

INTRODUCTION

AT THE EDGE OF THE FRAME

In January 1966, two years before he died, Dudley Murphy sat down to recollect his life. Most likely he spoke his thoughts into a tape recorder; the resulting manuscript has a conversational air and not much structure. Typos and misspellings imply a transcriber with little knowledge of film history, art, or French—all of which, as it happens, are essential to his story.

It's a life that reads like a picaresque novel interspersed with movies. "I feel I have been so fortunate to have been in what I call the creative centers of the world at the right time," he wrote.¹ And he was. He moved effortlessly from Greenwich Village bohemia to avant-garde Paris, the Harlem Renaissance, Hollywood, and beyond. Tall, blond, and charming, he was a cheerfully wide-ranging philanderer with little thought for the consequences. For him, scrapes and scandals were normal background noise, from courtroom dramas to love-crazed divorcées. Looking back on his life, *mad* and *gay* (in the giddy, nonsexual sense of the term) were among his favorite adjectives.

As a filmmaker, Murphy was something of a provocateur—erratic, messy, even irritating, but an envelope pusher nonetheless. Impulsive and extemporaneous, he alternated between industry insider and outsider, playing both roles with zeal if not always finesse. At a time when the classical Hollywood film form was rapidly solidifying, he determinedly pursued a looser, more evocative style. As mainstream moviemaking was straitened by an increasingly narrative approach, Murphy envisioned a different kind of cinema—turning out, among other things, the equivalent of modern

music videos in an obscure technology that lasted barely three years. Swerving in and out of the studio system, he was an early independent, searching out alternatives not only to the system but to Hollywood itself, attempting to set up production centers in New York, London, and Mexico City.

Even for a provocateur, though, his track record is disconcertingly uneven. Active from the 1920s through the 1940s, Murphy was the guiding intelligence behind some of the key films in early twentieth-century cinema and some of the worst clunkers the screen has ever seen. With artist Fernand Léger and others, he made *Ballet mécanique*, one of the seminal works of avant-garde cinema, then followed with the lamentable *Alex the Great*. He was responsible for blues great Bessie Smith's sole appearance on film and the dismal *Confessions of a Co-ed*. His filmography is studded with intriguing projects: he directed Paul Robeson in *The Emperor Jones*, had a hand in shaping Tod Browning's *Dracula*, and, over David O. Selznick's objections, gave Bing Crosby one of his first appearances on-screen. He adapted unconventional Broadway productions to film and made melodramas in Mexico. Collaborating with William Faulkner, he tried, unsuccessfully, to bring one of the author's most challenging novels to the screen. In between, he turned out forgettable Hollywood fodder. Throughout, he struggled to express a filmic vision that ran utterly against the grain of the industry in which, against improbable odds, he hoped for stellar success.

Formulated at the height of the silent era, Murphy's aesthetic was visually oriented and musically inspired. In the face of an industry style that valued story and character above all, his approach foregrounded visual wit and the pleasures of spectatorship, from kaleidoscopic imagery to visual rhymes and analogies. For him, music wasn't merely accompaniment but an organizing principle. It was a type of filmmaking that intelligently synthesized the best of what silent and sound film had to offer, and it was emphatically not what Hollywood was looking for. Insofar as he could, he resisted the drive toward narrative-dominated film that overtook the studios after sound. He was by no means the only one to do so; many of the industry's most gifted filmmakers resisted the shift with all the skills at their disposal. Few, however, fought it as both independents and studio directors or continued skirmishing for quite as long. Murphy's relationship to the film industry was uncomfortable at best, and his fit into film history has been little better. We don't know what to make of him or of an output so startlingly diverse, so uneven and discontinuous.

This is precisely what makes him interesting. By its nature, Murphy's career calls into question the basic oppositions that have shaped our understanding of cinema and its history: avant-garde versus mass entertainment, art versus business, highbrow versus low. Disordered as it is, his output reveals a sensibility that's instructively at odds with classical Hollywood film form; there's something to be gleaned from all that chaos. From the beginning of his career to the end, Murphy wanted to make films that could stand as both works of art and popular commercial hits. In his relative success at the outset—with early works such as *Soul of the Cypress* and *Danse Macabre*—and the increasing difficulties he faced as his career progressed, we can trace not only Murphy's own history but also, from a highly focused perspective, the evolution of the film industry. In the years that he was active, film became an avant-garde art form, the Hollywood studio system developed and consolidated, vaudeville surrendered to the movies, and sound film irrevocably succeeded silent. To one extent or another, he played a part in these events.

But the broader significance of Murphy's career lies beyond the edge of the film frame, where cinema overlaps with other areas of early twentieth-century culture. At a time when the American film industry was rigidly parochial in its worldview, Murphy pushed the boundaries, looking beyond mainstream culture for his subjects and directing some of the earliest commercial films to feature black actors in leading roles. His vision extended beyond the conventions of the industry in terms of who deserved the camera's attention as well as how films were made, distributed, and shown. He had distinct ideas of what the medium could and should do with respect to formal experimentation, technological innovation, and cultivating the tastes of moviegoing audiences. His career is of interest both for the films he managed to make and for the tantalizing projects that were never realized, from individual films to cooperative production ventures.

Was Murphy a "good" filmmaker? This traditional question is perhaps less illuminating, and less useful, than a more open-ended inquiry into his work. A close reading of Murphy's career—his accomplishments and failures, innovative ideas and half-baked schemes—offers insights into the development of film in the early twentieth century, as well as how we've come to think about it, and how that thinking has determined whose contributions count. By refusing to dismiss him, we implicitly call into question the assumptions that have relegated him to obscurity. In the canon of film history, Murphy is easily classed as an also-ran, but that reflexive

judgment does a disservice to film history, if not to Murphy himself. In searching out the larger cultural logic of his disjointed career, we arrive at a broader understanding of not only film history but how it's reckoned, not only cinema but the modernity that nurtured it.

Murphy himself is of some help in the process, though not as much as one might expect. For someone whose recollections filled eighty-odd pages of typewritten manuscript, he remains a surprisingly elusive figure. He seldom reflected on his own filmmaking to a degree that would satisfy a scholar and rarely addressed questions that cry out for elaboration: exactly how *Ballet mécanique* was made, for instance, or why he was so drawn to depicting African Americans on-screen. Even his randiest anecdotes carry a whiff of genteel reticence. Guided by his memoir, the life story that unfolds here is pieced together from many sources, ranging from personal correspondence to long-forgotten gossip columns; what unfolds along with it is a dazzling slice of cultural history.

Murphy was born and bred in the Boston area and made most of his important films in New York. But he belonged, in the truest sense, to Los Angeles, with an Angeleno's knack for self-invention, reinvention, and spin. Through him, we see the nineteenth century giving way to the twentieth and modernity remaking American culture, starting in L.A. Murphy's struggle to establish himself as a filmmaker may be equally understood as a struggle to master the basics of a new cultural and economic structure—one for which mass-media entertainment, public relations, and the cult of celebrity were essential building blocks. The son of artists, he saw film as one art form among many and himself as a creative individual in cultural milieux that extended from Los Angeles to New York and Paris. At one time or another, he collaborated with Ezra Pound, Man Ray, Duke Ellington, architect Richard Neutra, and a good percentage of the Algonquin Round Table. He talked montage theory with Sergei Eisenstein and got drunk with James Joyce. Charlie Chaplin turned up at his parties; Dashiell Hammett was a poker-game regular. Fats Waller purportedly worked out arrangements at the piano in Murphy's New York penthouse, and at Murphy's instigation, what became the only surviving North American mural by Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros was painted in the yard of his Los Angeles home. In a low-key, informal way, Murphy was a catalyst, and his life story is a careening ride, as mad and gay as he could make it, through the cultural landscape of the early twentieth century. He never pulled off the brilliant coup that would have rocketed him into the Hollywood stratosphere, but the fates were kind, and in the

end he landed on his feet, lightly. At every turn, film, art, and life intertwined furiously. He wouldn't have had it any other way.

On the title page of his memoir Murphy wrote, by hand, two inscriptions. The first quotes the crewman Stubb in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*: "I know not all that may be coming, but be [it] what it will, I'll go to it laughing." The second is his own: "Have one on the house." If one is an epitaph, the other is an invitation. By all means, belly up to the bar. It's a good story.