I have been a lover of film virtually all my life. In general I have preferred movies that were art first and entertainment second...or at least movies that made optimum use of the visual and audio media. When I was in my twenties, my favorite directors were Fellini and Bergman, and of course I greatly admired the cinematography, at least, of Orson Wells; but I also loved the work of many directors, like Frank Capra, who primarily wanted to entertain but who nevertheless really knew how to use visual imagery. In Capra’s *It Happened One Night*, when Clark Gable carries Claudette Colbert across a stream, despite their constant squabbles, the way the moonlight sparkling off the river engulfs the couple tells you in no uncertain terms that the two will end up in love at the end of the picture. Capra knew the language of cinema.

At a later point, I found that Alfred Hitchcock, though he too was clearly aiming at pure entertainment, was in fact a kind of folk-genius and probably the greatest director of all times. Many of Hitchcock’s films were flawed in some way or contained some bit of tastelessness or misjudgement (but not *Notorious*, of course, which is a perfect gem). However, the master was so playful and willing to experiment, and he had such a talent for shooting scenes in a way that would capture your attention without at the same time detracting from the advancement of the plot, that his movies were the most captivating of all for someone like me who just enjoyed watching for the very sake of watching.

What I most liked about cinema was the same thing that I liked about some other arts: it was the feeling of discovery. I loved seeing how the language of film could almost secretly comment on a story, in other words, how it could even carry on a subtext, how it made me think. After the scene in Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* where the hero and the villain end up standing behind the grating of a gate across the street from the hero’s house and then the police arrive, most of the subsequent shots contain a grating or latticed or striped image suggestive of the prison with which we know that the hero is feeling threatened. I will never forget the wonder and admiration I felt when I discovered this. Perhaps most viewers notice this only subliminally, but, when you consciously detect fairly subtle things like this, you feel a kind of intimate bond with the director/cinematographer. It makes the cinematic experience humane and personal.

Another example that occurs to me is from Hitchcock’s *Suspicion*, where Joan Fontaine, a young vulnerable wife torn by equal parts of love for her husband, played by Cary Grant, and suspicion aroused by his strange behavior, is pictured in her quandary with a diagonal shadow splitting her in two. Then there are just the incredible compositions and textures: one after another after another...like the wonderful rain-flowing windows and the shadows of these that dapple the walls of Manderley in *Rebecca*. In fact there is a pervasive use of shadows in almost all the Hitchcock films (even the few mediocre ones); but this motif of shadows stands out most of all, of course, in *Shadow of a Doubt*, the director’s own favorite film, it seems.

I could say that Hitchcock is all about light and dark and shadows, black and white; but then look at the color films, above all *Vertigo*, and you will see some of the most interesting color work, both bold and subtle, in all of cinema. Look at the way he makes the city of San Francisco appear, in broad daylight, like a dream. Part of this, naturally, has to do with putting things on the lens or between the lens and the subject, but part of this, too, is the use of silence. There is a twenty-minute part of the film in which only two brief sentences are uttered. In general, Hitchcock didn’t like “talking heads.” He wanted to tell stories in as visual a way as possible. Often, as in *Torn Curtain* and *Topaz*, the most important information exchange of the film is
only observed from a distance, out of earshot. We see the interaction rather than hearing it. Of course, the master started his career in silent films. He knew exactly what he was doing.

Later I began watching older and older films, finding, here and there, astonishing feats of cinematography and seeing clearly where Hitchcock and others were coming from. In fact, the silents tended to be some of the best of all, although, very unfortunately, relatively few have survived the ravages of time, fire, and war. Watch Act 8 of G. W. Pabst’s Pandora’s Box (1928, starring Louise Brooks who invented or at least perfected modern naturalistic acting) and you will see some of the most evocative visual compositions ever put on film. In fact, as in the best of this type of movie, every single frame would be worthy of being placed in a photography show at an art gallery. (Of the four soundtracks available on the Criterion DVD, choose the solo piano.) Watch E.A. Dupont’s Piccadilly (1929) to see a somewhat ordinary plot transformed into the highest visual art—especially beginning at about the middle of the film—by an elegant cinematic vision second to none. Many of the scenes are more or less tableaux rather than movie scenes in the ordinary sense. Watch Mauritz Stiller’s The Saga of Gösta Berling (1924) to see, especially in the second half, a now almost alien vision of unbridled Romanticism. Don’t judge it as being “overacted,” but see it, again, rather as a series of paintings or tableaux that bring us closer to a lost world of feeling. The scene of the race across the frozen lake (I won’t give it all away here!) is like something straight from Goethe or Franz Schubert’s Lieder. Lars Hanson and Greta Garbo are visually highlighted in such a way as to seem almost like gods. Garbo, in this first full-length film of hers, adorned in early 19th-century costume and makeup, is not nothing less than a “vision” in every shot. No wonder she went on to be the greatest movie star of all time. She was less an actress than a sheer apparition. And I’m not just talking about her considerable beauty—in which category Louise Brooks perhaps beat them all—but rather about that mysterious quality called “screen presence.” Clint Eastwood and Cary Grant had it too. If people like this are anywhere on screen, you’re looking at them. Period.

Many of the discoveries and techniques of the earlier great directors have been subsumed into the technical repertoires of the moderns, both those working for big studios and those now called independents. Sometimes, the new material is worthy of the cinematic history with which these borrowings associate it, and sometimes one just seems to be watching sad parodies. Nevertheless, there is still great work coming out. Scorsese and Malick and De Palma, for example, are still very active. Actors who understand film inside and out have sometimes had great success, as in Onegin, directed by Martha Fiennes and starring Ralph Fiennes, and the exquisite The Good Shepherd by Robert DeNiro. The latter is particularly subtle. Watch the scene toward the end where the Matt Damon character hugs his son, whose bride-to-be has just been thrown out of a flying airplane. If there is any doubt that the father has ordered this heinous deed, this doubt is removed simply by the unusually long duration of the shot of his face, his weary, tragic eyes distorted and bloated beneath the thick glasses. This is visual poetry.

I have always liked just about any movie, even a mediocre one, with at least something good in it. I would watch James Bond films (prior to the mess called A Quantum of Solace) just for all the exotic destinations, the beautiful women, the choreographed fights, and the special effects. I always liked adventure films. And how could it get better than the Jurassic Park movies? Those dinosaurs were so realistic that you not only saw them in all their detail but their movements helped you understand how the amazing physics of their huge bodies must have worked. What a feast for the eyes! And Steven Spielberg! Despite his tendency to cater too much to the crowd, in my opinion, he really did create some of the most impressive American visual icons, right up there with Norman Rockwell. How about that little boy in Close Encounters pointing at the light
of the aliens! Or that train on fire zooming by in *War of the Worlds*! What an image!

So why am I running through this somewhat random catalog of what I enjoy and have enjoyed about movies? It is so you will be better able to see what I mean by saying that the cinematic art might be gradually dying.

Sometime in the mid-90s, during that often annoying interval in the movie theater when the audience is bombarded with splashy trailers that often make even relatively decent movies seem worse than they really are, I remember that my brother Greg and I commented on the sounds of explosions completely gratuitously inserted in between each camera shot, a gimmick obviously meant to imply that the film being advertised was so raucous that it would shake your popcorn right out of its tub. I think I was the one who wondered out loud (probably after the booming, blasting trailer had run its lumbering course) what the next new decadent cinematic absurdity would be. I must admit that I did not predict that it would be the incessant jiggling of the camera.

Some years later, in 2006, my question was definitively answered when I went to see a new movie with a friend. The subject matter and the actors were interesting to me, but within just a few minutes I realized that I was not enjoying the film at all. Not only was there no “cinematic language,” no meaning in the shots and the camera positions, but in fact it was not even easy to look at things within the frame because the camera was so unstable. I could not “feast my eyes” on anything. It was as though the director were preventing me from actually looking at anything for more than half a second. Textures were blurred by the bobbing of the camera. Any choreography on the actors’ part was basically erased. I was not really supposed to be looking at what I was seeing. It was as if it were just expected that I would follow the dialog and sort of “skim” the images but not really pay much attention to them. The cameraman was obviously just walking around and shooting the action rather randomly as if this were just a documentary...even though it wasn’t a documentary. Was it now assumed that the average movie-goer had the attention span of a gnat? I looked around the theater and didn’t notice anyone else looking as dissatisfied as I was. Actually, what with all the awkward and seemingly meaningless close-ups and focus flares and gratuitous pans, I began to feel a little claustrophobic, as though unable to control my own eyes, and ended up reading a newspaper in the lobby until my friend came out after the film had ended.

Of course I was aware that hand-held camera was becoming popular in some circles, and I had seen a fair amount of it in TV commercials and in wobbly clips from TV shows that I certainly did not want to watch. I had managed, through conscious or unconscious effort, to avoid that sort of thing in the movie theater. I guess the key was that I watched trailers and clips. I knew that *The Blair Witch Project* had started this unfortunate trend. I assumed that the main inducement for directors to use a hand-held camera was that it was much cheaper and simpler. You wouldn’t have to laboriously plan out shots. You could just have the cameraman walk around and take in the action as in a documentary. The trade-off would be that you would not actually be using an articulate cinematic language. Rather than the art of cinema, you would be practicing mere “video,” that is, rather naïvely taking in whatever images happened to be in front of you. So it now seemed that there were two kinds of movies: cinema and video. The latter type would include both the standard kind of casual documentaries and the new kind of poorly made, visually dumbed-down feature films.

I had always realized at some level that many people weren’t really watching the movies they professed to “watch” but that actually they were just following the story and rather passively experiencing whatever cinematography there was, good or bad; but I had not ever suspected to
what a degree this might be true. I started to talk to people about this issue and found that about 25% were either annoyed or actually made motion-sick by the hand-held camera technique. Another 70% or so didn’t seem to notice or care much. Only about 5% or so said anything positive about it. The typical argument in favor was that it made the movie more exciting, as if you were right there in the action.

Clearly the hand-held technique was derived from documentary formats in which it was difficult or perhaps impractical to use a steadycam. Over the years, the shaking or unsteadiness and random movements of the camera came, quite naturally, to be associated with “reality” or the chaos of real life. In other words, unstable camera work acquired a connotation. This connotation is of course artificial, but there is nothing wrong with that. All cinema is and should be artificial to one degree or another. Why, you ask, is this technique in particular artificial? Because there is a function in our brain called “gaze stabilization” that causes us not to experience the world as jiggling around every time we move. In some birds of prey this function is even more highly developed. There were prehistoric flying dinosaurs whose brain cavities show that their gaze stabilization apparatus was more powerful than anything we find today. A person or other creature with good gaze stabilization has to be violently shaken before it seems that not he or she but rather the world around him or her is being shaken. Thus, the way a hand-held camera portrays live action is not, for the most part, the way we actually experience it. Unstable camera work portrays live action the way we experience it through a hand-held camera. When we move around the world, we experience ourselves as moving to a much greater degree than we experience the world moving.

So hand-held camera work does, like all types, have an artificial connotation, a semiotic value. The problem, though, is that like all aleatory methods in all realms of art, the more it is used, the more narrowly it circumscribes the repertoire of other semiotic modalities that can accompany it. In other words, the more random something becomes, the more limited become the other ways in which it can mean something. In a drawing you can insert random scribbles here and there to express shadows or uncertainties of any kind; but the more you do this, the more you are limiting your control over what you can articulately communicate to the potential viewer. Aleatory methods are sometimes introduced for experimental reasons. It can be fun and even instructive to see what pops up out of randomness. But it doesn’t tend to go much farther than that. John Cage’s famous aleatory music is not famous because people still enjoy listening to it or because it says a lot to them. It is famous simply because it was so aleatory. It was a cool experiment. But the absolutely aleatory ultimately has only one message. It is monomodal. Its very meaning is randomness.

Again, good artists in any medium can use a certain degree of randomness to great effect. Jackson Pollock’s paintings may look random to the casual observer, but the randomness there is only in the specific placement of individual globs of paint. When viewed as a whole, his paintings contain very intentional and regular rhythms and color relationships. Pollock’s contribution was that he learned how to force semi-random subsystems to cohere into non-random wholes. Those who do not care for Pollock’s paintings will nevertheless understand the principle involved.

If you translate this principle over to cinema, you see that although aleatory camera work does have a meaning, its meaning is monolithic. A hand-held film may make you feel as though you were right there in the middle of the action, but the jiggly camera work takes away the ability of the director to say other things visually. Of course the dialog, lighting, acting, etc. can contribute meaning, and of course there are choices between close-ups and wide shots, etc. But
that is pretty much the limit with this technique. The viewer sees things without much of a
context of wider visual meanings. We see the content more or less as mere observers, naively,
almost like children, with no real commentary from the cinematographer, no thought. What we
see portrayed may make us think, but not the way in which we see it. We are watching video
rather than cinema.

There are obviously some well-intentioned, even prize-winning hand-held efforts that have a
strong effect. These especially are the sort of thing that can fool people, even smart people, into
thinking that they are watching cinema. This is the danger. Such a film can put across a strong
experience through the medium of mono-message random video rather than through
polyreferential, semiotically articulated, visually reflective cinema. The fact that the message can
be strong tends to hide the fact that the visual component only exists in order to convey a certain
bare minimum of contextual information. Its randomness does not preclude intelligent thought,
but neither does it promote it. In fact, that is the problem with the hand-held technique, the
message “You are excited!” or “This is real!” is too simple compared with all the other
informational potential there is in the art of cinema. As a thinking viewer, I know that the action
being presented to me is not really happening, so when I see nothing but the visual message This
is real! This is real! This is real! This is real! I become first dissatisfied and then
irritated....and a lot of people actually get physically ill. The images I see do not encourage me to
examine them. I can barely fix my gaze on anything. This is not essentially a visual medium any
more. I am not watching cinema; I am being subjected to a series of sensory inputs. I am a lab
rat. I may possibly think about what I am looking at, but I am not at all being induced to do so. I
am being told not to care so much about what I see. Fleeting images are unimportant. I should
not be so literally visual. If the camera lurches to the left or jerks to the right, I should not ask
myself why. I should not look for meaning in that. My God! I should not look for meaning!
...But I enjoy seeing and thinking and discovering and finding meaning! I enjoy the interplay of
my mind with that of the cinematographer! I do not want just random impulses! I want a vision!
A vision! Stop trying to dumb me down!

Of course, camera shaking has been around since the beginning. In Citizen Cane, the camera
wobbles in pseudo-documentary style for just a few seconds when we get a glimpse of Cane in a
newsreel. Sometimes, unstable camera work is very effective, as in the scene in The Road to
Perdition where Michael Sullivan, played by Tom Hanks, drives off the road at night into a field
and has a stern talk with his son. It is very subtle and lasts for perhaps under a minute. For this
reason it actually makes an impression (whether conscious or un). Meaning is derived from
contrasts. If the whole picture had been filmed this way, there would be no effect at all. It would
be meaningless. It would be the usual visual static like that of so many moronic TV
commercials. This is real! This is real! This is real!

The best use I have ever seen of hand-held camera was in Harry Potter and the Half-Blood
Prince in the scene at the Weasley house in the middle of the cornfield when the Death Eaters
attack. Although this sequence lasts at least five minutes or so, it is still meaningful both because
of its stylistic contrast with the rest of the film and because it is combined with images of crops
and Death Eaters shooting this way and that. It is a good way to characterize the sudden feeling
of danger and chaos.

Sadly, though, I have seen film after film in recent years in which there is, at the beginning,
some fairly stable, though not necessarily interesting, cinematography and then, at some point,
halfway or two thirds of the way through, the wobbling starts...as if to say, “Well now it’s time to
start getting excited!” The method is almost always purely gratuitous and is usually a clear substitute for the actual creation of excitement. It has become a sad cliché...not unlike the light plinking of upper register piano chords that comes in when feelings are supposed to become tender or the pizzicato of mid-range strings that, in comedies, is intended to indicate that a character or situation is a little quirky or nutty.

Sometimes the sudden conversion to the hand-held technique severely detracts from an otherwise fairly decent film. In the version of *The Merchant of Venice* with Al Pacino, there is a scene of dramatic confrontation where the sudden jiggling of the camera robs Pacino of the effect he could have if we could actually see what he is doing. In *Up in the Air*, the camera starts shaking for no good reason at the party scene. I suppose the director wanted to show that the main characters were blending into the party; but the jiggling, as it often does, just ends up distancing us from the characters. They start to matter less and even seem a little silly to us because we are visually alienated from them. Fortunately, the director recovers his control before the end of the film....and George Clooney has excellent screen presence.

It is no surprise that bad camera work is now not only tolerated but even encouraged by the motion picture establishment and that awards are even being given out for visual drivel. This is akin to the pandering to trends that has long occurred in academia. Remember literary “deconstruction”? Remember, in architecture, the obligatory “post-modern” mauve-and-teal color schemes? The *Emperor’s New Clothes* syndrome will always be around. Perhaps I should not worry too much about the current trend toward meaninglessness in camera work. People will just get tired of it and it will eventually seem passé. Since it is essentially annoying, it will inevitably kill itself. Right?

Actually, it’s hard to know where this will go, but the obvious worse scenario would be that television and online video and poorly made movies will cause the younger generation to entirely forget how actually to look at what they are watching. The idea of planning a shot for communicative or esthetic value will be forgotten. There will of course be an underground of people who want something more than video; but these people will be as rare as, say, readers of poetry have already become. The problem with dumbing down is that it can become permanent. Look what happened with the original commercially motivated mandate in the 1950s and 1960s that most television programs use the level of English of a 4th-grader. Now we have news commentators speaking in incomplete sentences or in complete sentences but without subject-verb agreement, and almost no one on TV would be able to formulate an indirect question to save their life. (“They wanted to find out what would the President do about Russia.”) At this point, the reader can fill in his or her own pet peeve: something innately valuable that has been lost due to apathy, neglect, and ignorance.

I hope the above worst-case scenario does not come about. As I said, there are still cinematically intelligent movies being made. Let’s encourage those who make them by watching them and giving them good ratings on Amazon.com and Netflix....and subtracting stars for visual blather. Let’s write reviews praising thought-provoking cinematography. Then maybe cinema won’t die after all!