

WHAT IS CINEMA?

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*William Wyler, the Jansenist of Mise en Scène*

One scene in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, when Dana Andrews breaks off with Teresa Wright, is constructed dramatically around three characters. The sequence takes place in a bar. Fredric March has just persuaded his friend to break up with his daughter and urges him to call her right away. Andrews gets up and moves towards the telephone booth by the door, at the other end of the room. March leans on the piano in the foreground and pretends to be interested in the musical exercises of the disabled sergeant, who is learning to play with his hooks. The camera's field of vision begins with the piano keyboard in close-up, frames March in a medium shot, takes in the whole bar and leaves Andrews, quite tiny, plainly visible in the distant background. This shot is clearly built around two dramatic poles and three characters. The foreground action is secondary, although it is interesting and unusual enough to make a strong claim on our attention, especially since it occupies a large amount of space and a special position on screen. The real action, which represents a turning point in this precise moment of the story, unfolds almost secretly in a little rectangle on the left-hand side of the screen at the back of the room.

What connects these two fields of action is the figure of Fredric March. He alone, with the viewer, knows what is happening in the phone booth. In addition, following the logic of the scene, it is he who reacts to the impressive

display of his disabled comrade. From time to time, he turns his head slightly, his gaze crossing the screen diagonally to check up on Andrews with a worried air. Finally, Andrews hangs up the phone and, without looking back into the room, disappears abruptly into the street. If we were to reduce the true action of this scene to its component parts, it is really only made up of Andrews' phone call. Our only immediate interest is in this telephone conversation. The only actor whose face we want to see in close-up is precisely the one whose distance from the camera and the glass of the phone booth prevent us from clearly making out. As for what he is saying, naturally this is imperceptible. The real drama is unfolding in the distance, in something like a little aquarium which allows us to glimpse only the banal and everyday act of using a public telephone booth. Depth of field is used here to the same ends as those which led Wyler to use soft focus to record Marshall's death; here we are far enough away for the laws of perspective to produce the same effect as soft focus.

The idea of the phone booth at the back of the room, forcing the viewer to imagine what is going on there and to share Fredric March's concern, was already an excellent staging device in itself. But Wyler felt that, if used on its own, it would destroy the spatial and temporal equilibrium of the shot. He had to both counterbalance and reinforce it. Hence the idea of a diversion *in the foreground*, secondary in itself but whose visual presence is in reverse proportion to its dramatic importance. This action is secondary, but not insignificant, and viewers cannot overlook it, because they are also interested in the story of the disabled sailor and because not every day does one see someone playing a piano with hooks for hands. Forced to wait without clearly seeing when the principal character has completed his phone call, viewers are obliged to divide their attention between the hooks and the phone booth. Wyler has thus killed two birds with one stone: the diversion at the piano enables him, first of all, to

prolong as long as necessary a scene which would have seemed endless and necessarily monotonous otherwise. But what the introduction of this spurious action really does is organise the image and literally construct it. Wyler superimposes the action of the *mise en scène* onto the action of the scene, dividing viewers' attention against their will and directing it where it is needed for the time it is needed, thereby obliging them to contribute to the drama being crafted by the filmmaker.