

The Responsibility of Watching

BY SCOTT MONCRIEFF

The motion-picture medium has an extraordinary range of expression. It has in common, with the plastic arts, the fact that it is a visual composition projected on a two-dimensional surface; with dance, that it can deal in the arrangement of movement; with theatre, that it can create a dramatic intensity of events; with music, that it can compose in the rhythms and phrases of time and can be attended by song and instrument; with poetry, that it can juxtapose images; with literature generally, that it can encompass in its sound track the abstractions available only to language.

—Maya Deren, filmmaker and theorist

Film is unquestionably a marvelous artistic medium, combining several traditional arts in one. Perhaps equally unquestioned, many if not most films are not worth the time it takes to watch them.

However, viewers bear a significant responsibility for being active and thoughtful when watching. With these points in mind, here are a few suggestions for improving viewer awareness, as well as a short list of films that I consider worth contemplating from a spiritual perspective.

Develop Camera Awareness. Get accustomed to noticing the role of the camera, almost as if it is a character. Is it close to or far away from what it's shooting, at eye level or above or below, moving or stationary?

Characters, landscape, and motion can be photographed from dozens of positions, and a lot of the artistry of the film comes from the placement and use of the camera. For instance, while recently watching *The Queen*, I was struck by the placement of the camera during the scene where the reserved queen breaks down and sobs, briefly. The camera is placed a good way behind her, maybe thirty feet, and to the side, rather than in front of her, so we can't see the tears rolling. The camera, in other words, has the good manners and reserve that the queen wishes to uphold throughout the film.

Contemplate the Worldview. What are the film's opening and closing shots, and how does that framework relate to the vision within? What characters are shown to be admirable and what characters not? What values does the film seem to uphold? What questions does it engage?

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Scott Moncrieff Recommends

