

WHAT IS CINEMA?

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© CABOOSE 2009. ISBN 978-0-9811914-0-9

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*Theatre and Film* (1)

It is true that in Europe, and particularly in France, nothing has been as successful as the American comedy. Apart from the very special case of Marcel Pagnol, boulevard theatre's contribution to film has been disastrous. Filmed theatre, however, did not begin with talking films: go back a little farther in time, in particular to the days when the *film d'art* was attracting attention by its failure. At the time, Méliès was in his glory, but in general he saw film only as a way to perfect his theatrical marvels. For him, trick shots were merely another magic act. Most of the great comedians in French and U.S. cinema came from the music hall or boulevard theatre. One need only watch Max Linder to realise his great debt to his days in the theatre. Like most comics of the day, he played to the audience, winking at them and making them feel his predicaments. He had no compunction about using asides. As for Charlie Chaplin, even if we disregard his debt to English mime, it is clear that his artistry consisted in refining, through film, music-hall comedy techniques. Here, film surpasses theatre, but by extending it and ridding it of its imperfections. The economy of the theatrical gag is subordinated to the distance between the stage and the audience and especially to how long the audience's laughter lasts, which drives actors to extend the gag's effect until the laughter dies out. The stage thus incites them, even obliges them, to indulge in hyperbole. Only in film could Charlie achieve

his perfect mathematics of situation and gesture, to convey the greatest degree of clarity in the least amount of time.