On the first Monday in October there began at the New School for Social Research, 66 West 12th Street, New York City, an unusual series of lectures that will make up what is probably the first course of its kind in this country: a critical presentation of the cinema—its history, its future; its social basis, its esthetic evolution; its forms and categories, et cetera. The lectures are being given by Harry Alan Potamkin, of the Exceptional Photoplays Committee [of the National Board of Review], a student and critic of the cinema who combines a wide and thorough knowledge of motion pictures, old and new and of all countries, with a profound understanding of people, so that to him the art of the screen is not only a live art, but one connected intimately with human living. His lectures are accompanied by illustrative film excerpts and other descriptive accessories, as well as by talks by important representatives of film bodies and activities.[3]

As we saw in a previous chapter, Terry Ramsaye had tried to come back, after teaching his 1927 course, to the New School at the beginning of 1931

to offer a new course on the motion picture. It is hard to know what transpired both to bring about the failure of Ramsaye's course (although I have made some suggestions in chapter 2) and then to have Potamkin succeed him, but it must be said that Potamkin was certainly a better fit for the New School. (USC's Boris Morkovin also tried to find a visiting position at the New School during this period. He sent a letter proposing a course either in literary study [with typical ambition he outlined five different topics, ranging across nations and genres] or in cinema. For his cinema offering, he suggested courses similar to ones he was teaching at USC: Screen Drama, Fundamentals of Motion Picture Production, or Social and Psychological Aspects of Motion Pictures. Nothing came of Morkovin's offer, and he remained in Los Angeles.)

The biographical notice that the New School bulletin ran in 1932 to accompany Potamkin's course provides some background on his career:

> Harry Alan Potamkin. B.S., New York, 1921. Director, Children's Play Village, Philadelphia, 1923–28. Managing Editor, *The Guardian*, 1924–25. Studied cinema in Europe. Foreign correspondent, National Board of Review; adviser on European films to American exhibitors, 1928–29. Elected to council of international cooperative of independent films. Sarraz, Switzerland, 1929. Correspondent, *Close Up* (London), since 1929. Contributor to general and special press here and abroad. Free lance editor of films. Member, Exceptional Photoplays Committee, National Board of Review.

Potamkin had been born at the turn of the century to an immigrant family, and through much of his life he absorbed and mediated currents of art and thought from both Europe and the United States. In the 1920s, he seemed destined for the life of the poet and used his honeymoon in 1926 to travel through Europe in hopes of meeting legendary figures of modernism and to study new literary traditions. Evidently, he discovered that much of the cutting-edge literary work of the moment took inspiration from the cinema, and he began to examine that art more systematically. He had always been an avid moviegoer, but now film became an object of close investigation. In Europe, he met with many of the important film critics and aestheticians and studied their efforts to promote the art of film not only through their writings but also through more active cultivation of film culture in ventures such as the little cinemas and the cine-clubs. Upon his return to the United States, Potamkin began to read systematically in the English-language literature on the cinema—both those works that dealt with the history and industrial structure of the Hollywood entertainment film and those that set

out to theorize film's broader artistic potential. Around 1927, Potamkin himself began to write regularly on film, and there has been some speculation that at the time of his death, he was preparing a world history of cinema. As the *Nation* (for which Potamkin had been a frequent contributor) put it in its obituary for him,

> As a film correspondent in Europe for several years and as a member of the National Board of Review, Potamkin had opportunities of seeing more pictures, and a greater variety of them, than is the lot of very many people interested in the field anywhere in the world. The result was that he was in a position, just before his death, of becoming the first historian of the new art—its stumbling beginnings, transitions, experiments, and triumphs.[4]

Potamkin seems to have regarded his often quite occasional writings on film as forming the basis for such a world history: at his death, he left notes for an "Outline for a Text Book on the Movies" that collated his criticism in order to offer an assessment of worldwide cinematic experimentation in relation to the global dominance of the Hollywood model.[5]

It might well be that Potamkin's New School course was to be one venue in which he would try out ideas for this planned world history of cinema. Certainly, the broad sweep of the course, as summed up in the National Board of Review notice, suggests an attempt to deal ambitiously with cinema history as the evolution of formal devices in relation to social change, and this in an international context.

Potamkin certainly had a more cosmopolitan or internationalist perspective than Terry Ramsaye. As important, he had a strong leftist commitment that would have fit in well with an increasingly liberal, if not itself leftist, inclination of the New School, which often had seen itself in progressive terms as an intervention in social relations and knowledge.

In fact, from at least 1931 on, the New School had been one host to film screenings that the Workers Film and Photo League (WFPL), an activist organization of which Potamkin was a key member, had organized for labor education. As film historian Russell Campbell explains,

> Series were devoted to the history of Russian cinema, educational and scientific films, "the productions of independent amateurs and experimenters," "distinguished" films and so on. European directors featured by the League included Pabst, Lang, Clair, and Epstein, while Hollywood movies rescued from oblivion included *Hands Up* (with Raymond Griffith), *Beggar on Horseback* (Cruze) and *The Last Moment* (Fejos) as well as the early works of Chaplin. Frequently, speakers accompanied

the screening (Potamkin, Joshua Kunitz, or Joseph Freeman, for example, on Soviet Films).[6]

Much of the content of these screenings coincides closely with Potamkin's own screen taste (e.g., he was a big fan of early actor Raymond Griffith, whom he felt had been shunted aside by the Hollywood machinery), and it is easy to imagine that Potamkin was centrally involved in setting up the New School screenings. It would seem that he had forged close links with the school well before his course.

Few traces remain, however, of his lecture series itself. The aforementioned *National Board of Review* magazine notice offers a breakdown of topics covered, as does the New School bulletin for 1932–33, which provides a week-by-week syllabus for the course. The following provides the full breakdown of Potamkin's course as listed in that bulletin (within brackets, I have interpolated any important phrases from the National Board of Review article that show up in its breakdown for the sessions but that do not also figure in the syllabus version printed in the school's bulletin):

Course 54: Lands, Films, and Critics—Harry Alan Potamkin. 12 Lectures.

Mondays, 8:20–9:50 P.M., beginning October 3. $10.00.

The lectures will be accompanied by film excerpts—selections from the National Board of Review's compilation The March of the Movies, a Soviet animated film, a "sponsored" industrial film—and notable full-length films. Speakers who are specialists in their respective fields will supplement Mr. Potamkin's lectures; among them will be G. W. Bitzer, dean of American cameramen, collaborator with Griffith on Intolerance, etc.; Wilton Barrett, executive secretary of the National Board of Review; a director; an expert in animation and others.

October 3: The I's of the movie: inventor, investor, impresario, imperialist
The relation of the mechanism to the art; economic organization; showmanship—the movie ritual; the international arena. [The film as merchandise, purveyor of other merchandise, vendor of the national idea, instrument of colonial control.]

October 10: First statements and first principles
The primitive cinema, the advent of the director, the intrusion of the star, the perfection of the scenario, the progress of cinematography [; montage].

October 17: The compound cinema
Music [and the movie], sound, color, variable screen, stereoscopy, tactilism, olfactory cinema, television.

October 24: Social energies and the national film
The early control [the first triangular competition]: France, Denmark, USA; the pinnacle of the bourgeois cinema: Sweden; the film "march to Rome": the Italian cinema; [the Latin Cinema;] the golden age of the German kino; England's belated drive; Japan—the largest producer; [the Russian film—czarist, Soviet, émigré;] minority cinemas.

October 31: The prestige of the American film
Its growth; influence; influence of other cinemas upon it; cults; its present status.

November 7: Pivotal films
A critical analysis of films like Intolerance, Caligari [—date or milestone?], Last Laugh, A Woman of Paris, Potemkin, Arsenal, Front Page, etc.

November 14: Presentation of a major silent film
With commentary.

November 21: Hollywood or Lenin Hills?
The coming of the Soviet film; Russian film before the Revolution; the world prestige of Soviet kino; objections to it; misconceptions; the two poles—their relationship.

November 28: Censorship: the control of the film
Censorship here and abroad; censorship local, national or at the [production-distribution] source; selection not censorship—National Board of Review; supervision from within—Hays; the church battle for control; the little cinema movement.

December 5: The humorous film
Slapstick [or "churlish" humor], wordly farce, comedy, satire; Sennett, Linder, [Langdon,] [Ray Griffith,] Chaplin; René Clair [and rhetoric]; [Popov, Protazonov] and others [in the USSR].

December 12: The animated film
Origins; the American animation [cartoon or "funny"]; French entr'acte film; Japanese rice paper films; [German silhouette;] puppet films; Soviet multiplication film; abstract animations, etc.

December 19: Presentation of a major talking picture
With commentary.

There is certainly much to say about this course in and of itself, but I think it takes on additional resonance when it is related to Potamkin's other en-

ergetic activities in film, from his writings to his screening programs to his militancy for the WFPL. At first glance, for instance, the December 5 and 12 sessions that help bring the course to a finale can appear to deal with issues of genre and subgenre in ways that would not necessarily be out of place in today's film teaching (although Potamkin perhaps paid more attention to varieties of animation than might be the case with any but the most specialized of topics courses today). For the most part, most current film curricula still organize their courses (especially at the undergraduate level) around a valorization of genres, treated either for their imputed formal achievements or for their ostensible social representativeness; of standout directors; of national film movements seen as combining representative types of films with nationally specific themes or issues; and of "pivotal films" (to use Potamkin's term) considered as historical markers in the evolution of screen achievement. It is clear that all these emphases were already present in Potamkin's approach to film and would seem to constitute much of his pedagogy of film.

But even as he was offering a film education that appeared to adhere to canonical models, Potamkin was also fashioning it in directions that were all his own and that bear close connection to the broader socio-aesthetic elaboration of film in his extensive writings. Potamkin's personal inflections of the standard film pedagogy start, for instance, in the very first word of the course's title, "Lands." Potamkin's approach to film often emphasized geographically local contexts from which various film movements derive. As he put it in the essay "Phases of Cinema Unity": "[I]n the unity that is the aesthetic problem of all film artists, there are the details of unity which in each land take on different necessities" (37). That is, while declaring all true film artists to share in the vocation of seeking to create works governed by unity of purpose, Potamkin contended there was no one golden path to such unity and that each national cinema would evolve its own procedures of artistic creation. At the same time, there was no inevitability that would lead each land naturally to discover its artistic richness. Potamkin was attuned to those local and specific material conditions that could foster art but also those that could inhibit it. Yet even at his most political, Potamkin never wavered from a concern for the aesthetic dimension as a sign of national well-being. The political health of a nation was reflected in the aesthetic health of its culture, and the two fed into each other dialectically. For example, for all the exciting "muscularity" (Potamkin's word) of America's narrative cinema, the very fact that it could seem to do no more than tell and retell fast-moving stories was a sign of sclerosis. The American nation had not outgrown its pioneer mythologies of conquest and aggression, and its cinema could only reflect that through its limited narratives of muscular action. In a critique of British documentary filmmaker John Grierson, Potamkin argued that faced with the lessons of American and Soviet cinema, Grierson had chosen incorrectly:

> Grierson has said he derived the *energies* of his film from the U.S.A. cinema, the *intimacies* from that of the U.S.S.R. . . . Why did Mr. Grierson not seek his energies also in the Soviet kino? Montage is an expression of the energies as well as of the intimacies. . . . I suspect that Grierson has defined energies as muscular impact. The American film is a film of muscular impact. It cannot be said to contain anything so plural as energies, for the energies—the creative expressive energies—of the U.S.A. are suppressed. The energies of a film are the energies of a land. (396)

It is important to emphasize here how Potamkin was suggesting that Grierson had a choice: Hollywood or Lenin Hills, as the title of one of his New School sessions had it. For all his belief in national identity and its embodiment in national culture, Potamkin was not a determinist who imagined that all citizens absorbed the same national impulses and in the same fashion. Against national determinism, there could be the choice, whether individual or collective, to do something different. There could be education to make the citizens of any one nation aware of the aesthetic possibilities that had been actualized elsewhere in the world. (Hence, Potamkin's self-assigned job as a film reporter: he worked to announce the accomplishments of international cinema to local audiences. On the one hand, he frequently brought news of European modernism to American readers by means of a wide variety of publications; on the other hand, he also served as U.S. correspondent for such cosmopolitan journals as the Swiss-based *Close-Up*.)

Choice and change were possible for citizens of a land because the very identity of that land was itself social and not natural. That is, a nation was formed out of history, out of material factors (even if these had coagulated into seemingly stagnant form), and history then was always something consciously made, not just mindlessly inherited.

Not for nothing did the very first session of Potamkin's New School course promise to deal with what he termed the "I's of the movie" (inventor, investor, impresario, imperialist) in connection to such issues as "[t]he relation of the mechanism to the art; economic organization; showmanship—the movie ritual; the international arena. The film as merchandise, purveyor of other merchandise, vendor of the national idea, instrument of

colonial control." Although elements of a critical political economy approach to media had always been apparent in his work, Potamkin had become increasingly concerned by the 1930s by the constraints of media control on cultural production. As he put it, for example, in a 1930 essay on national cinemas and the ways each cinema "expresses with a grandiose expansiveness the economy and the politics of a land":

> As American society has become less and less diffuse, and more and more concentrated, with a corresponding concentration of the economy of the land in fewer and fewer hands, the motion picture has become less and less expressive of "independent" manipulators and more and more the merchandise and instrument of consolidated enterprises. . . . The movie is concentrated in the hands of the financial powers along with the various other media of rapid intelligence—radio and television, and, as of old, the press. There is the alignment. It expresses itself in the total impasse of American society. (151, 153)

This, then, was to say that there was no natural destiny by which a nation took on its cultural identity. That identity came from a clash of material forces—institutions, social practices, imperial gestures, and so on—and could always be configured differently. Indeed, if the movie companies had formed themselves into a cartel that fostered societal sclerosis, an alternative could be imagined: "The threat [to media domination by the cartels] can come from only one other trust: labor" (153).

In Potamkin's philosophy of national cinema creativity, then, there was little attempt to root national cultural expression in an essential and inevitable identity or a zeitgeist. It is worth noting, for instance, the extent to which the topics in Potamkin's New School course focused on *social factors* as strong influences in the evolution of national cinema: thus, he promised to give attention in his lectures to the business structure of select national cinemas, to the material play of rivalries between nations (with a recognition of Hollywood domination but also of the impact of other cinemas upon it), to institutional interference (e.g., the international impact of censorship), to national cinema history as a history of breaks as much as of organic development (e.g., Russian cinema would be dealt with in terms of the revolution that took it from pre-Soviet to Soviet models), and so on. Given the extent to which such social factors had a fully historical basis—nothing natural made them inevitable, nothing essential meant they could not be fought against—Potamkin assumed that filmic activity in any particular country was in no way *destined* for either artistry or mediocrity. Artistic accomplishment was literally something *to be accomplished*. And it would happen only if the right conditions existed and the right assessment made of those conditions by creators, critics, educators, and audiences.

Potamkin certainly saw his own various efforts as a unified intervention in the cultural front of political struggle. For example, in 1931, Potamkin issued a "Movie Call to Action!"—a veritable manifesto for the WFPL—and it is striking to see the extent to which he gave pedagogy an integral place alongside other forms of activism. Potamkin outlined twelve goals for the new organization, with education significantly framing the list as the first and last of these goals. For purposes of brevity, I will quote only enough of the twelve points to give a sense of them and of pedagogy's place among them:

1. educate the workers and others in the part the movie plays as a weapon of reaction;
2. educate the workers and others in the part the movie plays as an instrument for social purposes—in the U.S.S.R.;
3. encourage, support and sustain the left critic and the left movie maker who is documenting dramatically and persuasively the disproportion in our present economy;
4. create a chain of film audiences who would morally and financially guarantee such films;
5. publish a periodical devoted to our purposes . . .

11. re-discover and present neglected films of significance;
12. educate the critic and worker by closer contact with the worker; THE SECOND PART OF NUMBER 3 IS EVENTUALLY OUR MOST IMPORTANT PURPOSE! THIS PURPOSE IS MADE MEANINGFUL BY NUMBER 12![7]

As Potamkin himself asserted via this capitalized declaration at his polemic's finale, the fostering of propitious conditions for the work of the leftist *filmmaker* needed to be the primary mission of the WFPL, but it is more than clear that Potamkin saw education as integral to the effective realization of that mission: education of the audience (away from Hollywood lies and toward the truths of politically committed cinema; away from Hollywood trivialities and toward the aesthetic richness of world film history); education of workers (toward their own potential as documenters of the times they were struggling through); but also education of the educators—a training, that is, of critics and commentators so that they would learn to disavow their own elitism and try to find alliance with workers in everyday struggle.

Even when he was not directly addressing practical questions of schooling, pedagogical concern was never absent from Potamkin's efforts, and this

helps us draw a connection between his broad criticism of culture and the specific curricular initiatives he undertook in his New School course and in his plan for a School of the Motion Picture. Take, for instance, a short review Potamkin offered in 1932 of *Shanghai Express* in the Communist paper *The Daily Masses*. For Potamkin, von Sternberg's film was a piece of meretricious reactionary ideology, and the first part of his review set out to explain how the film's content embodied counterrevolutionary sentiment in its depiction of the Chinese rebel as a corrupt bandit driven by personal urges rather than political principles. Potamkin worried that other Orientalist films attacking Chinese revolutionaries were on their way from Hollywood.

What is important for our purposes is that Potamkin, in ending his review, addressed his broader concern about a wave of Orientalism with a specific appeal *to pedagogy*. The words of his final paragraph are instructive:

> The answer lies with the audience of the movie, which D. W. Griffith called "the workingman's university." The movie tycoons are looking for a new audience. They cannot see that the new audience is the old audience with a new mind, a mind in advance of the reviewers and the producers. The audience can be directed to see the fraudulence of a film like *Shanghai Express*. Showings of films like the Soviet pictures, *A Shanghai Document* and *China Express*, profound and convincing, utilizing no "picturesqueness" and no posed frames, are themselves initial arguments against the shallowness of the American film, which has only a prejudice to inform it. The Workers Film and Photo League through bulletins on paper and screen must *instruct* the film audience in the detection of Hollywood treachery. (510; my emphasis)

Several points are worth noting here: the idea that audience response to a movie comes from forms of learning; the concomitant faith that audiences can be taught to be in advance of the assumptions that producers and critics hold about them; the activist premise that vanguard organizations (such as the WFPL) can guide the already learned response of the working-class audience in new learned directions; the belief that education in this case involves undoing the (shallow) lessons of Hollywood by contrasting them with richer lessons from Soviet cinema; and the overall implication that movies themselves are argumentative forms that militate against dominant ideological positions.

This last point—that films had pedagogical qualities themselves insofar as they constitute arguments—was central to Potamkin's theory of education. That films themselves were instructive did not mean they were explicitly didactic: even the shallowest of Hollywood films would, by its very existence, be making an argument that some people (the Hollywood producers) accepted that art should do no more than remain shallow. As we saw with Potamkin's twelve-point manifesto, he gave priority to activist filmmakers' own potential to use their creations as arguments against dominant cinema. Ideally, one could hope for an organized movement of cultural production that would itself constitute a rich aesthetic and social education. At the end of the essay "Motion Picture Criticism" Potamkin imagined, for instance, "the time when a definite social group begins to enact its social program in the motion picture" (51). But he also realized that the pedagogy contained in films themselves could only be aided by an explicit pedagogy from critics, viewers, and teachers. As he put it in the very next line, "In the meantime, it is the critic's business to help force that movement."

A formal pedagogy of film, for Potamkin, had not only to teach the art of the future but also to unteach the pseudo-culture that dominated the present. That is, a first set of lessons would have to do with breaking the spell of Hollywood escapism. Paradoxically, if all films offered lessons, the ones from Hollywood taught ignorance and the deliberate fostering of affective, nonintellective, and unreflected enthrallment to superficial story and image. It is revealing that Potamkin began his essay "The Ritual of the Movies" (1933) by examining such ritual as the way in which audiences were encouraged to become fanatics (or fans) of Hollywood cinema offered up as a veritable religion for viewers' unquestioning devotion. In ritual, Potamkin argued, "The observer has no objective attitude towards the thing that is going on" (217). As revealing, Potamkin ended the essay with an ode to movie discussion clubs as an "educational forum" in which the spell of the movies could be broken. Potamkin hinted that humans by nature wanted to reflect—wanted to learn and develop—and therefore could only end up feeling betrayed by the movies. As he argued:

> You will find it very difficult to remember motion pictures for their point, for their ideas, because they are so built as to simply assure a response from the audience at the moment and that is, by the way, to my way of thinking, one of the reasons audiences are not coming back to the movie theatres. . . . We are all, in our way, philosophers . . . we like to make deductions, and when individuals go to a movie they like those movies which seem to give them what they call an idea, a philosophy, a thought. (217)

Potamkin's philosophy of culture imagined a central role for pedagogy in several ways. First, for both filmmakers and film viewers alike, there could be training in the techniques of cinema—close study of the ways films were put together to work their effects. By understanding the precise mechanics by which cinematic devices affected audiences, an education in film

technique fundamentally could help viewers break the ritualistic spell of technique. As Potamkin put it in an essay that called for film classes for children, "The concentration upon the mechanism [i.e., practical techniques of filmmaking] would lead the child to look for the mechanical base in the films he sees at the theater, thereby diluting the effect of the inimical content" (214–15). In veritable Brechtian fashion, Potamkin argued, against those who felt that analysis took all the fun out of film, that the breaking of cinematic illusion by knowledge of technique did not mean a loss of pleasure for spectators. Quite the contrary, there were new forms of pleasure to be gained for wizened spectators in achieving mastery over the superficial entertainment of the movies. It could be a source of pleasure to attend the movies with knowingness.[8]

In another essay on pedagogy for children, "The Child as Part of the Cinema Audience" (1933), Potamkin gave an example of such pleasure-filled distanciation through educated awareness of technique. He had sent children to see the Norma Talmadge film *Camille* but had instructed them to concentrate their viewing on editing tricks and photographic technique. As he recounted, "They went to see *Camille* and I asked them how they liked it. Many of them had not seen the picture because they were looking for effects, but in looking for those technical things their pleasure was enhanced through their particular experience at the motion picture theatre that day, without accentuating the sexual suggestion" (225). However, technical training and awareness of craft were not enough. There was always the danger of technique being fetishized for its own sake. Potamkin respected the Americanist tradition of workmanship, but he felt that there needed to be more than mere technical competency in the craft of any art form. Even though his politics predisposed him to an often uncritical admiration for Soviet film, it is noteworthy that Potamkin expressed reservation, in one of his last written essays, in regard to the overemphasis on technical accomplishment in the cinema of Sergei Eisenstein. With a background in engineering, Eisenstein had certainly mastered filmic form, but for Potamkin he had done so to the detriment of resonant social meaning. In Potamkin's words, Eisenstein's "montage gives the weight of the physical content, but not the meaning of the social, because the personality of the event is lacking. Yet he is the greatest living master of construction, which unfortunately is not enough. . . . There is but negligible reference to the social subject-matter, and then apart from the formalities of practice" (440).

At the extreme, craft without purpose could lead to meaningless formalism. Potamkin reserved some of his strongest criticism for European avant-gardists like the Dadaists or Surrealists who put together pieces of film with

brio but to no purposeful end. While Potamkin lauded the irreducible force that formal devices held as specific artistic practices, he did not want recognition of the *relative* autonomy of the aesthetic dimension to turn into a cult of art as self-contained practice cut off from society. He worried about those philosophies of film that turned it into art-for-art's sake. In his essay "Motion Picture Criticism," Potamkin wrote of the "insidious danger" of the "film-cosmogonists" who dogmatically essentialized cinema: "Footnotes become categories. The danger is accentuated by the fact that these egomaniacs seize upon currencies and appropriate them. The hope for the film and for criticism, as for the society which includes them, is in a thorough inquiry into society. Dissociated aesthetics must today be reassociated with its source. . . . Only a social ideology can supply the efficacious instrument" (50).

To make works of technical proficiency that either had nothing to say or, as in the case of the muscular Hollywood narrative, said reactionary things was to limit film's ability to resonate with its times. The filmmaker as well as the film viewer needed more than technical training. They would need to synthesize film production knowledge with broader knowledge of issues of culture and society. As Potamkin put it in regard to the director René Clair, whose cinema he had reservations about both in its Dadaist short and its feature fiction film phases, "Clair needs a re-education, not primarily in technique, but in subject matter" (409). Potamkin, notably, wanted students of film to balance their special knowledge of the craft with general education in the social issues of the day.

At the very least, such education could foster a process of distanciation not unlike the one he advocated in regard to technical training. That is, if knowledge of filmic devices could enable audiences to step back from film's formal tricks and gain pleasurable awareness of just how they worked, so too would social knowledge enable audiences to judge the lies of ideological cinema against the political truths of the world. In his essay "The Cinematized Child," Potamkin had argued that along with "training in a major contemporary [artistic] device," there needed to be "development in social (not 'moral') judgment" (215). As he explained the process,

> The content of the film should be officially recognized in courses dealing with the film as a current topic with free opportunity for the expression of opinion, reserving to the teacher the tool of Socratic stimulus—to be used in calling to the surface the ritualistic suggestions of press, fan magazines, ads, films, rumors. The relating of fact to fancy within the experience of the child would stimulate the critical judgment

> of the child to a reappraisal of the misleading illusion. . . . The child would be encouraged to make his own deductions. (214–15)

In other words, trained viewers could bring to the movies worldly knowledge against which they would then judge the content of the movies. It was apparent that in such a model many Hollywood films would be discovered to be inadequate, if not misleading or even dangerous, forms of social pedagogy.

Now that we have seen some of the broader outlines of Potamkin's educational philosophy, we can return to his classroom pedagogy more specifically. Of course, one might object that much of that broader philosophy came in writings on the pedagogy *of the child* and really did not have to do with film's place *in higher education* as I have been examining it elsewhere in this book. Yet it is clear that Potamkin, author of a biography of Lenin for children, never assumed a rigorous divide between child and adult student. At the very least, the seductive lies of Hollywood posed the danger of child-like regression in which mature intellects gave up critical awareness to wallow in mindless cultism and fandom. Adults could always revert to an infantilism of an unworthy sort. Against this, Potamkin imagined maturation as a developmental process in which seeds of knowledge planted early on would bear bountiful fruit later. There was no essential or irreconcilable difference in pedagogy for children and for adults.

In this respect, it is noteworthy that one of Potamkin's rare explicit discussions of his "Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture" served as the finale to an essay entitled "*The Child* as Part of the Cinema Audience" (my emphasis). The essay opened with reference to the problem of children and the cinema (which in that period would have meant the problem of the effect of films on children), but Potamkin concluded with curricular discussion *at the university level,* as if the end of his essay was the structural answer to the beginning: a planned higher education could be a way to solve the announced problem of education *for children;* university instruction in cinema was the proper conclusion to the early and ongoing contact of the young child with the art form. Clearly, Potamkin was envisioning a film curriculum that would begin early on in the child's life and would continue logically into early adulthood. Certainly, he felt, young children could be given the social training that would enable them to judge the lies of filmic fiction against the realities of the world they were growing up in: "In the social treatment the method to pursue is to have the child relate, with assistance from the teacher, the fancies of a film to the facts of his own experience. What does he see in the picture? Can he extract from the film the truth or the falsehood? I think that can be taught" (225).

Like the film-betterment campaigners of the 1930s such as Frederic Thrasher (who will be discussed later), Potamkin wanted film awareness to be part of the early pedagogy of children (but he separated himself off from the film-betterment reformists by arguing for the need to teach film as a social, rather than moral, force). In Potamkin's words, "What are we going to do for these movie-minded young people? We must establish out of this whole educational pattern from the early days a program by which they are taught movies in the manual arts and movies in the social subjects" (226).

It is important to note, however, that along with manual training and training in social criticism, Potamkin hinted at a third essential form of pedagogy around film, one that he thought was best held back *until the child had grown up a bit.* This was aesthetic education: the teaching of sensitivity to the specific ways in which the art at its best offered imaginative extensions of social experience through formal and structural mechanisms. Despite his critique of meaningless formalism, Potamkin was not inattentive to the specific formal resources of cultural practices. Quite the contrary, many of his writings entailed a close examination of cinematic form. For Potamkin, to understand the particular force of an art form within society, there needed to be precise analysis of its specific formal resources. As noted earlier, in fact, his way of dealing with art's relative autonomy was to imagine the aesthetic dimension as in a symptomatic, homologous relationship to social life: a healthy society would be reflected in a rich and well-structured art.

As Dudley Andrew has explained in one of the few concerted writings on Potamkin's philosophy of film art:

> [W]hile the artwork is separate from reality, its life is the same as life in the world. That is, the living film is the film which has found its proper patterning and such patterning comes not from an abstract playing with form but from a close attention to the patterns of real life. . . . [The filmmaker's] artifact becomes formally constructed in such a way as to provide a particular contemplation of its energized theme. Nevertheless, the theme itself can unleash aesthetic energy only if it is based on a proper understanding of reality. . . . All of Potamkin's writing cries out for a search for a new cinematic form responding freely to a revolutionary theme producing not excitement but an intensive vision of that theme. This is a sophisticated vision of both politics and art.[9]

A full education in film would entail, then, a strong component of aesthetic education. In his essay "The Child as Part of the Cinema Audience," Potamkin had not included aesthetic education along with technical and social training, since, as he explained, "I do not stress as yet the aesthetic be-

cause children do not begin by being aesthetic in their reactions" (224). Aesthetic education was necessary to enable the well-rounded citizen to understand art's irreducibly specific place in society, but this understanding had to come in its own good time. Once children had learned basic craft and technique, and had learned how to judge the lessons of film against the experiences of the world, they could then be exposed to the third level of pedagogy, aesthetic appreciation. As Potamkin asserted, "Gradually they will take the movie up in its refinement of art" (226).

Importantly, Potamkin seemed to imply, this ultimate phase in one's film education could best happen in the university. But it might be worth noting, in passing, that Potamkin spoke of college students as "children," too. He referred to his proposed School of the Motion Picture as "a possible system where degrees will be given so that the parents may be satisfied that the children who go to the school of cinema may get an A.B. degree; may even get a Ph.D." (226). Again, for Potamkin, there was a continuum from the young child to the college student.

It is worth lingering on Potamkin's belief that a university devoted to film instruction should include a specific training in aesthetic appreciation, for it contributes a nuance to our understanding of Potamkin's politics. Some commentators have been tempted to argue a break in Potamkin's critical trajectory at the beginning of the 1930s wherein he discovered political commitment and ostensibly abandoned many of the aesthetic concerns that could have garnered him attention from historians of film art. For writers who need to imagine that an aesthetics of film can only be impoverished when it is touched by the taint of politics, the notion of a clear split allows Potamkin's early writings to be valorized and isolated from political commitment. Even some writers on the Left who cite his work give in at times to the temptation to accept this idea of a break and see Potamkin the radical as having left behind the concerns of Potamkin the aesthetician.

At the very least, Potamkin's New School course belies the idea of an easy, definitive split in his career. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the central idea of the "compound cinema," which gave its name to the posthumous volume of Potamkin writings, and which is often taken to sum up Potamkin's imputed *early formalist concern* for a specificity of cinematic art, shows up in one of the foundational sessions of the New School course (see the syllabus reproduced earlier in the chapter). In other words, *long after his ostensible definitive break from aestheticism*, Potamkin was still centrally focused on the concept that had been key to his early aesthetics. At the risk of simplifying a complicated notion, we might say that the notion of the compound involved a valorization of a planned, organic approach

to film form and function: for Potamkin, a Compound Cinema was one that systematically combined its elements in an effective whole. The fact that he devoted the third week of his course to this topic shows that for Potamkin the elaboration of a sociology and social history of film was in no way incompatible with an aesthetics of film, even an aesthetics of its irreducible formal specificity and its potential organicity. For Potamkin, the aesthetic dimension (as Herbert Marcuse would later term it) symbolized a realm of human creativity above and beyond economic exchange and therefore was a necessary dimension of life that needed to be established and fought for. In Potamkin's view, the radical struggle of the 1930s included art as one of its very sites and goals.

It makes sense, then, that in his New School course Potamkin's discussion of the idea of the compound cinema came *after* an initial session on the economics and business of film and then one on the evolution of film away from its primitive days toward its present-day compounding. By beginning in the first week with issues of political economy, Potamkin was assuring that his history of the art form would not take on idealist trappings. Whatever the cinema accomplished as art, it did so within the precise historical context of material institutions, of a dominant mode of production, and of a weighty social history. As he put it in the declaration that serves as the epigraph to this chapter, "Art has always been a victory against odds," and as he went on to add, "The odds now are more vicious than ever, as we move toward a qualitative change in society" (51). Potamkin would continue to valorize an *aesthetics* of film even after his move into leftist activism, but, at the same time and necessarily, he acknowledged the material conditions in the industrial mode of production that artistic potentialities stood in relation to. The richness of what he would promote as the compound cinema could emerge only in opposition to those entrepreneurial forces that threatened to turn art into a mere matter of economics and calculation. In this respect, just as the notion of the compound cinema endured across the supposed break in Potamkin's career, it is likewise striking to note that his elaboration of the institutional odds against which cinema art had to struggle had already been initiated in the years *before* the "break." If the first session of Potamkin's course was devoted to what he termed "the I's of the movie: inventor, investor, impresario, imperialist," it is noteworthy that all but the last of these terms were already presented together in an essay from 1929. In "Music and the Movies," appearing three years before he gave his course and before the supposed break into political commitment, Potamkin declared, "If we are to see the art of the movie fulfill itself, we must do away with a number of conditions, and one is the elimination of the three i's: in-

vestor, inventor and impresario. We must recognize the independence of the movies" (99). Perhaps Potamkin's addition in 1932 of "imperialist" to the list signaled a new level of political consciousness, but the very tone in which he presented his sense of the impediments to screen expressiveness was virtually the same from 1929 to 1932. Art was always a realm of freedom, worthy of defense against the encroachments of commerce.

For Potamkin, there were many roads to creativity, many forms of compounding that could make of cinema a creative art. In fact, if Potamkin could be so severe in many of his critical writings, it was in large part because it seemed more apparent to him when something failed to be art than when it succeeded. The goal of the critic would not be to articulate the proper path to creation but to outline the overall principles by which a multiplicity of possible paths could be entertained. As Potamkin put it bluntly, "I say here that it is the creator of films who tells us how many kind of films there are, and not the critic" (33).

This is not to say that there was no function for criticism. As I have noted, it is in fact quite apparent that Potamkin took the critical function very seriously. For him, much of the role of criticism was to create a propitious space in which creative experimentation could flourish. This meant that criticism would take as its task to clear the ground of impediments to creativity: false avenues, bogus aestheticism, formulaic sclerosis, institutional blockages, and so on. Insofar as the job of the critic was in large part to cultivate a context for creative experiment, Potamkin easily saw criticism as a social activity: that is, it was not merely a description of the formal attributes of compound art but also an analysis of the best cultural conditions in which such art could grow. Potamkin was drawn to Soviet film in large part because he felt that it was working to incorporate critical attitudes into its very structures—the idea, again, that films themselves were argumentative, educational forms—but he also assumed that critical writing and the education that would emerge from it could help art make its own critical work more systematic and less reliant on myths of intuition, spontaneity, and chance. For example, in the essay "Tendencies in the Cinema" (1930), Potamkin lauded Soviet cinema for its increasing "intellectualization of the film" but also noted that its incorporation of criticism into its cinematic structures had been impeded by Soviet directors' reliance on the nonintellectual, muscular, and literal model of American cinema. In Potamkin's words, the Soviets had experienced failure "due to the employment of this reflective instrument in a non-reflective structure, the culmination of the film's first technique, the physical or American" (44). To the extent that Russian filmmaking activity maintained contact with vibrant cultural and

social activity, it would gain in awareness of critical work and could begin to internalize the critical voice into its own cinematic structures. Cinema itself could eventually become a critical discourse, but only to the extent that it interacted with the critical writing (both aesthetic and social) of the day. As Potamkin put it:

> There can be no propagating art without the impulse of criticism. There can be isolations, as in France; there can be the momentarily effective, as in America; but for a cinema permanently great, strong and productive there must be criticism. The conversion of this criticism, the social theme, into its form is art, cinema. Form is the conception constantly *informing* the structure. The Russian film alone moves toward a permanent form. It is not likely that the American film, far removed from whatever critical center there is in the United States, will approximate, for some time to come, more than a style or a manner. (44–45)

Although he could be intensely opinionated in his evaluations of specific works of cinema, specific filmmakers, and specific national cinemas, and although he could be quite polemical in militating for his broader aesthetic positions, it is important to recognize the extent to which Potamkin was trying to elaborate a nondogmatic or, in his term, nonabsolutist approach to film creativity. Potamkin believed that film artists had taken upon themselves an essential, inescapable mission, but he did not feel there was any essential form in which they could or should set out to realize that mission. For example, he was unlike many modernist critics of his time in his not seeing the coming of sound as an inevitable impediment to experimentation. While it was clear to him that many employments of sound traded experimentation for mere literalism (his term for the greatest failings in cultural production, the surrender of aesthetic transfiguration to noncreative mimeticism), he also felt that sound could, in the best of cases, offer new elements for the nonmimetic compounding of form that he felt created the possibility of art. When it broke away from literal transcription of noise and voice, sound could offer the filmmaker a new resource for creative play: voice could be stylized, sound could be counterposed against silence, speech could become part of a rhythmic structure calculated according to the beats of montage, and so on.

In his article "Tendencies in the Cinema," Potamkin argued that the increasing incorporation of criticism into cinematic form necessitated a rethinking of cinematic language away from Hollywood literalism and toward complex structural compounds:

> The necessities of the critical subject-matter and the reflective processes have been evolving a new logic of cinematic construction. . . . Griffith

> created the "flashback" . . . but since the American film, remaining muscular, literal and sentimental, could not see the structural significance of this device, it remained as merely a part of the practice of "cutting." Russia, re-studying the film at its source, developed the Griffith technique and established montage as cinema construction. . . . Beginning with this structural establishment of a device, the film could advance in its hunt for a language and get as far as the figure of speech. (45)

Such invocations of "structure" and the "structural" recurred throughout Potamkin's writings, and it would not be pushing things to treat him as a protostructuralist in anticipation of the theorists of the 1950s and 1960s. Art, for him, was not the literal representation of reality but a representation in which various artistic elements were combined into significant totalities. In the case of film, in particular, the combination of elements should lead to a rhythmic whole in which each piece worked together with every other and in which no element did not contribute to the overall aesthetic purpose. In his words, "The ideal cinema will be conceived as a ramified and rhythmic graph, a rhythmic cine-graph" (100). Potamkin was even in conformity with the assumption of structuralism that individual material signifiers do not naturally possess significance. They are not meaningful substances in and of themselves but gain their significance from the process of articulation with other elements. As Potamkin asserted in a critique of the idea in French film criticism of "photogénie" (the notion that, in his words, there is "a particular cinematic quality present in every substance"), "There is nothing intrinsically 'photogenic.' . . . The cinema and not the substance determines that" (93).

To the extent that the compound is created out of structural articulation of elements, Potamkin would even go so far as to suggest that there were no such things as isolatable individual signifiers in a film, since signification arose only from the final articulated result. That is, to the extent that articulation created a meaningful totality, it would be an arbitrary and artificial exercise to extract from the work individual units and attempt to identify their contribution to the whole: there were in fact no such units of individual meaning prior to their articulation in the compound. As Potamkin asserted boldly, "*The entire film must be preconceived in anticipation of each detail.* . . . The whole disciplines the detail, the detail disciplines the whole. . . . No such thing as a 'shot' exists in the aesthetic sense of the cinema, whatever one may call the immediate taking of a scene" (14–15). In other words, to isolate analytically something like a shot would be to ignore that the "shot" was meaningful only in its place within the total structure.

As Potamkin continued, "Films are rhythms that commence and proceed, in which—ideally—every moment, every point, refers back to all that has proceeded and forward to all that follows. A stress or a deformation, an image or an absence of image, has a validity only if it is justified by the pattern up to that point, and if it leads again to the pattern from that point. In brief, one may not establish a camera angle unless the entire film contains the mind for *that* camera angle" (15).

While each film ideally developed its own appropriate structure and while there therefore could be no a priori notion of the one right way to create cinematic art, Potamkin's structuralism did allow him criteria for aesthetic judgment. Potamkin inveighed, on the one hand, against works of art that were too simple or literal because they lacked structuration. He did not welcome that purification of form associated with a modernist minimalism. Art was created not by the emptying out of form and its reduction to minimalist purity but by the significant articulation of elements into a complex compound. On the other hand, he also critiqued artworks that engaged in random assemblage of elements without seeking any real structural relationship among them. Thus, he was a strong adversary of surrealism and Dada (in a revealing bit of gender bias, he accused them of "effeteness"). Additionally, ever the structuralist, he maintained that only precisely delimited, discrete formal elements could serve as units within a structure: thus, he argued against such fads as the release of fragrances into movie theaters, since he felt that smell did not form itself into precisely defined signs that could be articulated in coherent fashion with other elements in the ways that sounds or images did.

In one crucial respect, Potamkin departed from some versions of structuralist thinking. In particular, he was concerned not with the elaboration of the anonymous combinatory rules of a general language of film but with those specific articulations that represented *creative use* of film form. That is, Potamkin was not out to establish a general, shared film language but to pinpoint those creative idiolects by which individual filmmakers could find their own strengths at articulating a coherent and effective cinematic expression. There was no general cinematic language, there was no ideal cinematic structure, just a series of creative experiments each associated with specific individuals who would "speak" their own particular and personally articulated filmic discourse.

Such a concern for individual contributions to the international art of cinema helps explain some of the setup for Potamkin's New School course. Once he had established, in the third session, the overall aesthetic ideals of the compound cinema, he could (1) deal in that same session with the vari-

ous formal devices that either might contribute to compound structures (e.g., variability of screen size could become an element in a film's structural play) or, in contrast, might impede the structural process (hence, the monstrosity, for him, of the idea of "olfactory" cinema, since smells were not articulatable into structures); (2) examine in the following week the ways in which the history of diverse national cinemas showed them dealing variously with cinematic structure; (3) acknowledge in the fifth week the particular but undeserved privilege and prestige that American cinema had garnered by substituting literalism for complex investigation of cinematic structure; (4) segue from the acknowledgment of American domination to the recognition of pivotal works from around the world that stood out from the formulaic mass of Hollywood narrative film; and so on.

Given the extent to which Potamkin intended his "Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture" as a broader curriculum designed to offer a general overview to the student who would be, as he put it, "professionally interested in the films" (587), it is less apparent that Potamkin's plans for the school directly reflected his own pointed sociology and aesthetics of film than did his own actual course at the New School. That is, the School of the Motion Picture would not represent one teacher's pedagogy—even Potamkin's—but would offer a diversity of approaches. The very fact, too, that Potamkin's proposal appears to have come in response to a commission from an established university may have meant that he himself felt a need to tailor his own perspectives on film to the larger requirements of a venerable academic institution.

Revealingly, Potamkin referred to himself in the third person in the "Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture" by listing himself, among other names, as one possible teacher for courses (he cited himself as one of several critics who could offer "elementary lectures on the films and related arts" and as one of two persons, the other being Alexander Bakshy, who could teach History of the Films). It is as if he was suggesting that he be one voice among the array of professors and pedagogical positions that could show up in the curriculum. (In passing, it is worth noting that for his school Potamkin recommended Columbia's Frances Taylor Patterson in the area of scenario writing.)

In a number of his writings for *Movie-Makers*, the magazine of amateur filmmaking, Potamkin had evidenced a preoccupation with practical issues of film production, and he indicated a central place for filmmaking in his school proposal. At the same time, his concerns with practical issues never were disconnected from his larger aesthetic and political concerns and from his assertion that the richest sort of filmmaking could only come from

artists knowledgeable of broader cultural trends and political issues of their day. In this respect, it is important to note that although Potamkin presented his "Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture" as the basis for a curriculum leading to the "equivalent of a Bachelor of Science" (i.e., an empirical, practice-oriented degree), he also clearly intended that an education in the practical work of filmmaking include attention as much to history and aesthetics of film as to hands-on training.

Potamkin envisioned the curriculum as a four-year course of study leading to the Bachelor of Science. There would be a first year of courses required of all students (some of which would also be open to the public) and then three years that broke into somewhat specialized tracks. (One exception to this separation of the curriculum was a course on the "history of the motion picture," designed specifically for would-be critics, which he proposed should be offered over the entire four-years.) The three-year, specialized part of the curriculum itself was then divided into two parts. First, a series of "Specialized Courses" that seem to approximate different tracks in professional filmmaking: Direction, Cinematography, Acting, and Scenario. Second, a group of "Seminar Courses" that honed in on increasingly specific, ever more hands-on areas and appear designed to give students actual practical experience in the professional world of filmmaking: studio production methods; on-set filmmaking; and labs in script writing, directing, and acting. Finally, Potamkin proposed that the curriculum also include invited lecturers who would come to the school to address issues of financing and distribution.

This last curricular suggestion (that the school pay attention to the business side of cinema) might give the impression that Potamkin's proposed school was envisioned primarily for the formation of not merely professional but also commercially oriented filmmakers. However, given Potamkin's own cosmopolitanism and his political and aesthetic commitments, it is easy to read between the lines for how his proposed school clearly was expected not to serve as a path to Hollywood-like filmproduction. For example, although the curriculum did include some courses that might seem to have a directly practical bent, many first-year courses were more general in scope and focused on the aesthetics and history of film in ways that echoed Potamkin's nondogmatic interest in the rich potentials and diversity of cinematic creativity. For example, Potamkin called for a course on aesthetic history that would focus on the development of taste and on the "sequence of styles"; one can readily imagine he took this to involve awareness of cinema in its *international* context. Likewise, Potamkin proposed that there be several courses that would lead from the study of

film to comparative work with other arts: thus, one course, on "comparative literatures," would look at literary forms such as the novel, the short story, and drama; another, on design, would center on visual arts such as painting, sculpture, architecture, costume, and the decorative arts. Very rarely did Potamkin's proposed curriculum focus on the commercial business of mainstream Hollywood film.

In fact, a large part of Potamkin's proposed curriculum made no specific reference to Hollywood. Above all, he suggested that an initial part of the first-year curriculum deal with "The Forms of the Cinema." Here, what Potamkin termed the "Dramatic" form (which presumably is where Hollywood-style feature filmmaking would find its place) was listed in last place—after other forms such as Industrial, Ethnic, Educational, Abstract (absolute), and the News Film. In other words, from the start, Potamkin's school would treat narrative fiction film as only one form among many. In fact, consonant with the ways his New School course had given over an important part of its content to instruction on aspects of the animated film (one of the forms of cinema in which Potamkin took great personal interest), for his school Potamkin also clearly saw animation as having special importance, and he gave it particular attention. As a form that easily could be structurally planned for rhythmic compoundings, that could lend itself to creative interactions of sound and image, and that by its nature appeared to eschew photographic literalism, animation found favor with Potamkin in a way that the Hollywood feature film did not.

The downplaying of the mainstream Hollywood narrative film in the curriculum also showed up in another aspect of Potamkin's proposal for the cinema school. Beyond the curriculum, he envisioned a "Library of the Motion Picture," where films and supportive material ranging from books, journals, and scripts to stills and set designs would be available to students for consultation. Potamkin's plans for the library clearly show his expansive interest in a study collection that would extend far beyond the Hollywood feature film.[10] First, he made it clear that the film collection would have "two main categories": both foreign films and domestic ones, thus signaling once again that American film was to take up its (relative) place alongside other cinemas. Second, he outlined the types of film that the school library should include, and here again, the dramatic film was listed as only one option among many. In addition to the dramatic film, the collection, he argued, should include ethnological film, experimental film (divided into the two categories of abstract and absolute), educational film, industrial film, documentary, and, as always, animation.

Certainly, as his list indicated, Potamkin assumed that a "library" for the study of film should collect representative works that had "popular success," but he also expected it to attend to films that were representative of non-U.S. national trends (such as Swedish or Italian). And he called for the library to give attention to films that stood out from commercial regularization through their specific aesthetic virtues: thus, his proposed library would house films that demonstrate "[i]nnovations in style and technique" and illustrate "principles of film-making"; it should include works that highlighted specific directorial accomplishments and notable performances; and it should give special attention to "[p]ivotal masterpieces." Knowing Potamkin's cosmopolitan bent, it is easy to assume that such criteria for the library implied a collection of films only minimally devoted to dominant Hollywood-style filmmaking.

Published after his death, Potamkin's "Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture" remained a dream never directly put into practice. Significantly, Potamkin's own primary intellectual and political community of the 1930s, the Workers Film and Photo League, did take some inspiration from his plan by seeking to create a film school in his memory: the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School, which began to offer courses primarily in film production starting in late 1933. But, as Russell Campbell points out, quoting publicity material for the school, the new venture differed from Potamkin's notion of a motion picture curriculum *that would have taken place within the context of a private university.* As Campbell says, "Potamkin's outline . . . was for a four-year course of study within a university setting for 'students professionally interested in the films'; the FPL school offered training for 'workers and intellectuals who have pledged to become active participants in the work of the Film and Photo League upon completion of their studies (a five-months course).'"[11] Already at the time of the announcement of the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School, the *Nation*'s film critic, William Troy, had noted the differences. Some of these differences between the WFPL school and a university curriculum might, he thought, be beneficial: "In beginning as an independent enterprise, it [the WFPL film school] will have certain advantages, the chief of which is a freedom from the restrictions of academic financial and political organization." But Troy also warned of the drawbacks of the program's isolation from a larger academic context: "[A]t the same time it may suffer from the reduced opportunity to correlate its particular field with other related fields—like literature, painting, and the dance" (all of which, we may note, Potamkin had identified as areas of study in his proposal for a university-based film curriculum).[12] In the event, the Potamkin school did not last more than a year, and so even this vague descendant of Potamkin's original pedagogy disappeared.

Likewise, there would be no new film pedagogy at the New School for a number of years after Potamkin's death, despite the evident interest of the school's administrators in having their institution address this important modern cultural form. At the end of the 1930s, film critic Sidney Kaufman began a survey course on film, based on MoMA's Film Library circulating series. Meanwhile, Jay Leyda, who later would write that Potamkin's project for a School of the Motion Picture represented one of the few real proposals for film education in America, began to team-teach a New School filmmaking workshop with Irving Lerner, who had been one of Potamkin's cohorts at the Workers Film and Photo League. Here, perhaps, some remnants of Potamkin's expansive vision of a committed film curriculum continued on in however attenuated a form.

6 Appreciations of Cinema

Syracuse Discovers Film Art

An Aristotle is needed to clear the ground for an aesthetics of the cinema.
SAWYER FALK, Cinema Appreciation lecture notes, circa 1934

The art of seeing has to be learned.
SAWYER FALK, Cinema Appreciation lecture notes, June 1, 1960

In the middle part of the 1930s, as he crafted one of the weekly film analysis assignments for the class Cinema Appreciation, Syracuse University undergraduate William Ashley found that he had to disagree with some of the aesthetic principles that the course instructor, Sawyer Falk, had so emphatically established.[1] Falk's position, so often restated as to become a veritable mantra, held that film most attained the status of Art when it exploited its essential nature as a medium of visual dynamics. For Falk, cinema was fundamentally an art of visual tonality, kinesis, and energetic graphics. Story and drama were secondary values, important only as pathways into an essential visual dynamism. The problem for Ashley was that he loved *Winterset*, a theatrical adaptation from 1936 that was the sort of dialogue-heavy, visually undynamic film that Falk hated. Despite the fact that Cinema Appreciation was offered under the rubric of drama and that Falk himself was a professor of theater arts, Falk's approach to film emphasized neither its narrative nor its representational qualities, and it certainly downplayed those aspects of dramatization that came from the sound film's ability to convey information through speech. For Falk, film should eschew the "theatrical" insofar as this term referred to characters spouting supposedly significant lines of dialogue. As Falk had said, for example, in a lecture on the Hollywood comedy *Cain and Mabel* (1936), which struck him as little more than canned theater: "If we have many films of this ilk the cinema certainly is a degenerate art. . . . It is just a picturization of the Saturday Evening Post. There is little in the way of cinematic value—dynamics nil; pictorialism nil; sound, gibberish and unmeaningful."

True, Falk knew that commercial cinema was inevitably geared to story-

29. Boris Morkovin, "The University Studies the Motion Picture," *National Board of Review Magazine* 13, no. 10 (October 1938): 4.

30. It is not clear how the association with Disney came about, although Disney was a frequent visitor to cinema classes at USC. On December 8, 1933, in a talk on "Psychological Aspects of the Animated Cartoon" at Caltech, Morkovin had emphasized Disney films and referred to Walt as a genius and a prophet. Perhaps this attempt to flatter Disney was one of the things that brought the professor to Disney's attention.

Disney had clearly been interested in finding ways to outsource the training of his animators to professional pedagogues and thereby render it solid and rigorous. It was in the very same period that he established connections with the Chouinard Art Institute, in Valencia, California, later to become the prestigious California Institute of the Arts with funding and decisive organizational input from Disney, and serving from the 1930s as a venue for instruction of Disney animators and for recruitment of talent into the studio.

31. Interview, *Daily Trojan*, June 25, 1931, 7.

32. *Motion Picture and the Family* 2, no. 3 (November 15, 1935): 2.

33. For one version of this tale, see Louise Spencer's account in "Mrs. Spencer Tracy's Own Story," *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1972, 90, 116–20.

34. Boris Morkovin, "Psychotherapy and Techniques of Perceptual Reeducation of the Acoustically Impaired," *Hearing Survey Quarterly*, no. 1 (1944): 1.

CHAPTER 5: POLITICS AS PEDAGOGY, PEDAGOGY AS POLITICS

1. Harry Alan Potamkin, "A Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture," in *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Teachers College Press, 1977), 587–92. Further references to *The Compound Cinema* in text.

2. Jay Leyda, "Advanced Training for Film Workers: Russia," *Hollywood Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (April 1946): 286.

3. Anonymous, "A Course in the Motion Picture Art," *National Board of Review Magazine* 7, no. 11 (November 1932): 15.

4. Anonymous, Harry Alan Potamkin obituary, *Nation*, August 16, 1933, 171.

5. The two-page draft, "Outline for a Text Book on the Movies," can be found in the "Potamkin" folder in box 42 of the National Board of Review papers, available at Special Collections, New York Public Library.

6. Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States, 1930–1942* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1982), 55.

7. For the full list, see *Compound Cinema*, 585.

8. Peter Decherney also discusses the relation between Potamkin's philosophy of pedagogy and broader theory of culture in Brechtian terms in the chapter "Everyone's a Critic: Harry Alan Potamkin's Marxist Film Library," in his *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 88–96.

9. Dudley Andrew, "Harry Alan Potamkin," *Film Comment* 10, no. 2 (March–April 1974): 56–57.

10. Peter Decherney offers important insights on Potamkin's "Library of the Motion Picture" in "Everyone's a Critic," 91–96.

11. Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, 57.

12. William Troy, "An Academy of the Film," *Nation*, November 22, 1933, 605.

CHAPTER 6: APPRECIATIONS OF CINEMA

1. Course materials for Cinema Appreciation are to be found in the Sawyer Falk papers, box 4 ("Cinema"), University Archives, Syracuse University. Unless otherwise referenced, cited documents come from this collection. In many cases, Falk put dates on his lecture notes. In other cases, as we will see, since his course often revolved around discussions of films currently in the theaters, we can make good guesses by noting the release date of the film he was lecturing on. But in some cases, no date is given, and I will simply cite such material for its support of the overall argument. Some of this material comes from decades later than the 1930s. But, as I make clear, Falk's overall position on film did not change much over a three-decade period. Pronouncements from the entire span of his career in teaching Cinema Appreciation tend to fit in well with his overall aesthetic position, and I have therefore permitted myself to quote across the range of his film teaching.

2. Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of the Cinema* (New York: Jonathan Cape, 1930). Falk even brought Rotha to his class in 1937 to lecture on documentary film. In at least one version of Cinema Appreciation in the second half of the 1930s, Falk assigned Gilbert Seldes's quirky textbook *An Hour with the Movies and the Talkies*, seeming in particular to find useful Seldes's argument that cinema was an art that transcended reality to create fantasy. By the 1940s, he had a much longer reading list, although quite an eclectic and even sketchy one, with texts of history (e.g., Bardèche and Brasillach's *History of Motion Pictures*, in its 1938 edition, translated by MoMA's Iris Barry) and industry analysis (e.g., Raymond Moley's *The Hays Office* and Mae Huettig's *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*) overwhelming the more specifically aesthetic analyses—limited to Arnheim's *Film as Art* and Lindsay's *Art of the Moving Picture*—even though Falk himself said that his course would be neither historical nor industry-oriented.

3. David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 20.

4. Subsequently, Richard Griffith did in fact offer a guarded but overall favorable review of the Deren films in *New Movies (The Magazine of the National Board of Review)* 21, no. 3 (March 1946): 22–23.