

# MOVIE

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A JOURNAL OF FILM CRITICISM

ISSUE 8

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## Moments Apart

In 2010, Tom Brown and I published the collection *Film Moments*, which brought together thirty-eight writers, each offering a short chapter on a moment from a film of their choice. In the book, we acknowledged a debt owed to the work of V.F. Perkins, making specific reference to sections of his landmark work, *Film as Film* ([1972] 1993), which, to our mind, provided the exemplary evidence for ways in which claims for a film's achievement can be articulated through sustained and detailed scrutiny of particular moments ([1972] 1993: 2). We chose Perkins' reading of interrelated sequences from *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and we might equally have focussed on his essay, *Moments of Choice* (1981), which illustrates Perkins' characteristic precision as he weaves together an appreciation of small sections from different films to form a persuasive, overarching argument concerning the extent to which certain directors embrace the constraints and opportunities offered to them in order to harness the potential of those expressive elements at their disposal.

As editors, I don't recall our referring explicitly to Perkins' work when we invited chapter contributions, although we surely incorporated aspects of his critical standpoint into the requests and we certainly included a good number of scholars who were intimately acquainted with the importance of Perkins' writing. Nevertheless, without the investment ever



being made overt, it is the case that many contributors followed a path similar to that set out meticulously by Perkins: using the moment as an opportunity to say something about the film as a whole and often constructing a case for that film's achievements based on their account of a single moment. This suited our aims, not only because we were so obviously sympathetic to those methods but also because we hoped the book might offer some guidance to film students who may be asked to write about a film in detail in a limited number of words and who might therefore be required to organise an argument around specific examples. Our contributors' dedication to this approach, though very welcome, nonetheless opens up some gaps that we never attempted to address in the book. By taking a single moment to illustrate something broader about a film, chapters in *Film Moments* implicitly create an organic relationship between the moment and the film, between the part and the whole. One consequence of this endeavour is that forms and degrees

of disconnect between a moment and the film in which it occurs are left unattended to. The book therefore fails to consider what can be made of those moments that stand apart in films. It is this matter that I will spend a little time with for the rest of this essay.

The question of incongruous moments is in fact addressed by Perkins in his study of *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1941). Reflecting on RKO's destructive treatment of Welles' film, Perkins focusses in on a close-up shot of Lucy (Anne Baxter) that the studio saw fit to insert once the director had completed his work, and which over-simplifies and disrupts a style of representation that had been developed with delicate care up to that point (1999: 60). Here, a conflict between ambition and interference creates a moment of disparity, serving to highlight the director's art and also certain industrial constraints within which he operated. Elsewhere, Andrew Britton finds Spencer Tracy's performance in the final scene of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*

(Stanley Kramer, 1967) to be at odds with the rest of the film precisely because he understands it to possess qualities that are otherwise lacking:

Spencer Tracy's astonishing delivery [is] strikingly at variance with the cautious reformism to which the film portentously commits itself. In a film characterised by the turgid factitiousness of its dramatic effects – by a false and self-serving sincerity – the speech is remarkable for its enactment of genuine and substantially realised emotion. (Britton quoted in Clayton and Klevan 2011: 7)

Britton measures his evaluation of the scene against a judgement of the film as a whole, locating its strengths within a relationship of discrepancy rather than congruity. He is careful to avoid falling into the kind of claims sometimes offered casually in defences of films, whereby they are 'saved' by oneredeeming aspect or another. Indeed, the 'turgid factitiousness of [*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner's*] dramatic effects' is still in place and afforded perhaps greater emphasis due to Tracy's 'enactment of genuine and substantially realised emotion'.

I want to stay with this idea of ill-fitting moments in film, and pursue it in a little more detail. In particular, I am interested in a short sequence from the 1994 release *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell). The film (hereafter *Four Weddings*) is with some justification regarded as a success story for British cinema in the 1990s, finding audiences and critical approval on both sides of the Atlantic. The film contains a number of scenes that are structured for comedic effect and, indeed, it is perhaps an achievement of *Four Weddings* that this humour often covers a lack of dedication to any kind of believable reality. By this, I do not mean that the film fails on grounds of attempted *realism*, but rather that it makes limited efforts to persuade us that the individuals on screen have any existence outside of the set pieces in which they feature. In this way, the events of the film take place in a vacuum, with characters coming together apparently from nowhere and returning to nothingness. The task of believing in them as human beings is made difficult, therefore – a particular issue for a film that wants to convince us of the intimate, long-standing friendships that exist between its central characters. Andie MacDowell's performance in the

film is often seen as a weak point and, certainly, she delivers most of her lines in a style reminiscent of a non-native speaker reciting sentences for the first time from a language tape tutorial. Nevertheless, it could conversely be argued that MacDowell's characterisation, hollow and thin as it may be, merely constitutes a more pronounced version of other similarly weightless characterisations in the film but without the equivalent easy humour to finesse its shortcomings. In this way, and from a certain perspective, we might conceivably view MacDowell's performance as a congruent element in the film rather than an aberration.

The claim that MacDowell's performance is consistent with the film's overall approach to its characterisation provides a counterpoint to this article's central interest in the idea of discordant moments. Pursuing that theme, I want to focus on a short sequence involving *Four Weddings'* main character, Charles (Hugh Grant), and his friend, Fiona (Kristin Scott Thomas). In the course of my discussion, I place emphasis upon the performance of Scott Thomas and, to a lesser degree, Grant, as means of drawing attention to aspects of quality and achievement within a specific scene. This approach is influenced by the closer attention that has been paid to performance in film studies and, particularly, the body of work that Andrew Klevan has developed as a leading voice in this area (2005; 2013). Klevan's critical notion of 'rapport' provides a strong guide. Klevan evaluates performance as 'an internal element of style in synthesis with other aspects of film style and explores the achievement of expressive rapport' (2005: i). This approach offers a useful framework for thinking about performance within isolated or incongruent moments precisely because Klevan invites and explores an intricate understanding of the expressive rapport between *internal* elements of style in synthesis. That rapport may not be of consistent quality across an entire film, and may be most strongly realised only in fleeting moments. Consequently, a performer's achievement, as one internal element in synthesis with others, may not be evenly weighted in the film as a whole. I take this to be the case in *Four Weddings*. The sequence I want to draw attention to takes place during the film's third wedding, at which the bride is Carrie (MacDowell), with whom Charles

has fallen in love. He has just concluded a conversation with a former girlfriend, Henrietta (Anna Chancellor), when Fiona appears in a doorway behind him and enquires after her: 'How's duckface?' ('duckface' being the derogatory term Fiona reserves for Henrietta). As Scott Thomas delivers the line, she gently rotates a golden cigarette lighter in her fingers and taps it on the surface of a cigarette box she holds: a repeating gesture that reflects the idle playfulness behind her disdain for Henrietta. Charles turns around at the sound of Fiona's voice before facing away from her to say: 'Good form, actually. Not too mad.' Grant infuses this line with a tone of mock-politeness, picking up on Fiona's humorous contempt but in fact making it slightly crueller through the playacted propriety of Charles' response, whereas Fiona's enquiry was at least marked by its unfettered condescension. Equally, her line possesses the greater impact and precision through its sharp three-syllable structure, Scott Thomas managing to get force behind the 'duck' of 'duckface' to make it sound faintly obscene, whereas Charles' reply conforms to the dictates of social etiquette, Grant uttering his words indeterminate out to the room, rather than straight back towards Scott Thomas to engage with her teasing. Themes of directness and openness will come to define these characters in the exchanges that follow.

Charles' gazing out across the room is revealed to be purposeful monitoring as, seconds later, the arrival of the bride and groom is announced: Carrie and her new husband. As the couple take their places for the traditional first dance, guests make their way between Fiona and Charles. Fiona follows the stream, moving slowly across to stand behind Charles. From this position, she perches her chin lightly on his shoulder as he continues to stare out in blank adoration. Fiona lays a hand gently on his other shoulder, leaving it to rest for a moment and pressing into him a little closer before noticing that Charles has not reacted at all to this new intimacy.

Scott Thomas glances around the space before letting her gaze rest on Grant's turned-away face, delicately capturing her character's moment of realisation. We cut to a reverse shot of Carrie and her husband performing an awkward, joyless and unromantic Highland dance (he is a senior



politician of Scottish heritage) and then back to Charles and Fiona as she asks: 'You like this girl, don't you?' Scott Thomas allows a brief, grudging smile to form on her lips before letting it drop to deliver the line with flattened expression that conveys Fiona's sense of resigned inevitability: the question is a statement and hardly requires an answer. There is a trace of disappointment behind this resignation, a disappointment with Charles that we can understand and appreciate as we return to shots of Carrie's stilted, rigid and passionless performance of wedded bliss. Scott Thomas loads Fiona's subdued question with further urgent, unspoken questions: 'You like *this* girl? You like *this* girl so much you are not even aware that *I* am touching you *now*?'

But these questions remain unasked. Charles looks around briefly as Fiona speaks and then returns his gaze to Carrie, voicing his discomfort at watching the object of his affection marry someone else. Fiona remains still as he confesses, her face expressing her despondence as his words leave her lost, the display of emotion safe as she remains protected behind him: invisible. Once Charles has concluded, she winces slightly and turns away, walking to lean against the doorway behind him. After a second, he sees that she has moved and follows her, asking her whether she has 'identified a future partner for life yet'. He begins this question by calling her 'Fi-Fi,' an especially playful term that not only functions as an affectionate juvenile nickname but also reinforces their relationship as platonic to Charles, still defined by the names they have called each other for years. For him, their friendship is rooted in a shared past: innocent, benign and familiar. Fiona has taken out a cigarette and has it to her lips, raising it to the side of her mouth as she smirks at his question and then lighting it with a deft flick of her lighter. The smooth poise and sophistication of Scott Thomas' cigarette-lighting contradicts Charles' view of Fiona, emphasising that she is not a playmate but a complex, refined adult. Costuming helps to reinforce this notion, as Fiona's elegant black dress, gold bands and earrings contrast with Carrie's starched, jewel-flecked wedding outfit and, before that, Henrietta's ostentatious Highland gown complete with vivid red sash and matching lipstick. In comparison to other adults in this scene, Fiona looks like a grown-up in control

of her stylishness and her subtlety. Her elegance is lost on Charles, however, as he instinctively directs his attention back to Carrie while Fiona takes a drag on her cigarette and answers: 'No need really. The deed is done. I've been in love with the same bloke for ages.' As Scott Thomas delivers this line, she plucks a fragment of tobacco from her bottom lip and flicks it lightly away on the word 'ages'.



It is a small gesture but, combining with the lines she delivers here, one that comes to encapsulate the futility of the love that Fiona describes, as though she were already letting it drop before it had even been named.

Charles' interest is piqued and he turns back to her: 'Have you? Who's that?' Fiona's response to his question is elaborately formed. As he speaks, she looks out across the room, smiling and raising her eyebrows at an off-screen reveller. This grin develops into a slight laugh and she raises her

shoulders minimally, using that motion to swing her head back towards Charlie, making him the recipient of the smile still held on her lips. She answers: 'You Charlie.'

Scott Thomas performs this series of movements fluently, combining them in a continuous flow.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, she builds delay into Fiona's reply, making clear that the character is postponing the moment of delivery and attempting to perform her answer with a show of ease and confidence. It is a poor performance. The smile is too rigidly fixed, the delay too deliberately weighted. Fiona reveals too clearly the effort involved in constructing the act of casualness, exposing the apprehension and nervousness that underpins the attempt. The confession is spoken in strained tones through the grin and, once it is disclosed, Scott Thomas lets her gaze drop marginally as her smile falters. The act cannot be sustained, and Fiona's immediate discomfort overtakes any image of happy nonchalance she might have wished to project.



Fiona's unease is intensified as we cut to a reverse close-up shot of Charles looking back at her, stunned and impassive. We might note Grant's restraint here in remaining still, not allowing a flicker of charm or empathy to soften the reality of Charles' inability to find any response to this display of human emotion. We return to Fiona in a mirrored reverse close-up and the shot is held for a number of seconds, extending the moment of her growing more self-conscious as no response is offered to her confession. Scott Thomas tilts her head upright and widens her eyes marginally to disclose Fiona's mild exasperation with her friend (a look that asks: 'aren't you going to say *something*?').



As with earlier movements, Scott Thomas uses this small motion in one direction to begin another as she tilts her head back to the side, using this as a leading force to propel her through the doorway and out of the frame.

The scene presents a moment of rare vulnerability for Fiona as she leaves herself open to Charles' blank response. Her muted frustration stems not from surprise that he is unable to offer a meaningful reaction but, rather, from disappointment that he has so accurately met her expectation of how this moment might play out. We are entitled to ask, given that we later discover Fiona's love for Charles has endured for many years, why she chooses this moment to declare her feelings at all, given that he has just confirmed his love so sincerely for someone else. This would seem the worst possible opportunity for Fiona, which might lead us to suggest that it was her intention to make the declaration without hope of reciprocation. From this perspective, we can understand

her confession to Charles as a way of beginning to end her infatuation with him, rather than a means of striking up a romantic union. Her apprehension in declaring her love – the delay, the fixed smile, the attempted casualness – reveals her nervousness at finally reaching the point of confirming that it has no future, rather than the more conventional anxiety over whether or not these feelings will be rewarded. Fiona knows they will not. And, finally, Charles reveals his inability to receive the news of Fiona's desire with instinctive human empathy: he simply looks back at her without expression. Again, Fiona must have expected this from Charles, given his lack of awareness for her in the moments leading up to her confession: his blindness to her beauty, his instinctive prioritising of his infatuation with Carrie over her. Fiona knows she is in love with the wrong man. In revealing that love to him, she successfully places a boundary between them, closing off the possibility of a shared love forever. This



notion continues as the rest of the scene plays out. Charles follows Fiona into a side-room and she stands away from him, first with her back turned and then side-on, her upheld cigarette-bearing hand forming a barrier, until she places her hands across the back of a sofa in front of her, creating a strong triangle shape with her arms that encloses her and excludes him. He is unable to breach this border, and she does not react to him even when he weakly attempts to offer comfort by belatedly placing his hand on hers.

Her words are now distanced and disengaged, even as she describes her passion to him. She jokes in clichés ('I knew from the first moment. Across a crowded room – a lawn, in fact'), she dismisses her feelings ('It doesn't matter. There's nothing either of us can do on this one'), and she lies about her pain ('Friends isn't bad, you know. Friends is quite something'). And Scott Thomas avoids eye contact with Grant now, allowing Fiona to withdraw into her own thoughts rather than place any further burden on Charles. Her posture, gestures, focus and vocal delivery convey the extent to which Fiona has already closed off these emotions to Charles. Even as she describes her infatuation, she puts it away in the past, marking it as futureless ('Just forget this business. It's not to be'). By speaking it aloud, she is saying goodbye to her love.

My contention is that Scott Thomas' performance of her character in these moments reveals levels of depth and complexity that reward further thought and consideration. Her expressive choices suggest a history and a psychology for Fiona that invites us to interpret and evaluate her actions. Grant, too, commits himself to a depiction of his character

that is not flattering, emphasising the point that Charles' general absent-mindedness has the potential to overlook or misread the thoughts, actions and emotions of others. The scene offers an expansion of the ways in which social awkwardness might be given meaning in the film, adding its potential to be painful and constraining alongside its capacity to be charming or quirky (as it is elsewhere in *Four Weddings*). The tone of the scene is quiet and subdued in contrast to the film as a whole. It lacks resolution and, indeed, Fiona's predicament would struggle to be adequately resolved in a story that is motivated so emphatically by the ultimate romantic union of Charles and Carrie. It is apt that it should take place 'to the side' of a main narrative event in the film and, indeed, Fiona's intimate and personal melancholy will almost immediately be swept away by the sudden death of another character (Gareth, played by Simon Callow) and the extended public show of mourning that follows. So, in many ways, the scene doesn't quite fit the contours of *Four Weddings* as a whole, possessing an understated dramatic tone and depth of characterisation not replicated in scenes elsewhere. I am not, however, proposing that the film is redeemed by this short sequence. Rather, I want to stay with the achievement of this moment *as a moment*. It is possibly representative of nothing other than itself. Taking that view necessarily means that my analysis of the moment is inherently limited and isolated, which runs against notions of criticism as a process of expansion that begins with the small and particular only to trace larger patterns, wider relationships. I think it unlikely that my understanding of the sequence would lead to a fuller, more cohesive appreciation of *Four Weddings*. It may not help illuminate familiar overarching topics such as star performance in romantic comedy, British cinema in the 1990s, representations of social class or gender, for example. Should that curtail any admiration for the achievements I take to be represented in this moment? Should moments be discounted if they do not fit into larger coherent patterns? Inevitably, I am bound to say no but, in that answer, I am advocating a critical discussion based on more modest qualities like eloquence and economy, which can emerge so vividly and particularly in small moments. Put simply, I have tried to describe and

detail some of the *work* that I take to be involved in creating the moment from *Four Weddings*. To return to some concerns in the work of V.F. Perkins', mentioned at the start of this essay, our appreciation of a film can be enriched when we are alert to the expressive choices that have been taken, moment by moment. The quality of those choices may not be consistent across an entire film and they may not offer thumbnail representations of larger themes that we might want to pursue across films more generally. Nevertheless, it seems unreasonable to simply let these moments go or to let our critical preoccupations blind us to their discrete merits. In some films, a distinguished moment might be all we have.

As editors putting together the collection *Film Moments*, Tom Brown and I enthusiastically welcomed opportunities for our contributors to use moments as a way of speaking about a film as a whole. (Indeed, these moments were used further to correspond with and represent yet larger definitions as we divided the book into sections on film criticism, history and theory.) An emphasis was therefore placed on the coherence and congruence of moments as they related to wider forms and structures. For obvious reasons, I would not want to discount the merits of that approach and I certainly welcome its continuation. However, by focussing for a while on moments that do not fit – that stand apart – we are reminded that this process of 'widening out' is not automatic and does not provide us with criteria against which the value of moments could always be judged. An attempt to develop any uniform approach to how moments in films can be handled and evaluated might easily risk the suggestion that all films merit the same levels of scrutiny because they exhibit equal capacities for balance, unity and coherence in their design and execution.<sup>2</sup> We would not struggle to reject such a notion, and it may be that these features can be found only within a moment, at a level that is especially particular and internalised. However, if we take those qualities to be at odds with the film as a whole, then a moment's achievements could in fact contribute to a wider pattern of imbalance, disunity and incoherence. It follows that a moment might be special, and remain special to us, without necessarily representing or encapsulating broader topics.

The temptation to use a moment as a means of articulating 'something bigger' may derive from a perception that we need to justify looking at moments in detail at all: that the small, the slight or the fleeting finds merit as a route to larger-scale forms and structures. However, I find the moment from *Four Weddings* to be useful in illustrating the benefits of staying with a moment to explore its internal relationships, its complexities, in a way that complements the precision and detail I take it to possess. But that undertaking is based equally on my feeling that the film as a whole does not stand up to equally close scrutiny. Had I wanted to make a case for *Four Weddings* exhibiting such qualities consistently, the discussion would have stalled. Alternatively, I might have overlooked this moment's merits in an effort to assert something general about the film (that its characterisations and interactions fail to convince) or misrepresented the film's shortcomings by using this moment as a measure (that all of its characterisations and interactions are equal to this sequence's accomplishments). We have options for the ways in which we decide to approach and evaluate film moments. However, as the *Four Weddings* example suggests, these choices are dictated by the nature of those moments and the films in which they occur, rather than by any overarching structure we might wish to impose upon them. Ultimately, this brings us to an idea of value that is shaped by the object of study, remaining flexible and responsive rather than rigid or unyielding.

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<sup>1</sup> Klevan's notion of 'fluency' is useful here: in an article, 'Living Meaning: The Fluency of Film Performance,' he 'celebrates the achievement of fluency by a selection of film performers and indicates the way in which, as each action flows fluidly in the next or as one move integrates with another, they make it difficult for us to isolate or crystallize meaning.' (2012: 35).

<sup>2</sup> These terms, 'balance, unity and coherence,' derive directly from Perkins' *Film as Film* and underpin his reading of the sequence from *Psycho*, mentioned at the beginning of this article.



## Inarticulate lives: a reading of the opening to Terence Davies' *The Long Day Closes*

The early feature films of Terence Davies openly bare their use of quotation and allusion. Like mosaics fashioned by a cultural bricoleur, the films are rich in recontextualised borrowings from other films, television, radio, popular music, and painting. Indeed, part of the particular pleasure that *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* (1988) and *The Long Day Closes* (1992) offer lies in spotting these references, often densely embedded in the films' narrative worlds. The opening to *The Long Day Closes* – a travelling shot of two minutes and twenty seconds along a derelict street – represents just such a fragmentary series of quotations. The film does not conceal its borrowings, even if many viewers may be unaware of their origin; it is abundantly clear that these non-diegetic voices are not strictly part of the world of the street. In this article, I concentrate my focus on this opening shot with the intention of complicating the conventional explanation of the film's use of quotation offered by critics.

Colin MacCabe, speaking in chorus with many other writers on the film, suggests that '[y]ou could kind of psychologize it, and say that it's Bud's unconscious ...' which assembles the fragments through 'which he interprets his reality' (quoted in Koresky 2014: 105). Such an argument allows a productive reading of most of the film. Bud (Leigh McCormack), for most of the film's running length, is positioned as a



focalising figure, centripetally drawing together the disparate cultural references through the implied associative logic of his memories, interests, and fantasies. However, the opening shot employs an equivalent mosaic structure before the introduction of Bud. I am interested in how these quotations are to be read in the absence of a cohering character, and how this alternative reading strategy can inform and shape an understanding of the film more generally.

As the opening credits dissolve into an unspectacular shot of a red brick wall, a gong sounds. Neither time nor place can be ascertained from the image, although it appears to be night. As the sound of the gong fades, the voice of Margaret Rutherford from *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (Frank Launder, 1950) is heard: 'A tap, Gosage, I said "a tap" – you're not introducing a film'. While the voice speaks, shifting lights play across the brickwork, anticipating the projector's flickering light in the film's later cinema sequence. The gong – a sound associated with the opening of Rank Organisation

film releases – and the quotation forge a link between *The Long Day Closes* and British cinema of the 1940s and 1950s.

These British references are succeeded and complicated by the grandiose Hollywood sound of the Twentieth Century Fox fanfare, almost absurdly re-introducing the barely-begun film; as though inspired by the dynamic music, the camera begins to crane down and across the brick wall, exposing a tatty sign for Kensington Street L5 and an even tatter poster for *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953), starring Richard Burton. The grandiose fanfare lends these ruined signs a kind of exhausted grandeur. *The Robe* – a film set within an Empire whose remaining traces throughout Europe are in many instances in the form of magnificent ruins – was the first film to be shot in CinemaScope and the first to use the revised fanfare with choral embellishments heard in *The Long Day Closes*; the music haunts the dilapidated poster as a memory of the excitement and innovation associated with the film's 1953 release. *The Robe* is invoked simultaneously in the past

moment of its triumphant release and in a later moment in which its poster hangs limp and forgotten on a bare brick wall in Liverpool.

This juxtaposition of grandeur and decay is central to the achievement of the opening shot. As the fanfare fades away, the camera cranes down and pans right, revealing a terraced



street in Liverpool, derelict and ready for demolition, photographed in velvety darkness and unrelenting rain. This present moment of dereliction is hard to locate historically; it could be the moment of the film's release, or an earlier decade when many terraced streets in Liverpool were bulldozed for new housing. Whenever this present is, it is haunted by the voices of a post-war cultural past. As the camera completes its pan and reveals a symmetrical wide shot of the street, a plaintive, disembodied voice calls, 'Louis'; unremarked, this voice (which belongs to Alec Guinness in Alexander Mackendrick's 1955 film *The Ladykillers*) disturbs the silence of the abandoned street as it seems to wait for a response.

As the echo of the voice fades, a lush opening chord introduces Nat King Cole's 'Stardust'; the camera, almost imperceptibly, begins tracking forwards down the street. The song's romantic lyrics – its references to 'purple dusk', 'twilight time', and 'meadows' – are counterpointed with the images of gutted terraced houses, and this juxtaposition gestures to the strange beauty of the street: evocative pools of shadow, the light catching the drops of "Hollywood"-style rain' (Davies quoted in Everett 2004: 100) as it falls in perfect, drenching sheets, and the sound of the rainfall like gentle applause. Before the explicit and stabilising introduction of a

character, the quotations imbue the images of the grimy street with varied associations of romance ('Stardust'), humour (*The Happiest Days of Your Life*), suspense (*The Ladykillers*) and glamour (the Twentieth Century Fox fanfare).

On the soundtrack, Nat King Cole sings of the song that 'will not die' and the camera tracks 90 degrees to the right



and moves in on the open door and dilapidated hallway of one of the houses. The music stops. The percussive sound of rain is insistent, urgent. The camera climbs up to the hallway. The voice of Alec Guinness from *The Ladykillers* says, 'Mrs Wilberforce? I understand you have rooms to let.' The rain continues to fall inside the house, unchecked by the absent roof. The transition from the undatable present to the past of the 1950s continues as, in the empty house, a voice calls across time, 'Mam, mam'. A slow dissolve reveals the hallway's past with Bud sitting on the stairs.

### Inarticulate Character

The opening shot of the film resists the kind of character-centred explanation which sees cultural references as 'the icons of subjectivity' (Elsaesser 1998: 291). In the film's slow opening, Bud is both absent and yet to be introduced; to read the Bud of the later narrative back into the sequence is an imposition. His interests, memories, and fantasies have not yet been established, and they cannot be constructed as a secure interpretative framework through which to read the complex, layered opening. The unspecified time of the sequence suggests a point in the future, but an older, retrospective Bud

cannot be inferred with any confidence. Criticism has often argued that Bud – shy, withdrawn, anxious, his muteness a possible result of his unexpressed homosexuality – finds the challenges of articulating his desire relieved by a utopian popular culture which allows an escape from and expression of both the humdrum and traumatic aspects of life. This argument has typically avoided detailed engagement with this troublesome Bud-less beginning, and the strain is quickly felt when the character-centred approach is used to read the opening shot.

Jim Ellis argues that characters in the film experience pleasure 'vicariously through the arts' and that 'this investment in fantasy makes life tolerable' (2006: 141); it is, however, unclear whose pleasure and fantasy the opening shot documents, and what the role of tattiness and disrepair is in such a fantasy. Jefferson Hunter argues that 'Davies's people make a larger and brighter world for themselves out of [...] [this] culture' (2010: 249) and that, for example, '[m]usic gives inarticulacy a way to be eloquent' (245), but the opening shot presents no people doing this and it is uncertain what is being articulated through the use of the inappropriately reappropriated Twentieth Century Fox fanfare. Michael Koresky suggests that '[t]he people *are* the music [...], their profoundest unspoken emotions expressed only through melodies and lyrics' (2014: 69), but it is unclear whose emotion, unspoken or otherwise, is being voiced through 'Stardust'; its mature retrospections seem a strange fit for a young boy. Wendy Everett suggests that the film marks a 'recognition of the centrality of popular culture [...] in the articulation of subjective identity' (2004: 102), but, again, no subjective identity has yet been established to be articulated. Each of these general critical statements on the film struggles to make sense of an opening which gathers together its quotations in the absence of any explaining character; there is no sense at this stage in the film that Bud, or any other character, is securely controlling the mosaic structure.

### Inarticulate Forms

The reading which follows does not lose sight of the characters who become so important through the film, but it

loosens the tether between the shot's meaning and the interests, memories, and fantasies of the yet-to-be-introduced Bud. It suggests that the audio-visual richness of the opening is not simply speaking on behalf of the mute Bud. Indeed, that richness amounts to a saturation which complicates, and does not ease, reading. Far from relieving Bud's inarticulacy by providing a compensating eloquence, the relentless piling up of mismatched quotations is a kind of *formal inarticulacy*. If 'articulation' – allowing the term to resonate with both its senses – may be defined as the arrangement of elements in an expressive structure in which the transitions (or joints) between those elements operate invisibly and without resistance, an *inarticulate* structure is one in which the joints creak, in which the transitions declare themselves. I take inarticulacy not to be the *absence* of articulation, but rather its *complication*. This structuring conceit can be seen at work in the opening shot's arrangement of quotations. For all its control and sense of careful composition, the film's structure is not seamlessly continuous and, instead, seems to stutter in an inarticulate bricolage of pre-existing, inherited elements.

This bricolage – which Jacques Derrida defines as the 'borrowing [of] one's concepts from the text of a heritage' even though 'their form and their origin are heterogeneous' (1978: 360) – explicitly draws attention to its mosaic structure. The notion of a superficially benign set of cultural texts which renders difficult lives tolerable and permits self-expression is not sufficient to explain the full operation of the film's inarticulate bricolage. Even as the sequence establishes its own distinctive sense of style, both its images and soundtrack also frustrate the emergence of a reassuring continuity; the image, despite its use of a continuous take, climaxes in a temporally disorientating dissolve, and the soundtrack is principally made up of non-diegetic borrowings inserted into the sequence without explanation or smooth transition. The sequence, then, renders transitions visible and audible, liberating their potential as disruptions. The opening is dislocated (an effect contributed to by the uncertainty of the place's identity and the fake-real status of the studio set). What Michael Koresky describes as 'daring dissociative aesthetic choices' (2014: 49) create a disorientating text which is initially hard to navigate. Recontextualisation complicates; it is unclear

what meaning can be attributed to the Twentieth Century Fox fanfare, for example, when it is encountered outside of its usual positioning at the head of a film. Denotation is almost entirely stripped away (as this is, according to the preceding quotation from *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, emphatically 'not introducing a film'), and the connotation that remains is uncertain. These quotations from heterogeneous cultural sources form a disjointed inarticulate structure which speaks in the *absence of any character*.

At the same time, the opening shot dazzles with its broad range of quotation: Hollywood cinema, mainstream British film, popular music, fine art, autobiography. The sequence is suffused with a dilapidated glamour, a celebration of the redemptive possibilities of the arts. The litany of remembered quotations uncovers the romantic possibility in the squalor of an abandoned, forgotten street. The film's elaborate opening travelling shot reveals a street suffused with a kind of radiant dilapidation, a muted exquisiteness. The past is made splendid as it is embellished with the arranged particles of popular culture in a play of recontextualised quotation. At the same moment, it also creates a discordant and uncanny landscape in which reliable categories collapse in the vertiginous shifts from one quotation to another. The film's urban space is rendered as both grimly naturalistic and clearly artificial. These counterpoints resist harmonious synthesis into a clear account of a character's remembering consciousness. The street is both immortalised and demolished by the sequence, beautiful and pitifully ruined, transfigured by and broken into the fragments of the quoted texts; it becomes frightening as well as reassuring, its surface romanticisation both unconvincing and convincing.

A reading of the opening shot which is not predicated on the coherence of a retrospective imposition of the character of Bud recognises the contingency of any interpretation; its statements embrace the hesitant, doubtful, subjunctive mood of 'could' and 'might', and recognise the achievement of the sequence's uncertain connotation. The brick wall with which the sequence begins could be the impassive sign of solid endurance or restriction. Margaret Rutherford's querulous voice from *The Happiest Days of Your Life* declares that the unseen Gossage is *not* introducing a film; this line, at the

very moment in which the film *is being introduced*, calls into ironic doubt the film's ontological status. At the very least, the film's identity as *a* film is thrown into question, as the emphatic indefinite article sits uncomfortably with the structure of *The Long Day Closes*; this is not just *a* film, but a compendium of voices, images, and publicity from many films. (As a line from a school-set farce, it may also be seen as a foreshadowing of the persecution which Bud will himself endure at the hands of teachers and fellow students, an abject disavowal of the notion that school represents a period of unique pleasure.) Given the context of the shabby street, the Fox fanfare can be read as both dynamic and overstated; the conflation of the pomp of the music and its associations with the mundane drabness of the street results in both the elevation of the humdrum and an absurd bathos. The poster for *The Robe* invokes the Bible, the central cultural lynchpin in 1950s Catholic Liverpool (tying cinema to the kind of oppression which Bud later feels at the hands of the Church). The image of the poster may retain a certain nobility, leeches from the fanfare and the foregrounded cinematographic conceit; however, in concert with the detritus which remains strewn around the set, its torn surface seems also corrupt and moribund.

The camera, having descended the wall and passed the poster, pans to the right and settles momentarily, facing the street. The voice of Professor Marcus (Alec Guinness) from *The Ladykillers* calls for 'Louis', a character whom, in the film, Marcus intends to kill. The tonal complexities of Alexander Mackendrick's film (a black comedy about a heist by a homosocial and inept group of disparate crooks, in which knowledge and ignorance, lawfulness and criminality, strength and vulnerability are comically confused) confuse the emerging meanings of *The Long Day Closes*. With each quotation, the sequence further strips away the interpretative supports customarily expected in a film opening; as Douglas Pye argues, '[f]ilm openings then [typically] orient the spectator to what is to follow [...] [with] initial indications of how the film will address its audience and how the audience will be invited to respond' (2007: 18). These orientating gestures are muddled in *The Long Day Closes*. There remains an emphatic invitation to respond, but the terms of the invitation are



confused by the simultaneity of two impressions: the dense network of quotations could be a charming period marker or the threat of an overwhelming and alienating cacophony. In relation to the opening shots of Davies' earlier film, *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, Pye writes that

It is impossible to produce more than hypotheses at this stage. The film invites these kinds of interpretative manoeuvres but deliberately withholds a framework that could enable us to anchor the significance of what we see and hear, encouraging initial processes of association but no certainty. It holds us at a distance in various ways – spatially, temporally, cognitively, evaluatively – so that we are required to interrogate what the film is doing and ask what kind of thing it is even as we experience the intensity of feeling communicated by the songs, and begin to understand something of the family and social context being evoked. (27)

The effect of the disorientation of *The Long Day Closes*'s opening is even more profound: the cultural quotations are more densely structured, the family less immediately defined, the social context more hazily presented in the image of the abandoned street. Nor is the disorientation restricted to this stage of the film; the concluding shots of the night sky offer no more solid a framework than the opening. In *The Long Day Closes*, the significance of the reappropriated, recontextualised, connoting quotations cannot be finally determined.

### Inarticulate ideology

While it is important to decentre Bud in the film's opening sequence, it is also productive to consider the opening's position in relation to the wider film, and not merely as a standalone exercise in bricolage. Lacking the 'cultural cohesion' identified by critics such as Koresky (2014: 70), the inarticulate cultural landscape of inherited and fragmented texts pre-exists, delays, and even eclipses the emergence of characters' voices, defining the limits of what they can say and contributing to their muteness. The particular quality of this muteness can be usefully considered in the terms of Paul de Man's differentiation between *silence*, which 'implies the possible manifestation of sound at our will', and *muteness*,

to which we are 'condemned' because 'we are dependent on this language' (1984: 80) over which we have limited control and which must be inadequate to the job of expressing the extent of our experience. This dependence on an inadequate language which pre-exists the speaker suggests that muteness is, in fact, a kind of inarticulate bricolage; it is the compulsion to use existing terms to make a statement that can only ever hope to be an approximate expression of a personal experience.

Later in the film, the relationship between inarticulate mosaic form and character muteness becomes clearer. In the penultimate scene, a mute Bud stands in the coal cellar. This safe space for quiet despair is a mundane place which is presented in relationship with cinema; its solid darkness is broken by a single beam of light which recalls the projector beam from the earlier sequences set in the cinema and bares the device of the scene's own artificiality. Abandoned by his best friend, anxious about his developing homosexuality, Bud weeps for the only time in the film. (His position and the extent of his despair may be reminiscent of Maisie [Lorraine Ashbourne] in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* when she stands in the same cellar after her father has beaten her.)



As he stands in the coal cellar, Bud's complex emotions are articulated for him, without explanation or acknowledgement, by what Armond White describes as the 'pure emotional phenomena' (1993: 12-13) of a series of quotations: the narrator (Orson Welles) discussing George Minafer's 'comeuppance' in Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942); Bud's teacher (Robin Polley) discussing erosion from *The*

*Long Day Closes* itself; and Miss Havisham (Martita Hunt) on her own deterioration in David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946). After Bud has stepped through a doorway into an impenetrable darkness, and as the voice of Miss Havisham instructs Pip to 'play, play, play', the camera cranes up through a spatially disorientating transition to a shot of Bud and his best friend (Karl Skeggs) sitting beneath an enormous and beautiful night sky, the final shot of the film against which Arthur Sullivan's song 'The Long Day Closes' plays. Bud has no voice in this sequence at all; he is spoken *about* and *for* by the non-diegetic sounds of voices from other, earlier films and musical compositions.

This sequence, along with the opening shot, raises crucial questions concerning the relationship between the inarticulate bricolage of the film's form and Bud's muteness. Quotation only happens across the divide of strange reappropriation (a fictional adult American, a disliked teacher, an old and fictional woman of the nineteenth century, and a Victorian composer of largely comic songs) and uncanny presence (it remains unclear whether the voices are located in Bud's memory or somehow independent). While the discussion of just deserts, erosion, decay, and endings may resonate with Bud's experience, the reappropriated lines also impose definitions and associations on Bud's experience. *The Long Day Closes* does more than explore the power of popular culture to speak for individuals who may otherwise be silent; it implies that popular culture defines what it is possible for Bud to say. In the absence of originary and idiosyncratic comment by Bud, the only expression is in the form of quotations from popular culture, which construct the meanings and tone of the sequence.

This effect of speaking independently of the character is felt only more keenly in the film's opening shot. Here, Bud is not only silent; in his absence, the inarticulate sequence establishes the very terms on which Bud (and the film) will be 'dependent', and by which he is 'condemned' (De Man, 1984: 80). Bud's muteness is not so much *reflected* in the opening shot, as *constituted by it*. Bud's identity does not consist of personal declarations with the appearance of originality; instead, statements about him are made in a cultural vocabulary which he has inherited in the form of education, film,



music, religion, and family. Through a structure that offers no definitive means of navigating its disjunctive seams, the film's opening moments intimate the confusions of what will prove to be the most contentious and painful site of mute silence for Bud: his unarticulated, confused queerness. Far from being a means of self-expression, popular culture encourages repression behind a veil of euphemism and generates shame with its preponderance of heteronormative images. The just-over-two minutes of the opening shot half-articulate a series of veiled queer film fantasies: the gently dangerous homoe-roticism of the oiled athlete striking Rank's gong, made all the more provocative by the withholding of the image; the gender-disorientated world of *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, in which a girls' school is chaotically moved into the premises of an all-boys school; the disturbed homosociality of both the heisters and the old women in *The Ladykillers*; the gender-ambiguous 'you' of 'Stardust'. Sex is established as a question of disturbing quotation, a reality which Bud cannot escape later in the film as his excruciating desire for a local builder (Kirk McLaughlin) is transformed through a shocking reappropriation of the violence of Christ's crucifixion. This fantasy, the apex of the logic of repression and euphemism, is significantly borrowed from the kind of cinematic Bible narratives alluded to by the poster for *The Robe*.

If the opening shot is read as an establishing of the bricolage structures according to which identity and desire will be articulated through the film, an ideological dimension to the sequence's composition becomes apparent. The jolting transitions and jarring disjunctures between the component parts of the film's bricolage present, in the face of characters' absence or silence, the oppressive puppetry through which cultural myths articulate themselves. Lévi-Strauss writes that a myth's unity

[...] is a phenomenon of the imagination, resulting from the attempt at interpretation; and its function is to endow the myth with a synthetic form and to prevent its disintegration into a confusion of opposites. (quoted in Derrida 1978: 362)

The de-mythologising impetus of Davies' films, by drawing attention to the use of music, image, and dialogue through overt quotation, *allows* a disintegration into opposites. The



opening's mosaic texture stages a series of collisions, a kind of intellectual montage, in which the bricolaged fragments create a landscape in which characters arise from (and are not represented by) 'the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined' (Derrida 1978: 360). The splendid ruins of the street suggest both the opportunities and the limitations offered by the cultural texts available to Bud.

This structure of inarticulate collisions may be seen operating in the opening sequence's use of Nat King Cole's 'Stardust'. At a descriptive level, the lyrics resonate with the film image: 'the purple dusk of twilight time', 'the little stars', 'wander[ing] down the lane'. The lyrics also declare the song's engagement with memory and loss ('the years gone by'), which are key concerns of the wider film. More specifically, the 'memory of love's refrain' – an idealised past recalled in a 'lonely' present in which the lovers are 'apart' – invokes a kind of nostalgia. The narrator of the song claims that '[t]he melody haunts my reverie / [a]nd I am once again with you / [w]hen our love was new'; in turn, the melody of 'Stardust' haunts the opening of the film and the deserted street. Far from being straightforwardly apposite, though, the song's image of love, in which 'each kiss [is] an inspiration', introduces a kind of romance which will remain determinedly absent in the film, and one of its most poignant sources of pathos. This kind of cultural representation of romance, in which the narrator finds 'consolation / [...] in the stardust of a song', establishes – before Bud is allowed to be present – a definition of fulfilment which Bud cannot enjoy. Unlike the song's narrator, he has no memories of his own to sustain him. His only interests, memories, and fantasies are of songs and films that 'will not die', perpetual reminders of an ideal which he cannot aspire to.

Those critics who have seen the film as 'sentimental, particularly in [its] retailing of certain stereotypes of working-class life' and who have argued that Davies is only interested in 'a kind of history', that is 'a memory realism' (Ellis 2006: 134), have underestimated it. It is the ideological operation of history, especially cultural history, which provides the film's central theme. Susannah Redstone argues that Davies' films are apolitical and nostalgic because they present 'versions of events as always-already there' and are

not 'discursive enunciation [which is a form that] lays bare its partiality' (1995: 42). Radstone's comments do not engage with the notion that the film's political comment is that the terms through which individuals may speak are 'always-already-there' (demonstrated within the film by the fact that the quotations begin before Bud is introduced), and that this suggestion is not nostalgic in her apolitical sense, but in a new political sense which exposes nostalgia as a scripting of lives in which culturally endorsed euphemism and cliché (such as that schooldays are the happiest days of your life) are preferred. Within this politicised critique of nostalgia, the evils of homophobia, bullying, and domestic violence are inscrutable, and the landscape is one of suffering relieved only by moments of cultural access which are both relief *and* repression, both enchantment *and* indoctrination.

This tension is already encoded in the opening shot which collapses the comic and the sinister, the nostalgic and the ruined, the city as opportunity and the city as failure, the street as lively and the street as dead, all evoked through the counterpoint of quotations, an inarticulate bricolage of incompatible voices which creates a complex series of connotations and significances that is both compelling and disturbing. From this bricolage, Bud emerges as a character constituted by the popular culture which pre-exists and then surrounds him. Characters become performative reiterations. Criticism on the film which has sought to define Bud as a focalising figure who exerts a centripetal force on the film's proliferating meanings distorts the film by overlooking the suggestiveness of the opening shot. *The Long Day Closes's* inarticulate form, openly performing the mosaic structures of borrowed terms at work in the construction of both texts and selves, marks a centrifugal pull away from the potentially grounding centre of such a clear focalising character.

Rejecting the arguments of Radstone and others that Davies is an apolitical director, this article has sought to identify the ideological critique at work in *The Long Day Closes*. Popular music, cinema, theatre, and art construct the heteronormative models of romance (disavowing the realities of homosexuality and brutally unhappy matrimony), nostalgic accounts of history (disavowing the characters' painful pasts), and irresistible narratives of the inevitability

of institutions (justifying the harsh regimes of church, school, and home) within which characters must define their identity. Song lyrics and film narratives offer them the relief of escape or expression at the same time as encouraging their senses of themselves into orthodox positions. It is not just that Bud feels the difficulty of discussing his emergent homosexuality, his sense of isolation, or his fears of violence; he *does not have the language* with which to speak of his emergent homosexuality, isolation, and fear. The cultural communicative tools which have been given to him do not allow for such an expression. Both Bud and the film itself speak in borrowed words, but by making those borrowings visible they show the ideological and inarticulate operation of the culture from which they borrow.

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## Fold upon fold: figurative logics and critical priorities in Nicole Brenez's work on *Abel Ferrara*

This article is a study of aspects of the criticism, and critical methodology, of Nicole Brenez, taking her book *Abel Ferrara* (2007) as its primary text. *Abel Ferrara* was translated by Adrian Martin, who has done a great deal to champion Brenez's work in the English-speaking world. I am fully in agreement with Martin about Brenez's significance, but I find that he sometimes appears to overstate the distinctiveness of her methodology. He has written that she practices 'a mode of film criticism that calls itself *figural analysis*' (2015); in what follows I shall argue that, rather than representing a wholly distinct 'mode of film criticism', Brenez's work has affinities with that of critics in the tradition associated with *Movie*, specifically V.F. Perkins (affinities that I have not seen commented upon elsewhere). But, though both Brenez and Perkins give a central role to notions of synthesis, their critical priorities are somewhat different, and I shall also indicate some areas of divergence, which could be said to hinge around ideas of credibility and the importance of the viewer's uninterrupted immersion in the fictional world.

Brenez has published extensively, but her single major work (still untranslated into English) remains *De la Figure en général et du Corps en particulier* (On the figure in general and on the body in particular) from 1998. As the title indicates, the notions of figures and figuration are central to

her approach; she frequently makes reference to things like 'figurative invention' and 'figural logic'. Martin remarks that 'quite deliberately it seems to me, Brenez never defines the concept of figure in any direct, simple, clear way', though he also reproduces an email to him from Brenez where she insists that she's 'trying to be very clear: the analysis is about the process elaborated by the film to construct its own type of "figure"' (2012: 7 & 31). I think Martin is quite correct that there is, in Brenez, a deliberate decision not to offer a single, easily digestible definition of figuration; the definition offered by Brenez and Luc Vancheri that is cited by Martin (2012) is anything but simple and digestible.<sup>1</sup> This reluctance does not, however, result from any wish to be mysterious or elusive but rather from the fact that figuration is, for Brenez, an absolutely fundamental concept. In illustrating how this is the case I would like to draw attention to the intersection of two familiar senses of the figurative in her work, an intersection that has interesting consequences for film criticism. This will enable me to indicate some important assumptions that Brenez shares with Perkins and other critics in the *Movie* tradition.

In studies of rhetoric or literature, the figurative exists in opposition to the literal: figurative language is language that is *not literal* (or at least not merely, or not entirely literal). In visual art, however, the notion of the figurative exists in

opposition not to the literal but to the *abstract*. Figurative art represents people, animals, plants and objects, whereas abstract art – which does not – is referred to as 'non-figurative'. These two senses could be seen as pulling in opposite directions. In visual art figuration moves *towards* some kind of 'replication' of the world we know, while in literature it pulls *away* from it; away, that is, from direct, literal, factual statements about the world. These remarks need to be qualified somewhat to emphasise that I am referring to *tendencies*, not mutually exclusive properties. Not all linguistic figures are non-literal, hence my qualification 'not merely, or not entirely'; they are all, nevertheless, distinguished from an idea of plain, 'non-figured' language (even if such a thing could never actually exist in practice). Film is interestingly placed because of the way it makes use of phenomena that can be described using either sense of figuration. It is not unique in this; when illustrated, novels also negotiate the distinction of the figurative from both the 'literal' and the 'abstract', and certain genres of painting employ something akin to literary figuration in their use of imagery (Dutch *vanitas* still lives, for example). Nevertheless, although it is only infrequently remarked upon, the fact that fully accounting for many filmic sequences, images, or motifs requires that we attend to both senses of the word is very striking. Brenez's work, I want to argue, suggests that it might be illuminating





to think of the role played by what we shall see her refer to as the “plastic” (visual) and “rhetorical” operations in a film as aspects of one broader process, that of figuration.<sup>2</sup>

Brenez compares Ferrara's *The Blackout* (1997) with George Cukor's *A Star is Born* (1954) which, she claims, ‘serves essentially as a “rough draft” for *The Blackout* to the extent that the common motif of disappearance determines an exigency of figurative invention’ (2007: 106). In *A Star is Born*, Judy Garland plays a singer named Esther Blodgett who the alcoholic film-star-on-the-decline Norman Maine (James Mason) discovers, makes a star (after she has been renamed Vicki Lester by the studio), and marries, before his drinking causes her to plan to end her career in order to care for him. Maine overhears this intention on her part, which prompts him to commit suicide in an attempt to liberate her. Towards the end of the film, Maine drowns himself, an event indicated by a shot of Maine walking off into the sea followed by the sight of his dressing gown drifting helplessly among the rocks in the shallows. The film ends with Esther announcing on stage that ‘This is Mrs. Norman Maine’. Brenez writes:

*A Star is Born* metaphorizes disappearance before and after the elided suicide. Before, by the transformation of Norman into a reflection: we see him already dissolved in the oceanic image, glazed in the glass window. It is thus an anticipation, a *figurative prolepsis*. After, we witness

the return of the deceased on a new stage, that of the music hall where Vicki, before an immense blue background that transposes the Pacific Ocean into an almost fluorescent monochrome, begins her number with the famous words, “This is Mrs. Norman Maine,” thus immortalizing Norman in the form of his alter ego. This time it is a case of *figurative analepsis*. (107; my emphasis)

What Brenez intends by the phrase ‘metaphorizes disappearance’ is not entirely clear; it relates to her claim that both *The Blackout* and *A Star is Born* explore heterosexual couples that somehow fuse – “This is Mrs. Norman Maine” – and that this fusion is achieved first by ‘each partner playing the other’s image’ and subsequently ‘because the event of suicide engenders the visual principle of figurative propagation’ (107). This claim is not, however, necessary for the point I wish to demonstrate, which is rather more simple, but also much more general in its application. Norman’s suicide is ‘elided’ because it is narratively crucial but only indirectly represented. The scene of the death itself, as I have mentioned, indicates the event by showing only its preparation – Maine walking into the sea – and its aftermath, in which the sodden dressing gown also serves as a metonym for Maine’s drowned body. But, Brenez shows, the death is also indirectly represented both before and after its occurrence; it is foreshadowed in a ‘figurative prolepsis’ and recalled in

a ‘figurative analepsis’. The images mentioned by Brenez are connected figuratively in two ways. First, they predict or recall particular representational images: the actual images resemble each other, which is to say that their figuration – in the sense familiar from visual art – has something in common. Both images represent the sea by featuring a wide expanse of blue, emphasised by the breadth of the Cinemascope image. But the images are also connected figuratively in a second way, by means of their symbolism. A ‘literal’ reflection of the ocean in a window becomes a metaphor for the way Norman will soon meet his death, while the blue of Vicki’s stage backdrop is a metonym for the ocean, and hence for that same event (now in the past). This, I think, is partly what Brenez means when she writes that ‘we have to envisage a figurative logic, not merely as a treatment of a motif, a theme or a singular form, but also in terms of the grouping of figures, in senses alternately plastic [...] and rhetorical’ (1998: 16).<sup>2</sup> Given that anticipation and recall of narrative events are part of a film’s narration, Cukor’s film offers an instance in which such narrational devices require that we attend to figures both in the sense of visual representation (which Brenez refers to as a ‘plastic’ sense) and in terms of pattern and symbol, in a ‘rhetorical’ sense (cognate with the linguistic meaning of ‘figurative’; attentive to aspects of signification such as metaphor and metonymy). It is not merely that Norman’s death by drowning is prettily and poetically evoked by certain figurative (metaphoric or metonymic) procedures, but that *narrative* functions of foreshadowing and recalling his death are achieved by the use of representational images (figuration in one sense) that signify in the way that they do by means of metaphor or metonymy (figuration in the other sense).

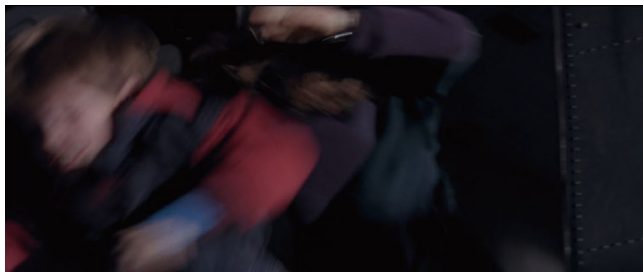
For Brenez, then, a film’s metaphoric connotations (say) may be crucial to its narrative strategies: ‘This is not merely a matter of rhymes aiming to establish a thematic coherence but of constructing a film through the form of a passage between altered images’ (21). We should not, she argues, approach visual or rhetorical echoes or rhymes merely as devices that help generate a supplementary layer of, say, symbolic patterning, but examine the ways in which, as we progress through a film, we encounter images that resemble one another but are ‘altered’ in significant ways. Metaphorical or metonymic



meanings, or many other kinds of implicit meaning, can be central to the narrative of a film, and we often understand them by means of the film's 'passage between altered images'. Brenez's use of the term 'figurative' to cover the intersection of the visual and the rhetorical is reminiscent of V.F. Perkins' use of the word 'image' in the following: 'A fur coat provides Max Ophüls with an image for the rewards and limitations of the role of bourgeois housewife in *The Reckless Moment*' (1981). The coat is, simultaneously, a *visual* image and a *metonymic* image; Perkins underlines this by choosing not to put all the weight on the rhetorical connotation by saying, for example, that the coat is a 'symbol' or an 'emblem'. Not only this, but Perkins also shows a profound sensitivity to the 'passage between altered images', if we take 'image' in a broad enough sense. He observes about Ophüls's *Caught* (1948) that the director 'uses three different coats to depict the options open to his indecisive heroine [...]. The use of dress here goes beyond working as a simple but effective visual presentation of changing circumstances. It helps also to define an attitude to those changes' (1981). The passage from one coat to another is central to our understanding of the film on a number of interpretive levels. Another example, from the same article, is Perkins's treatment of three shoulder-clasping gestures at the beginning of Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950), which help to 'establish that neither hero nor heroine is sure whether the man's embrace is protective and loving or threatening, murderous' (1981). This is achieved by means of three gestures performed by three different characters, each gesture being 'significant in their own right' in delineating the boundaries of the film's Hollywood setting, but also – by means of the 'passage between' them, Brenez would say – serving 'to dramatise the ambiguity of gesture itself' (1981).<sup>2</sup>

To repeat: Brenez recommends that we should see our understanding of films – of both their narrative and metaphorical aspects – as coming about by means of our response to the relationships between images which change. Tracing the differences between these images is crucial, and is an operation which she thinks of as elucidating a dynamic process of transformation rather than explaining an abstract scheme of patterning. Articulating the way that this happens is central to her critical project; her references to 'figurative logic' very

often apply, in a broadly Deleuzian way, to the 'logic' of a particular film or group of films. The goal is to indicate the distinctive ways that figures (in all senses) transform in the film(s) in question (this is what we saw her refer to above as 'the process elaborated by the film to construct its own type of "figure"'). Having seen how Brenez's understanding of figuration leads her to share key assumptions with Perkins, I shall now offer an example of the kind of figurative logics that particularly interest Brenez, and which often lead her in directions that Perkins might not have found so amenable.



Brenez devotes a number of pages in *Abel Ferrara* to the notion of 'figurative anamorphosis': 'Ferrara's films are structured like passages through the looking-glass; it is a matter of passing from the recto to the verso of a given situation or image' (2007: 15). A clear example of what this means can be found in Ferrara's *Body Snatchers*, Ferrara's 1993 remake of Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), which is a film that, for Brenez,

plainly obeys the anamorphic logic of Ferrara's work. At the start, in an eminently familiar domestic gesture, Marti [Gabrielle Anwar], riding in the back of the family car, pushes away her stepbrother, Andy [Reilly Murphy]; at the end, she hurls him from a helicopter

down into a world consumed by blood and fire. The fold is perfect. (20)

A simple act of sibling impatience is transformed at the end of the film into something far darker; Andy has to be destroyed because he is no longer Andy, having been replaced by the body snatchers. The image of Marti innocently pushing away her brother has been 'anamorphically' transformed into an image of his (replacement's) destruction, in a process that illuminates both images. By referring to this as an instance of 'figurative anamorphosis' Brenez, it seems to me, intends the same blend of rhetorical and plastic meanings that we encountered earlier: this kind of pattern is figuratively (metaphorically) anamorphic – the rhetorical sense of figurative – but also operates by means of visual images – the plastic sense. This kind of procedure (of 'figurative logic', to use Brenez's own language) she claims to be characteristic of Ferrara's cinema; his

[f]ilms are organized upon a single major fold, where the beginning finally meets or "touches" the ending to offer a striking comparison, or a more gradual pleat, where the major fold is progressively translated throughout in a series of small folds (akin to a pleated skirt) over the entire structure of a film. (15)

Such procedures are, of course, not unique to Ferrara: we might see *A Star is Born* as another example of such a procedure, in which the disappearance and death of James Mason is the central 'fold', around which the proleptic and analeptic images mentioned above are organised.

Brenez is also interested in how pre-existing figures, such as archetypes, are deployed and transformed within a particular film; she writes that '*Body Snatchers* progresses by superimpositions and slippages from one maternal archetype to another' (84). A distinctive feature of the film, for Brenez, is the dizzying *range* of archetypes it puts into play, connecting one with another and thereby complicating and destabilising the possibility of using any of them to generate a rigid interpretation of the film – one that, for example, attempted to 'decode' the film according to a static set of oppositions. *Body Snatchers* involves, in the first place, 'not the double status of mother/stepmother but that of mother/wife' (84); it is not only a question of the legitimacy of the



substitute mother but also the relationship between the female, and her body, as nurturer of children and as erotic being. The false, body snatched version of a woman who was already a replacement, a stepmother – Carol (Meg Tilly) – appears ‘in the marital bedroom as a nude body, a body

posed as improper, suspect, displaced, and menacing’, in part because the ‘erotic vision is attributed to the scared little boy’ (84). Andy sees the body of his real stepmother, lying on her bed, crumble into dust, after which her replacement steps out of a closet. We see a naked female body framed from the

neck down, emerging from darkness into warmly lit clarity, emphasising it as an erotic vision. We then cut to the face of a retreating Andy, terrified and disgusted, before cutting back to a close-up of the false Carol’s face, indicating the separation between the familiar mother (terrifying *because* she is so familiar to the boy, and yet he knows she cannot be his mother, not even his stepmother) and the eroticised female body. The editing emphasises both the separation between the two archetypes (the mother and the sexual object) and their connection, because we know they are aspects of a single body. The replacement of the real stepmother is represented in a way which both singles out these two archetypes and rearticulates them in an uncanny, disturbing way. Andy rushes downstairs to his father, screaming that ‘Mommy’s dead’, only for the false Carol to descend the stairs in a white dressing gown, now reintegrated into a form that Andy can see is a terrifying substitute, and that his father, Steve (Terry Kinney) can only see as his completely non-threatening wife, in her familiar role as weary mother. Brenez also analyses Ferrara’s use of myth, anchoring the film within popular iconography:

Carol is Wicked Stepmother, witch, ghost (in her white nightgown, haunting the house with her oppressive presence), ghoul (vampires), succubus (demoness who comes in the night to be united with a man whom she will then eat), Medusa, enigma (her smile, whose trace appears in the final shot of *New Rose Hotel*), and, last but not least, she incarnates death. (84)

Rather than simply listing any association that occurs to her, Brenez is attempting here to indicate the richness of the various tropes of illegitimate substitution that the film alludes to. (The list is anchored with concrete details: the white nightgown, the nocturnal setting, the smile.) Furthermore, she does not restrict her interpretation to a simple translation of the narrative into a psychoanalytical, metaphorical or mythic register; it is not merely a question of ‘timeless’ archetypes, but of establishing relationships between them, or transforming one into another. Each viewer is likely to register different associations somewhat differently, at different points of the film, but nevertheless Brenez indicates that the way relationships form between such associations is



something that necessarily takes place *in time*, as we watch the film – not only when we contemplate it afterwards – resulting in ‘a film not of disquieting strangeness but its opposite, abominable familiarity’ (85).

For Brenez tracing such procedures can take precedence over the maintenance of the world of the film; this is where the difference with Perkins, who writes in *Film as Film* that ‘[a]ll that matters is to preserve the illusion’ ([1972] 1993: 121), begins to emerge clearly.<sup>2</sup> Brenez writes approvingly that ‘Ferrara’s scenes are less plot events than visual echoes. Their logic is not especially Aristotelian, for they are not determined by linkages of cause and effect or before and after. They belong to a psychic process: the *reproduction of a trauma in multiple aftershocks*’ (17). She remarks that we are led, in a number of Ferrara’s films, ‘to the limits of understanding’ (129). For Brenez, these films do not merely depict the pathological, but are themselves organised pathologically: ‘it is no longer the protagonist who becomes delirious but the film itself. Trauma no longer functions merely as a narrative cause or motor; it becomes a structuring principle’ (128). She gives an example of this from *The Driller Killer* (1979), in which a painter named Reno (played by Ferrara himself) becomes a serial killer. The film ‘offers, in visual terms, the passage from local to total delirium’: at one point

[...] the link between creative torment (painting a canvas) and murder (drilling a tramp’s body) undergoes a lengthy visual elaboration. The rest of the film is devoted to economizing these transitions, directly joining creative act and criminal gesture, neither of which is connoted as more realist than the other. This leads to the formal fusion of both dimensions of experience in the final red monochrome. (129)<sup>3</sup>

We are often unable to distinguish between hallucination and reality in Ferrara’s films, which can put their narrative coherence at risk. One of the most dramatic instances of this is the conclusion of *New Rose Hotel* 1998, about which Brad Stevens – in a book Brenez describes as ‘magisterial’ (5) – refers to as an instance of ‘the destruction of narrative: in *New Rose Hotel*’s final section we are presented not with a resolution of the story [...] but rather with a state of total collapse in which the protagonist [...] is simply abandoned at a

moment of crisis’ (Stevens 2004: 274). But for Stevens, as for Brenez, such procedures do not make the films themselves incoherent – do not turn them into hallucinations – but are tools for a coherent investigation into hallucination itself. For Brenez, what looks at first glance like formal disarray need not be evidence of incoherent unintelligibility but can help us gain an understanding of disorder, particularly ethical and political disorder.

For Perkins, on the other hand, neither effective narration nor effective symbolism are likely to result if the film becomes incoherent or undermines its credibility, which will only distract the viewer and unbalance their response. A well-known passage in *Film as Film* finds a lighting effect in Losey’s *The Criminal* (1960), via which a convict’s ‘face is seen isolated against a black background’, to be destructive of ‘the framework of maintained belief’, because although the device is intended, Perkins assumes, ‘[a]s a means to eliminate distraction’, it in fact ‘merely substitutes one distraction for another’ (83). Aaron Smuts, in a critical but sympathetic assessment of Perkins’ views on credibility, argues that Perkins uses the word ‘in at least three different senses and [...] never makes it clear how they all fit together’ (2006: 86). After exploring credibility in *Film as Film* in the sense of, first, correspondence to reality; second, as a function of internal consistency (‘something like playing by the rules of the game’); and, finally, as convention, Smuts argues persuasively that belief is, for Perkins, the goal of credibility, and thus that ‘[w]hat Perkins’ concept of credibility amounts to is a rough composite between internal consistency and correspondence with reality in the form of convention. Perkins is insistent that the filmmaker must remain out of mind’ (2006: 88 & 90). Achieving credibility, for Perkins, is one of the ways films also achieve coherence, and ‘[c]oherence is the prerequisite of meaning’ and ‘the means by which the film-maker creates significance’ ([1972] 1993: 116). Katerina Virvidaki has, however, recently argued that ‘if we dissociate a basic aspect of Perkins’ understanding of film coherence – namely, a film’s “synthetic” understanding – from a particularly tight form of “synthesis”, valued by Perkins,’ it then becomes ‘possible to argue for a *pliant* and *variegated* understanding of the workings of’ coherence and incoherence

(2017: 4 & 3). Perkins is willing to grant that incoherence can be significant, but sees it as likely to lead only to profligately unconstrained interpretation: ‘Meaning may exist without internal relationship; but coherence is the prerequisite of contained significance’ ([1972] 1993: 117). One reaction to this claim, pertinent to many of Ferrara’s films, might be to wonder whether a film could, somehow, contain – which is to say motivate, make intelligible use of – its *incoherence* or, in Brenez’s terms, its *disorder*. I propose that Brenez’s treatment of credibility, coherence, and synthesis suggests ways of reconsidering, or resituating, some of Perkins’ fundamental claims. This might, for example, be one way of reading her statement that Ferrara’s ‘work introduces disorder into a cynical world; misunderstandings begin here, since some critics attribute this disorder to the films themselves’ (3). She implies that the films’ disorder can be seen as *motivated incoherence* that is intelligible in relation to the disorder of the world at large, and would agree with Brad Stevens’s claim that ‘Ferrara imbricates our responses to imagery with our responses to external reality’ (2004: 272).

It would be beyond the scope of this article fully to tease out the affinities and divergences between these proposals and Perkins’ assertion that his claims rest on seeing the fiction film ‘as a synthetic process whose conventions allow the creation of forms in which thought and feeling are continually related to our common experience of the world’ ([1972] 1993: 187). But we can say with confidence that, though Brenez shares some fundamental assumptions with Perkins, she has a different attitude with regard to the role played by credibility and the ways in which a truly successful narrative film must efficiently integrate all its elements. Like Perkins, she is concerned with synthesis; one of the great strengths of Ferrara’s cinema, for her, is the way it ‘manifest[s] Ferrara’s genius for figurative synthesis’ (6). What she intends by ‘figurative synthesis’ is not made entirely explicit, but there are clues. She admires *Body Snatchers*, for example, because of the way it maximises possible interpretive avenues. Is it, diegetically, a fantasy, a ‘dream of a teenaged girl [...] a lethal fable invented so that she can do away with her brother, mother, and father’ (7); is it a science-fiction, ‘a futuristic essay on industrial pollution and global militarization’ (6); or is it, perhaps, ‘a



retrospective meditation on “Hiroshima man” (6)? Brenez does not ask, like Perkins, for synthesis to be achieved by means of a balance predicated on maintaining the illusion of the fiction but, rather, for a synthesis that comes about via the forging of links between narrative, metaphorical, and visual procedures – even if this process disrupts our involvement with the narrative world; the emphasis is always on movement and transformation, on what we saw her above refer to as ‘a passage between altered images’ (21). This passage may reorientate hierarchies at any moment; even Ferrara’s use of allegory she admires because it ‘is especially kinetic: his characters allegorize not fixed notions but questions or problems’ (13). A maximally ‘figuratively synthetic’ film seems, for Brenez, to be one that activates, moves among, and forges connections between, *as many* different narrative, thematic, and visual phenomena as possible – whereas for Perkins, a maximally synthetic film is one whose synthesis is itself maximally *efficient*, as smooth and integrated as possible; for him a synthetic theory is ‘a theory of balance, coherence and complexity’ ([1972] 1993: 189).

This difference in critical priorities can also, I think, be seen in the way Brenez manipulates interpretational priority. Demonstrating the credibility of her critical claims is not always her first priority; there is, in her work, a role for what may initially appear to be rather implausible claims, in the way that they encourage the reader to reconsider their sense of a film’s organisation or significance. An instance of this can be found in her discussion of a short sequence from *Body Snatchers* that Brenez refers to as ‘the fifty most terrifying, synthetic seconds in narrative cinema’ (10). The young boy Andy lies listening with worry to an argument between his father and sister. There is a dissolve to what Brenez calls the ‘dark, speckled brilliance’ (10) of an asphalted road. The camera moves right to bring Carol, Andy’s stepmother – or rather her false, alien replacement – into view, dressed in dark clothes, her dark hair moving slightly in a gentle breeze. She is seen from above, at such an angle that her face is visible but its expression foreshortened and unreadable. The camera lowers itself, getting closer and closer but maintaining the same angle on her face before eventually rotating slowly so that she is presented at eye level in close-up, to the right



of the screen. Conventional framing is only achieved at the very end of the camera movement. A military truck can be seen facing us, out of focus and slowly approaching. ‘Carol’ is looking off to screen left; now she turns her face slightly to the right (further towards screen left) and another truck enters the frame from the left. The truck passes her and she hands a soldier at the back of the truck a black plastic bag which contains, we know, the remains of the real Carol.



The way the crane shot transfers our point of view from above the earth – only gradually bringing us into alignment with the false mother’s own level – mimics the extra-terrestrial arrival of the body snatchers and their adoption of human scale. Mimicry is an entirely appropriate strategy (figurative strategy, Brenez would say) for a film largely concerned with that very process. Brenez emphasises both the sequence’s symbolic dimension and the way it is connected to the preceding sequence:

In a slow-motion sequence-shot, the false, snatched mother, Carol (Meg Tilly), moves toward a truck, carrying a garbage bag that contains the remains of the real mother. Much is fused in this image of man-as-ashes: the Nazi ovens, the obliteration of bodies in Hiroshima, and the contemporary transformation of genetic patrimony

into industrial property [...]. But the lap-dissolve that begins the sequence-shot, superimposing the disturbed face of Andy upon the cosmic asphalt, suggests that it is all the nightmare of a young boy. (10)

The first part of this passage permits a perfectly conventional division between narrative content and its symbolic resonances which may, out of context, appear a little far-fetched but which Brenez integrates into her wider reading of the film’s ‘figurative synthesis’, arguing for example that in it ‘[t]he capitalist system is figured as a toxic military base’ (10) and linking an image of the shadows cast by a group of soldiers to ‘the outlines of bodies imprinted onto Hiroshima’s walls’ (7). But the point about the nightmare of the young son instead takes its starting point from a purely visual feature of the film: the dissolve superimposes the asphalt on the face of the boy. Brenez is not arguing that, diegetically, what is going on *is* merely a nightmare – ‘It was all a dream!’ – but rather that what she would call the film’s figurative invention raises this possibility, or connotes such an idea. It does so because it is a merely one instance of a pattern that Brenez finds in a great many of Ferrara’s films. *The Funeral* (1996) ends with the coffin lid being lowered above Johnny’s (Vincent Gallo) dead body, leading Brenez to suggest that ‘the final image suggests that the entire film might have been the dream of a corpse’ (77). She also argues that the way that a scene in *Dangerous Game* (1993) in which Harvey Keitel confesses his infidelities to his wife after having just learned from her of her father’s death is sandwiched between two shots of air stewardesses offering him a drink gives rise to the idea that he was ‘dreaming the intervening scene’ (97). Brenez’s claim is that it is part of Ferrara’s style, of his films’ figurative logic, to employ certain images in such a way as to evoke a sense of dream or fantasy without going so far as actually to generate a fantastic diegesis. But because films that *do* wish to indicate a diegetic dream or fantasy often use the exact same devices, the result is a curious and distinctive effect that hovers between possibilities, with both the prosaic diegesis and the sensation of a dream active simultaneously; such effects are common even in those of Ferrara’s films not primarily concerned with hallucination.

Brenez's mode of writing is, then, related to her critical priorities if we understand that term with reference to the way she structures her arguments. It is true that she doesn't, as a rule, give much attention to detailed description, but her work has other strengths and pleasures. She does at times employ a somewhat apodictic tone, which can result in what might appear to be grandly sweeping claims. Take, for example, her discussion of the scene in the restaurant after crime kingpin Frank White (Christopher Walken) is released from prison in *King of New York* (1990), and the modes of complicity with his criminality that it displays: 'There are five orders of complicity: subordination, connivance, collusion, attraction, and embrace' (65). Although, in context, it is relatively clear that the claim about 'five orders of complicity' is specific to the restaurant scene, its placement soon after the opening of the section, which refers to Hobbes's view of human nature and its 'three principal "causes of quarrel"' leading to 'three modes of behaviour involving the use of violence' (64) means that the possibility of reading the claim about complicity as a general one is, one might say, connoted. But it would be a mistake to read the way she structures her arguments as evidence that her criticism begins with the abstract and simply imposes extraneous ideas on the films she discusses. On the contrary, returning to the films after reading her criticism shows how closely attentive she is. Nevertheless, perhaps because she wants to distance herself from an empiricism that might consider itself to be neutral and purely objective, or (in another Deleuzian gesture) to dissuade us from thinking that philosophy needs to be 'applied' to films – rather than that films can be examined with an eye to determining the philosophical work that they themselves are doing – she tends to introduce specific details as *evidence* for more general claims, rather than as *material* on which to build those claims. This strategy might well make us miss the vivid description of films to be found in other critics, but there is surely no reason to wish for a single model of textually attentive criticism. Brenez, I would argue, draws out lines of thought which one can follow upon returning to the films in question, rather than merely extracting themes or pursuing loose associations. John Gibbs and Douglas Pye correctly observe that '[i]nterpretation has to be rooted in

the concrete details of the text (its style) because it is only through these that we gain access to the film's subjects', but there are different ways such a 'rooting' might exhibit itself in written critical texts (2005: 10). Brenez's style is not wholly devoted to demonstration through close reading – though it does do this – but it is nevertheless *based*, throughout, on close reading.

I want, finally, to ask whether Brenez always fulfils her commitment to fluidity and transformation by examining a single tiny example, which is again an instance of 'the movement of one thing towards its other', from *Ms .45* (1981). This film tells the story of how suffering two rapes on a single day transforms a mute seamstress named Thana (Zoë Tamerlis) into a vengeful killer, who eventually wants to destroy all men simply for being men. The film's culminating massacre takes place at a Halloween party, at which Thana – who takes on the trappings both of 'virgin' and 'whore' by dressing as a heavily made-up nun (combining the insignia of the only

sexual roles traditionally allowed women by men in order to enact her task of obliterating all men) – is eventually stabbed to death by her friend Laurie (Darlene Stuto). Brenez writes:

By erasing Thana, Laurie bears witness to the gesture – at once castrating (she wields an enormous knife) and protective (without this gesture, society is no longer even possible; it would be the reign of pure violence, Thana's reign) – through which the human creature participates in his or her own enslavement. (90)

The gesture is presumably castrating because it puts an end to Thana's use of her (phallic) gun. But what are we to make of the fact, unmentioned by Brenez, that the *knife* is also clearly shown as *Laurie's* symbolic phallus?

Before she stabs Thana, Laurie holds the knife erect at her crotch, accentuated by her black skirt which is open at the front, revealing her legs and underwear. The gesture is not exactly emphasised but the slow motion of the sequence gives us plenty of time to notice it. Despite the tiresomely familiar





misogyny which is on plentiful display elsewhere in the party (two men discuss buying virgins, while another man denies his partner the option not to be a mother by refusing to have a vasectomy despite earlier having promised to), at the moment of her death Thana is positioned between two instances of *subversion* of gender, combinations of supposedly contradictory gender codes in single individuals. Her final victim is a man dressed as a bride in white, who stands in front of her; behind her is Laurie, wielding her knife as surrogate penis. Even given the fact that, as Brenez argues, there is a sense in which Thana 'incarnates the logical, politically radical response to an intolerable situation' (89), the consequence of fully enacting this response would, as Brenez says, be the obliteration of all society. Brenez notes that 'Thana drifts towards a collective massacre – erasing all masculine bodies suspected of sexual aggression, then any man whatsoever, and finally [...] every kind of body, whether male, female, or transsexual' (42), but she neglects

the application of imagery that transgresses gender boundaries to Laurie, the agent of Thana's destruction. Perhaps we could read the gender slippage in this final composition as a whole as giving the lie to Thana's misandry, which dominates her violence. Even if it is initially directed against one man, and eventually becomes indiscriminate, the majority of the film's narrative outlines the way the object of Thana's hatred expands from men who approach her sexually to *all men*, in general. According to this misandry, men are utterly other than women, and therefore utterly unworthy of existence. In fact men and women are *not* wholly other to one another, but this Thana will never understand; hence the complete incomprehension with which, as she dies, she says to Laurie the only word she speaks in the entire film: 'sister'.

Why, then, does Brenez not mention Laurie's phallic knife? Perhaps she simply did not notice it. Perkins wrote in his final published piece that '[w]hen some salient detail escapes comment, the omission may as soon result from a writer's

decision and priorities as from a failure of observation', but that it is also 'inevitably' the case that 'we do fall victim to failures of observation' (2017: 384). Even if Brenez's omission is the result of an oversight, perhaps she was prompted not to notice it – if one can say such a thing – because of her interpretation of Laurie as an agent of accommodation with regressive norms. In Brenez's reading, Laurie's 'irritation and rage in the face of harassment [...] nonetheless expresses itself in a socially admissible way' which serves ultimately to 'render the situation tolerable' (89). Thana is, as we have seen, the radical alternative to such behaviour, who must ultimately be destroyed, and destroyed by Laurie, the socially acceptable face of protest: 'Laurie kills the adolescence that is represented throughout the film by Thana's bodily mutation. This is an adolescence entirely aligned with rebellion [...] Once dead, Thana can become an adult, that is, servile' (90). It would not have been easy for Brenez's argument to explore the consequences of any transgressive sexuality associated with Laurie while retaining such a firm opposition between two forms of protest as embodied in the two characters. This small example can serve as a reminder of how vigilant the critic concerned with figurative transformation needs to be, because of how seductive static oppositions can be even to those explicitly dedicated to avoiding them.

There does not, then, seem to me to be such a thing as 'figural criticism', if it is considered to be an alternative to other, supposedly more traditional, methods. (Not to mention the fact that the *Movie* tradition is by no means monolithic or even entirely coherent; the writings of, say, Andrew Britton or Raymond Durnat are in some ways almost as different from Perkins as is Brenez.) Brenez's approach offers an example of alternative emphasis rather than a wholly distinct approach to criticism. This is not, of course, a weakness because it increases the ways in which Brenez's practice could usefully inform other styles of criticism; to take on board its example does not require that one subscribe fully to her method in all its aspects. Brenez may sometimes invert critical priorities, but she does not do so merely to be different. Her thinking is systematic (in that it makes structurally interconnected theoretical propositions and articulates a strong sense of films as interrelated wholes, as well as parts of oeuvres that



themselves, in turn, form interrelated wholes) but not in such a way that any omission discovered risks its collapse. I see no reason why one cannot envisage a criticism that combines the nuanced description and sensitivity to pattern and motivation we find in critics such as Perkins with the interests in explicit theoretical construction and varied forms of excess and disorder that motivate Brenez. Such a criticism might provide some fresh perspectives as well as facilitating the application of some of Perkins' most important insights to films that those critics who draw on his methodology have sometimes tended to consider as lying out of bounds.

### DOMINIC LASH

Dominic Lash recently completed his PhD on confusion and disorientation in film at the University of Bristol. An article on faith, agency, and self-pity in Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) has just been published in the *Quarterly Review of Film and Television*.

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with, or resulting from, such processes would involve us in complexities that are not to the point here.

<sup>3</sup> My translation. 'Il faut envisager ensuite la logique figurative, non pas seulement comme traitement d'un motif, d'un thème ou d'une forme singulière, mais aussi en termes de groupement de figures, au sens tour à tour plastique (le contour corporel, l'effigie) et rhétorique (enchaînements et déchaînements, syntaxe et parataxe des liens eux-mêmes).'

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Alex Clayton for prompting me to think harder about this resonance between Perkins and Brenez and suggesting these examples.

<sup>5</sup> This phrase should not be seen as implying that Perkins was any kind of naïve realist; it indicates, instead, his resistance (at the time he wrote *Film as Film*) to certain aspects of modernism. This resistance finds expression in the stipulation – which this phrase reflects – that once the rules of the film world are set up, whatever they may be, then it is important for the film to abide by them, lest the viewer's experience be unhelpfully disrupted.

<sup>6</sup> The film draws connections between the acts of painting and (murdering by) drilling, and both activities reach a culmination in the final monochrome, which is both a 'painterly' image and a metonym for blood – once again the two senses of figuration (plastic and rhetorical) are entwined.

<sup>1</sup> The definition states that figuration is the 'symbolic game or process aiming to establish a fixed, evolving or unstable correlation between the plastic, aural and narrative parameters able to elicit fundamental categories of representation (such as the visible and invisible, mimesis, reflection, appearance and disappearance, image and origin, the integral and the discontinuous, form, the intelligible, the part and the whole [...]) and other parameters – which may be the same parameters, depending on the particular type of determination effected – relating to fundamental categories of ontology (such as being and appearance, essence and apparition, being and nothingness, same and other, the immediate, the reflective, inner and outer, [...]).' (translated by Adrian Martin and cited in Martin 2012: 8).

<sup>2</sup> I shall concentrate in this article on the notion of *figuration*, rather than attempting to define what a *figure* might be. This is because, as I attempt to make clear in the course of the article, figuration is, for Brenez, so fundamentally processual that defining the noun associated



## *Manhattan Melodrama* W.S. Van Dyke, 1934

*Manhattan Melodrama* has not received the recognition it deserves. It is famous, but for an unfortunate reason: it was the movie John Dillinger watched on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1934 in Chicago's Biograph – before he walked out to be shot by the G-men of the Bureau of Investigation (the future FBI). Critically, however, the film has received only intermittent attention. The most substantial piece I have found is by Jonathan Munby in *Public Enemies, Public Heroes*, where the film is discussed as a gangster movie with specific contemporary resonances (1999: 66-82). Munby makes a good case for the film, but *Manhattan Melodrama* is much more than a gangster movie. Unfortunately, one attempt to label it differently – in *Hollywood Genres*, Thomas Schatz refers to it, along with *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Michael Curtiz, 1938), as a 'Cain-and-Abel' movie (1981: 99) – is highly misleading; yet the label has stuck, and has been repeated by several critics.

I would like to look at the film primarily from two points of view: as a male melodrama which becomes a tragedy, and in terms of its stars – Clark Gable, William Powell and Myrna Loy. The former is unusual – there are not many Hollywood movies with a genuinely tragic hero – and the latter is striking because it is a definitive film for all three stars. For example, it was the remarkable chemistry between

Powell and Loy in *Manhattan Melodrama* – apparent from their first scene together – that resulted in their being cast as husband and wife in the long-running *Thin Man* series.

*Manhattan Melodrama* was released in May 1934, towards the end of the so-called 'pre-Code' period. In fact, the term 'pre-Code' is a slight misnomer. Under the supervision of Will Hays, the Motion Picture Production Code was written in 1930, but at first it lacked an effective mechanism for enforcement. Although Hays hired Joseph I Breen as public relations man for the Code as early as October 1930 (Leff & Simmons 1990: 14), for some time Breen was unable to prevent Hollywood producers defying the Code. Between 1930 and 1934, Hollywood studios, seeking to counteract the slump in admissions brought about by the Depression, readily produced films whose content went beyond what Hays and Breen considered suitable for American audiences – primarily in terms of sex and violence. These are the films retrospectively referred to as 'pre-Code'. It was the Legion of Decency, a Catholic body, that brought an end to this period of relative licence. In April 1934, it mobilised such an outcry against the 'excesses' of Hollywood films that Hays was obliged to step in, committing the industry to proper enforcement of the Code. In July 1934, the Production Code Administration (PCA) was set up, with Breen at its head, and with effective sanctions. Hollywood producers could be fined if they did not follow its rules – scripts to be submitted to the PCA for vetting before production; completed films likewise submitted afterwards. If a film was passed by the PCA, it was awarded a Seal of Approval. The Seal was the crucial sanction – without it, a film would not be distributed by any of the major distribution networks.

The *AFI Catalog 1931-1940* records that there were discussions between the Studio Relations Office (the future PCA) and MGM about certain 'censorable' elements in *Manhattan Melodrama*, and some of these elements were in fact deleted (Hanson 1993: 1317). But others were not – e.g. the dimming of the prison lights when Blackie (Gable) is executed – which suggests that, because of its date, the film was not subjected to as stringent a policing of its elements as future Hollywood productions. In fact, the film does not significantly violate the Code, but it nevertheless deals with moral issues with



General Slocum: Blackie takes Jim away from his reading.

a maturity that became rare as the PCA shifted films into more simplified good versus evil conflicts. *San Francisco* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1936) and *Angels with Dirty Faces* both have the same basic premise as *Manhattan Melodrama*: two boys who are childhood friends grow up to embrace very different destinies, one becoming a criminal, the other supporting law and order. But in these later films the moral conflict is simplified: the law-abiding figure is a priest. In *Manhattan Melodrama*, Blackie, who becomes a gangster, is similar to his successors in the other two movies. But Jim (Powell), who becomes first the district attorney, then the governor, is a much more novelistic and divided figure than the priests – and the corresponding conflict between the two men is much more complex.

### Traumatic events

The movie begins as a melodrama, with two traumatic events in rapid succession. The first was a real-life disaster: during an excursion of the steamship General Slocum on 15 June, 1904 on New York's East River, a fire resulted in the loss of over a thousand lives. In the movie, Blackie Gallagher (Mickey Rooney) and Jim Wade (Jimmy Butler) are on the ship with others from their East Side community, and the



**TOP** Blackie and Jim beat up the bully.



**BOTTOM** Father Joe saves the boys.

disaster functions as a traumatic event in that it orphans them both. The boys themselves jump into the river, but although Jim can swim, Blackie can't, and they require Father Joe (Leo Carrillo) to save them both from drowning. Since, however, Father Joe's cloth prevents him from being other than a spiritual father, they are adopted by Poppa Rosen (George Sidney), whose son Morris was also lost in the disaster. (Just before the fire, Blackie and Jim rescue Morris from a bullying. Indeed, the fire interrupts their beating up

of the bully.) The new family is formed across ethno-religious boundaries (Poppa Rosen is Jewish) but, more strikingly, it is all male. Since we don't see either of the boys' mothers alive, the absence of a maternal influence on their growing years is effectively complete: inevitably, this has consequences for the future.



**TOP** Leonid Kinskey slaps Poppa Rosen.

**BOTTOM** The police charge at the melee.

However, only a few years later, Poppa Rosen is then himself killed – the second traumatic event. As a communist speaker – Leon Trotsky (Leo Lange), no less – addresses a

New York crowd, disparaging American politicians and looking forward to the anticipated Russian Revolution, Poppa Rosen protests: he, too, is from Russia and in America there's 'plenty for everyone'. He is promptly set upon by Leonid Kinskey ('You dirty capitalistic stool pigeon'), and a fracas ensues. The police charge in on their horses and Poppa Rosen is trampled underfoot.

The two traumatic events are explicitly paralleled. On the General Slocum, there is a fight, followed by the fire, which sets off a general panic. During the panic, a woman faints and there are several shots of her lying unheeded on the



deck as people stampede around her. In the street, there is a fight, followed by the police charge. Again, the boys manage to escape the crowd turmoil, which is very similar to that on the boat, and here it is Poppa Rosen who falls and is trampled underfoot. The abandoned woman on the General Slocum can now be seen to stand in for the boys' mothers. For the boys, the two disasters are unusually personal: they are orphaned twice.

To begin a film with two such traumatic events is exceptional – indeed, the only other example I can recall is that of *Orphans of the Storm* (D.W. Griffith, 1921). There the father of Louise (Dorothy Gish) is murdered and she is torn from her mother and abandoned as a baby (the first traumatic event). She is taken into a family, where she becomes the adopted sister of Henriette (Lillian Gish), but then both sisters are

orphaned by the plague (the second traumatic event). As the link suggests, this is a melodramatic structure: binding the two protagonists as siblings before taking them into adulthood. Although, as adults, Blackie and Jim do not refer to themselves as brothers – whereas Louise and Henriette do indeed refer to themselves as sisters – their relationship as friends is also, at heart, fraternal.

I have used the narrative parallels between *Orphans of the Storm* and *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) to argue that these films possess a specifically melodramatic type of narrative, one in which an initial traumatic event – here, the sundering apart of a family – echoes compulsively through the story until the rupture can be healed by the formation of a new family (Walker 1993). *Manhattan Melodrama* offers a variation on this structure; it may be seen, in part, as like a male version of the *Orphans of the Storm* story. Thus, whereas Henriette and Louise grow up to become *victims* of ‘the storm’ (the events prior to and during the French Revolution), in *Manhattan Melodrama* the boys grow up to become *a part of* ‘the storm’. The storm here is the gangster era of prohibition, and both men define themselves in relation to it: Blackie joins it; Jim actively fights against it. Nevertheless, melodramatically, ‘the storm’ functions in a similar way in both movies. Just as events leading up to and during the French Revolution repeatedly keep tearing the sisters apart, so the clashes between the different worlds inhabited by Blackie and Jim repeatedly threaten their relationship. But, whereas *Orphans of the Storm* moves towards a happy ending for the two adopted sisters, *Manhattan Melodrama* has a tragic ending for the two adopted brothers.

Equally, though more obliquely than in *Orphans of the Storm*, the narrative of *Manhattan Melodrama* includes echoes of the two initial traumatic events. Blackie and Jim first meet as adults outside the Polo Grounds in New York during another real-life event, the Jack Dempsey-Luis Firpo World Heavyweight Boxing Championship fight on 14 September 1923. Both men are on their way to the fight, but neither makes it, because they stop to talk and the fight is over so quickly. However, they can hear the sounds of the audience reacting to the fight, sounds which continue throughout their abbreviated conversation. In this scene, the fight is displaced from

them, but it nevertheless creates a sense of background turmoil, and as the punters pour out of the arena after the fight, the two friends are spun apart, unable to make a firm date to meet up in the future. The scene establishes a precedent: all their meetings until the climactic courtroom scene will be fleeting – or missed. It’s as though the violence of the traumatic events continues to rumble in the background, forever disturbing a harmonious relationship between them.

When Poppa Rosen is killed, Blackie blames it on the police: they simply charged in without looking. And so, although ‘communist agitators’ started the affray, it is the police suppression of it that is indicted. Blackie swears revenge: ‘Someday I’ll get even with dirty rotten cops’ (the last three words now niftily censored – one of a number of minor elements that were allowed before the strict imposition of the Code, but have since been deleted). This initiates a split-screen montage sequence of the boys growing up: Blackie with his dice; Jim at his books.



One would expect the political aspects of this event to be picked up on later. This does not happen, which suggests that perhaps here the gangster era is in some sense the American equivalent of the Russian Revolution: a period of great political turmoil, with the class conflict necessarily recast in terms of law and order versus crime. This enables a fourth film, the Chinese *Two Stage Sisters* (Xie Jin, 1964) to be brought into the discussion. In many respects like a Chinese *Orphans of*

*the Storm*, *Two Stage Sisters* differs from the Griffith movie primarily in the ideological split which develops between the two adopted sisters in the final years of the civil war. Whereas Chunha commits herself to the ideals of the Communists, Yeohung is seduced by bourgeois-capitalist luxuries (money, furs, jewellery, alcohol and above all, sex: the film is highly puritanical) into decadence and dependency, becoming a pawn of the KMT forces of reaction. In other words, as in *Manhattan Melodrama*, each protagonist is identified with one of the two politically conflicting forces, an identification which, for ideological purposes, is characterised as a moral / immoral opposition. Equally, as in *Manhattan Melodrama*, the morality of the political conflict is finally symbolically dramatised in a highly personalised (and theatrically enacted) courtroom confrontation between the two, in which the immoral character remains literally speechless in the face of the other’s righteousness.

### The Oedipal Triangle

As the boys grow up, Blackie remains emotionally a child, gambling (= playing), carefree, irresponsible. This is suggested, too, in his relationship with Spud (Nat Pendleton), whom he has also known since childhood. As a boy, Spud was Blackie’s dupe; now Blackie has taken him on as a sidekick, as though he needs someone around whose foolishness is entertaining. Spud’s amiable naivety is childlike, and he and his girlfriend Annabelle (Isabel Jeans) are primarily used for ‘comic relief’. By contrast, Jim’s identification with the law places him in the role of the father: in Lacanian terms, he takes over the function of the dead father (by extension, the Symbolic Father) by binding himself to the law. For Blackie, this places Jim in an unassailable position: he can only defer. Writing about *Manhattan Melodrama* in *Pictures Will Talk* – Joseph L. Mankiewicz was one of the film’s scriptwriters – Kenneth L. Geist declares himself baffled by this deference (1978: 67), which goes so far as Blackie’s submission to Jim’s prosecution of him for murder. Melodramatically, however, it makes sense. The traumatic events have another remarkable consequence: as though seeking to fill the gap opened up in ‘family relations’, Jim and Blackie grow up to duplicate,



in their own relationship, the father / son relationship of the Oedipal drama.

This is played out on a number of levels. Blackie sees Jim as rising to be the ultimate secular father-figure: one day he will be President. Indeed, as Munby points out, the film supports this through the parallels it suggests between Jim and Franklin D. Roosevelt: Jim, too, marries an Eleanor (Myrna Loy) and becomes Governor of New York (1999: 67). Equally, when Eleanor, who used to be Blackie's girlfriend, leaves him and subsequently marries Jim, Blackie accepts this; as though he recognises that Jim as father-figure should have possession of the woman. Even the way Eleanor meets Jim is suggestive. On the evening when Jim is elected District Attorney – that is, when he takes the first step up the political ladder – Blackie is supposed to meet him, but he has a gambling appointment: he sends Eleanor instead. It's as though, now that Jim is beginning to fulfil the destiny Blackie has envisaged for him, Blackie unconsciously feels that Eleanor belongs to him. However much the film stresses Blackie's chronic inability to keep appointments, it is surely not insignificant that he leaves Eleanor and Jim alone together (in the Cotton Club) all evening. Afterwards, Eleanor speaks of the 'security' that someone like Jim offers, and actually tries to 'reform' Blackie: she wants them to get married. Blackie refuses; Eleanor leaves. Although she cannot leave to go to



Eleanor tries to persuade Blackie to marry her.

Jim – when a heroine is involved in such a switch of affection, a time lapse is necessary to indicate that she is not flighty – the presence of Jim's overcoat ('accidentally' left behind as he said goodnight) tells Blackie clearly enough 'why' she left.

However, if Blackie seems like a dutiful son-figure, accepting that Eleanor will choose Jim, he also resents this. The Oedipal tensions are by no means conjured away. But Blackie cannot direct his anger at Jim, whom he loves as a friend independently of his filial deference, and so he displaces it onto a fast-operating racketeer, Manny Arnold (Noel Madison). Again the timing is significant. Blackie's showdown with Arnold occurs on the same evening – New Year's Eve – as Eleanor's re-meeting with Jim, two months after she left Blackie. The next day, Jim tells Blackie that he and Eleanor are getting married: within the conventions of 1934 it is relatively clear that the two of them have just spent the night together. And so Blackie shoots Arnold at the same time as Eleanor and Jim first sleep together. In addition, New Year's Eve is *the* privileged night for lovers in Hollywood movies; literally dozens of films testify to the 'truth' of Barbara Stanwyck's line in *My Reputation* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1946): 'They say the person you're with as the New Year comes in is the person you'll be with all during the coming year'. Blackie may not know that Eleanor and Jim are together, but he may suspect it. Certainly, in his conversation with Arnold, Blackie reveals that his loss of Eleanor has made him ruthless. On election night we saw him give Arnold time to pay his debts, but now he has run out of patience: 'a lot's happened in the last couple of months'.

At this point, the film introduces an unusual complication. Blackie had told Spud to return Jim's overcoat to him; instead Spud 'borrowed' it, and now he absent-mindedly leaves it behind in the hotel room where Arnold is murdered. Such carelessness is entirely typical of Spud, but Blackie's failure to notice the coat as he leaves the room is more telling: it looks like a classic Freudian slip, repeating Jim's slip in leaving it behind in Eleanor's apartment. However, what this means is ambiguous. We assume that the coat will be traced back to Jim and he'll be on the spot: either he'll be blamed or he'll have to finger Blackie. If the former, Blackie's 'forgetting' the coat looks like revenge (the duplication of

the initial 'forgetting' is especially relevant here); if the latter, guilt. Such a confusion of motivation seems particularly appropriate to an Oedipally based murder. As it happens, Jim alone recognises the coat and he confronts Blackie with this privately. And now Blackie, fully aware of what is at stake, sets out to convince Jim that it isn't his coat. Since Spud had had a new coat made, identical to Jim's, this is possible, provided Jim accepts the new coat as his own.

As a plot device, the business with the two coats is clumsy, but it also introduces an intriguing subtextual intimation.



**TOP** Taking a phone call from Tootsie, Blackie holds the gavel.

**BOTTOM** Jim finds the gavel in the pocket of his new coat.

In the pocket of his coat, Jim had left a gavel he had picked up whilst in the Cotton Club with Eleanor on Election Night. Blackie finds the coat and the gavel after Eleanor has walked out; the latter serves as a particularly irritating symbol, with its (only temporarily misleading) sexual overtones. Now he returns the gavel to Jim in the new coat, and it is the sight of this that convinces Jim that the new coat is his. In other words, he is deceived into accepting new for old by the memento of his first date with Eleanor. But it is now, in addition, a symbol of his *success* with Eleanor: he is rewarded with the return of the phallic symbol which he had forgetfully left in Blackie's care. Blackie's returning the gavel is a gesture of appeasement – it deflects the father-figure's wrath – and arguably it works as such because of its sexual overtones: the son signalling his acceptance of the right of the father to the phallus (and, by extension, the woman). Moreover, because the gavel is in the coat, it's as though the coat symbolises Eleanor (and she is in fact wearing it when



Jim sees her back to her apartment). Perhaps this accounts for Jim's refusal to notice the coat's newness: it's as though, in fantasy, this allows him to view Eleanor as re-virginised. And so, he cannot bear his erstwhile assistant Snow (Thomas Jackson), later, referring to Blackie as his wife's ex-lover.

Such a reading of the coat transaction operates in the film's subtext. It doesn't displace the obvious interpretation – that Jim assumes this is his coat because the gavel is in the pocket

– but it does suggest that rather more may be going on than is at first apparent. We know that Blackie cannot get away with murder. But, after the coat transaction, Jim, now the DA, seems incapable of pursuing the investigation as he should. When Jim invites Blackie to be his best man, his secretary (Claudelle Kaye) warns him of the inadvisability of such a move: 'People are saying that you let Blackie Gallagher off the Manny Arnold killing out of friendship'. And, when Jim is nominated for governor, Snow, seeking revenge for having been dropped (for corruption) from the DA's ticket, has a ready source of impeachable material in the case. He says Jim didn't even try to find Arnold's killer: in every speakeasy in town they know it's Blackie Gallagher. And 'friendship' does not seem a satisfactory explanation; as evidenced by Jim's later, quite ruthless, prosecution of Blackie. It is rather that Jim wilfully deceives himself about the coats, which renders him incapable of seeing Blackie as the murderer. And this self-deception would seem to be bound up with the symbolic overtones of the coat transaction.

Jim and Eleanor marry. Blackie does in fact decline Jim's invitation to be best man: he sends a telegram saying 'No-one else would understand' – significantly, Snow reads the telegram before handing it to Jim. We do not see the wedding, but we do see the couple about to depart by ship for their honeymoon, where we learn that Father Joe, now a priest at Sing Sing, returned to New York to marry them. Keeping Father Joe as a background presence throughout the movie – he is also with Jim on Election Night – prepares us for his crucial intervention towards the end.

Blackie had promised to be there himself to see the honeymoon couple off but, even though he arrives in an ambulance, he is again too late. (In *Me and Orson Welles* [Richard Linklater, 2009], set in 1937, Welles himself uses a private ambulance to beat the New York traffic.) In fact, we never see Blackie, Eleanor and Jim together as a group, which is also relevant to the Oedipal triangle. The absence of such a scene clearly undermines Blackie's professed happiness at Jim and Eleanor's marriage.

Only when Blackie commits a second murder is he arrested and prosecuted by Jim. And here, ironically, the murder – of Snow – is as much to protect Jim as Blackie himself. Snow was

threatening to use his inside information on Jim's conduct of the Arnold case to destroy Jim's chances of gubernatorial election. Eleanor, worried about this, informs Blackie, who says he'll 'have a talk' with Snow.

In the light of Blackie's conviction that Jim will one day be President, we can read his killing of Snow as his behind-the-scenes service to ensure that Jim proceeds smoothly to the next stage: election as governor. In killing Snow for Jim, Blackie acts, again, as a dutiful son-figure. This may be related to a key point in Philip Slater's analysis of the motivation behind US political assassinations: 'the assassin does not really kill authority, he kills in the *name* of authority' (1970: 56). Jim's destiny 'authorises' Blackie to kill Snow. However, on this occasion, there is an unfriendly witness: a blind man who isn't blind.

The Tiresias figure – a blind seer – is not uncommon in movies, whether identifying the murderer (*M* [Fritz Lang, 1931]; *The Informer* [John Ford, 1935]; indirectly *Peeping Tom* [Michael Powell, 1960]) identifying innocence in a character presumed guilty (*Saboteur* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1942]; indirectly *The Blue Gardenia* [Fritz Lang, 1953]), or simply being psychic (*Don't Look Now* [Nicolas Roeg, 1973]). In that the blind man here is a fake, one should not perhaps invoke Tiresias, except for the latter's place in myth as the man who identifies Oedipus as the murderer of his father. In the light of the reading of Arnold's killing as 'displaced parricide', this seems too remarkable to be ignored. Now Blackie accepts the punishment for murder he so neatly evaded earlier: his passivity in the face of Jim's ruthless prosecution testifies to his submission, finally, to the father's wrath.

It's as though the original crime of displaced parricide 'returns' through Snow. With Arnold's killing, it was the timing of the murder that was significant; in Snow's case, it is the setting. Blackie kills Snow in a washroom in Madison Square Gardens. An ice hockey match is taking place in the background, so the scene echoes the place where Blackie and Jim first met as adults. And so, although Blackie kills Snow for Jim, there is also a subtextual hint that, once again, the murder is like displaced parricide.

A further complication is that Snow as blackmailer arises in response to Jim's disavowal of Blackie's responsibility for

Arnold's murder, and he is powerful because he speaks the truth that Jim represses. Snow is like Jim's shadow, corrupted and repressed, but knowing his, Jim's, dark secrets. And one secret is bound up with Eleanor's history. The specific accusation that provokes Jim to strike Snow is, 'You wouldn't hold Gallagher because you wouldn't prosecute your wife's ex-lover'.

The ruthlessness of Jim's prosecution of Blackie arises from a number of factors, but one is contained in this accusation: he is mercilessly proving Snow wrong. A second factor relates to his own earlier wish that Snow be silenced. In killing him, Blackie had acted like Jim's Id, and so Jim's prosecution is also a Superego punishment of the Id, a punishment fuelled by his own guilt at the murder: Snow, after all, was speaking the truth. The film is very sharp about Jim's legal practices: he virtually ignores the first murder (of a racketeer) but vigorously pursues the second (of a lawyer). And, however badly Jim may feel about this, it is clear that his successful prosecution of Blackie clinches his election as governor: he has demonstrated his integrity by sending his friend to the electric chair.

We only see the final stage of Jim's prosecution of Blackie. But, from the moment that Jim enters the courtroom (on this occasion, it is he who is late) and begins his summing-up to the jury, the whole scene has an electric intensity. In such a situation, with an audience and with a powerful speech to

deliver, Powell is at his authoritative best, dominating the room as moves around, incisively driving home his points. Within the courtroom are not just Eleanor, but also, sitting together, Annabelle, Spud and Tootsie (Muriel Evans), Blackie's current girlfriend. The scene is built on montage, cutting not just between Jim, relentlessly laying out his case, and Blackie, tensely listening, but also incorporating these other figures. About halfway through the speech, we are shown that Father Joe is also again present, sitting with Eleanor, but he is not integrated into the dynamics of the montage – unlike the others, he is never shown on his own. Because, ideologically, he must seem to be impartial, his is rather an inert presence.

The scene could be analysed in detail for the way specific phrases are accompanied by specific reaction shots of Blackie and the four significant spectators; I will limit myself to the shots that occur at the climax and conclusion of the speech. Jim has been building a case against gangsters like Blackie throughout his speech, and now he stands close to the jury, telling them that a conviction would, 'give a warning to other gangsters and murderers that they are through'. Cut to a close-up of Blackie, sweating with the stress of what he is hearing. Back to Jim, who turns from the jury and walks towards Blackie. The camera moves back with him to bring Blackie in the foreground into shot. Jim, too, is sweating: 'In 1904, when the General Slocum burned, I made a



**TOP** CU of Blackie sweating.

**BOTTOM** Jim moves to address Blackie directly.



Blackie's trial. Eleanor is angry at what Jim is saying; Father Joe is neutral.



Jim addresses the jury.

boyish effort ...' Cut to Blackie: 'to save Blackie Gallagher's life'. Blackie shakes his head, as though trying to shake free from the tension. Back to Jim: he, too, is now in close-up, and he is looking down at Blackie: 'Today I demand from you his death.' Cut to Eleanor, who shakes her head in disbelief at what her husband is saying. Then to Annabelle, who fearfully clutches Spud. Then to Spud, staring angrily – and also sweating. Then to Tootsie, biting her lip as she tries to control her tears. Finally, back to Blackie. He leans back, and with an effort recovers his insouciance; he returns to a sketch he



## REACTIONS TO JIM DEMANDING BLACKIE'S DEATH.

**FIRST COLUMN****TOP** Eleanor appalled.**MIDDLE** Annabelle frightened.**BOTTOM** Spud angry.**SECOND COLUMN****TOP** Tootsie biting her lip.**MIDDLE** Blackie recovers his insouciance.**BOTTOM** Blackie's sketch.

has been drawing and even shows the flicker of a smile. Jim, still sweating, sits down. He ignores the proffered hand of his delighted assistant and writes a note. In the background, we hear the judge's final remarks to the jury – these continue throughout the rest of the scene. Cut to Blackie sketching and then the sketch itself: himself in the electric chair. Jim's note is delivered to Blackie: 'Sorry, Blackie, I had to do it'. Blackie writes a reply: 'Okay, kid. I can take it. PS and can you dish it out.'

Here, we could argue, Jim is actually playing to the electorate, which provides the most sinister reason for his relentless prosecution: political ambition. But in the reaction shots of Blackie and the four key spectators, we see the cost – the ruthlessness of Jim's prosecution, to say nothing of its intended outcome, remains etched on their faces. Even though Blackie is able to recover his familiar devil-may-care attitude, the other four are devastated. After this, the only way in which Jim can keep his integrity with the film's audience is to give up the governorship at the end.

**Sacrificial hero; tragic hero**

Blackie kills Snow as a result of a confidence from Eleanor. Here, one could argue, he is acting *as* her ex-lover, gallantly protecting her husband – a motivation also found in certain later gangster movies, e.g. *The Roaring Twenties* (Raoul Walsh, 1939). And by forbidding Eleanor to tell Jim why he killed Snow, Blackie offers himself as sacrificial victim. Jim can prosecute him without constraint, untroubled by his



Proto-noir lighting: Blackie is sentenced to death. His lawyer on his right.

own place in Blackie's motive. Indeed, Jim can *use* him as a vital stepping stone to the governorship.

Jim is elected governor, in which capacity he has the power to commute Blackie's death sentence. The latter's lawyer (Frank Conroy) petitions him to do so, on the grounds that (1) no motive has been found for the killing and (2) Jim was elected governor on the strength of the case. Jim refuses: 'There is no case to change the verdict of the court.'

The refusal is, nevertheless, unhappily made. The virulence of Jim's prosecution has exhausted itself; now he evidently feels remorse. At this point, Jim becomes a tragic hero, painfully torn between love and duty. On the evening of the execution, he 'broods' by the fire. Deeply concerned that he should not let Blackie die, Eleanor tells him that Blackie killed Snow for him. Jim, agonisedly, 'You know what that means?' Eleanor: 'It means that, but for Blackie Gallagher, you wouldn't be governor'. Jim: 'It means that the State has finally found a motive for the murder. There isn't a chance now.'

By returning to the grounds of the lawyer's petition, this brilliantly crystallises Jim's dilemma. Resolving the motive multiplies considerably the force of the second point – Jim's election. Inevitably, Jim's experience of tragic dividedness is intensified, but he remains adamant: 'I must do what I think is right.' Appalled that he should let Blackie die when he has



TOP Jim broods by the fire. Eleanor's head is (just) visible as she enters in the background.



BOTTOM Eleanor tells Jim why Blackie killed Snow.

the power to stop this, Eleanor leaves him, telling him precisely what he is sacrificing for his principles: 'Blackie's life, my love, our happiness.'

Finally, just before the execution, Jim goes to Sing Sing to see Blackie. He is deeply affected that Blackie should have killed Snow for him, but says 'There's nothing I can do to repay you'. Unable to help Blackie in the present, he blames himself for the past: 'When old man Rosen died, it was up to



TOP Jim visits Blackie in Sing Sing.



BOTTOM Father Joe joins them.

me to take care of you ... I was too busy'. At this moment, arriving to accompany Blackie to the electric chair, Father Joe enters the cell. This is a crucial symbolic reunion: the characters say it is the first time the three of them have been together since the East Side, but, so far as the film is concerned, it's the first time since Father Joe saved the two boys from drowning. Moreover, because there is no scene with Blackie, Eleanor and Jim together, this reunion also stands





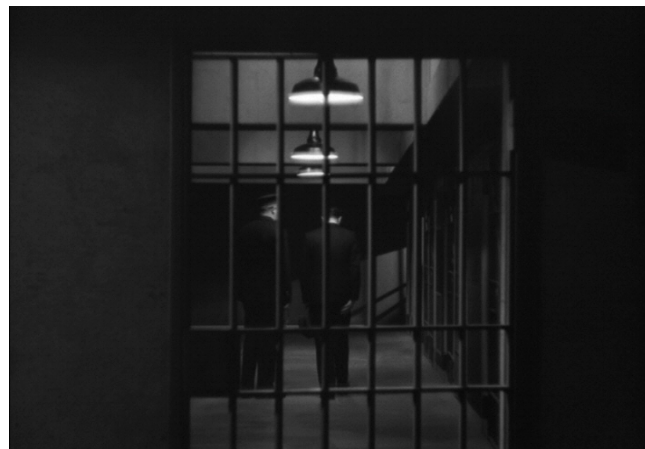
Blackie and Jim's farewell.

in place of that 'missing' scene. (In that he pulled the boys out of the water, Father Joe is symbolically their mother-figure.) And this provides the emotional pressure to break through Jim's commitment to his duty: he says to Blackie 'I can't do it; I've got to commute you.' But Blackie refuses. He realises that, were Jim to do this, it would ruin his career 'And for what? So I can rot in this hole?' And so here he becomes a genuine sacrificial hero; ensuring, by his death, the preservation of Jim's public integrity.

The dimming of the prison lights – signalling the use of the electric chair – occurs as Jim walks slowly away, out of the building. There is a poetic element here: the imagery suggests the tragic hero leaving the stage. But the dimming of the lights also marks the moment of the sacrificial hero's death – a death whose burden Jim will henceforth have to carry.

Even though Jim then goes on to resign the governorship, Blackie's refusal to accept the commutation enables this to be done honourably. Jim is the film's 'representative of the law' and cannot be explicitly corrupted. He has his moment of weakness, when he offers to save Blackie from the chair, but he atones for this by a public confession and his resignation. And this, of course, frees him for an equally honourable reconciliation with Eleanor.

From the moment that Jim knows why Blackie killed Snow (or, at least, the part of the motive relating to himself),



JIM WALKS AWAY AS BLACKIE IS EXECUTED

TOP The lights dim.

BOTTOM The lights return.

the chain of events is arguably inevitable. In order for the film to bring about a resolution acceptable in both emotional and ideological terms (preserving Jim's humanity; protecting his ideological status), Jim has to offer to save Blackie's life, Blackie has to refuse and Jim has to resign. Nevertheless, the film achieves considerable intensity as it negotiates these stages. Tragic heroes are relatively rare in the Hollywood cinema; films with both a tragic and a sacrificial hero even rarer.

## The stars

Blackie Gallagher is an archetypal Gable role. Blackie is a natural leader, running a business enterprise – here a gambling joint – with a practised ease, respected and admired by those who work under him. Moreover, except to those who violate the gambler's code – debts must be paid – or who threaten those he cares for, Gable / Blackie is entirely honourable. In *San Francisco*, Gable's character is again called Blackie – emphasising the films' connections – and although Father Tim Mullin (Spencer Tracy) is extremely hostile to Blackie's involvement in what he, as a priest, thinks of as vice, he nevertheless tells Mary (Jeanette MacDonald) that Blackie has a code: 'he never lied, he never cheated and I'm sure he never took an underhanded advantage of anyone.' It is much the same in *Manhattan Melodrama*. As a gambler, Gable / Blackie is also lucky, which is bound up with his insouciance: he wins so often because it wouldn't trouble him if he lost. Incidents such as a police raid simply do not bother him – he takes them in his stride. In matters of the heart, however, Gable stands a little to one side of the Hollywood norm. Although he is invariably attractive to women, and is indeed romantically susceptible, he insists on remaining sexually free – unlike most other stars, he considers marriage as a step towards the trap of domesticity. In this respect, *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), is an atypical Gable role of the era.

I would like to clarify the nature of the Gable persona with reference to Robert B. Ray's notion that classical Hollywood cinema is dominated by two male archetypes, the 'official hero' and the 'outlaw hero' (1985). These figures may be seen as an extension of the categories of 'adventurer hero' and 'settled husband-figure' put forward by Robin Wood (1977). Ray summarises the two types:

Embodied in the adventurer, explorer, gunfighter, wanderer, and loner, the outlaw hero stood for that part of the American imagination valuing self-determination and freedom from entanglements. By contrast, the official hero, normally portrayed as a teacher, lawyer, politician, farmer, or family man, represented the American belief in collective action, and the objective legal process that superseded private notions of right and wrong. While



the outlaw hero found incarnations in the mythic figures of Davy Crockett, Jesse James, Huck Finn [...] the official hero developed around legends associated with Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Lee [...]. (1985: 59)

Ray goes on to argue that Gable was the star who 'most obviously drew on the outlaw hero tradition' (77). He continues:

[Gable's] cheerfully self-reliant image occasioned his frequent appearances in ... [films] ... that dramatized the conflict between romantic independence and societal responsibility. Typically, these movies were reluctant hero stories that required Gable to play a man who had fled from civilization only to find it at his door, bringing in its train problems [...]: wrongs to be righted, villains to be fought, women to be protected. Generally [...] Gable's films turned on a dilemma: his obligations to some particular community (the moral center) threatened his determination to remain free and unentangled (the interest center). (78)

However, if that characterises the Gable roles where he is within the law – Ray's main examples are *Red Dust* (Victor Fleming, 1932) and *China Seas* (Tay Garnett, 1936) – *Manhattan Melodrama* and *San Francisco* are rather different. The crucial conflict for Blackie in *Manhattan Melodrama* is not between moral responsibility and emotional independence, but moral responsibility (protecting those he loves) and avoiding the legal consequences of his actions. In *San Francisco*, where he does nothing more reprehensible than run an illegal gambling joint, it is his resistance to the Christian religion that is presented as the problem, and – showing rather confused thinking – the film uses the 1906 earthquake itself to make him see the light.

Furthermore, *Manhattan Melodrama* is also a film which include both types of hero. Two of Ray's major examples of this opposition within an individual film are *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), but *Manhattan Melodrama* would serve his argument equally well. Here, too, the heroine is pulled between the two men, but ends with the official hero; here, too, the outlaw hero in some sense sacrifices himself so the official hero remains free to pursue his destiny. Just as Rick (Humphrey Bogart) shoots Major Strasse (Conrad Veidt) to

save Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid) and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman), and Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) shoots Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin) to save Ransie Stoddard (James Stewart) for Hallie (Vera Miles), so Blackie shoots Snow to protect Jim – and Eleanor. In *Casablanca*, the killing is absorbed into the film's war-time project: it means that Laszlo is free to continue his work for the resistance, and Rick will join the fight. *Liberty Valance* is bleaker: Ransie is assumed to be Valance's killer, which makes him famous and launches him into a successful political career, whereas Tom declines into obscurity. But *Manhattan Melodrama* is bleaker still: Blackie is executed for the killing; Jim gives up his political career.

Ray also makes the point that, in the strongest examples of this structure, the opposition between the two heroes is heightened by giving the official hero elements associated with the outlaw hero and vice versa (1985: 64). This, too, is found in *Manhattan Melodrama*. Thus Jim moves through some of the same territory as Blackie – a prize fight; night clubs – and comes into contact with the same crooks; indeed, he even asks Blackie about one of them. And Blackie, in turn, encourages Jim in his crime-busting operations: 'You don't play ball with those grafters'.

One of the finest Hollywood actors of his era, William Powell was only rarely given roles which enabled him to show just how good he really was. Jim Wade is one of those roles. As Jim, Powell conveys both authority and lightness of touch; intelligence and empathy. In addition, in the later scenes of *Manhattan Melodrama*, he is utterly compelling as a man agonising over a moral predicament: he absorbs the tensions into himself. It is possible that one reason why there is no scene in which Jim, Eleanor and Blackie meet as a threesome is because it would have been difficult to script whilst preserving a balance between the two men. Without Eleanor, Jim and Blackie can spar back and forth with ease, affectionate and joking, accepting one another's foibles. With Eleanor present, tensions would inevitably arise.

When Jim makes his belated entrance into the courtroom and elegantly excuses his lateness, Blackie, with evident admiration, comments to his attorney, 'Class. It's written all over him: class'. Blackie admires this in Jim because he himself lacks it: there is almost always a sense of a working-class

rough diamond in the background of Gable's roles. But Powell's persona includes a patrician's sense of ease in social situations. This contrast, too, is typical feature of films with an outlaw hero / official hero opposition: the former is more rooted in his environment, more down-to-earth, whilst the latter, pursuing noble ideals, usually moves in a more elevated social world.

In 1938, a poll conducted by Ed Sullivan in the 55 papers which syndicated his column voted Clark Gable and Myrna Loy 'the King and Queen of Hollywood' (Williams [1968] 1975: 63). This is a sign of just how popular Loy was during this period but, although she made seven films with Gable, it was above all her performances with Powell – especially in the *Thin Man* series of films – which guaranteed this popularity. And it was *Manhattan Melodrama* that first brought them together. Indeed, Loy herself has commented: 'From the very first scene we did together in *Manhattan Melodrama*, we felt that particular magic there was between us' (Kay 1977: 76). The scene is set in the back of a chauffeur-driven car: in place of himself, Blackie has sent Eleanor to 'entertain' Jim. But Jim has not yet met her, and he is a little startled to find this woman crashing into his car and then making a joke to the effect that she is enacting a sexual scandal scam. As soon as Eleanor has explained, however ('Blackie sent me'), and she and Jim settle down to talk, the scene sparkles with their rapport. David Thomson has suggested, accurately I think, that '[Loy] was only really stirred if she liked the idea of a screen partnership' (2002: 534), that is, she needed a male co-star to bring out her intelligence, warmth and vivacity. Even so, what we are seeing in this short scene in *Manhattan Melodrama* is the beginning of something exceptional in Hollywood movies: the birth of a male-female partnership that is both scintillating and full of genuine affection.

It is possible that Myrna Loy was so popular because she embodied the notion of the 'ideal wife'. Feminists may feel uneasy with such a designation, with its overtones of a self-effacing wife who is 'understanding' towards her husband. But, although Loy was understanding, she was not self-effacing: in her most characteristic roles, she would show both a resilience and a critical intelligence which she was not afraid to express. Overall, one senses in Loy a sense of irony towards

male behaviour, but this was tempered by an engaging sense of humour – she was almost always extremely likeable. Even when, as in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), her role is largely restricted to handling a husband who was having difficulty adjusting to the post-war USA, one can see her deftness and quiet competence: she always knows what to do.

In popular memory, Loy is of course indelibly associated with the *Thin Man* films, and again she has spoken about what was special about working with Powell: ‘There was this feeling of rhythm, of complete understanding, and an instinct how each of us could bring out the best in the other’ (Kay 1977: 77). But, however popular they were at the time, these films only play out the Powell-Loy marital relationship in a light-hearted comedy mode: Powell in particular seems constrained by the distinctly limited requirements of the role of Nick Charles. But in *Manhattan Melodrama* we see both the light-hearted banter and the tense drama. This is really the definitive Powell-Loy movie.

### Generic influence

Made only two years after *Manhattan Melodrama*, with the same director and star, *San Francisco* – at least in its central relationships – is like a Christianised reworking of the earlier movie. But, as also in *Angels with Dirty Faces*, the shift in the law-abiding figure from the law to the priesthood is a highly regrettable step. Everything is now simplified: as a priest, the law-abiding figure becomes infallibly right, rigidly censorious and punishingly anti-sex. All the marvellous ambiguity and complexity of Powell’s Jim Wade is lost in a procession of noble fathers initiated by Tracy’s Tim Mullin, stalking through the narratives as the ideal representatives of the repressive PCA. It is a relief to note the ‘post-Code’ variation of *True Confessions* (Ulu Grosbard, 1981). This returns to the melodramatic origins by making the two figures actual brothers, but signals its modernity by shifting to a priesthood / law polarity in which the priest is the legally corrupt figure.

MICHAEL WALKER

Michael Walker has been on the editorial board of *Movie* and its on-line successor since 1969. His most recent publications are ‘Steven Spielberg and the Rhetoric of an Ending’ in *A Companion to Steven Spielberg*, ed. Nigel Morris (Wiley Blackwell, 2017) and *Modern Ghost Melodramas: What Lies Beneath* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

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# V.F PERKINS

## 1936–2016

### Badness: an issue in the aesthetics of film

**Editorial Note:** This is a paper presented by V.F. Perkins (1936–2016) to the Society of Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) Conference in London (2005). Perkins presented several versions of this paper (and he taught the topic of badness in his classes on film aesthetics at the University of Warwick for many years), but he never formally published the work. We are presenting it here in *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* because we think it is a valuable addition to Perkins' published criticism and his philosophy of criticism.

Despite renewed interest in aesthetic questions, there remains a nervousness in our field about aesthetic evaluation, based on a fear that it must always and only set out to authorise sets of tastes and preferences which work to sustain privilege. In this view, reflected in a concern with the canonical, evaluation has a primary purpose to establish or defend orders of rank between the esteemed and the despised, to validate a scale that has such as *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928) at its top, and such as *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (Arthur Crabtree, 1944) at its base. Against this concentration on preference and hierarchy (Shakespeare over *Titanic*? Oasis over Schubert?) I stress another aspect – evaluation as the articulation of value, the grateful effort to spell out the nature of a significant achievement. In critical

practice, we find plenty of instances where evaluation is founded on admiration and gratitude and strives for community of understanding rather than for exclusivity.<sup>1</sup>

I suggest also that issues of evaluation may be approached freshly and usefully from the opposite angle, through a consideration of badness. Is it our experience that movies may have the attributes of bad communications, being for instance bigoted, deceitful, vindictive, hypocritical or self-serving? If so, then surely it is necessary to find terms in which we may discuss the badness of films which are bad as works of art rather than in their presumed or demonstrated social effects.

A scene from *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989) provides an emblematic instance of cinematic badness which is distinct both from ideological offensiveness and (since it is made with great proficiency) from ineptitude. The scene employs an inflated rhetoric and some crude but effective devices of emotional manipulation that may disguise contradictions between its declared project (anti-authoritarian) and its dramatic structure (which validates the authority of the hero).

The scene comes about twenty minutes from the start of the film – an extract chosen because its four minutes do make a discussable kind of mini-movie, but also a sequence that dramatises issues of artistic judgment. Robin Williams plays a teacher called Keating newly appointed to teach English at an exclusive boys' school.<sup>2</sup> My extract reaches its climax with the teacher's words: 'In this class you will learn to think for yourselves again.'<sup>3</sup>

The sequence starts by equating the teacher with the boys: his gestures of boredom at the reading from the book are shown to us after we have seen a range of similar gestures from the boys, filmed in a similar floating movement of the camera. Note the convergence of close-ups on the cut that links the most abstracted of the pupils to the image of the teacher.

The difference is that the boys believe that they should try to conceal their boredom whereas Keating *performs* his boredom so as to validate the display of true feeling. [You will have noted the ignorance and spite in the alleged reading of 'Dr J Evans Pritchard, Ph.D']

Throughout the scene one boy, the red-haired Cameron, is used to define for the audience the appropriate response. The







definition is achieved through style: Cameron has already been characterised unattractively and in this scene he is made to represent the opposite of the good, and thus to be a crucial element in its definition.

First, he represents sheep-like submission by being shown to copy down everything that the teacher puts on the blackboard, and by being shown to be the only boy who does this. After he has been scorned for his conformism, he is then mocked for his resistance to Keating's instructions and has to be prodded into copying.

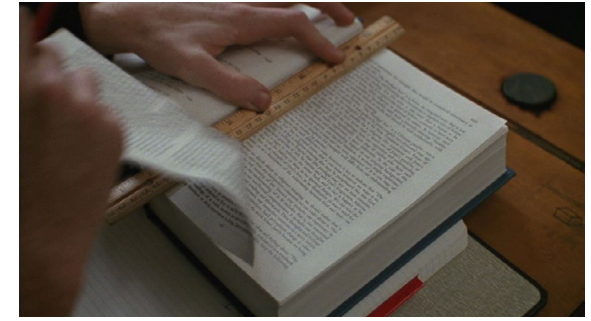
Even this he performs with timid neatness, by tearing along the edge of a ruler. The straightedge is made into an effective metaphor of character. The move away from routine provokes him to anxiety rather than to pleasure. Note the abundance of close-ups on Cameron's actions.

The scene is not only, as I said in my introduction, a scene about art and criticism. It is also about education, about teaching as performance and about demonstrating appropriate ways of acting upon a critical judgment.

Can the scene's joy in destruction stand as an image for liberation? (The more vivid image might be of a book burning; <sup>6</sup> but that image would remind the audience in troubling ways of the recent history of Europe and America.) 'In my class you will learn to think for yourselves again.' This line occurs over the image of the waste paper basket travelling from boy to boy. The movement has a pleasing rhythm, and our pleasure is enhanced by the completion of the circuit. What is proclaimed as Individualism is pictured as militaristic uniformity. Note absence / exclusion from this image of the figure of Cameron (validated by the possibility of seeing this as a Cameron viewpoint image).

Keating is teaching vandalism while he claims to be teaching poetry. But the scene mobilises its rhetoric – for instance through the reaction of the more conventional teacher who intrudes upon the class – to secure approval for Keating's approach.<sup>4</sup>

Here as throughout the film Keating is never made to face an awkward question of judgment. He is always right. If he had taught the boys to think for themselves, we might expect one or more of them to challenge his judgment, to ask what he thinks about the matters of 'Perfection' and 'Importance' in the appreciation of art; or whether Evans-Pritchard might





have something useful to say about Tennyson. But no boy raises any question that the film takes seriously.<sup>5</sup> No boy refuses, in a principled way, to join in the use of violence against ideas that is pictured in the destruction of the books – and the film never suggests this as a possibility. Only the dislikeable Cameron shows any resistance.

I suggest that there is a failure of perspective in relation to Keating and the figure of the star. The film gratifies the spectator by making it easy to be on the right side; it offers a dishonestly simplified viewpoint on conflict. We must recognise that this is only one scene. Whether we agree to take it as an instance of highly effective but corrupt filmmaking must depend on whether we think the scene accurately represents the film as a whole.

Perhaps my interpretation of the scene could be challenged by seeing it differently within the context of the complete film? Could this scene become part of a critique – or

a more rounded assessment – of Keating? I do not think we could deny that there is a contradiction in the scene between ‘Think for yourselves’ and ‘Follow my orders’. But we might defend the contradiction. We might see it as deliberate and eloquent: in terms of character, the image shows that the teacher’s deeds are in conflict with his words. Or we might understand the sequence thematically, as illustrating that there must always be a contradiction in the claim to lead a revolt against authority.

The question of intention arises here. Do we believe that we are meant to notice the contradiction? Or is it a failure of the film to construct a truthful image of education and judgment. It is possible that the filmmakers were so eager to produce an exciting and amusing scene that they lost sight of the issues of education and judgment. There was a failure to reconcile showmanship with thematic intelligence.

This seems a failure in the movie’s own evident project: it wants to be a gripping melodrama; it wants to be a thoughtful dramatisation of important issues. It must always be difficult to achieve dramatic vigour and, at the same time, present a coherent and satisfying consideration of ideas.

I suggest that *in the result* the film is dishonest and self-satisfied in its presentation of deep and important issues about art and about the politics of education.<sup>7</sup> This suggestion pays the film the tribute of supposing that it had the possibility of being penetrating and intelligent as well as exciting. We cannot discover whether a work will reward serious attention without approaching it as if that is possible. We must keep our eyes and minds open to the possibility that a film is deeper, more intelligent and more profoundly composed than we can see at first viewing.<sup>8</sup>

But the same process through which we aim to articulate some facets of the brilliance of great movies may lead us to understand the failings of lesser work.

Most scholars in film studies in the English-speaking world are worried by, and many are hostile to, evaluation of the kind that I have presented here. Some are afraid, and some are certain, that to discuss the defects in a popular film is to claim a position of intellectual superiority over those who have liked it, and who have been excited and moved by its drama.

I think the problem is that they hold a view of evaluation very close to the one presented by the author Evans-Pritchard in *Dead Poets Society*. They think that evaluation has two main features: firstly is a matter of measurement – it discovers this much Achievement and this much Importance; secondly it is a matter of hierarchy – it asserts that Shakespeare’s achievement is larger and weightier than Byron’s. As a result it gives the critic a false authority. It allows the critic to become a dictator who tells us which works and which artists we are allowed to admire and which works we are allowed to enjoy.

I agree with the teacher Keating that this is a false view of artistic appreciation. In the first place evaluation is not a process like the judgement in a court of law; it cannot fix a verdict which the world must then accept. Instead, it is a contribution to a discussion. It acknowledges one’s place as the member of a community with other film-lovers – any of one’s



listeners or readers may challenge or raise problems with the view that one has proposed. The arguments I have sketched about DPS are open to anyone who is able to understand the film's drama.

We can show one another new understandings. We can open doors for one another onto new pleasures, new observations and new interpretations. We can trust others to show us where we have been narrow or hasty or forgetful. In the critical conversation it does not matter if we are unable to resolve our differences. I believe that a philosophical account of evaluation must be able encompass a common experience. It must recognise what for me is a vitally significant fact – that my appreciation of some great works of cinema has been created or enlarged by the ideas and observations of other critics. There are many movies that I found boring or puzzling when I first saw them. In time, some of those movies have become very important and pleasurable to me because other spectators or other writers have opened my eyes to an achievement that I did not see for myself. Sometimes others have given me the first suggestion that allowed me to progress into new and revealing observations of my own.

Evaluation need not be a process of ranking the cinema's achievements in a hierarchy, nor of praising one group of movies at the expense of another. Instead it is part of the effort to understand, to exchange and to share the understanding of the value that works of art have for us. Good criticism is motivated by gratitude for the achievement of the filmmakers. It tries to present an accurate and sincere account of the meaning that films have for us. Critical understanding is most importantly an understanding of excellence. Criticism is an effort that we join in together to explain why films matter to us. I believe it is also our communal attempt to reward the courage, wisdom and generosity of the artists. The goal is to understand and to give words to the precision and subtlety that film can achieve, and finally to reward the artist's attention to detail with an equal attentiveness in the viewing.<sup>9</sup>

V.F. PERKINS (EDITED BY ANDREW KLEVAN)

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<sup>1</sup> I have the transcripts of two other versions that are very similar to each other, one given at the Faculty of Art and Design, Middlesex University (for which we have no date) and one given at the *Second Research Forum on Cinema* at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in 2000. In the footnotes, I will include some material from these versions that does not appear in this SCMS version of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> 'His subject is Literature, and his love is Poetry.'

<sup>3</sup> 'This scene comes about twenty minutes from the start of the film. We have been introduced to a group of boys preparing for University entrance at the start of a new term in an exclusive American boarding school. The school advertises its success in preparing boys to prosper in the world of business and academic competition. Its headmaster emphasises uniformity and a reliance upon tradition. The story is about the impact upon this school and these boys of a new teacher who opposes the dullness of routine and who urges the boys to "Seize the Day".'

<sup>4</sup> 'The scene appeals powerfully to young audiences but its appeal is, I suggest, based on the pleasure of the fantasy that the best teacher would be one who joins in disorder and who disrupts discipline rather than enforcing it.'

<sup>5</sup> Perkins' highlighting of badness as a useful evaluative concept evokes literary critic I. A. Richards' chapter 'Badness in Poetry' in his *Principles of Literary Criticism* ([1924] 2001, London and New York: Routledge). Some of their concerns are similar. For example, Perkins' claims about the simplistic sealing up of the drama joins hands with Richards' claims concerning the premature 'impression of conclusiveness' in poetry (187). As far as I know, Perkins had no knowledge of the chapter by Richards, and he would surely have cited it had he done.

<sup>6</sup> I have retained the underlining that Perkins uses.

<sup>7</sup> In a note at the end of the paper, Perkins writes, 'It's the *film* that is dishonest, not necessarily out [of] an intention of dishonesty.'

<sup>8</sup> 'Perhaps it is thought that I am asking too much of the film, inspecting the detail of its gestures too closely? My answer to that accusation would be that it is only by probing the detail – by taking each of the filmmaker's decisions seriously – that we may discover the depth of the achievement. When I spoke about this film at the University of Pittsburgh a few years ago a student in the audience began a question by saying that of course the film would be confused and dishonest. It was designed only as a work of entertainment for the thoughtless masses. It would therefore be pointless to expect or hope for a serious discussion of important ideas. My reply to this was that all popular films are about serious issues. They have to be. If they are to engage the spectator's interest and sympathy they have to dramatise feelings, desires, ideas and conflicts that matter in the world that the audience inhabits. All movies are about important subjects. The

important question is – Do they present those important subjects with intelligence as well as vigour? Does their dramatisation of the issues recognise the depth and complexity of the problems they have undertaken?

We might ask whether the scene from *Dead Poets Society* satisfactorily balances the need for action (shown in the tearing of the pages) against the need for reflection [thought] – shown in the heavy [boring] seriousness of the words read from the book.

When I suggested in Pittsburgh that the film was dishonest and self-satisfied in its presentation of deep and important issues about art and about the politics of education, I was taking *Dead Poets Society* more seriously than my young questioner.'

<sup>9</sup> Readers will note that Perkins' closing remarks refer to matters of evaluation generally, rather than to the topic of badness per se. This may be because the topic of badness was meant to stand as one possible example of evaluative practice. The version of the paper given in Tehran Museum was called 'Evaluation in Film Study' and at Middlesex University 'Evaluation in Film Criticism – the Case of Badness'.



# INTERVIEWS

## Introduction

The four interviews which follow were conducted in the late 1990s when I was researching the critical history of mise-en-scène. They appeared as an appendix to my PhD and quotations from the interviews were published a number of subsequent publications, most notably *The Life of Mise-en-scène: visual style and British film criticism, 1946–78* (MUP, 2013).

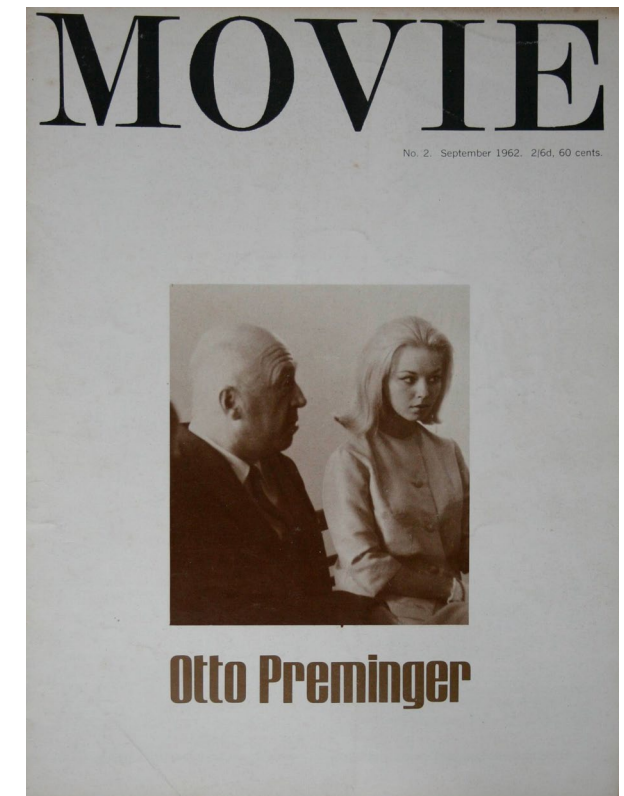
The interviewees were selected for their first-hand experience of the debates around the relative significance of film style which played out across a number of small film magazines and elements of the national press in the early 1960s; subsequently each became an influential figure in film publishing and education. Ian Cameron and V.F. Perkins were founder editors of *Movie*, building on their work on the film section of *Oxford Opinion*. Charles Barr was writing about film for another student magazine, *Granta*, when he encountered the startling claims about movies in *Oxford Opinion*; subsequently he published articles in *Motion*, *Movie* and *Film Quarterly*. Alan Lovell's politically engaged attitude to film positioned him on a different side in some of the debates of the early sixties; his writing at this period appearing in *Definition*, *Universities and Left Review*, and *Peace News*, among other publications.

There are a few points that may provide helpful contextualisation. The first is to note the significance of the order and timescale of the interviews (the first taking place in July 1996, near the end of the first year of my PhD and the last in April 1999 during its final stages). When I interviewed Ian Cameron I hadn't yet read *Oxford Opinion*, the issues of which I subsequently tracked down at the BFI and the various copyright libraries. This had a bearing, of course, on how informed my questions were, but also on my ability to respond to some of the replies. The recollection of each of the critics I spoke to is exceptionally good, but had I read *Oxford Opinion* prior to the first interview, I might have helped fix the chronology of Cameron's recollection of their encounter with *Cahiers du Cinéma* more accurately, for example. Furthermore, as the interviews progressed, I developed a

clearer sense of the argument of my thesis, and this informed the kinds of conversations I was able to have, and the debates I was able to engage with.

More generally, as you will see, each of the interviewees is extremely generous in their answers, sometimes asking suggestive questions or proposing other areas for enquiry. In all, they provided an elegant extra form of supervision, to complement the excellent guidance which I received on the project as a whole from my actual supervisor, Douglas Pye. Being able to conduct these interviews was enormously rewarding for me at the time, and it is my hope that reading them will prove interesting and informative today.

JOHN GIBBS, 2019



## Ian Cameron

24 July 1996

[*Oxford Opinion*] ...was a general student magazine that happened to have delusions of grandeur at the time. The film section was perhaps six pages, and I was responsible for that with three others; Mark Shivas, Victor Perkins and someone called Gary Broughton who went into teaching and didn't stay in film criticism ... The important period would be summer term 1960 and autumn term 1960. I seem to remember it coinciding with finals ...

**Q:** *Not detrimentally I hope?*

No! And there were in all, probably half a dozen issues.

**Q:** *Had it been in existence as a magazine before you became involved?*

Yes it had. It existed as a magazine, I think, on a more or less once a term basis. Indeed, I did one long film piece for it (which was actually the first extended thing I had ever written on film) on, of all things, Roger Vadim. And then it changed. But both Mark and I, particularly Mark, had been writing for other student magazines at Oxford. Around that time we also started to write for *Film*, which was the Film Societies magazine.

**Q:** *What were you actually studying at Oxford?*

I was doing Zoology, Mark was doing Law, Victor was doing History.

**Q:** *What was the impulse behind your becoming interested in film, and doing the work at Oxford?*

Well in my particular case, and I think it was probably the same for Victor but not for Mark, it was National Service – I was in the Airforce, Victor in the Army – getting stuck in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do except go to the cinema five times a week. Which we did, and saw therefore, a very large number of films – mainly films of the 50s, nothing particularly early. The period we were in the services was 55 to 57 and at this point I started reading *Sight and Sound* and *Monthly Film Bulletin*. I suppose the initial impulse was the purely practical one that we went to movies, saw things we really liked, thought were really good, and then read the review in *Sight and Sound*, the reviews in the papers and they said, 'just another over-long Hollywood movie'. It was as practical a thing as that. From there, I had no thought about getting involved in film criticism. I suppose the next stage was Victor and me becoming involved in running the Film Society in Oxford – and coming out of that was the invitation to write, first of all for *Cherwell* for which Mark was film editor and which was edited by Peter Preston, who eventually became editor of *The Guardian*. Obviously where we started was reviewing what came on at the local cinemas and, apart from the one long piece I'd written, it was not until we got to *Oxford Opinion* that we began writing at length.

What I wouldn't care to say (Victor might have some more formed ideas on this than I have) is at exactly what point we became conscious of what was happening in France. Certainly it was not where we started from, and I don't think that in the period of *Oxford Opinion* *Cahiers* featured very large, if at all, in our consciousness. You have to realise between *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie* there was a fallow period of two years where we saw a whole lot more movies and read more. I think in general it is true to say that the impulse behind *Movie* was in no way a theoretical

one. It was reacting to films we liked, and trying to say what we liked about them, which led in due course to an interest in direction and, to some degree, towards a more text-based criticism than was current at the time.

Important in the genesis of *Movie* is what else was happening at the time. *Sight and Sound*, which was the dominant film journal in Britain, had been taken over in the early 50s by the people from *Sequence* – Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Gavin Lambert and their side-kick Penelope Houston. Led by Anderson, they had moved towards a vaguely left wing 'committed' process, where the important operation is seen to be evaluation rather than analysis. At the point when *Movie* emerged – in fact it may even have been *Oxford Opinion* – others were trying to go further along in this direction, which seemed to us entirely sterile. If you look at some of the early issues of *Movie* you will find us tackling films which on an obvious content level we might have found ... I was going to say 'repugnant' but that's perhaps putting it a bit strong – things like Fleischer's *Barabbas* or, in an even more extreme way, Leo McCarey's *Satan Never Sleeps* which is stridently anti-communist and pro-catholic. I've always seen *Movie* as having moved from a practical concern towards any theoretical content or worked-out-attitude that might emerge later. I haven't read Victor's piece on British Cinema in the first *Movie* for a long time (because, although it was ostensibly the editorial board, it was actually predominantly Victor) but I think it was trying to nail the simplistic attitudes of what else was happening at the time. By the time of *Movie*, June 1962, the first films from the *Cahiers* group had appeared, and we were well aware of what *Cahiers* was doing. In fact, we printed the odd bit in English – the Chabrol piece, a Rivette piece on Hawks. The latter we edited because we felt it contained quite a bit of garbage.

**Q:** *Yes, the 'Big themes, Little themes' piece in Movie 1.*

Well it was an obvious thing to translate from *Cahiers* as a starter, as it did link in with Victor's piece on British Cinema.

**Q:** *The idea being that ‘meaning’ in a film isn’t necessarily contained in the plot or in the dialogue, but elsewhere?*

There had been a tendency to look at films in an overall, rather than concentrated, way and to take from them basically what the plot synopsis told you was in there. One of the things we were interested in was trying to get to grips with the decisions that were being made, whether it was in terms of camera movement or camera position – which was what we were trying to do (and, I may say, attracted widespread derision for doing) in the Minnelli piece: ‘Why does the camera go up now?’, ‘Because he’s watching the sky.’; which I still feel was a valid attempt. And other things, like the order of presentation of information in a film which emerges, I think, in the pieces on Hitchcock. Definitely, we were interested in the detail in a way that people had not been.

This did not purely involve the American cinema. The biggest article I did at this point was one on Antonioni which didn’t appear in *Movie* – it was a whole issue of *Film Quarterly*, and then we published it as a separate publication. (Eventually it became the first part of a *Movie* paperback for which the later films (after *L’Eclisse*), which I disliked, were covered by Robin Wood.) This was in 1962, or it might have been 1963. It took me a long time to write it because of the key difference between dealing with films then and dealing with films now – no video.

**Q:** *That was something I was going to ask you. The technology you had at your disposal for attempting close analysis – was it just public screenings or ...?*

Yes. Basically, it was all done in public screenings. Which meant in order to deal with *L’Avventura* I saw it eight times, at public screenings. And it meant that something which turned up once or twice at the NFT presented a considerable challenge! I got very good at writing notes in the dark. For the Antonioni book the only one I was able to view on a Prevost, or similar, was *Le Amiche* – and that was very interesting because I found one could actually do a whole lot more if one could sit down with the thing, run it backwards and forwards and play with it. But this

was just not available to us because at that point none of us were involved in film teaching, not that there was any. The first academic thing that happened in Britain was in 1960. Thorold Dickinson was made Lecturer in Film at the Slade (which is part of UCL) and the impact of that was that there were two research students per year. I think Ray Durgnat was one in the first year, and Charles Barr was one in the second year – and it was through Charles that I got access to the Prevost. But apart from that, it was all accomplished at public screenings.

**Q:** *Is that the case right the way through those first nineteen issues?*

Yes. Which meant that if you wanted to do something extended on a film that was not current, you tended to have to travel all over London to all sorts of cinemas.

**Q:** *Must have become quite expensive!*

The key cinemas like the *Tolmer*, which was a converted church of some sort by Warren Street tube station, cost, even in the sixties, only 1s.9d (which is less than ten pence). The *Rex* in Islington, which is now *The Screen on the Green*, was about the same. So it wasn’t particularly expensive – if it had been we wouldn’t have been able to do it.

**Q:** *In your introduction to the *Movie* Reader you talk about the ‘prevalent woolliness’ of the existing British criticism. Was the desire for empiricism very important?*

Yes. There were all sorts of clichés flying around and a general lack of empiricism. A reasonable example is the idea of the ‘anti-war’ movie. The number of war movies that could be counted as pro-war movies is really pretty limited, and in that most war movies tend to show war as a rather unpleasant experience they can all, or almost all, be taken as anti-war movies. Yet almost the main evaluative term about war movies at this point was whether or not they were ‘anti-war’. Which in general, with a few exceptions of a heart-on-sleeve nature like Stanley Kubrick, meant *not American*. This is one area, another

is the fact that critics weren’t bothering to *look*. If you read the reviews of *Rio Bravo* – which emerged in Britain, I think, in 1960 which was a rather crucial moment for *Oxford Opinion*, and us – you will find that they were almost all saying ‘another John Wayne movie, *much* too long, an example of Hollywood current inflation, etc. etc.’ and not noticing that actually the thing was rather tautly constructed. So we did want to make everything more analytical, clearer. We wanted to do this, I suppose, to explain what was good in directors that were being ignored; for all sorts of reasons, many of them straightforward ‘cultural gap’ reasons. An obvious example is Frank Tashlin. He was just seen as irredeemably vulgar and this was at the point when he had just made his handful of really good movies, which had passed without note – like *The Girl Can’t Help It* where the critics were totally unable to see beyond Jayne Mansfield and Rock ‘n’ Roll. It was something that I thought extremely good at the time, and there was no one else to say it. They were in fact saying it in France, which I certainly wasn’t aware of when I first saw *The Girl Can’t Help It*. Trying to clarify detailed responses to film was, I think, *Movie*’s main feature. The fact that it happened to have a second characteristic which was a taste for the American cinema probably concealed this from at least part of *Movie*’s public at first, and quite a lot of critics. Certainly the operations we chose to perform on the American cinema could be, and *were*, eventually, performed on the European cinema .... I suppose an image of the difference between the way people who wrote on *Movie* looked at cinema and the way others did can be seen in our reaction to the three dominant, early, New Wave directors from France. Virtually all critical opinion in Britain and America preferred Truffaut to everyone. And you can see exactly why they did, because *Les Quatre Cents Coups* is a very heart-on-sleeve movie. We, on the other hand, liked Chabrol which invited a very different response. *Les Bonnes Femmes*, which was widely hated at the time, is actually a movie which demands a much more complex and detailed response than early Truffaut.



**Q:** Were there any modes, or models of close analysis, within literary criticism that you might have been aware of, do you think?

Absolutely not. Indeed, I think one of the things about early *Movie* was the absence of English degrees around the place, the fact that we were coming to it without any background in literary criticism. Certainly in my case, as someone who was doing a science degree, I had not read any literary criticism. This changed a bit with the arrival of Charles and, particularly, Robin Wood whose background was much more in this area (although I think Charles' first degree was not English, Robin's most certainly was) and that did introduce another element. No, the literary models were just not taken account of, and indeed if anyone had suggested to us that that might be a way to go I think they would have met with some resistance. The idea that cinema could be treated as a more or less literary medium, rather than a more or less visual medium, would have made us not at all eager to look in that direction. As for myself, I was much more interested in the directions indicated in the Lawrence Alloway article, in *Movie* 7, which I suspect has been more anthologised than anything else *Movie* ever did. And rightly so.

**Q:** It certainly prefigures a lot of later approaches, doesn't it?

Yes, that and Alloway's book for the Museum of Modern Art, on thrillers and violence, which is also very good. In fact Alloway, who by the late 50s / early 60s had quite a big reputation as an art critic, was one of our more vociferous supporters. Although it never surfaced very much he, and I believe also the architectural critic Reyner Banham, had tastes in movies very similar to *Movie*'s tastes in movies before *Movie* came along. Somewhere (I've never been able to track it down, but I heard it from Alloway) Reyner Banham is in print as saying 'Written on the Wind is the movie that sorts out the men from the boys', which is not something that you would expect *Sight and Sound* to be saying at the time.

**Q:** So, in the period between Oxford Opinion and *Movie* you had encountered a fair amount of French criticism.

Yes. We were all, I think, limited by not being particularly confident readers in French. So while one collected *Cahiers du Cinéma* and leafed through it, I'm not sure how much in detail we took from it. Victor reckons that we mainly looked at the interviews, and I'm inclined to agree. We certainly took pointers in terms of what we should go and see from it – the idea of the importance of direction, mise-en-scène, I guess not. The works of André Bazin had not been collected in English at the time, and the important ones were quite early in *Cahiers*' existence. I think that it was a matter of us, in a parallel and I guess much less intellectual way, finding that we shared a lot of *Cahiers*' tastes and approaches. But I don't think there was anything more worked out than that.

**Q:** The term *mise-en-scène* itself ... I had imagined that's where it came from, is that the case?

I'm just wondering where the term *mise-en-scène* came from. There don't seem to be many other candidates around. It was certainly not current as a critical term. You wouldn't have got Dilys Powell or C.A. Lejeune talking about the *mise-en-scène*. So I guess it must have come from *Cahiers*. I'd be very interested. Undoubtedly if you are reading all this stuff you will discover what the first use of *mise-en-scène* in *Movie* is. I doubt you'll find it in *Oxford Opinion*.

**Q:** I think the first time is in the first issue in Mark Shivas' piece on Minnelli which precedes the interview, he slips it in on the second page.

Ah, does he? It is difficult now to think back and remember how self-consciously one was using the term *mise-en-scène*. Certainly we recognised direction as the key function ....

**Q:** I was going to ask how much attention to style and *mise-en-scène* come hand in hand with an interest in authorship?

I suppose the interest in authorship came partly out of seeing lots of movies, initially unselectively, and discovering that the common link between the ones you liked was not that they were all made by Columbia, or starred Alan Ladd, but that they were directed by people one hadn't been instructed by the critics to notice. There was always the view, which is of course not entirely without truth, that film is an art form involving groups of people rather than single people. This always seemed, oddly, applicable to Hollywood but not to similar operations in France. The formulation of the idea of a director as author might, I think, have been stimulated by *Cahiers*. The idea had been floating about in our minds before that. We were always clear, in a way that I think *Cahiers* were not, that there were other things in movies that could be crucial – whether a star or a script-writer or what have you – and this had undoubtedly occurred to us by the start of *Movie*. But amongst directors there were those who could almost be relied on to produce a remarkable product and there were, at the other end of the scale, those who could be relied on to screw it up. And in between there were a lot of other people who could produce staggeringly good movies if the stimuli were right and really appalling ones if they were not. Richard Fleischer is a particularly good example – The range between *Mandingo* and *The Spikes Gang* is very wide!

**Q:** It was the act of direction, and those sort of questions, that interested you rather than a polemic around who is an 'auteur' or not?

Ah, the whole 'auteur' thing comes from another source.

**Q:** Andrew Sarris?

Andrew Sarris. Those who were in the general area of *Movie* included the British contingent and also three Americans – Andrew Sarris, Eugene Archer (who was the second film critic on *The New York Times*) and then, and entirely separately, Peter Bogdanovich. There was also a Swede Stig Björkman and a Spaniard José Luis Guarner who shared a lot with us, and in fact Guarner

was responsible for the translation of some of the books into Spanish. Sarris, who unlike the rest of us had a regular critical niche (in *The Village Voice*), had – the word ‘soundbite’ comes to mind – had identified something which was lurking in *Movie* 1 in that histogram of directors. But he had identified this, more strongly than the rest of us, as something that was in effect marketable, and he then took it to absurd lengths – the ‘is he / is he not an auteur’ view. I would say that all directors are ‘auteurs’ but the likes of Fred Zinnemann are lousy ones. Whereas Andrew definitely saw auteurship as various levels of state of grace. That was, I think, actually going off in not merely a wrong direction but rather a dangerous one because it allowed everyone else to take a very simplistic attitude to what we were trying to do.

**Q:** *It gave director-centred criticism a bad name which, in a way, it is still trying to shake off today.*

Yes. Certainly we were much more about text-based criticism than about trying to sort out ‘the pantheon’, which is a foolish occupation because we all have our own. It’s not a matter of great significance that I like Joseph M. Newman movies and it’s not going to be significant unless I happen to be able to make a case for them, which I never did. No, the whole ‘auteur’ thing I see now as a slight red herring, though at the time I also saw it as an annoyance that Andrew was attracting a lot of publicity for what really didn’t seem to be helping the cause of what we were trying to talk about.

**Q:** *You mentioned André Bazin, earlier on, as someone whose earlier articles you certainly wouldn’t have seen, but people have suggested that *Movie* is in a line of descent, a tradition, from Bazin. Do you feel there is any validity in this view?*

Only in the most ill-defined way. If one takes Bazin as being the person who set out early in *Cahiers* a lot of the ideas that *Cahiers* espoused, *Movie* certainly espoused quite a lot of the same ideas. But I think they were probably differently articulated and if there was a direct link it was almost by osmosis – from reading things in

*Cahiers* which would have been somewhat informed by Bazin’s view. I think the people we were reading, as far as we read anything in *Cahiers*, were probably Chabrol and Rivette .... Certainly I would not for a moment accept any sort of placing of Bazin in the intellectual parentage of early *Movie*.

**Q:** *Do you feel that CinemaScope was a factor in encouraging you toward a style-based form of criticism?*

CinemaScope definitely was important. It was important partly because all the other fellows hated it, and certainly it encouraged us to look at what was happening on the screen. In a slightly different way if you, which I would not recommend, were to look at the thing I wrote on Vadim in 1959 quite a lot of it was on the details of composition and so on .... Hell, it was bigger!

**Q:** *Is it the case that another factor in British criticism at the time was the montage-derived theories of film, and might CinemaScope be seen as nurturing something of an opposition to that?*

There had been, I think, very little action on the theoretical front in cinema. There’s the early Eisenstein and Pudovkin, and then what? ‘What’ is Ernest Lindgren, Béla Balázs, people who actually started from the viewpoint that the theory of the cinema was established by Eisenstein and Pudovkin. It had certainly occurred to us that Eisenstein and Pudovkin were wrong! We were pretty immune to any taste for the Soviet cinema, but no one had really thought about the cinema in those terms when we were writing. I’m sure people had, but in terms of what was published and available it wasn’t around. I think the hostility to CinemaScope came from people whose feeling that montage was the basis of cinema was almost being undermined by CinemaScope, where you can put two heads on the screen at once in close up – gosh! – and, probably intuitively, we took to it. But the currency of montage theory? ... it was lurking somewhere, not much articulated, a sort of ‘fundamental truth’ – as indicated by Alfred Hitchcock, who was only too glad to refer to it.

**Q:** *There is a moment in the ‘Movie Differences’ discussion, in *Movie* 8, where you make the point very clearly that editing is not something a director has to use but can use, it being one of the options the director has at his or her disposal.*

It seemed to be self evidently true, and had in fact been noticed before in the work of Gregg Toland for Welles and Wyler. People had said, ‘gosh, here he is playing around with other things than editing’ and no one seemed ever to have taken it any further than that. It’s interesting to note what at that time we *hadn’t* seen, in this context. Before the start of *Movie* we hadn’t seen *Rope* – though we knew about, and were fascinated by, what it was said to do – and we certainly hadn’t seen *Under Capricorn*. Yes, montage was something we all assumed was a tool, not *the* means.

**Q:** *Do you think you were conscious, at the time, that under the ‘umbrella’ term of mise-en-scène, or in talking of style, there were a number of quite different ways in which the concept was being used? So, on the one hand you might compare Preminger’s style with Hitchcock’s in terms of where it positions the spectator, and on the other you might talk about mise-en-scène as expressive of character in, for example, the Barry Boys piece on The Courtship of Eddie’s Father. Were you aware there were a number of different, quite distinct, ways in which you were talking about mise-en-scène?*

I think we were happy to use mise-en-scène as a rather inclusive term, rather than actually analysing what we meant by it. So, no, I don’t think we went very far in that direction.

**Q:** *How much do you think of early *Movie* writing as an attempt to explain how films work, in relation to the spectator?*

Certainly. The larger articles in *Movie* very often had a dimension of trying to explain how the films we liked (because it will become apparent to you that, on the whole, we only wrote about the films we liked) worked. The article on *The Man Who Knew Too Much* was definitely an attempt in that direction. As was the other Hitchcock

piece I did and I think this is true of many of the better things in *Movie*. Certainly, that's what I was after in the Antonioni piece and I think you will find it was what Charles Barr was up to in the CinemaScope piece, which appeared in *Film Quarterly*. *Film Quarterly* was, incidentally, a journal even more reactionary than *Sight and Sound* at the time, but it was willing to try things. If I had offered them something on Howard Hawks at length, rather than something on Antonioni at length, I think I would have got a resounding negative. But one could get things in there – Charles' piece on CinemaScope.

**Q:** Did you attempt submitting articles to *Sight and Sound*?

No. We saw *Sight and Sound*, and the British Film Institute in general, as the enemy. If you look at the first issue of *Oxford Opinion*, there is a lengthy dissection (and when I say lengthy probably I mean 2000–3000 words because film criticism has definitely got longer) of a British Film Institute publication, which purported to identify the fifty best films ever made. The BFI was firmly identified as what we were against – I suppose, in fact, we gained some of our identity from that very thing. Also the tastes that we displayed and the views that we'd expressed were taken, quite wrongly, to mean that as we were not obviously left wing critics (in the sense that the people on *Definition*, the left wing film magazine of the time, were) therefore we had to be right wing critics. And liking the odd Leo McCarey movie was merely going to confirm this. No, *Sight and Sound* was not something we ever wanted to get in and write for. After *Oxford Opinion*, which got us noticed, what we wanted to do was start our own magazine – and having got noticed by the press, we thought that the people who ran magazine empires would only be too glad for us to do it. We were, of course, wrong.

**Q:** Do you feel, in retrospect, that many of the directors you were writing about – Ray, Minnelli, even Preminger – were directors that would, a decade later, be celebrated as melodrama directors and do you feel that there might be a generic specificity to 'mise-en-scène'.

We certainly liked films that were melodramas. We enjoyed, I suppose, excess. The flippant Reynier Banham quote about *Written on the Wind* actually is quite significant because liking *Written on the Wind* is automatically a statement against a certain good taste and dignity.

**Q:** Sirk, although I believe there is something on him in *Oxford Opinion*, is not a figure who is particularly noticeable in early *Movie*.

He was right at the end of his career, don't forget. One unfortunate feature of *Movie* is that *Movie* came out as the great days of the American cinema were drawing to an end. *Oxford Opinion* more or less coincided with *Rio Bravo* and *Psycho*, the beginning of *Movie* coincided more or less with *Advise and Consent*. Hollywood was definitively falling apart. There was a regrettable fact that a lot of the directors we espoused realised they were auteurs, moved to Europe and started making lousy movies. Anthony Mann, Tashlin, Nick Ray for that matter, had all made their best movies by the time *Movie* started. So, although we didn't know it, what we were looking at was an area of cinema that was actually in decline.

**Q:** That's a very good point. I had been wondering why, say, Preminger whose style is so effaced as to be almost invisible at times caught your enthusiasm and attention whereas someone like Sirk who is much more obviously working with elements of mise-en-scène didn't seem to be so much of a focus. But I suppose that's a very good reason – that Preminger was bringing out films the whole time through that period ...

Yes. That is, I think, very important. Preminger was actually more available. When we saw the Sirks, we loved them. But I think the only one we saw in the days of *Oxford Opinion* was *Tarnished Angels*, and we had to go to a flea-pit 15 miles out of Oxford to see that – and it was astonishing. But so too was, say, Losey's *Time Without Pity* which was a movie made in Britain which is, as I remember it, devoid of what were seen as the strengths of British cinema. I suppose the idea of melodrama was

not definitely articulated at this point, and had it been we would have undoubtedly said, 'Gosh, yes, melodrama – a lot of what we like is melodrama'. But then a lot of what we liked were westerns. The other thing that was absent, apart from video which has allowed one to study film in detail, was television as a source of almost limitless films to watch.

**Q:** And films from the past, I suppose?

Yes. The thing about obvious (not in the derogatory sense of the word) mise-en-scène as exemplified by Sirk as opposed to Preminger reminds me of another aspect. There was one other area of film criticism from France which was the MacMahonists. There was a cinema in Paris called *Le MacMahon*, and a group of people around it who produced a magazine that ran for a few issues, called *Présence du Cinéma*. They were into directors who maintained a totally naturalistic surface. What they liked was Preminger, Tourneur, Walsh, early Losey. There was a defining moment in *The Criminal* when the background light dims behind someone in a totally artificial manner, which was the moment at which these guys parted company from Losey. It took the rest of us a few films more. Again, it is very difficult to analyse now, but availability was a big part of what shaped our tastes – and what was conspicuously absent was the American cinema of the 40s, the movies that Andrew [Britton] loved. Bette Davis movies were just not around. There were two routes to the American cinema of the past. One was what you could catch at a flea-pit, which was shown with the reels not necessarily in the right order and usually substantially damaged, but that got you back to the early 50s. The other source was film societies and the NFT, but this was a very limited view which included Frank Capra, Frank Capra, and Frank Capra. *Bringing Up Baby* was allowed. The Capras included *Mr Smith* and *Mr Deeds*. And a rather random selection of other things, Cukor was three films, no four – *Pat and Mike* and *Adam's Rib* were accepted, *Born Yesterday* was accepted, not as a Cukor movie but as a Judy Holliday movie, and *The Philadelphia Story* which was nice and stage-play-based. Apart from that,



the period from 39 to 49 was represented by *Stagecoach*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Oxbow Incident* ... very little else. That was really all we had seen of the 40s ... Victor and I managed to get a few other things that were available for the Film Society in Oxford. There was quite a lot still floating around in 16mm.

**Q:** *Just returning, for a moment, to the MacMahonists. Where were you encountering their views?*

They came over. At some point, I cannot remember exactly when it was, they came over and hired themselves a small viewing theatre in Covent Garden and 16mm copies of everything they could lay their hands on. This is how I got to see things like the early 40s movies of Edward G. Ulmer, they had not merely *Detour* but things like *Club Havana* which were of no great import but at least one got to see them, and a lot of Raoul Walsh, like *Salty O'Rourke*.

**Q:** *Was it a commercial venture or was it artistic ...?*

Oh, their hiring of a viewing theatre was purely for their own delight and instruction. I suspect they were in a position to afford it. There were two of them, one was a man called Pierre Rissient who has turned up on the television – I think he became a PR person, particularly for American directors much in the way Tavernier did. I forget who the other person was ... but we saw quite a lot of films. Mainly, we got our film-going through a keen study of *What's on in London* and being ready to go to very strange places.

**Q:** *And the interest in 'invisibility' – do you in retrospect feel that to be important ...?*

Yes .... Of course, that led us towards directors who simply hadn't been noticed – invisibility in mise-en-scène was a sure recipe for invisibility in terms of critical reputation.

**Q:** *It strikes me that many of the articles in early Movie make the same points that one would wish to today, in the light of feminist theory and other debates that have had an impact*

*on the study of film – which I feel is something of a testament to the method, and to the films themselves.*

That is, of course, very cheering. In a way it is almost a natural product of trying to go into films without great preconceptions. Trying to see what they are saying or doing, rather than assessing them against a standard of what you would like them to say or do. What people would like films to be saying or doing is really rather too important in most mainstream criticism of the late 50s.

**Q:** *Finally, is there anything else in particular which you feel we haven't covered but that would be important to talk about?*

I'm sure the key to the early *Movie* is that it was very much something that was designed to work from the ground up, from analysis of detail, and that any theoretical overview emerged from that. If there is something we opposed more than anything else it was doing it the other way around ....

**Q:** *Do you think your scientific background helped in that respect?*

Oh, Certainly. I went to movies wanting to look. And I think one might have done that to a greater extent, more successfully, had the technology that is now available, been available then – and had we been situated in institutions of higher learning rather than variously scratching a living.

## V.F. Perkins

22 May 1997

*The interview begins with a discussion of the interview the *Movie* editors conducted with Vincente Minnelli and published in the first issue (June 1962). The interview included questions about a sequence from *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1962), and provoked a fair amount of critical comment in the press, Ian Cameron responding in the second issue of *Movie* in the article 'Films, Directors and Critics' (republished [here](#)).*

I think in some ways that the interview with Minnelli in the first issue was quite important, not for anything it achieved but for what it was trying to do, for the aspirations that it represents. I don't think we prepared ourselves well enough for it, by which I mean I don't think we understood what being well prepared would consist of, and maybe Minnelli wasn't the person ... but I'm much less convinced of that. It represents a way of thinking about film, the sort of questions you might ask both of a film and of a film-maker. And not one informed by literary criticism!

**Q:** *Where did you get hold of the technology to conduct the interview?*

That's an interesting question. It took place in MGM's viewing room, with the fragment of film run a couple of times but with no stop and start, 'Let's look at this', the kind of opportunity that an editing table or a video would offer. That's one of the difficulties under which it was done. I think in film teaching there is a real problem with how you dispose the space, the ideal conditions for watching a movie are absolutely un-ideal for discussion. And in that situation, as I remember it, Ian and I were sitting in the row ahead of Minnelli and the MGM person who was with him – so spontaneity of contact was very limited.

**Q:** *That particular article raised a lot of ire, didn't it?*

People were looking for ways to counter-attack, and that was an opportunity. Retrospectively (I haven't seen it for many, many years) it seems to me unlikely that *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is really a major achievement! And you could understand that initiative, hostile-ly, as simply an expression of a rather juvenile film-mania. Since Minnelli didn't offer the kinds of penetrating account of what he was up to that an Orson Welles can offer, it was a good target. *Movie* had after all been very aggressive. What do you do in response to that? You either keep quiet and hope it will go away, or you find a way of hitting back.

**Q:** *You weren't able to have any more of those sort of encounters with directors?*

I think it's a pity that we didn't do it again, with the improved technology. Other directors could have engaged in that thing quite happily and, as I say, if we had been better prepared maybe Minnelli could have done too. I think there were opportunities in what he said that we weren't equipped to take up, at that point.

**Q:** *It seems strange that when the technology did become readily available, and when film studies began to become an academic activity, there isn't a corresponding increase in detailed criticism.*

No. The early history of film studies is so caught up with the passion of theorisation, which I understand precisely as an avoidance of text.

**Q:** *I suppose one of the really striking things about *Movie* is that you were responding to the films that were on down at the local Odeon rather than some films in an idealised past, or talking about what the films that were around should be.*

I'm not sure I understand that.

**Q:** *Well it strikes me that it is easier to talk about a group of films thirty years later than it is to talk about them as they are emerging.*

Well, I think one way of understanding it is that *Movie* was asking of journalism something that, on the one hand journalism is incapable of delivering, but on the other journalism claims to deliver. It was asking film reviewing to be film criticism, let's say. Part of the nature of *Movie*'s demand was that criticism should actually be based on more than one viewing of a film – and that's still not accepted. I was startled to learn that one of my colleagues had written an article for *Sight and Sound* on the basis of a single viewing of a film. It seems to me some kind of mad arrogance – accepting that some people's recall can be very much more detailed than mine. But the inaccuracy of most reviewing and of most aspiring criticism in the pre-film-studies era is very impressive. Part of my understanding of where the motivation for *Movie* came from was a desire to make statements about film that *were* accurate in relation to the text (though at that time the habit of talking about films as texts was not in place), where there was some basis in observation for the things one wanted to say about the film. And part of that involved the discipline of checking what you had in mind to write against a further viewing. In some ways the core of *Movie*'s problem, and some of the developments since we first got together, is that matter of the relationship between material observation and evaluation, assessment, interpretation – understanding in other senses. I understand that as relating to a desire (certainly on my part, I don't know how widely this understanding

would be shared) to escape from class-based notions of taste, where understanding is related to the person rather than to the process. Understanding as something which happened, rather than something which was achieved.

**Q:** *So one of the main motivational factors for getting to grips with the detail of text, the departure from what Ian Cameron calls the 'prevalent woolliness' of existing criticism, was the desire to talk about the objective features of the text rather than one's own response to the text?*

Well to relate the two, at any rate. I don't think we did, and I don't think we were aiming to, divorce response from the material content. What the material content of the text is, is actually a very difficult question. The status of off-screen sounds, say, and the images they evoke for us seem to me to be part of the material content of the text, but they're not visibly there the way that the wind ruffling the heroine's hair is visibly there. So there is a problem around what is materially present, but that's a problem of an order of sophistication ahead of whether it matters that the camera moves during a particular moment of the film, that a scene is shot indoors or outdoors, and if indoors what sort of environment, etc. etc. Another dimension, given that we were very partisan, is that I think it's important to have a certain kind of respect for the activity of filmmaking, for the intelligence and proficiency of filmmakers – based on the assumption that what they do actually makes some kind of sense that it would be interesting to articulate. And I don't think that's general. On the one hand there was this particular kind of partisanship that made one (then, but to which I would adhere to a large degree) very sceptical of the claims which were being made, and on the other a belief that film criticism conducted itself in much too lordly a fashion, in which it felt that it knew better than the filmmakers. As that Minnelli interview indicates part of our impulse – I think it was *our* impulse, it was certainly mine – was to regard what the filmmakers did as in advance of the critic. So it was the critic who needed educating rather than the filmmaker.

I think all those things become much more pointed when you start teaching. Unless you are happy to stand in

front of the class and issue forth rather vacuously, either on a grand historical level, or on a theoretical level, or on a level of taste – going on and on about how wonderful this is and how they've got to learn how to appreciate it – without specifying the points at which the meaningful complexity of the text can be evident ... I don't think I can quite finish that sentence. Yes I can – the alternative to all those things is precisely to treat the text in a way which makes it available to discussible analysis, where the precision of what you've said about it is open to challenge. The correctness, but also the relevance – is one treating this detail in a way which exaggerates its role in the total production, or that is consonant with the way that the film as a whole seems to be working? Treating detail in a way that opens things up to discussion rather than existing on authority. Claims on authority usually go back to claims about either innate good taste, which is class based, or intellectual supremacy – neither of which are worth having in a class room.

**Q:** *That's a very interesting perspective, but it wasn't until considerably later that you started teaching, was it?*

In a small way it happened quite quickly, but in a sustained way no.

**Q:** *What were these early experiences?*

Things like talking to groups of film society members, evening classes and so on. I did a certain amount whenever I got hold of a bit of film that I could take into school. Ian and I, I don't think anybody else, were earning a living once we had left university by supply teaching, in schools that were very far from being nests of privilege. I was teaching mainly English. In my first year of teaching I taught A-level Mechanics but that just reflects the desperate state of London as far as teaching was concerned, but thereafter I taught mainly English. I remember showing the Howard Hawks episode from *Full House* in my English classes in Bermondsey, but there were also various things, mainly documentaries and what you could get on free loan from County Hall. So I used film as much

as possible in teaching, while not seeing myself as truly a teacher – trying to do it decently, but thinking of it as how I was making the money to pursue my interest in film – and Ian was doing something similar in a different school. Then there was, biographically, a gradual progression to involvement with the Education Department of the BFI and in teaching further education at Hornsey College of Art (which was the first place that had a continuous film course). I gradually changed the number of hours I was teaching in schools so as to make more room for film teaching in various contexts. But I think the problems of teaching ten, eleven and twelve year old school kids whose attitude could easily become 'Why do I want to know this? What use is this to me?' was not irrelevant to some of my other activities.

**Q:** *Moving on to a rather different subject, to what degree do you feel that Cahiers du Cinéma was an influence?*

Ever so important. *Cahiers* was the first place I ever had anything published.

**Q:** *Really? I didn't know that!*

A letter about *Rio Bravo* was I think my first published effort at Film criticism.<sup>7</sup> It was a response to Luc Moullet's article about *Rio Bravo* which I simply wrote him as a letter but which got published, and that thrilled me a great deal. My French was not good enough to read *Cahiers* with assiduity. It was odd, if your French wasn't terribly good – my French finished at O-level and the further development it has received is entirely from reading French film criticism and watching and listening to French movies – there were some writers that were easy to read. Bazin was ever so easy to read if you didn't have very advanced French, as were the interviews translated from English. I don't know what they would read like to a French eye, or ear. The two things that I think made most impact were: firstly, the degree of seriousness and passion with which a film like *Rio Bravo* was discussed, not the content of the discussion but the tone and fact of it; and secondly, the mode of conversation with filmmakers. I think the interviews were



more important than anything else. These are the *kinds* of questions it makes sense to ask a filmmaker. Partly it's manifest in the asking of them, but also in the way they're then treated by the filmmaker who responds to them as intelligible inquiries. And the reception of *Touch of Evil* was just so much more intelligent in France than it had been here. That was very affecting in a whole range of ways. *Touch of Evil* when it appeared was *such* a thrilling movie. I suppose there's a sort of pretentious adolescent dimension too – feeling that one was one of the few people to appreciate this wonderful, martyred movie. (I think it was important to the whole thing that we were very young.) But the level of discussion that the film received in France, particularly in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and the interviews around it, made an enormous impact.

**Q:** Was it something of a recognition that someone else was thinking the same things that you were beginning to think yourselves, or was it more 'Goodness, look what they are doing here!'?

It was partly at the level of taste and enthusiasm. I think I can better understand hating *Touch of Evil* than I can understand being indifferent to it. I think it is clearly a work of genius, and that doesn't mean it's a good film, necessarily. I was teaching a class on *The Magnificent Ambersons* only yesterday, when I was saying that I thought *Citizen Kane* was a work of genius but not a particularly good film. But there's a whole excitement about the kinds of eloquence a film can have in *Touch of Evil*. As I say, even if you think it's a disgusting work, which would not be a stupid way to react, that would need to be placed alongside the recognition that it was so intelligent, energetic, and achieved.

**Q:** Where were you getting access to magazines like Arts and Cahiers?

I think Ian brought back issues of *Cahiers* from Paris, and I subscribed as soon as I saw what it was. It had been mentioned in *Sight and Sound*, where one could perceive *Cahiers* in opposition to the posh end of British

film criticism. In fact they were all journalists together at the Cannes Film Festival and so on, and had a closer relationship than one realised. I found some *Cahiers*, I can't remember where, but I came across a great stash of back-numbers in England somewhere, an Oxford bookshop or something like that, which I bought. And there were the odd French film books available. The one I remember is Ado Kyrrou's *Amour-Erotisme et Cinéma* which clearly was imported because the French stood for 'cheeky'. I don't know if you know Kyrrou, he is someone in a different ideological camp to *Cahiers*, but some of his stuff did get published in *Cahiers*. Little bits of that book oddly enough, which I certainly didn't read cover to cover because it was a very thick book, were quite impressive – in terms of attitude and his hatred of *Brief Encounter*! (laughs) I remember it making quite an impression in suggesting different ways in which your values might come into play in relation to film. There was a version of PC in play at that time (well there always is) about, as it were, Official Positions – films ought to support the notion of brotherly love and so on – and that Official Position never accommodates the variety of human interests and appetites. There are various forms of liberation available, but one of them concerns the values you are allowed to bring to your appreciation of the arts.

**Q:** As well as the values, do you think an interest in *mise-en-scène* was stimulated by *Cahiers*?

Yes. But my understanding of an interest in *mise-en-scène* is that it is just an extension of the question, 'Well, what is interesting about movies?', of trying to find ways in which one's experience and one's enthusiasm can be articulated, and exchanged. It gets tiresome just to say 'Wow!' at one another, or 'Euch!'.

**Q:** What about the term itself? I notice that you use it in your Nicholas Ray article in Oxford Opinion. It was a term in the English language at this time, but do you think you picked it up from the French?

There was an article by Tony Richardson in *Sight and Sound* called 'The Metteur-en-scène' which I would have read, for sure. *Sight and Sound* and *Monthly Film Bulletin* had been very important to me as an adolescent movie fan reaching for culture. At one point I would have known that article pretty well. It's interesting to me that I made that usage, because I would have guessed it wouldn't have come till later.

**Q:** You say something like, 'Nicholas Ray subjects a frequently banal narrative to an idiosyncratic *mise-en-scène*'.

But don't you think that's partly because English lacks a word grand enough for direction? Because direction also means which way does traffic go, and has all those traffic cop implications. I don't know if you know the article that I did for *The Movie* on *mise-en-scène*?

**Q:** 'Moments of Choice'?

Yes – well there I tried to restore some force to the word direction, I was talking about a sense of direction. In some ways I deplore the pretentiousness of *mise-en-scène* as a term, but it occupies a gap in the English language where the word 'direction' isn't strong enough, isn't definite enough. So *mise-en-scène* stands for something like 'the work of the film stylist' rather than just the direction.

**Q:** I suppose also at that time (in English) the director wasn't the figure she or he would be for *Movie*?

Well, that depended who the director was. At the posh end the director was fully acknowledged – if it was Flaherty, or René Clair. It was in relation to a cinema regarded as routine that the director's work was routine as well. The questions of method and focus are also bound up with questions of taste. Is *Rio Bravo* a film it makes sense to be thrilled by?

**Q:** I suppose Ray was a figure who *Sight and Sound* weren't entirely hostile toward?

*Sight and Sound*, if you look back at it, is quite peculiar. It would be quite interesting to know the Penelope Houston version of that history. Certainly in terms of *They Live by Night* they were very supportive, very enthusiastic. But later on their interest became very patronising and I was affronted to my core by the way they received *The Savage Innocents*, which is still one of my favourite films, and which was given such a disgusting dismissal at the back of *Sight and Sound*. Compare the kind of camp indulgence that was extended to *Johnny Guitar* by *Sight and Sound* with the enthusiasm, perhaps in some ways over the top enthusiasm, with which it was received in France. I know which I would regard as preferable. Nicholas Ray was well received as long as he looked like an aberrant figure in Hollywood, but once he seemed to become a Hollywood filmmaker he was to some considerable degree sidelined. I remember at some point there emerged in the pages of *Sight and Sound* the ridiculous thought that perhaps the quality of *They Lived by Night* owed more to John Houseman than Nicholas Ray.

**Q:** *In the light of his later work?*

Well also in the light of Houseman's other work. But that just indicates the degree to which you haven't looked at *They Live by Night* to see where it's coming from, how it is being what it is being. The suggestion that somehow the producer could be responsible for the ways that things are lit, where the camera is, what the actors are doing is evidence of misunderstanding. I think it's probably based on the notion that the film is the script essentially, that all you need from a director is an *effective* realisation of the script.

**Q:** *What about the MacMahonists, were they an important influence?*

I don't think I can remember. Ian may have told you about a visit to London by a group of MacMahonists, including Pierre Rissient who is now a film producer. I think they were personally impressive. Again, in terms of the sort of liberation of attitudes that *could* be expressed or inhabited, I think there were some important things that came out of

some writing by Michel Mourlet, as well as Luc Moullet, both of whose writing / critical personae were fairly wild. The idea that you might take a committed interest in the violence of a violent movie, within the very staid conditions of English culture, was quite an incitement.

**Q:** *Michel Mourlet strikes me as the least 'English' of the French critics. I was thinking also of the way in which they liked Preminger and Losey, figures who were to become important to Movie. Was that an influence?*

I think it probably was. Once the initial connection had been made, I think I was inclined to take quite a lot of guidance from the French about what films to discover, or rediscover. I was trying to think when did Preminger ... oh well, for me it was with *Carmen Jones*, so that was the connection I would have made. *Carmen Jones* was a film that I had enjoyed enormously, and seen several times just out of enjoyment (in, I guess, my late teens). But I'm not sure how much else I'd seen until *Cahiers* gave the incentive to chase Preminger movies in Sunday screenings at the Astoria, Brixton and all that stuff. So I think we took quite a lot of guidance about who it would be worth considering, or re-considering – like Sirk! Losey was ever so important. I can't remember the chronology of it, but interviewing Losey and discovering the depth of detail to which the film could be designed and intended – this was specifically around *The Criminal* and *Blind Date* – was enormously important. And also his response – he was obviously tickled pink to find people taking the detail of the texture of his work seriously. But he personally, certainly for me, acted as an enormously strong validation of the idea that film makers knew what they were doing.

**Q:** *That interview appears in the joint issue of Oxford Opinion and Granta, but I think that takes place after you had actually left Oxford.*

Yes. It's funny, he was enormously important but I didn't actually like any Losey films much after that point.

**Q:** *What particular reason was there?*

Well I think he was someone for whom it was a misfortune not to be able and required to carry on within the popular forms. I think his move into Art cinema didn't do him any good, didn't do his *work* any good. That's not to say, obviously, that to continue working under the kind of conditions under which *The Damned* was made was somehow preferable.

**Q:** *I'm wondering whether this is related to ideas around discretion, or invisibility?*

I certainly don't give a damn about invisibility. Part of my own critical quest is precisely to make visible (laughs), and *Touch of Evil* is certainly not remarkable for the invisibility of the direction, or *Johnny Guitar* or any of Nick Ray's work. I think there's a question about *integration*, which can sometimes become a kind of seamlessness. But what is visible is so much related to what one is prepared to look for and at. I just think that if you go in for a flamboyant style the odds get longer. If you win it's fantastic, if you don't it's the more miserable. So there's something to do with the degree of emphasis needing to be consonant with the scale of feeling or of thought.

**Q:** *Is it also to do with a coherent strategy across the whole work?*

Not as a demand, because most of the films that one treasures are films with lots of good bits, rather than perfect, and many of the greatest movies are in various ways seriously flawed, I would say. But there's got to be enough of an armature there, as it were, to act as support for the key moments.

**Q:** *I mention it because it strikes me that by the time of Film as Film you are talking more about the way in which a film might be, I suppose, a 'systematised whole' as opposed to the Movie articles.*

Yes that's right, and I think that *Film as Film* slightly overdoes coherence really. It's odd in a way, because the general statements of that book strongly emphasise coherence and

yet it never talks about a single complete movie, it's always with bits.

**Q:** *I suppose the nearest you come is with Psycho.*

It is the nearest. I don't want to run away from the importance of integration it's just that in the rhetoric of the book, and in relation to the context to which I felt myself to be writing, I think that word is possibly overdone. But as I remember it, the book itself says that coherence is a fairly minimal claim. After coherence, what? I hope it says that.

**Q:** *A final question about French criticism – you mentioned how Bazin was easy to read, a lot of critics have attempted to place your work in relation to Bazin. Is that something you accept?*

Oh sure. I still think he's ever so insightful. And again the concern with the concrete – even though he is often inaccurate, as all detailed criticism of that time is – the concern with the concrete as the basis for any large understanding of what you advance, was important. It seems to me a waste of time to pick nits from Bazin because that's easy to do, as with any critical work of the past. I think what Bazin has to say about the connection between cinema and time and the war against time (he expresses it in terms of mummification at one point) is deeper than anyone has yet taken the subject. I think there's a strong connection between the cinema and the human fear of loss, or difficulties with loss, that Bazin points towards.

**Q:** *How does he fit in with ideas around the composition of the individual shot, as opposed to the montage-derived theories (Eisenstein / Pudovkin) that were prevalent at the time?*

There was a standard text of the time that was Ernest Lindgren's *The Art of the Film* and that itself made a kind of potpourri of ideas from Arnheim & Balázs and Eisenstein & Pudovkin, all of which one read in the quest for something that would enable one to notice and articulate more in one's enjoyment of film and which didn't seem to actually be very helpful. So, certainly in my case,

after a period of attempted submission to their authority one felt the need for something else, something that actually seemed to work. Eisenstein was more interesting than the others, again because of the degree to which he wanted to engage with particular moments, particular images and combinations of images. Without a knowledge of its cultural context, however, I think it's only semi-readable, so it only acts as an incentive rather than the detail of his ideas becoming available. Again, Bazin is so important for offering the sense that cinema isn't something that we understand. Whereas the tone of Arnheim, Balázs, Lindgren and so on, is that we *do* understand cinema and this is how we understand it. With Bazin you get the sense 'no we don't understand it, so let's start trying' which is much more enabling. Something that I quote to myself and students quite often without having the words exactly right – good God, I'm not even certain of the source, I think it's Schnabel who said of Beethoven's piano sonatas – 'This is music much better than it can ever be played'. I think of criticism very much in those terms, that criticism should aspire to be as good as the films that it's about, but it never will be. It should be based on the sense that our understanding is not yet adequate to the achievements of the great filmmakers, without being abject about it. In many respects I'm quite an arrogant person. Even introducing the question of my personality at this point represents a kind of arrogance – a manifestation of the fact that, that's a correct statement! Without a certain kind of confidence that you have, or will have, something worth saying you can hardly publish or go into the teaching business. But that arrogance, or confidence, needs keeping in check, balancing. Our understanding has to work to be worthy of the objects of understanding. I operate a lot of the time in opposition to the notion of authority, cultural authority essentially. Again, it presents some interesting quandaries as a teacher because I want to offer what I've got usefully to offer, but I don't want students to be overly impressed by my knowledge and understanding. In a way, I want them to pick and mix from what they think they can get out of me.

**Q:** *It's often suggested that Movie applied methods of literary criticism to film. Is there any validity in this view?*

Well, I expect there must be, and I don't see why it would be a particularly vicious accusation. The reason I say there must be – apart from Robin Wood who was at that time a very convinced admirer, one might say disciple, of Leavis – is that despite the fact that I regard my own literary training as minimal (much thinner than I would like it to be), I think what's in the air culturally is so pervasive. I didn't study literature but I certainly read the book reviews in *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times* and *Encounter* and so on. So the literary values represented in Kenneth Tynan's or Harold Hobson's theatre criticism (I don't know if these names mean anything to you, but they were important figures of the cultural journalism of my formative years) and the degree to which, for instance, the culture of *Sight and Sound* was a literary culture, would mean that one would have absorbed a lot of those values, those ways of thinking and expressing things. I suppose the relevance of the question is related to the fact that one of one's charges against criticism as practised at that time was that it was literary. In a sense, I think I could have done with the support of a much more sophisticated and developed literary background than I then (or now!) commanded.

**Q:** *Then there might have been the danger that you wouldn't have been looking at Hollywood films in the first place – you might have taken on values which were hostile to popular culture. Though it didn't slow down Robin Wood very much!*

That's right. There is something about the connection between modernism and snobbism that I think one was looking to avoid. The degree to which modernism as a crusade or a particular vehicle (I'm talking speculatively at this point), as a particular set of commitments – a commitment against the popular, against the comprehensible, against ease of enjoyment – isn't somehow motivated by a desire for exclusivity. That seems to me clearly the case in some expressions of modernism, how centrally it is the case with modernism as a whole I'm really too ignorant to say, but it is a suspicion that I carry.



**Q:** *One of the claims that is sometimes made is that your interest in close analysis was directly derived from knowledge of Richards and the American New Critics.*

Well it wasn't. It wasn't in the sense of having properly read any of their work. My question would be whether that wasn't so generally in the cultural air that necessarily one absorbed it – and if that's where the motivation to close inspection comes from then I'm very grateful to them!

**Q:** *The position I'm taking in relation to this material is to suggest that you weren't consciously saying 'Aha! So and so works like this, let's try this with film', but that some of these ideas would be readily available in the culture. For example it has been suggested that Movie's interest in coherence comes from Leavis, but you don't have to look very far to see that this isn't just true of Leavis, it's true of a whole tradition that stretches back at least as far as Aristotle.*

Yes, and I think the attack on coherence in the seventies was largely phoney anyway. It doesn't represent a commitment to some other set of values that could be articulated aesthetically.

**Q:** *You think that that argument rather lost its way?*

Yes ... but things hang on awfully long after they ought to have died. I think you would do much better to ask for some more precise specifications of what this word coherence is, of the work it's doing. But to deny that it represents an important consideration? Returning to the idea about literary criticism as an incentive to close analysis – I would think that its importance would come from coinciding with this other, differently motivated, desire to find ways of talking in *concrete* terms about, or finding the supports for, the judgements and interpretations that one wanted to offer. One thing that I remember impressed me in a negative way in puzzling through some of these problems (and I don't think one can sufficiently stress the stumbling way in which things move) was a piece that Penelope Houston wrote in *Sight and Sound* about Cukor which attempted close analysis. It actually had frame stills from a sequence, of *It Should Happen to You* I think, about

which she managed to say absolutely nothing of interest.<sup>2</sup> I'd approached this article ever so sympathetically (it was a good time before *Movie* got going, I think – I'm not sure about the date). I remember I thought 'Great, she's really going to do it!', and being very disappointed that from closely inspecting this sequence she had found nothing interesting to say. I think that stayed with me as representing something that ought to be possible, you ought to be able to do this.

I don't know what Penelope Houston studied at University, maybe her basis was literary? What did Lindsay Anderson do, and Gavin Lambert? What you rebel against is almost as important as what you embrace. That may be just an example of the complexity of where things come from, but I certainly remember that article in both strongly positive and strongly negative terms. A sense of 'yes this is what should be being done, but it hasn't been'. I think part of that progression for me also came out of my discontent with the things I had tried to write on the journalistic basis, on the having-seen-it-once-and-now-do-a-couple-of-paragraphs-for-*Isis* sort of basis, and not thinking the results were worth anybody's time.

Music criticism is interesting, I think, because since as long as I can remember (and my sense of it is that there's a long history) music criticism has always had this difficulty about the relationship between the grand generalisation about music, talking about it in terms of affective values and emotional values, and the technicalities of key changes and cross-rhythms. I could see *Movie's* efforts and what has followed them as much in relation to that problem, which it seems to me music criticism still is largely unable to cope with. I read as much music criticism as I did literary criticism. Gombrich was another quite key figure but of a somewhat later stage.

**Q:** *What sort of period?*

More or less in the period after leaving Oxford. I think Paul Mayersberg introduced me to Gombrich, and when I first started teaching at what was then Bulmershe I read quite a bit of Gombrich and thought that his method of discussion was more concrete and more available than

most of the art criticism I had previously encountered. Again, it achieved a better balance between the specific and the general than much criticism seemed to do.

**Q:** *So your first encounter with Gombrich would have been about the time when you started Movie?*

Probably about the start, yes. I couldn't say for sure.

**Q:** *Something I noticed about Movie writing: there is a lot of focus on the way in which effects work on the spectator almost below the level of consciousness. Whereas perhaps later mise-en-scène type criticism is more interested in the way in which the mise-en-scène 'presents' rather than 'represents' – I am thinking about the Brechtian approaches that were applied to melodrama.*

Well, Brecht came tremendously into the air didn't he? The first great Brecht champion that I was aware of was Kenneth Tynan, so there was an earlier period of Brechtianism before the *Screen* version hit us – and of course there was the Losey-Brecht connection to encourage one. But I was, and remain, pretty ignorant about Brecht. I guess my own absorption of the Brechtian dimensions of current cultural discourse in the sixties and seventies would be just that, rather than a truly informed and assessed position. But you were asking something about ...?

**Q:** *The interest in trying to pin down the ways in which a spectator may respond without being conscious of it.*

With hindsight, I would say that has a lot to do with the problem of the relationship between what multiple and detailed viewings can reveal to one and what one understands to be available to the ordinary viewer. But in saying that, I would want to emphasise ever so strongly that the ordinary viewer isn't somebody else, the ordinary viewer is me the first time I see the film, or when I see it in a relaxed frame of mind, or when I see it without some of the information that I subsequently acquire. So I'm not wishing to estrange myself from some inexpert figure. I'm saying that gathered information puts one in a different position, and then there is precisely the question about the

relationship between one's developed view of something and the occasion on which the film now articulated in this way was, or was not, available. Is one relating to some kind of ideally positioned viewing of the film? What is the status of these detailed observations, their relevance to the experience of someone, initially oneself but then others, whose enjoyment and appreciation of the work one is hoping to assist? It would certainly be a radical disadvantage to an observation or an interpretation one advanced if one had to concede that this was not a view that could possibly have been reached by someone in the course of seeing and responding to the film. But on the other hand one is trying to improve oneself as a spectator, to make oneself a better receiver of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* or *Bringing up Baby*.

**Q:** *I was thinking of that example from The Man who Knew too Much, which compares the two versions of the film. In the example the second version was preferable because it works without the spectator having to 'translate' the mother holding the son's button.*

Again, I have not read it for a long time, but I think I would now be very unhappy with most of the attempts at, so to speak, spectator psychology in *Film as Film* – and I've got less and less interested in the whole area of attempting to establish the pattern of thought and feeling of the movie spectator. I think it almost inevitably gets you into a very mechanical understanding of our imaginative engagements with film or any other kind of fiction. I don't deride other people's attempts to make sensible articulations in this area, though I think a lot that isn't sensible goes on. It's not something I have remained interested in, or feel an aptitude for exploring. On the other hand one of the unacknowledged, or insufficiently acknowledged, dimensions of popular movie making is that one of the controlling objectives of the movie is to hold the spectator's emotional attachment to particular characters and their goals. I think that is crucial to the form of most Hollywood movies. So understanding the form means at least understanding the movie's conception of how the audience can

respond. I remember with some embarrassment certain bits of *Film as Film* which seem to me to involve a rather mechanistic psychology of the audience.

**Q:** *In retrospect, do you feel you were witnessing the death of mise-en-scène in 1975?*

(laughs) I certainly think something changed. I think that the students I teach are correct when they perceive that there is a difference between what they think of as old movies, and what they think of as current movies, which can go back as far as *Bonnie and Clyde*. *Bonnie and Clyde* was made before they were born, but there is a sense in which *Bonnie and Clyde* and other films immediately adjacent to it represent markers for the movement from old movies to new movies. A whole host of things changed, of course. I think every answer I give you is going to be a convoluted version of 'I don't know'.

I think that Golden Ageism has a foundation, that is I think that the best movies of the twenties, thirties, forties, fifties were better than the best movies that we're getting now. There were always, and always are likely to be, oceans of crap, and a greater number of misfires than successes. Even among people who are working dedicatedly and ambitiously, you're more likely to get it wrong than to get it right.

My sense of things is that, in an odd kind of way, the British cinema has conquered the world. Exactly what I then objected to about British cinema actually became the way movies were made internationally, with no middle ground between pretension and triviality. So I find it almost impossible to choose between latter-day Martin Scorsese and *Twister*. They seem to me to be equally impoverished. But maybe I'm missing the rich ones. I'm ever so mistrustful of my view of something having seen it once. On the other hand, when you see it once you do or don't derive from that viewing the motivation to go back and see it more than once. It seems to me that there's an awful lot of meretricious crap of *The Piano* kind that gets acclaimed, that sits in the *Lawrence of Arabia* position. I'm absolutely unrepentant about it, I went back to *Lawrence*

of *Arabia* in an attempt to see the neglected masterpiece, or the unseen masterpiece, and still regard it as a turgid, self-deluded piece of work. And I went with every effort to respond, given that I'm very impressed by the fact that, for instance, Nick Ray admired it a lot.

So I think there is a question about whether movies have been in a trough, from which they may or may not emerge. Whether the difference between my quite distanced feeling about current movies, even though I actually enjoy a fair number of them, and the zeal that some of the students can feel for them is simply an age gap and my view of things is very middle, or post-middle, aged? – I'm quite open to that possibility, not that there's anything that I would be able to do about it. My sense, however, is that movies have gone into a trough. The whole concept of the Hollywood Classical Cinema, for instance, depends on an unacknowledged dimension which is that you call something classical on grounds of quality as well as on other grounds. The concept of calling it *classical* cinema is absolutely incoherent unless you import into it the notion of significant achievement.

I watch *ER* and *Homicide* with more enthusiasm than I go to the movies. Of course, I'm tempted by the thought that television is the place where one should now look for significant achievements. On the other hand, the claims I want to make for *ER* or *Homicide* at their best, although genuine, do not have the depth of the claims I would wish to make for *Notorious*. I don't know how much of any of that constitutes elements of an answer to your question. One thing about *mise-en-scène*, is that evidently carefully thought strategies of presentation exist as much now as then. Whatever else you say about *The Piano* it's very calculated in its *mise-en-scène*.

**Q:** *Does The Piano have the same sort of delicate shifts in point of view as, say, the opening of Caught?*

Well it's conceivable that it does, but that's not my impression. But I think there is a dangerous stupidity about opining too freely on stuff that I have seen precisely as an ordinary cinema-goer. I know that I know more than

average cinema-goers, but if you see it once, in a particular mood, in a particular state of liveliness or exhaustion, what value should be attached to anything you have to say? It has the value of any interest that people find in it, but one shouldn't get very convinced about it for one's own sake.

**Q:** *One purely technical question, is it possible to remember what the term melodrama meant to you in 1960?*

I don't think I would have thought of *Written on the Wind*, for instance, as a melodrama. But memory may be a problem here. My impression is that I would mainly have used melodrama as a term of abuse. I think nowadays we've lost sight of the fact that it can legitimately be a term of abuse, can refer to outrageous and artistically unproductive contrivance, exaggeration of effects without any decent dramatic basis. That's a different hobbyhorse.

Very interestingly, Orson Welles said that Shakespeare wrote melodrama, and that made a big impression on me – in precisely one of the interviews around about the time of *Touch of Evil*.<sup>4</sup> So that reappraisal of the word was already around, but you see I think I'd have made a distinction, I wouldn't have thought of *Touch of Evil* ... *Touch of Evil* is a much more complicated case ... I wouldn't have thought of *Written on the Wind* as a melodrama, I'd have said it was a drama. And I would have thought you could legitimately discuss whether, say, *Rebel Without a Cause* was flawed by its melodramatic elements. But Welles certainly had this very interesting thing about melodrama in one of his interviews where against the grain he was saying 'Well, *Othello*'s a melodrama, fantastic melodrama, and Shakespeare never wrote tragedy, what he wrote was melodrama'. So that was a change in the cultural currency of melodrama. I don't think I had any problems about whether *Psycho* and *Touch of Evil* were great movies, but I wasn't really, at that point, concerned to position them in relation to a notion of melodrama. Asked about it I would have said that melodrama was something more like Saturday morning serials, cliff hangers.

**Q:** *More in the way the industry was using the term – as Steven Neale detailed in his paper for the Melodrama Conference – where Hitchcock is melodrama, adventure is melodrama?*

Yes, the orientation to suspense – and I would have thought a villain was crucial to melodrama. My understanding of melodrama in the fifties would have been related to the whole notion of the Gaslight melodrama, to Todd Slaughter. That whole tradition which existed almost only in parody, rather than in its authentic forms. There was a serial on the radio called *Dick Barton* – it was like *The Archers* except that it was cops & robbers and spies and it always ended with the hero in jeopardy – which would have satisfied my notion then of what melodrama was.

*Extra information from correspondence, 19.12.97:*

Mourlet was never one of the writers that I found it easy to understand through the language barrier. Perhaps it was more necessary with him than with some others to have a familiarity with the French / Parisian cultural context in relation to which he was operating. So epithets like 'Charlton Heston is an axiom' could have a value as provocation and defiance that was largely independent of the wider context of the argument / polemic.

I was inclined to accept any claim for Hollywood directors as significant artists; so, for instance, I thought worthwhile to investigate Joseph L Mankiewicz's oeuvre with the assumption that there was excellence to be discovered. He now appears to me to have been remarkably heavy handed, often – as in *Guys and Dolls* – dismayingly so. However I think it was and is advantageous to approach as many films as possible with the supposition that they have depth and excellence which one is charged to discover.

I do not think that Losey's direction was ever remarkable for its reticence, perhaps it is the importance he gave to achieving precision and eloquence in the performances – alongside the rhetorics of the image and montage – that distinguished him in the British context in which we 'discovered' him.

I remember being rather impressed by the Rissient party's emphatic preference for *The Big Sky* over *River of No Return*. Although I have never shared that preference, the notion that Hawks' style showed up an excess of ornamentation and elaboration in Preminger's gave me a lot to think over.

Your question about the technology for the Minnelli interview combined with your letter's enquiry about the date of my involvement in film education to remind me of something that might illuminate a little corner of the history. When I went to work in the BFI Education Department I discovered a Prevost editing table on the premises and it became enormously important to me as an aid to film study. It was very important in my preparation of a series of Schools TV programmes on film, and I remember using it to prepare a lecture for the BFI's summer school on the western – on the mise-en-scène of the first ten minutes of *The Left Handed Gun*. This was in the period when I was working, on and off, on *Film as Film*. It sounds mad but I believe it's true that I was the one person around the BFI who used the Prevost to facilitate analysis rather than simply as an alternative way to run a movie when the viewing theatre was unavailable. This experience established with me the notion that technologies to assist textual work were essential to the proper development of film as an academic and critical pursuit, so I started campaigning for the purchase of a Prevost machine as soon as I found myself in charge of Film Studies at Bulmershe.

<sup>1</sup> (1959) 'Hawksienne Albion', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 100 (October), 38.

<sup>2</sup> (1955) 'Cukor and the Kanins', *Sight and Sound*, 24. 4, (Spring), 186–191, 220. The sequence in question is actually from *The Marrying Kind*.

<sup>3</sup> (1958) 'Entretien avec Orson Welles (II)', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 87 (September), 2–26. (p. 7)



## Charles Barr

19 June 1997

*The interview began with a discussion of the people writing for Granta at the time of Barr's involvement (1960-61).*

Certainly David Frost wrote things on films and other topics, and Peter Graham, though he's not really a film person now, was quite influential and edited the compilation on the New Wave which was, I guess, more effective than anything in England in putting André Bazin's actual text in circulation. He wrote a lot about films in Cambridge at that time – and became Paris correspondent of *Films and Filming* for a few years in the early 60s.

**Q:** *Am I right in thinking he took over your editorial role on Granta?*

I forget whether it was directly afterwards, but yes he certainly did. And there's no problem if you want to get in touch with Peter Graham, that could be arranged. In fact he's always rather pleased when people contact him. He made a film called *A Shilling Life* – which maybe you ought to look at, I've got a copy of it here – a year or two after I'd left Cambridge, funded by the Cambridge Film Society. It's a 20 to 25 minute film set in Cambridge and it very much reflects the influence of the New Wave and

Antonioni; I'm sure he wouldn't mind me saying that it's a very pretentious kind of film. It has a number of people in it who became quite well known: Laurence Gordon Clark, who is a television director; Richard Boston, of *The Guardian* etc.; and Stephen Frears. It is very typical of the film culture of the time and the interesting thing is that it takes no influence from the American cinema at all, whereas now, intelligent, ambitious flimbuuffs would be likely to make something that was a recreation of Film Noir perhaps, or influenced by Tarantino, or Hartley maybe ... but the influence would tend to be American. That's always the thing to remember about that period (I can't remember quite what aspects of it you're investigating) that the dominant influence came from European cinema, and partly perhaps from the American cinema filtered through the New Wave, more than from, say, Nicholas Ray and Hitchcock. In a sense there were two currents; if the *Movie* people themselves, if Ian Cameron, Victor Perkins and company, had made student films – and I have a feeling that Ian Cameron did make a film while at Oxford – they might have been modelled on Ray and Fuller. But generally I think that people at the leading edge of university film culture still took Bergman, Antonioni and the New Wave more seriously than anybody else.

**Q:** *What must have been so exciting was to have not only to have these exciting things going on in Europe, but also you were getting the late films of Preminger and Hitchcock ...*

Yes. You've probably talked to Jim Hillier about this, but when I was at Reading [in March] he gave me a handout which was a proposal for a book about precisely the films of around 1960, with a strong emphasis on that idea that the great generation of American auteurs, many of them with their roots in the silent period, were making their last mature films at that time – Ford and Hitchcock and Hawks, and then the postsound directors like Minnelli as well. But there was a conflict between the champions of European cinema and the champions of American cinema, putting it very crudely, and of course *Movie* unites the two (as *Cahiers du Cinéma* does) – there's almost an

equal enthusiasm for both, and it's the coming together of both which is the key. There was quite a strong sense, perhaps wider than we are led to believe now, of regarding the celebration of American cinema as pretentious, not serious. You find it in the *Sight and Sound* articles of the early sixties. Who are these young flippant people who haven't grown up yet and don't realise that European cinema is inherently more serious than American popular cinema? And they take seriously the films of such commercial filmmakers as Ray and Fuller! I'm sure that was quite strong at Oxford, as well as Cambridge and the wider world. So many films around that time were the site of struggle about critical value – *Psycho* and *The Birds* and Minnelli's films ... and Ray as well.

**Q:** *At an earlier stage the Sight and Sound generation, as it were, had been quite keen on Ray but their ardour had cooled by the end of the fifties.*

Yes. Although it is so interesting that Gavin Lambert went off to work with Ray. Have you read the thing Gavin Lambert wrote in *Film Quarterly*, 'Goodbye to some of all that'? I think it's in *Film Quarterly*, where he's saying goodbye to England really, and is keen to go to America, and there's a certain amount about Nicholas Ray in it. But it is interesting that the *Sequence* people sort of discovered Ray and seem to have been responsible for getting his first film *They Live by Night* shown quite widely and written about by other critics. And then *Sight and Sound* review some of his films in quite a friendly way, don't they, but they feel that after *Rebel Without a Cause* he goes down hill. I don't know if Lindsay Anderson was ever very interested in Ray, I can't remember if he writes about him, but Lambert certainly was. Lambert was interested enough in him to go and work for him on *Bitter Victory* and *Bigger than Life*, which were exactly the sort of films which according to *Sight and Sound* (which Lambert had just left) showed how Ray had been beaten by the system, or alternatively had become in thrall to hollow, formalistic, nonhumanist values.

**Q:** Party Girl.

Yes, exactly. *Party Girl* was a great site of dispute. But getting back to what you said, it certainly does seem a very rich period, in retrospect, partly because now it's become such a commonplace to use 1960 as the date for the definitive crumbling of the old studio system. Directors were having to adjust to those changes, and I don't know quite what effect that has in itself, but perhaps they suddenly found they had more freedom? You have to find some way of gathering together the range of American films that were made. What do you think of those films? Do you see that as a very rich period?

**Q:** *I do. One of the questions I was going to ask you later on was whether you were a subscriber to the hypothesis of 'the death of mise-en-scène'?*

I don't quite know what's meant by 'the death of mise-en-scène'. Remind me what it is.

**Q:** *Well, Victor Perkins says that nowadays – this is 1975 – films, in terms of their style, are divided between 'arbitrariness and pointmaking' in the decisions they make about camera placement, those sort of decisions.*

There isn't a kind of 'organic' structure? ... the values of *Film as Film*.

**Q:** *Yes. I suppose Altman must be a key figure in that discussion – and perhaps one can contrast the camera movement, or the lens movement, in *The Long Goodbye* which seems to be mainly there to draw your attention toward the director and the fact that this is an Altman film, as opposed to, say, *Caught with those subtle shifts of point of view that the opening of that film provides*.*

Well, Robin Wood uses that thing in *The Long Goodbye* to say that mise-en-scène isn't dead, doesn't he?

**Q:** *He does.*

I don't really subscribe to that, I don't think, partly because there are some very strong distinctive filmmakers adjusting to the changing scene, but making films which

are extremely expressive in visual structural terms – like Peckinpah. You can't fit Peckinpah, for instance, into that sort of schema. I'm not sure whether Victor Perkins would do so, or whether he'd take him as an exception. Peckinpah is 'making points' strongly, but then so was Fuller. I'm not sure quite how you would place people like Scorsese or Ken Loach, not that he's a Hollywood filmmaker, but these are all people who seem to have a style which is intricately, intimately related to the subject matter. Whether it's as good or not? – I don't really see that as a particularly strong issue. And I think Victor Perkins was probably being provocative. Well, he was being provocative when he said it, but that doesn't mean he doesn't believe it. There's also the complication of the fluidity around the term mise-en-scène. Does mise-en-scène come in your title?

**Q:** *Yes.*

I think we talked about this earlier, but Robin Wood has that early definition of mise-en-scène (in *Definition*) where he includes editing in mise-en-scène. Whereas I find the useful sense of mise-en-scène is related to its meaning in stage terms, the staging – to do with the profilmic event. I think Victor Perkins' notion of the death of mise-en-scène includes the *découpage*. That sort of muddles the issues, so I would find it quite difficult to reconcile this with the dictionary meanings of mise-en-scène, and with the Bordwell and Thompson meaning which has become so dominant – Bordwell and Thompson say this is what mise-en-scène is and everybody uses the book, and it is a very workable and very useful definition which I think is actually better than the *Movie* definition, not that it was really a definition, it was a sort of evocation meaning, in a sense, film style.

**Q:** *Don't you think it's important to include the frame in a definition of mise-en-scène?*

Do Bordwell and Thompson include the frame, I can't remember?

**Q:** *I don't think they do, actually, because they have that separate chapter on cinematography. I suppose I'm going to have to decide at some point exactly what definition I'm going to work with.*

Well I think you've got to at least have a discussion of it, and maybe part of your project (it's not for me to say) would be to trace the development of conflicting notions of the term mise-en-scène and what is at stake in each separate definition. Or what is perhaps masked and obscured by the fact that the definition does slide through the years.

**Q:** *I'd certainly like to include the frame and I'd like to also include camera movement, camera positioning – and that would fit in with the polemical sense of mise-en-scène where it is what the director does, in that worse case scenario when ...*

Yes, true, the director's contribution. But then isn't there a further complication to wrestle with: the conventional distinction between auteur and metteur-en-scène, which is *Cahiers du Cinéma's* distinction, and then *Movie* in a sense picks that up .... (Indeed, doesn't Tony Richardson use the same terms to make a distinction, in a *Sight and Sound* article in the 1950s?)

**Q:** *Well, I'd always felt it wasn't so important to *Movie* – as it might be to Andrew Sarris, say. My impression is that you don't find 'auteur' referred to an enormous amount in *Movie* or that evaluative sense of auteur theory. When I interviewed Ian Cameron he said 'I think all directors are auteurs but some of them, like Fred Zinnemann, are lousy ones'.*

Ah. Is that the argument in the article 'Films, Directors, and Critics' which Ian Cameron wrote in an early issue of *Movie*? I remember the bit where he says the dominant personality in the movie can be all sorts of people, but it is more often the director, and certainly so in the best films .... That implies that he doesn't always think the director is the auteur.

**Q:** *That's true, of course, but other than that 'histogram' of directors at the beginning, my impression is that you don't get*

a strong sense that this person is an auteur and this person is a *metteur-en-scène*. I'm not even sure that the term 'metteur-en-scène' crops up in *Movie*.

No, it may not do. But it is still quite an influential division, isn't it, the auteur or the *metteur-en-scène*. It certainly still gets referred to, and that rather labels *mise-en-scène* as the thing which is mainly looked after by people other than the director, the profilmic event. And then the real author puts his signature on it by the way which the camera moves, the framing, the 'layout of shots' as Victor once put it, which I think is just a translation of *découpage*.

**Q:** Do you remember where he uses that?

No. I'm sure it's somewhere in *Movie*. I think it might be in the *Movie* discussion in number 8, where he uses it as a criterion: a good director does a layout of shots that is expressive and makes sense, that is not distorted or arbitrary.

**Q:** When I interviewed Victor he did say that he felt that modernday films like *The Piano*, say, are very calculated in the way that they position the spectator, but I wonder whether you think those later films have, in other senses of the term *mise-en-scène* (I suppose I'm thinking of the way in which *décor* might be expressive of character or those other sorts of things), whether you think post65 films display the same kinds of strategies?

I find that a rather difficult question to answer. Partly because there aren't that number of modern films that I feel a strong allegiance to, say, after Peckinpah. There's not that many very modern films that I use in teaching, or have written about. *Heaven's Gate* seems pretty much in the classical tradition. What was the question again?

**Q:** Do you get that detailed construction, in the sense of those evocative examples in *Film as Film*? Or I imagine the sort of work you can do with a pre-1965 film in class, in terms of

detailed discussion – do you find you can perform that sort of operation with a post-65 film?

Well, I don't do it very much. I tend to work with earlier films. I don't do much teaching of modern cinema, as opposed to modern television (though that's another story).

**Q:** Is there a reason for that?

Partly laziness. Partly, like Victor, being attached to certain periods and partly having focused almost all my research on film history, including early cinema. I don't know how this affects your project, but it seems to me that the major thing that has happened since the moment of *Movie*, since the 1960's, is a scholarly rethinking of the silent period and the very beginning of cinema, and the relationship of this early cinema to other media etc., which opens up areas that *Movie* was never interested in – not that many other people were in those days. A really dynamic rethinking of the scope of film studies.

But returning to the question of more recent films ... I think that Peckinpah, and for that matter Arthur Penn, are very interesting cases, and Scorsese and Cimino ... and Ridley Scott for that matter. All sorts of things come back to me that I do quite like working with. You're saying, basically, is the sort of closetothetext analysis of *Film as Film* still performable? Well, I'm not sure how much I ever wanted to do the sort of thing that Victor was doing with *Film as Film*, it's very idiosyncratic. I remember the scene that Victor writes about from *The Cardinal*, where Tom Tryon is cycling and the camera picks up the movement in a particular way and pans around. I did see that again quite recently, on the big screen as well, and I thought 'Great, this brilliant moment is coming up' and it was good, but still somehow a bit of a let-down ... nowadays I would just see that as a building block in the film, not that Victor would say otherwise, and as representing a relatively small part of the influence and importance and pleasure of that sort of film. I find somebody like Ken Loach very interesting in close formal terms – different from classical Hollywood, indeed rather hostile to

classical Hollywood, but in terms of *mise-en-scène* and framing and texture and everything (and in an almost consciously oppositional way to the way that Preminger or Hitchcock would do it) I would say that Loach is using the film medium in the same sort of organic and integral way. Victor would probably be shocked to hear that, I don't know what he thinks about Loach. Loach, of course, is not a Hollywood filmmaker, but he's somebody working in the age of television, in the age of video, of euro coproduction, who moves with the times, much in the way Hitchcock moved with the times. Directors can sustain a long career by adjusting intelligently, just as Hitchcock adjusted to sound, to colour, to the television era, to industry change etc. Then there's Michael Mann. *The Last of the Mohicans* is a really handsome Scope film. Do you know *The Last of the Mohicans*?

**Q:** I'm afraid I've never seen it. I remember Andrew Britton making some very dismissive remarks about the casting of Daniel Day-Lewis, but I don't think he'd seen it either.

Well, I've seen it once in the cinema and some of it again on television and I thought that there's a film like certain Ford westerns, like *Revolution* – which is almost my favourite 80s film. Have you ever seen *Revolution*? Now there's a *mise-en-scène* film, in the old sense, though again I suspect this claim might shock Victor. The British *Heaven's Gate*, really, and a much maligned film, but squarely in the great tradition of Hollywood cinema, in terms of the relation of the individual story to history and a very bold concept of a certain kind of *mise-en-scène*. I don't really go for films like *The Piano* very much, and I can see exactly what Victor means by 'calculation'.

**Q:** What about the sort of activity you perform in your article on Dodge City in *The Movie Book of the Western*? You manage to point to an enormous amount of suggestive material in that opening sequence, though I suspect your point is almost that in the western you can do this because the genre is so rich ...



Yes. I suppose in a way that's a subversion of *Movie's* detailed criticism, because it's detailed criticism saying it's nothing specially personal, and it's 'only' Michael Curtiz. I'm not quite certain whether that points in the direction of decentring the auteur in favour of the genre and the studio and the historical moment, or if it's saying Curtiz is an underestimated auteur. I think it's both. *Movie* clearly, in retrospect, was much too prescriptive about who were the great directors and who weren't. I find when I'm running survey courses on film history, which is one of the things we do at East Anglia, that I'm getting very interested in the concept of the journeyman director – like Curtiz and Mervyn LeRoy, both of whom are sort of chameleon directors who will take any sort of material and treat it in a professional and insightful way, certainly in their best decades. Maybe you take the Cameron line and say that all directors are auteurs but some of them are not very good ones, and some of them are worth a lot more attention, like Curtiz and LeRoy. But the whole *Movie* project was such an innocent one, and in a way predated such a lot of research and knowledge about film history. My article on CinemaScope was a terribly innocent article in historical terms.

**Q:** *Although, interestingly, it's more scholarly than most of the writing in Movie at that time, in the sense that despite not knowing much about the history of film you certainly make an attempt to examine in some detail earlier theories that had been advanced about film ...*

Yes

**Q:** *And you employ points of reference in ways that early Movie articles don't. Is that a reflection of the fact that it was produced as part of your research?*

I suppose so, yes. I don't know when people like Victor read Paul Rotha, Eisenstein and Roger Manvell and company. And maybe they had done so but just didn't feel that it was worth spending time on. I was doing a year's funded research, part of which was spent in reading a lot of books. Since I knew I was wanting to challenge critical

orthodoxies in ways other than writing about a particular director or a particular film, it was important to get a handle on those critical orthodoxies. But the whole field of early cinema had simply not been explored, so there are some references to Griffith which have no understanding of what Griffith stood for. That wasn't satisfactorily confronted until the seventies I think, understanding what Griffith stood for and what he did, and how he related to the economic development of the industry.

**Q:** *I suppose also, it's a theoretical article whereas the articles in Movie are for the most part reviews of films.*

Yes. What's the title of your thesis?

**Q:** *Well at the moment it's called 'Critical Approaches to mise-en-scène'.*

Oh well if it's 'Critical Approaches to mise-en-scène' then I think there is a potentially very productive sorting out to be done of that tangle of what I would say is really three definitions. (It's not for me to tell you how to do the thesis! But partly I'm wondering what your research gathering and your questions, are actually aiming towards.) The *Cahiers du Cinéma* definition of auteur vs. metteur-en-scène, the Robin Wood / *Movie* one of mise-en-scène as everything to do with directorial style, and Bordwell and Thompson's much more formalist one, which is more satisfactory in terms of clearly delimiting what mise-en-scène consists of. Some of the words that Raymond Williams deals with in his book *Keywords*, like 'realism', 'personal' or 'national' are similarly a site of struggle between certain kinds of values or critical contexts. It would be very interesting to untangle mise-en-scène in the same way.

Sometimes the influence of *Movie* is referred to in terms of close textual analysis. Are you engaging at all with Leavis, the precedent of Leavis?

**Q:** *I have been trying to assess the claims, often advanced, which suggest that Movie is applying models of close analysis derived from Leavis and other parts of literary criticism. Is that a view you have any sympathy with?*

Well, there's no doubt that Robin Wood was influenced by Leavis, but as far as I know the only other people this applies to were both marginal to *Movie*. That is James Leahy, who wrote a couple of things in *Movie* and later took over from Thorold Dickinson in running the film research unit at the Slade School, and me. We were both at Cambridge and were both influenced, though not nearly as directly as Robin Wood who was actually a pupil of Leavis. I certainly read I.A. Richards and read Leavis' books, and went to some of his lectures. But, as I said, both James Leahy and I were very marginal to that first impact of *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie*. Ian Cameron, Victor Perkins, Paul Mayersberg and Mark Shivas certainly weren't Leavisites, and in so far as they knew about Leavis they were rather scornful. Robin Wood came from somewhere very different from the others, and I think had a big influence because with Robin Wood it became impossible to accuse *Movie* of being flippant, which was one of the initial reactions – 'Here is a glossy magazine which celebrates empty Hollywood movies'. The underlying seriousness, of particularly Victor I suppose, wasn't as apparent as Robin Wood's, because Robin was deploying a certain amount of Leavis terminology and actually citing Leavis. Ironically, the opposition which initially appeared to many people – *Sight and Sound* versus *Movie*, serious versus flippant – was shown to be the other way round. It was *Sight and Sound* which was shallow, relatively speaking, and *Movie* which had a more earnest moral weight behind it.

**Q:** *When do you think that Robin Wood would have made this impact?*

I'm not sure when he first met the *Movie* people, but he wrote for the second issue, the Preminger one – so it must have been before that. To work out the dynamics of it fully, you'd have to talk to them – have you asked Victor when he first met Robin?

**Q:** *I didn't think to. When did you first come across them?*

It must have been 1960. I was one of a lot of people who got very interested in films at university, and obviously there

was no sort of structure within the university system for absorbing that, it was all unofficial culture. There were all these contexts for seeing films, talking about films, and writing about films – there were a lot of journalistic outlets, however primitive. It was a case of finding out your values and standards as you went along, at (certainly in my case) a very callow, adolescent time. I remember going to a bookshop in Cambridge, probably in my second year, and picking up this magazine *Oxford Opinion* and glancing through it and thinking, ‘Oh it’s got some writing about films, I’d better buy this’. And then reading the first issue of *Oxford Opinion* with the writing on film, and being rather outraged by it, rather shocked. It was obviously powerful writing but it seemed so wrong, it was challenging everything that one had just started to read about correct and responsible approaches to film .... Here were a lot of films being celebrated that I either hadn’t heard of or just assumed were very minor, like a Randolph Scott B-western. It was exciting but unsettling. And then there was another issue and I remember writing a letter to Ian Cameron (I do hope he hasn’t still got it, I certainly haven’t) saying that I was interested to see this but I thought they were very wrong about everything – I remember quoting De Sica, referring to humanism, European cinema etc. And referring to *Sequence* as well, because there’s a reference in that first issue, more or less the first thing. Ian Cameron says ‘Film criticism in Britain is dead. Perhaps in the good old days of *Sequence* ....’, something like that, and in my letter to him I said ‘You invoke *Sequence*, but surely *Sequence* stood for this and that’ and quoted Lindsay Anderson. Ian Cameron wrote back, a very courteous and considered reply, sticking up for the *Oxford Opinion* position, and saying ‘As a matter of fact I’ve never read *Sequence*, I just put that in because it’s the sort of thing people say, it’s caricaturing what people say about the good old days of *Sequence* – and we don’t need to read *Sequence*, we’re making a fresh start’. Anyway, I went on reading *Oxford Opinion* with great interest and made sure I went to see the films, and thought ‘maybe there is something in this’. Other people, Peter Graham for instance, thought it was pretentious rubbish.

There was a certain kind of division at Cambridge, as there must have been at Oxford, between people who were actually rather impressed, and struck, and influenced in spite of themselves, and other people who resisted and thought Bergman, Orson Welles, Antonioni and the New Wave were incomparably more important than all these Hollywood filmmakers they were writing about. It was such a complete break with everything. It didn’t seem to have any connections with Leavis, for instance, I don’t think I made a connection at all. And then came the film issue of *Granta*, and after that I was surprised to get a letter from Ian Cameron saying, ‘We rather liked the film issue of *Granta*, we don’t like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, but we did like your article on criticism (or whatever it was) and would you like to write something for *Oxford Opinion* or for another magazine that we’re putting together’. So there was a sort of *rapprochement*. Then somehow I met them (it was probably in London) and there was this joint issue between *Oxford Opinion* and *Granta* where I got them to give me an interview with Losey which they hadn’t been able to publish.

And then I went to do the year of research in London .... Did I tell you that they all applied for that studentship? I’m not sure they all did, but certainly Ian Cameron did, and I have a feeling that Victor might have as well. Ian told me that he had gone in for the interview and they’d asked him what he meant about his project of revising the orthodoxies of film criticism, and he said ‘Well there’s one particular book *The Art of the Film* which represents everything I distrust most about traditional film criticism. Ernest Lindgren isn’t here by any chance, is he?’ – and somebody put his hand up, Ernest Lindgren was indeed there. I remember that he was there on my own interview panel but I must have been more tactful. Anyway, I got the studentship, and by then I’d met them occasionally at the National Film Theatre. In those prevideo days, the wonderful facilities we had at the Slade school were very useful. The great thing was that you could see any film you wanted to, you just asked them to book certain films and they were booked. So Gavin Millar and I watched masses of films, some projected in 35mm on the big screen, and

some we just ran on 16mm. For the Preminger issue of *Movie* I think Ian Cameron or somebody had arranged to borrow 6 or 8 of his films on 16mm, and they came in and saw them all at the Slade School, at different times of the day and night. Likewise, Ian Cameron watched quite a few films there with me on the Slade’s Steenbeck for his book on Antonioni. So I got to know them a bit then, and so did James Leahy who was in London at the time. I wasn’t confident enough to write anything for *Movie* at the very start, nor was I particularly pressed to I don’t think, but I was working on my dissertation and I guess it was early 1963 when I finished it. Then I met Robin Wood, I’d just been introduced to him at the National Film Theatre by the *Movie* people, so they obviously had met him, he must have written to them after *Oxford Opinion* or after the first issue of *Movie*, and been coopted by them. When I finished my dissertation and sent it off to *Film Quarterly*, I remember sending a copy of it to Robin because I had been shown something that he had written for the British Film Institute Education Department on *Ugetsu Monogatari*. I don’t think it has ever been published, though he has written elsewhere about Mizoguchi. I think there was going to be a series of essays on great films, and he’d done one on *Ugetsu Monogatari* which was a very good example of early Robin Wood criticism: very close to the text, very serious, and arguing that here was the film of a serious moralist. It had some very nice stuff about deep focus photography and long takes, and I wrote to him and said I’d seen this article and really liked it and felt it was in tune with some of the things I had been working on, and here was a copy of a thing that was going to be in *Film Quarterly*. He wrote back and said he could see the connections, and we arranged to meet and got on well. And James Leahy and Robin and I became friends, I think better friends than Robin was with any of the *Movie* people, or than either James Leahy and I were at that time with any of them.

James Leahy would be worth talking to, particularly if you were reconstructing critical lines of force that followed *Movie*. James was probably slightly more on the fringes of *Movie* even than I am (because, after all, I am a

member of the editorial board still!). He very impressively got a film lectureship in Chicago, and then was appointed to succeed Thorold Dickinson, which was slightly surprising because he sort of came from nowhere, in comparison with Thorold, and hadn't written very much – but then in those days nobody had written very much, and there were no academics ready to take over from Thorold Dickinson, indeed there were no film academics in this country. His job could have been taken over, at that time in the early seventies, by someone like Karel Reisz, I suppose, someone who like Thorold Dickinson had, had a career in the industry which had then slowed down, or by someone, say, from the documentary movement. But James, as an English academic with a post in America and some publications, got the job. He updated the Slade in terms of opening it up. I don't mean just to *Movie*; it was already quite open to *Movie*'s kind of approach, because the attractive thing about Thorold Dickinson was how sympathetic he was to the work being done under him, by Raymond Durnat primarily, who was perhaps the most important of the Slade students because so much writing came out of the period that he spent there, and then by Gavin Millar and myself. We got in some Budd Boetticher westerns, and Thorold Dickinson was enthralled by them, he said, 'This is really opening my eyes, CinemaScope – wonderful thing! Look at that composition etc'. (You can see the results of this in his book *A Discovery of Cinema*.) But James not only consolidated the connection of the Slade with close textual reading, which Thorold Dickinson was sympathetic to, he also took on board various developments in scholarship as they were happening – he had Noël Burch and Barry Salt working with him before they had published much – and that was an important growth point. A lot of people like Pam Cook were students at the Slade, and James was very influential, at the same time as being rather disorganised in some ways and, I think, a poor politician. He never made it into an MA Course, it was always just a diploma course, and the end result, the writing done by the students, was often disappointing, without the spur of the degree qualification. So you had this wonderful spread of films being shown by, for

instance, Barry Salt and Noël Burch, who were developing what later became their major works, but it wasn't so productive at the student end, at least not in the short term, and it left the Slade very vulnerable, so that when there was a demand for cutbacks at London University the film department was just snuffed out completely, and James was left rather in limbo.

But getting back to where I was, in the early sixties, this was Robin Wood's first period of very productive criticism. It was when he was very family oriented and before he had 'come out'. He had a wide circle, including the *Movie* people and some postCambridge Leavisite connections; he kept in touch with a number of former English Literature colleagues. That was the time when Robin was writing for the early issues of *Movie* and developing the Hitchcock book. And then *Movie* had an interruption, it had several interruptions, and then the *Movie* paperbacks started to appear.

That was certainly a key time for me in the early 60s, I suppose I was ready for it. As soon as you take on board the significance of *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie*, you see the traditional criticism in a new light. You no longer read Lindgren and Manvell with that reverence, the feeling that 'here are the key texts for understanding film'. My CinemaScope article certainly came out of that reorientation. It was when I had learned not to resist what *Oxford Opinion* was doing, had seen enough films, and had seen *Psycho*, which seemed so absolutely decisive in validating what *Oxford Opinion* was doing. On the one hand, there was Penelope Houston saying that you have to understand this is Hitchcock's joke, and on that basis you can enjoy and respect it, within its limits. On the other hand, *Oxford Opinion* took it as 'the work of a great tragedian' or however Victor phrased it. And then Robin Wood wrote about it in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and I was taking the magazine, because I read French, though not as well as Peter Graham, who is very francophile (and lives in France now, and has done since the 60's). So *Cahiers du Cinéma* was to hand, and suddenly there was this article on *Psycho* by Robin Wood. I read it before I knew who Robin was, wondering 'Why has this Frenchman got an English name?', and

then suddenly he turned up, he was in England. He says somewhere that when he wrote his article on *Psycho* he sent it to Penelope Houston, and she returned it and said 'Interesting, we'd like to hear more from you, but we don't think we can publish it because the thing to understand about *Psycho* is that it's a joke'. So he sent it to *Cahiers du Cinéma* and weeks passed, he never heard anything, and then he picked up a copy of the magazine and it was the lead article.

I'm sure that this sort of enlightenment happened to lots of other people, but because I was in a privileged place, Cambridge, there was the opportunity just at that moment to apply for a scholarship to study film properly. 'CinemaScope: Before and After' became one of a number of articles in different places that challenged orthodoxies and did have some influence. But I think talking to James Leahy might be a good idea, if you're reconstructing the film culture of the period and not simply writing about textual analysis and the concept of mise-en-scène.

**Q:** *I'm not sure I have seen the film issue of Granta, is this an issue with a whole range of articles?*

Yes. I might have suggested it, or David Frost might have suggested it, but it seemed a good idea to have a film issue, because film was such a coming, trendy thing. It's got Anthony Perkins in *Psycho* on the cover. I wrote two things in it, one is about *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and the other is a general article about criticism, I can't remember what it is called, but it was essentially reproducing and endorsing a sort of *Oxford Opinion* aesthetic. I'd be quite curious to see it again, because I haven't read it for twenty years. Then the magazine has a report on the London Film Festival where masses of important, influential new films came out – *Rocco and his Brothers*, *Shoot the Pianist*, some Antonioni, there were lots of reviews by people like Nicholas Garnham and Peter Cowie who have become well known in their different fields.

The key stages, if you were constructing a single narrative history, would be *Oxford Opinion*, then their move to London to set up *Movie*, then the *Movie* Paperbacks, and then people going into educational institutions as



several of us did, though not really until well into the 70s. That would be the simple linear history, but there's not only Oxford to London, there's Cambridge in a minor way, and then there's the Slade School. Gavin Millar and I were there in the second year of the department's operation; before that there had been Don Levy, the experimental Australian film-maker, and Raymond Durnat. Durnat is an important figure because he was so productive, and he was so anti*Sight and Sound*. He had a sort of rapprochement with *Movie* doing his article on Michael Powell, though that wasn't till 1966. Then there is the British Film Institute Education Department, and the network of contacts it had with schools and adult education. I can't reconstruct exactly who was in the Education Department at what time, but a key figure was certainly Paddy Whannel. He died when, the 70s? I remember him quite vividly, because he was a friend to a lot of people. He was a very friendly, dynamic sort of person and he went to Chicago as well – he may in fact have replaced James Leahy there. He wrote a book on popular culture with Stuart Hall, and made some television programmes about cinema, including one on John Ford that was directed by Mike Dibb (who writes in *The Movie Book of the Western*, on Budd Boetticher). Paddy was certainly in the Education department by the time that the whole shift that we are talking about took place, and he embodies that significant position of being someone who really came from the old humanist tradition but was very struck by and receptive to the new influences. In a way like me, only in a much more important role, at the BFI. And the Education Department was also the base for people like Jim Kitses, Victor Perkins, Alan Lovell, and Peter Wollen.

Another quite important place is *Motion* magazine – like *Movie* a small independent magazine, that just didn't cohere in the same way. Raymond Durnat was important to it, I wrote something in one, and Ian Johnson wrote an article on *Peeping Tom* which was way ahead of its time, the first serious article on *Peeping Tom* in the English language. And *Definition*, which was sort of anti*Movie*, and yet Robin Wood wrote for it, didn't he, before he wrote for

*Movie*? That's where his writing on the concept of mise-en-scène appears.

**Q:** And Alan Lovell wrote for *Definition*.

Yes, I'm sure he did. And Paddy Whannel wrote at least one important article in *Universities and Left Review*, which later became *New Left Review* – that was another place for debate about film. Retrospectively, it seems that *Movie* was the big thing that was happening, and maybe it was the most influential, the one with the most enduring influence, because it was making the most telling, the most important shift from the orthodoxies that preceded it. But there were such a lot of other currents that were partly competing, and partly coalescing. The kind of person I am thinking of here is Dai Vaughan, who also wrote for *Definition*, and has remained a professional film editor, while continuing to write very intelligently about films from time to time; he has never been aligned with *Movie*, but he also seems to me very much a part of that 1960s rethinking.

**Q:** Just returning to literary criticism, what was the nature of that influence? Did you consciously say, 'This is what Leavis and Richards are doing with poems, let's try it with film'?

I can't remember it being conscious, but I certainly read Richards' *Practical Criticism* several times when I was at Cambridge. I can't really remember the early things I wrote about films, to what degree they contained close textual analysis.

**Q:** My impression (given that I am yet to see the special film issue) is that your writing varies even during the period you write for *Granta*. The earliest article I've seen is 'Anatomy of a Film' which is on *The Angry Silence*, which seems to be very much part of the humanistic tradition ....

Yes, that was in an earlier issue, and it would be a very good example of the humanistic tradition.

**Q:** And then a bit later on there's the one on *Spartacus* and one on *The Entertainer* in particular which seems both in its methods and its attitudes much more in line with Oxford Opinion.

Yes, I'd forgotten the one about *The Entertainer*. As a matter of fact I think I have to revise things, it was after that article that Ian Cameron wrote to me, and then he wrote again after the film issue of *Granta*. They'd obviously rather enjoyed picking up *Granta* and reading a strong attack on Tony Richardson. And of course that was before *Movie* had come out, so I suppose I was the first person to be in print with a strong attack on Tony Richardson. I remember Ian wrote and said 'We like your attack on *The Entertainer*, although we don't like *Room at the Top*', because I'd had some remark like, 'Unlike *Room at the Top*, *The Entertainer* doesn't successfully integrate its characters with their backgrounds' ...

I'm sure I was influenced by *Practical Criticism*, and also by Leavis' style of attack – Leavis could knock down respected works, and one could imitate that by attacking *The Entertainer* with a few well chosen details. Although that doesn't mean I feel I was being insincere. The *Spartacus* piece, as I remember it, contained the germ of my writing about CinemaScope. I was in the situation around that time of thinking 'This new studentship would be a nice thing to apply for', and you had to say what you were going to write about, and there suddenly seemed to be a great gap; and *Spartacus* had just come out, to add to all the handsome Scope films by Ray and others that I'd seen and liked previously. It was an area that seemed wide open, ready to be written about, and that is how it turned out.

**Q:** Do you think CinemaScope as a process acted as a spur toward developing a mise-en-scène criticism?

Yes. As I think I probably say in that article, once you had that really big screen it was no longer possible to write about a film sequence as if it was a translation of a literary sequence. It was certainly a catalyst for changing the ways of writing about film, and Mark Shivas had already

said something about that in an article in the first film section of *Oxford Opinion*; the title was something like 'Commercial Cinema: a few basic principles'. I can remember being very influenced by the way he evoked and then answered the common objections to CinemaScope, on the lines that this sort of criticism is blind to the visual richness that CinemaScope provides 'in any circumstances'. I think he did say 'in any circumstances', claiming that the wide screen was automatically a factor for greater visual richness and density.

**Q:** *Thinking back, it seems clear to me from the article that the argument about the spectator being required to do the work has everything to do with a view of cinema that dramatises themes rather than conveys messages. Do you think that's an important point?*

I suppose so, yes.

**Q:** *You talk very eloquently about the Pudovkin / Eisenstein model where the spectator has to follow a proscribed route to make meaning, and you're firmly against the idea that cinema exists to convey messages.*

Yes. Well that's certainly a lot of the thrust of it. I'm sure it's a rather facile opposition. I actually now really like Pudovkin's films, in some ways I prefer them to Eisenstein's films, and I think that, now that a psychoanalytical approach to movies is available, Pudovkin's films don't seem like message films, but more like very intense family melodramas – but that's another story. Nobody was writing about psychoanalysis and cinema then.

**Q:** *I think it's less an argument about the films than about criticism. 'A poem should not mean but be', as opposed to the more propagandist view of art which Definition was seeking to put across.<sup>1</sup>*

Maybe there's an unconscious reaction there against the whole schoolmasterly tradition of British criticism, and indeed British culture. We all in a sense came out of the war period and its aftermath, and there's that very strong tradition of documentary and propaganda, and of realism

being good for you, teaching lessons. So it was quite intoxicating to find a kind of cinema that was morally engaged, and was telling meaningful stories, but through giving the spectator experience rather than a lesson.

**Q:** *How far do you see your work at that time as an attempt to relate the material features of the text to meaning in other senses?*

I don't know. It's very difficult to think back into that time, there certainly wasn't a conscious agenda to do that. I think everyone had a project of doing justice to the pleasures and the experience of cinema, and so much of the pleasure was, and is, the sensuous richness and complexity of it all. Like, as you say, the complexity of poetic language, and it just seemed to be so brutally reduced in the standard writing about film – Roger Manvell being typical of that. The summit of cinema was reduced to certain kinds of patterning of shots at the beginning of *Great Expectations*. Certain things were held up as typical of expressive filmmaking – Ernest Lindgren has all these examples of the highangle shot and the lowangle shot. Meaning and experience seem to be defined in such a reductive way, with no real scope for complexity of texture and complexity of response and ambiguity.

I've realised one key name has been left out, I'm not sure how I managed not to mention him before, which is André Bazin. Undoubtedly for me the most important influence, on a reading level, was Bazin. More so than Leavis, and more so than I.A. Richards because Bazin was writing about film and was writing in a Leavis / Richards kind of way. Bazin's work became known at that time, partly because he'd just died and there were articles celebrating him. I think I commissioned Peter Graham, who was always going to Paris, to bring back André Bazin's collected essays which had just come out (in French, I've still got them). His essays on Wyler were particularly memorable, which was strange, because no-one especially liked Wyler. Wyler's reputation had gone down, but here were these great Bazin essays which used his work, and also of course Welles', as a key example of visual density and complexity. Do you know his essays? 'Montage

Interdit' was another important one, and very relevant to the line I was developing on CinemaScope. So Bazin was as important as any of the people I have mentioned. I think everyone knew about *Cahiers du Cinéma* and its hard line about certain things, and Bazin was part of that, and somehow transcended it all because he was known to have resisted what were seen as their wilder excesses.

I now see Bazin as having quite a lot in common with Leavis. They're both writing from before, and to some extent against, the spread of critical jargon. 'The real' is an absolute key term for both, although Leavis uses 'life' just as much – they both have this almost mystical attitude to life and reality which of course can seem terribly naive, and which helps to make Leavis easy to deconstruct and criticise. They both have this way of writing very vividly about particular texts, about particular lines of poetry in Leavis' case, from Shakespeare or Hopkins or whoever, and, in Bazin's, particular sequences of Welles or Wyler, Rossellini or De Sica. And making it part of a moral vision, a vision of life, which in Bazin's case is a sort of Catholic acceptance of the world, and in Leavis' a struggle for integrity and certain puritan values. They had a comparable earnestness which they mobilised in attacking – more explicitly on the part of Leavis – a shallower, less serious tradition of criticism. In terms of the relation of close textual analysis to moral issues, Bazin was a major inspiration. His death meant that he couldn't be writing about current cinema, and Leavis wasn't interested in the cinema, so Robin Wood and everybody else who was influenced by them were freed from actually following in their footsteps. Robin could write completely freshly about Hitchcock because nobody had really written from that perspective. Bazin had never written much on Hitchcock, and the approach of Chabrol and Rohmer and the other *Cahiers* writers was, though intriguing, somehow so distinctively French that there was no sense that he was following them. And for me, writing about CinemaScope in the context of American mainstream cinema, it seemed virgin territory.

**Q:** You mentioned the difference between French criticism and English criticism, what is the crux of that?

I think there was a significant difference in tone and context in French writing. Partly the language question, the French have this distance on American culture which enables them to see past certain distractions, but I don't think the Chabrol and Rohmer book could have been written by English people – I don't quite know what I mean by that. I think Bazin's work is perhaps closer to certain traditions of humanistic text-centred English criticism than it is to the much more impressionistic writings of Godard and Truffaut or, to some extent, Chabrol and Rohmer in their book. Bazin was quite anglophile, he liked a lot of English films. But I wouldn't attach much weight to my opinions on the difference between French and English criticism.

**Q:** What about the MacMahonists? You told me you were a subscriber to *Présence du Cinéma*.

Yes. I don't know how much influence the MacMahonists had, and I don't know how MacMahonist *Présence du Cinéma* really is because a lot of it is interviews and filmographies. I can't remember being influenced by anything I read in *Présence du Cinéma*. But it was a MacMahonist, Michel Mourlet, who wrote that 'Lang, Losey, Preminger and Cottafavi – these are the greatest of the great' – that was very striking, along with the notion of things being stripped down, bare and austere, that was characteristic of the early Losey. In the first thing I wrote for *Movie* I quoted the word *dépouillement*, meaning a sort of stripping down. I'd read this thing about Cottafavi; a Cottafavi film came out, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*; I rushed out to see it a few times, and wrote about it for *Movie*. So there, in a way, you can see the influence of *Présence du Cinéma*, through Cottafavi, and I latched onto this idea of 'stripping down'. I think that was part of the attraction of the French view of films, they caught something very important about American cinema (and others in the case of Losey's early British films, and Cottafavi) which opened up popular genre cinema and nonrespectableseeming

films to attention. *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* must be the least 'serious' film that *Movie* addressed.

**Q:** Other than your appreciation of Bazin, do you feel that the most important thing about the influence of Cahiers, and perhaps *Présence du Cinéma*, would be in terms of what sort of films would be worth looking at?

Yes, I think it was mostly the question of what and who was important to look at. As far as I'm concerned, and it probably applies to other people, André Bazin was the important critic, on the whole via work which hadn't appeared in *Cahiers du Cinéma* but had been written earlier. We read *Cahiers* and liked the rating system; seeing which films got high ratings and which didn't was always interesting. They named a range of directors whose work was interesting, and people did then at least check them out. I don't know if Ian Cameron wrote about *Comanche Station* in the first issue of *Oxford Opinion* because André Bazin had written about Budd Boetticher and signalled him as an important filmmaker, or if Ian just happened to see the film and thought 'this is interesting, I'll write about it'. Did he say anything about that? Certainly I picked up on Cottafavi because he was mentioned in *Présence du Cinéma*, or maybe in an article quoted in *Cahiers*. Many of the directors that *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie* wrote about were the Cahiers ones. Paul Wendkos had been mentioned in *Cahiers*, so I noticed a Paul Wendkos film was on in a double bill in an obscure cinema, and saw it, and then wrote about it in *Motion*. I would never have gone to see it, or if I had seen it I might not (who knows?) have thought much about it, if Wendkos hadn't been picked up as an interesting young director. Of course, we knew Hitchcock and Hawks were the two top people because there were these Cahiers people called *les hitchcockohawksiens*, and then duly in the first issue of *Movie* Hitchcock and Hawks were ranked top, and there was a lot of writing about Hitchcock and, soon, a special issue on Hawks. Some people said that it was all copied from *Cahiers du Cinéma*, but Hitchcock and Hawks were very established figures in the American cinema. I can't say that I went to see Hitchcock and Hawks films because they were mentioned in *Cahiers*

*du Cinéma*, they were famous anyway – this only applied, for me, in the case of minor figures like Wendkos and Cottafavi, people whom *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie* hadn't picked up – so this was my chance to investigate two new people, and make a contribution to this whole scholarly project. Mind you, nothing much happened subsequently with either of them. Cottafavi made hardly any more films, though I think Wendkos may still be working. I used to go and see his films fairly religiously, but I haven't kept it up.

**Q:** What about method, an interest in close textual analysis, *mise-en-scène*? Is there any link there?

You mean with *Cahiers du Cinéma*? No, I think it's a combination of Bazin and the Cambridge English tradition. Not that I was doing English, but I.A. Richards and Leavis transcended the boundaries of the English courses. I was reading classics, and I wasn't stimulated to spend all my time doing classics, so I spent a lot more time reading English critical works and novels and so on. So for me I don't think close reading came from *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and I don't know if it did for anybody. I think it's much more an English thing. I don't know where it came from for Victor. I think it just came from him! He doesn't have to be influenced by anyone. And from some intelligent and lively people getting together in Oxford and stimulating each other and talking about why they liked certain films.

**Q:** And for you, presumably having access to that technology at *The Slade* would have been an important factor.

Yes. And Antonioni was very important, particularly, for me and also Ian Cameron, *Le Amiche* – have you seen that?

**Q:** I haven't. He mentioned in his interview that you got him on to an editing table to see that.

Yes. We ran it backwards and forwards a lot of times, looking especially at the dazzling instances of the *plan séquence*, handling whole group scenes in a stunning long-take way. Without a Steenbeck, you used to have to



go into a cinema and see a film two or three times, and write a lot of notes and then try to recapture it on paper, since of course there were no videos to refer to.

**Q:** *You said that you knew Sequence as well when you were at Cambridge.*

Yes. I came across a second-hand set of it in a Charing Cross Road bookshop, and read it and was impressed by it, because it's very well written. It didn't really rub off on what I was writing, except possibly to some extent in style. Ford is an interesting case. *Movie* was initially very anti-Ford, as you may have picked up. When did the first Ford thing appear in *Movie*, was it Victor?

**Q:** Cheyenne Autumn?

Yes, which is very late.

**Q:** *Yes, about number 12.*

Yes, and the first film issue of *Oxford Opinion* has a very scathing reference to Ford, by Mark Shivas, and that set the tone. *Sight and Sound* liked Ford, *Sequence* liked Ford; not that they'd read *Sequence*, but anyway *Sight and Sound* and Lindsay Anderson were very enthusiastic, seeing Ford as the justification of the Hollywood system. So that was a clear was of distancing themselves from the English orthodoxy. And *Cahiers du Cinéma* hadn't yet become very keen on Ford. I think it was Bazin – or was it Roger Leenhardt? – who wrote 'A bas Ford, vive Wyler', 'Down with Ford, Long Live Wyler'. Ford was what the oldguard liked. So through the first part of the 60s Ford was almost a nonperson. I remember going with Gavin Millar, during our year at the Slade, to watch *Two Rode Together* at a cinema in Islington. And we came out and said, 'What an awful film, what a terrible film' and we slagged it off for quite a long time. And now I think it's a wonderful film. I'm sure that first reaction was influenced by the fact that Ford was not fashionable, and you'd have had to be quite bold to argue for Ford. It was rather like *Peeping Tom*. I was interested in horror films, which on the whole other people around me weren't, and I wanted to see *Peeping*

*Tom*, it sounded a rather scandalous film, and I went to see it in its first week and was bowled over by it and went back to see it the next day ... but nobody I knew had any time for Powell then, and I remember Victor saying very scathingly that '*Peeping Tom* could have been a good film if it had been made by a decent director', or something like that – writing it off completely, as indeed did *Cahiers*. So although the project was to overturn critical orthodoxies, it operated with its own sort of peer group culture – Tony Richardson was bad, Ford was old hat, Hitchcock was great, etc. And Powell and Pressburger were liked by nobody, *Sequence* included. And *Peeping Tom* we can now recognise as being way ahead of its time – the modern version of *Movie* has duly celebrated it.

And I think the case of Ford was rather similar. My own turning point was going to see *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* long after its first release, at a remote Irish cinema, and thinking it was terrific. But by then people were starting to come round. James Leahy always rated Ford, in fact it was he who convinced me that he was an important director. But it was a long time before anything affirmative appeared in *Movie*. Who was the first *Movie* person who wrote at any length about Ford? I suppose Doug Pye, and Robin Wood.

**Q:** *Robin Wood talks somewhere about the experience of going to an Education Department session on Ford run by Alan Lovell.*

And possibly Paddy Whannel also.

**Q:** *Well the two of them I think, and being won over during the course of the workshop as to Ford's qualities.*

Oh yes, well that is the BFI Education influence. Have you read *Sequence* yet? I still like the *Sequence* stuff on Ford. To have all that lyrical writing about *My Darling Clementine* at the time that it first came out, coupled with the fact that *My Darling Clementine* is such a great film ... that's an area where *Sequence* really has been vindicated, in the way that *Movie* was in relation to Hawks and Hitchcock.

**Q:** *And Preminger.*

I don't know about Preminger, Preminger is a person who's almost forgotten now.

**Q:** *Well that's interesting. At Reading, Doug and I and some other research students sat down and did some work on Bonjour Tristesse to see if it really was good, and we thought it was wonderful. We were really very impressed. You're absolutely right that he's a forgotten figure, but I think that Movie was absolutely right about his qualities.*

Well it certainly seemed to be at the time, and *Exodus* was a very important film. I never really that much liked *The Cardinal*, but I'd love to see *Exodus* again on a really big screen. I can remember seeing that in Dublin two days running, with Mike Dibb, whom I mentioned earlier – he represents the Dublin fringe (he was at University there) of this movement. He was a great friend of Paddy Whannel's, he directed the television programme I mentioned with Paddy about Ford (I wonder if he's still got it?) – that must have been about 1965.

**Q:** *Is there anything else that you particularly want to say?*

Talking about it all has reminded me of a lot of things, and I think the main thing is that complexity and multiplicity. If you're engaging with this period it is very important not to have a simple linear view: that there was this and then *Movie* came in and gradually undermined it. It is a conjunction of such a lot of different things and influences: *Definition*, *Motion*, the Slade School, the Education Department of the British Film Institute, certain people working in adult education, even things like *New Left Review* and *Universities and Left Review*. And the complexity of the French influence. And, certainly as far as I'm concerned, André Bazin was very important.

**Q:** *Victor was very keen to pay tribute to André Bazin.*

Ah, good. Part of the complexity thing is the balance of attention to American and non-American cinema in *Movie*.

**Q:** *The fact that there was such a balance does tend to be overlooked.*

Yes. And also in *Sequence*, *Sequence* was fairly evenly divided between American cinema and European cinema.

**Q:** *I remember you saying that you saw a number of affinities between the *Sequence* project and *Movie*.*

Absolutely. They both come out of Oxford for one thing, and they're both consciously reacting against an established orthodoxy, represented by people like Roger Manvell and Paul Rotha. But *Sequence* was opposing itself particularly to the dominance of the documentary people, of Griersonian Puritanism – and to all the euphoria about British cinema and its revival during and at the end of World War II. I think the defining moment in early *Sequence* is Lindsay Anderson writing on Ford (it's reprinted in the Preface to his book *About John Ford*). He says that when he got back from war service to London, he had a choice of seeing *Great Expectations* or *A Matter of Life and Death*, which were the great hyped-up films of the British renaissance, or *My Darling Clementine*, which nobody was very interested in. He perversely chose *My Darling Clementine* and was bowled over by this wonderful poetic film.<sup>3</sup> And then he celebrates *My Darling Clementine* very eloquently, and goes on to write about other Ford films equally strongly. And the *Movie* project, likewise, is defined at the time of a period of hype of the new British cinema, in this case *Room at the Top* and *Look Back in Anger* and all the other Tony Richardson films. *Movie* is saying the same thing as Lindsay Anderson who writes, at the beginning of his article on Hitchcock in *Sequence*, to the effect that 'British Cinema has always been uneasily caught between Hollywood and Europe' – not having the bold commercial confidence and generic rootedness of one cinema, and not having the seriousness and personal vision of the other. *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie* were more or less doing the same thing, saying that both British Cinema and British criticism are fatally flawed, wrapped up in tepidity, failing to appreciate the real potential of film. It's interesting that one of the contextual similarities is this hype about British

cinema which both are strongly opposing. There's almost exactly the same position occupied by Tony Richardson for *Movie* and Powell and Pressburger for *Sequence*, who represent vulgarity and bad taste.

Then there's the similar balance between the American and European. The new Italian cinema is taken seriously in *Movie* – Antonioni, late Rossellini – and in *Sequence* it's the neorealists. They both admire different periods of French cinema, and they both like Renoir. And interestingly, in American cinema Nicholas Ray and Minnelli are very important for *Sequence*, as they will be for *Movie*, which has forgotten, or didn't know, that Ray and Minnelli were important for *Sequence*. Also, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is a key film for both of them. So actually there's a lot more in common than Ian Cameron would have liked to admit, and maybe nowadays as a mild middle-aged person he would actually rather like *Sequence*, I don't know. But Gavin Lambert, have you traced what happened to Gavin Lambert?

**Q:** *I was reading that interview with him that's in the same issue of *Screen* as your *Straw Dogs* piece just yesterday.*

Gavin Lambert is a very positive figure, I think. He wrote a very sympathetic book on Cukor, and he had gone originally to Hollywood with Nicholas Ray; and he wrote an essay on Hitchcock in the early 70s which is certainly not in any way following the Lindsay Anderson disapproval of Hitchcock's work in Hollywood. I met Lambert two or three years ago in Hollywood when we were making the *Hundred Years of British Cinema* programme; he and Alexander Mackendrick are the two people who talk together in Hollywood with Stephen Frears, under the direction, again, of Mike Dibb. Unfortunately the interview gets chopped up, but there are still good things left. Yes, I definitely think the *Sequence* / *Movie* parallel is very interesting. As I said, *Sequence* started as the magazine of the Oxford University Film society and then moved to London, rather like *Movie* growing out of *Oxford Opinion*.

**Q:** *I think you even suggested a link between 'poetry' and *mise-en-scène*. [As I now recall, the parallel that had been*

*made in an earlier conversation was between 'poetry' and 'beauty'.]*

Yes, Anderson does talk a lot about 'poetry', and he means the texture of the image, the sort of thing which is very difficult to pin down on paper. And he does sometimes have some quite detailed shot-by-shot analyses, obviously not done in quite the same way as *Movie*. But the notion of 'poetry' is also I think, like the Leavis notion of 'life', that there's an indefinable something, that all the critic can do is point to the details, the sensitivity and precision with which something is realised, and stand back and say 'there you are', there is 'reality', there is 'life', there is 'poetry', there is 'beauty'.

**Q:** *Thank you very much.*

Some further thoughts:

I tend not to look very intensely or closely at modern films, partly through being more of a film historian, and partly from a sense that films just don't now have that same cultural centrality.

I don't care enough about current films now, in the way I used to do. When *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* came out, that was the most important thing that was happening in the world at that time and it was terribly important to keep seeing it and to celebrate it. I think it is partly to do with the postmodern culture, if you use that word, that makes everything continuously accessible. If a film comes out now there's no special reason to catch it at the cinema because it will be on rental video, it will be on sell-through video, it will be on television again, it will always be available.

**Q:** *It's almost like the sense that the Wednesday Play or Play for Today had an audience, when you only had a couple of television channels, and almost the whole population would have watched it.*

Yes, and you had to see it now. You had to see *Cathy Come Home* then because it was never going to be repeated. It was like you had to go to the theatre to see something because when the production stopped that was it. And

*Cathy Come Home* was exceptional in being repeated, and then it took ages before it was available. Something like *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* wouldn't automatically stay around and form part of a repertory.

A very strong admiration for Peckinpah is something I have in common with Doug, not just *Straw Dogs* (I'm not sure how I rate that compared with the others) but I feel something like *Junior Bonner* works on a level of intensity, eloquence and complexity level with any Western by anyone. But that's early 70s, isn't it? I'm just not sure if something like *The Last of the Mohicans* could repay the same close attention. I know very well that a film like that has the same level of detailed serious input, that it is worked out over a very long period, and is put together with immense care and commitment. Maybe I should set myself to really look at a film like that. And then Loach and Scorsese. Perhaps. But I suppose I just don't feel the urge to settle down and do such close analysis. What am I doing now? I'm working on *Vertigo*, and Hitchcock's British films, and British World War II films – those are the three things I've got to do before I can do my book about Wicket Keeping. And 1958 is precisely the moment before I started to get interested in films, and before the *Movie / Oxford Opinion* generation started to come through. So *Vertigo* in a way marks off that period, at the end of the classical era.

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<sup>1</sup> Wimsatt, William Kurtz (1954) *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 81.

<sup>2</sup> Barr's recollection of critical material is generally extraordinarily accurate. However, I think Anderson's recollection of seeing *My Darling Clementine* only appears in *About John Ford* – although he, Ericsson and Lambert did indeed celebrate the film and its director.



## Alan Lovell

13 April 1999

**Q:** Perhaps I can begin by asking you how you came to be writing about film in the first place? What was your entry point?

I guess my entry point, on a strictly personal level, was not doing any work at university at all, and going to see films. But the serious entry point was an involvement at Oxford with what was then the *Universities and Left Review*, and a general interest in trying to bring culture into political discussion.

**Q:** What period were you at Oxford?

1955-58

**Q:** So you were the generation before the *Oxford Opinion* contributors – the relevant issues of *Oxford Opinion* appeared in 1960?

I am confused now, because Victor was my contemporary, almost exactly I think. And indeed, one of the first memories I have of serious discussion of film was going to some kind of film group and meeting Victor.

**Q:** And there was already a strong political motivation for your thinking about film?

Yes, it was very much in a political context at that point. Given that there was an awful lot of energy developing in Oxford at that time – which led to *Universities and Left Review* – it was inevitably very politically coloured.

**Q:** What do you think the personal root of that political interest was?

It was to do with my own social background. Coming from a working-class background, and particularly going to Oxford, it's hard not to have views of politics and class.

**Q:** I remember your article in one of the issues of *Universities and Left Review* called 'The Scholarship Boy', which is about Hoggart and what you would wish to add to his argument.<sup>1</sup> It strikes me that the scholarship boy is a very interesting figure: Raymond Williams, Hoggart of course, you, Victor fits that description as well doesn't he?

Yes he does.

**Q:** ... Dennis Potter. It's a social phenomenon with considerable consequence for the movement we're discussing.

In fact, if you want to trace a real connection for me, I can remember going into Blackwell's in Oxford and discovering *The Uses of Literacy* – about which I knew nothing at that point, it hadn't been reviewed or anything – and being absolutely overwhelmed by the book: 'My God, it's the book I've been wanting to read all my life!'

**Q:** So you were very much involved in discussions from the *Universities and Left Review* perspective. What were your feelings when you encountered *Oxford Opinion*, and Victor and perhaps some of the other people?

My first impression of Victor and the others was that these were perfectly eager people who were also interested in film, and I had no strong sense of difference at all at that point. When *Oxford Opinion* started to first appear, and

then *Movie*, I felt strongly hostile to their choice of directors. It was hard for me, given the political background, to suddenly like all these American Hollywood directors, or to take them seriously at all. And I also felt there was no political dimension to their discussion, they weren't interested in politics.

**Q:** It seems to be one of the features of the New Left movement, in its first expression, is this strong distrust of certain aspects of popular culture, particularly American popular culture.

Yeah.

**Q:** That's very clear in *Uses of Literacy* where Hoggart is very keen to praise traditional popular art, but that's opposed with 'mass art'. But by the time of Hall and Whannel's *The Popular Arts*, and I suppose Peter Wollen's articles in the *New Left Review*, there's been a change hasn't there?

There has. I would roughly characterise it in the way you have, though I have a slightly complicated view of where Peter Wollen stood in relation to popular culture. One person I ought to mention as having a huge impact in terms of film and politics is Lindsay Anderson. Lindsay came to Oxford, and he talked to some kind of political group – I can't remember what it was – but I remember him talking about Vigo, and being very excited, and talking to him afterwards. As a consequence of that I developed a kind of relationship with him. And then being hugely impressed by his writing, particularly the article on *On The Waterfront*.

**Q:** That's interesting. Were you going back to discover the *On The Waterfront* piece.

Yes.

**Q:** And was that when you went back to discover *Sequence* as well? By the time of *Definition* it appears you're quite familiar with *Sequence*.

Yes, it probably was. It also was the time when Lindsay was writing things like 'Stand Up!, Stand Up!', about the need for commitment, which he published in *Sight and Sound* and which we reprinted in *Universities and Left Review*.

**Q:** *That is very interesting because that forms a direct link between Sequence, Anderson's expressions of commitment in Sight and Sound certainly, and your interest (as being that younger generation of around 1960), which isn't there at all in Oxford Opinion. In The Popular Arts there also seems to be a Sequence impulse in that Ford is the director whom they write about, and celebrate as valuable popular culture.*

Yes. In making that connection with popular culture Ford was invaluable – finding a popular artist you could really support.

**Q:** *How did you come to be involved in Definition?*

I can't exactly remember now. I met Dai Vaughan and Boleslaw Sulik ... it must have been when I first went to London, there was the New Left Review Club, I may have met them there. But it was the meeting with them. I guess they were the first people I had met who had similar political interest and wanted to connect film and politics.

**Q:** *That's interesting, the idea that it might have been the New Left Club where you met.*

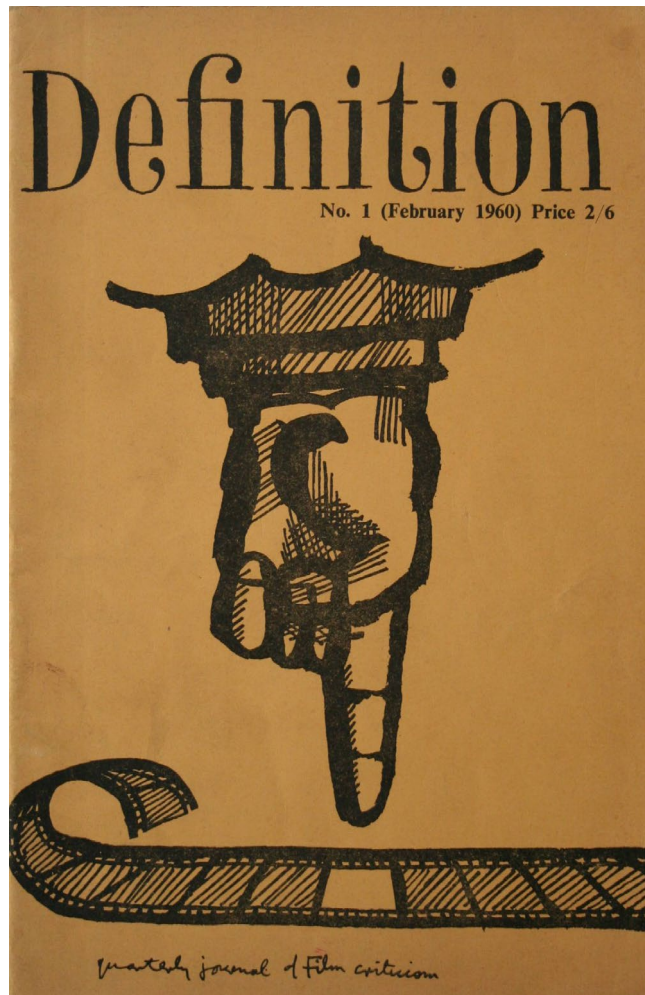
I can't think of any other context.

**Q:** *Perhaps you can clarify a point for me: Dai Vaughan is not the same person as the David Vaughan who wrote for Sequence and Sight and Sound?*

No, he's not, he isn't the guy who wrote about musicals for *Sequence*. David Vaughan was a dancer, or involved in dance? While Dai was an editor in the industry.

**Q:** *Did Dai Vaughan and Boleslaw Sulik have a background in the London School of Film Technique?*

They did, and that was very important too. Perhaps the connection came in that way? I'm not sure. I did do some



lecturing at the London School of Film Technique, but I think that was after I had met Dai and Boleslaw.

**Q:** *What sort of basis was Definition published on?*

Do you mean economically?

**Q:** *I do, really.*

Well that was entirely on the hope that we could sell enough copies, and that's why it was never viable. We used to operate with some very cheap Polish printers which Boleslaw knew. He was part of the whole Polish exile group in London and he had some connection with the printers who did it very cheaply for us, but even then there was no hope of meeting our costs.

**Q:** *Does he form a link with the interest in Wajda and that kind of cinema which was obviously important to Definition?*

Yes, but there's the other connection with Lindsay Anderson, because Anderson was the great champion of Wajda and the Polish cinema. Again this relates to the question of a popular cinema. We might now question whether Wajda and the Poles could be regarded as a popular cinema, but at that time it certainly seemed that they were people making popular cinema.

**Q:** *How did Anderson champion that, was it through writing?*

Yes, through writing. He was the film critic of *The New Statesman* for a time – in fact I think writing about the Poles got him sacked. He wrote about *Kanal* which came out in the same week as *Bridge on the River Kwai*, and he reduced *Kwai* to the last thing he dealt with, and *The New Statesman* thought this was the wrong order of priorities, and it was a parting of the ways.

**Q:** *What were you doing as a job at this point in time?*

I worked as a journalist for a pacifist newspaper called *Peace News*.

**Q:** *Can you tell me any more about Peace News?*

The history of *Peace News* is very interesting, it goes back to the 1930's and the development of pacifism. One of the editors was John Middleton Murray, who was a key literary critic of the 1930s, who championed D.H. Lawrence and was the husband of Katherine Mansfield. He was part of that kind of literary culture and he edited *Peace News* as well. There was a connection between *Peace News* and a lot

of people like Michael Tippet and Benjamin Britten who were conscientious objectors – so there was an historical connection with arts and culture. By the time I got there that had largely been lost, it was a narrow pacifist magazine, but then it got caught up in the whole Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament / New Left movement, and created space for people like me to write about film. And we had a theatre critic, a guy called Albert Hunt.

**Q:** So you were heavily journalistically involved at this time?

I was a journalist. *Peace News* didn't pay well, but I was employed as a journalist.

**Q:** Let us think for a moment about the battle over form and content and their relative value. In the editorials of *Definition* there is an appeal for a detailed criticism, it even appears in 'Stand Up! Stand Up!' which is the banner of committed criticism. But, and this may relate to only surviving for three issues, the reviews in *Definition* don't seem to be doing the kind of things reviews in *Oxford Opinion* are trying to do. Would that be your suspicion?

I think that's fair. The key thing, I think, in questions about style is that nearly everybody shares a root in something like Leavisite criticism. Obviously with Leavis the notion of close, detailed criticism – taking account of style – is very important. We were part of that, but that is in a sense compromised for us by politics, which leads in the direction of content. You're probably right that we didn't resolve that.

**Q:** So Leavis had, in a sense, been quite an influence on your methodology?

Oh, absolutely. At school in the sixth form we read Leavis, and when I was at Oxford I knew Stuart Hall, and Stuart was very much from Leavis – he was doing a PhD on Henry James. So we were absolutely steeped in a Leavisite approach.

**Q:** How interesting. Robin Wood was clearly influenced by Leavis, but one of the things I've been investigating is how

*much of a literary basis there is for the work of the Oxford Opinion writers, none of whom were actually studying English. I think that relationship is often overstated in their case.*

That's probably right. Robin seemed to be different from the others at that particular point because of that very deep involvement with Leavis – which kind of gives him a militant and, although it was not specifically political at that point, moral drive which is close to a political drive. Now that seemed missing from *Oxford Opinion*.

**Q:** Looking back from today's vantage point, how do you consider the relative ambitions of *Definition* and *Oxford Opinion*?

*Definition* now seems very limited. Almost accidentally it happened that three people – all of whom were kind of odd, particularly Boleslaw who was a Polish exile, but Dai was a filmmaker and I was a journalist and so on ... I'm not sure we represented anything much, outside of ourselves. Obviously we echoed that interest in politics, but in terms of film I don't think we had much. Whereas I think *Oxford Opinion* – and that's where Peter Wollen comes in – represent something in English culture which gives them more substance.

**Q:** So that's true of both *Oxford Opinion* and Wollen's association with *New Left Review*?

I think there are very interesting connections between *Movie* and the *New Left Review* – and disjunctions as well.

**Q:** What do you mean by 'something in English Culture'?

I think there's something – Anderson's very much part of that too ... Jennings ... – an interest in art and sophistication, taste, *mise-en-scène* and so on, as opposed to the vulgarities of content. And that interest being associated with a critique of England, and looking elsewhere to find your sophistication and taste. The other thing which differentiated me from them, in which I guess I'm influenced by George Orwell, was *Movie's* distaste for British cinema.

It seemed part of a long English tradition – Orwell comments upon it – English intellectuals don't like England, and are endlessly going on about how narrow and provincial it is. This is where *New Left Review* and *Movie* connect up: the interesting place is France. They go to different things, *Movie* obviously to *Cahiers* and *New Left Review* to Althusser, but French culture is very important for them.

**Q:** That's an interesting perspective, certainly. I'm not disputing your general point, but part of what is really remarkable about *Movie* and *Oxford Opinion* is the challenge to the established notions of 'taste': writing about Tashlin, or Fuller. It may well be about sophistication, but it's a very different kind of sophistication to that which is currently in place.

It would be really interesting to go back and look at how they wrote about Tashlin, but the discussion about Hitchcock, for example, particularly when it comes filtered through *Cahiers* or Chabrol, brings you into a world of great sophistication in art.

**Q:** It does, but it still seems an affront in 1960 to be advancing these ideas.

Yes, but the affront is much more 'this is Hollywood'.

**Q:** That's the stumbling block, not questions of taste *per se*.

That's where taste comes into it, that Hollywood is not part of acceptable taste, as it were.

**Q:** It seems there is something of a rapprochement between the *Movie* ideas about film and the new left emphasis, I suspect (correct me if I'm wrong) in the shape of the BFI education department and related activities. Would that be your impression?

The real rapprochement, in a way, comes from me because I was the person who got Peter Wollen the job at the BFI. It's almost as crude as that. I knew the *New Left Review* people, I read Peter's stuff and I thought it was really interesting, and I thought that the intellectual seriousness of



the *New Left Review* ought to come into film criticism. So I was very keen to get Peter in, and in fact the two candidates for the job were Peter and Victor.

**Q: Really?**

My candidate was Peter, but we all agreed that Victor was so good that we actually created another job for him.

**Q: At what stage had you come to work for BFI education?**

I had started to do freelance lecturing for them when I was still a journalist, and then I effectively became a freelance journalist and supported myself by doing a lot of lecturing. At that time the BFI had a lecture agency which organised lectures everywhere in the country. I already knew Paddy Whannel through *Universities and Left Review*. We used to come up to London from Oxford, and go to the National Film Theatre, and met Paddy who had just become the education officer.

**Q: He seems a very important figure.**

Yes, he was.

**Q: Returning to the earlier point, I'd suggest Peter Wollen is very different from the Movie tradition. He's very keen to take American films seriously, so they have that in common, but he's always less interested in style. When he goes on to discuss authorship style clearly isn't his main point of interest, it's recurrent features. Whereas with Victor, style is the most important aspect.**

My own view is very different now from what it was then, and this partly came out of a dialogue between my teaching at Warwick and what Victor teaches. I think in the end, Victor is not that interested in style. The emphasis is on the themes and ideas which you apprehend through style. The whole of the teaching at Warwick is organised on detailed criticism, that is for every course that you do you see a film twice, and it's assumed that's your basic method. But given that, the students know almost nothing about camera work. And I remember doing an introductory

course in which we simply talked about camera work. It always seems to me that Victor starts with mise-en-scène, but is very quick to get on to the meanings.

**Q: When I talk about style, I'm really talking about the way style relates to meaning. But I'm quite surprised by your suggestion that Victor gets through the style half of that equation quickly.**

There's not a huge awareness of style and lighting and sound, rhythm, pace.

**Q: But thinking about the Letter from an Unknown Woman piece? That's probably the most detailed piece of his that I've read.**

I don't remember it too well.

**Q: He writes just about the Linz sequence. The other moment I tend to think about is those tiny fragments from Caught which he discusses in 'Must we say what they mean?', in the most recently published issue of Movie (34/35. Winter 1990).**

My memory of the substance of the articles isn't very good. I think Noël Carroll gives a very good account of Victor's criticism in *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory*, when he talks about Victor's attention to detail and always finding a surplus of meaning in the work. It seems to me that's what's the real interest, it's the meanings, the extra meanings. Clearly, the way to find it is starting off with stylistic details, but I'm not sure that they detain him very long.

**Q: Ok, but given that (I'm sure you're important in this, I'm sure Paddy Whannel is important in this, I'm sure that Victor's important in this) but some of what Oxford Opinion and Movie establishes is brought to bear in that BFI Education set up, isn't it? Be it taking things in detail or the amount of attention you're prepared to expend upon a film, or in particular a popular American film.**

Leavis is the key thing there, because in a sense Victor is knocking on an open door with people like me or Paddy

who were influenced by Leavis. Immediately we will respond, 'yes, of course, you should look carefully at the stylistic qualities'. One of the debates we had at that time was with sociologists, who we felt always said 'oh well it means this, and it means that' and simply talked about the obvious features of the plot.

**Q: So you were really taking a position saying, 'well, you haven't really understood how these things are qualified by ...'?**

Yes, that you really have to look carefully and so on. Actually I would say that the *New Left Review* impulse from Peter Wollen was not influenced by Leavis in that way, in fact the *New Left Review* was quite hostile to Leavis for political / cultural reasons, and I think you're quite right that Peter doesn't take over that kind of interest in stylistic matters.

**Q: Are there any other things that are worth recording about the activities of the BFI education department, that would be of interest to a history such as the one I am writing?**

It's a question of things you take for granted. Clearly the thing which had the biggest impact was the seminars. I can remember Peter doing the first paper on semiology and nobody had a clue what semiology meant, desperately looking in dictionaries! Those seminars were pretty open, and a number of people from *New Left Review* came, like Tom Nairn and Jon Halliday. All the ideas of semiology, psychoanalysis, Marxism came out of those seminars, that's my really vivid impulse. Against that you have to put the lecturing we were doing all over the place, in which we were doing a lot of (in a sense) mise-en-scène work. The classic method was that we had an extracts library, and we would go and show and analyse the extracts. The famous scene from *My Darling Clementine* – going to church – was endlessly shown and analysed. And so I think that did influence a lot of people towards a mise-en-scène type of approach.

**Q:** *That must be a very important stage in the dissemination of those ideas. An exciting initiative, and not the sort of thing you can imagine the BFI organising today.*

No.

**Q:** *So Movie's hostility to British Cinema has always been a point where you diverge from them?*

Yes. And that connects with the *New Left Review*, because the *New Left Review* had a similar hostility to British Culture, regarding it as a philistine, narrow culture. That's what provoked me to do my paper about British Cinema, 'The Unknown Cinema'<sup>3</sup> – nobody seems interested in British Cinema, they all just dismiss it.

**Q:** *Jacob Leigh was telling me about your more recent essay, 'The Known Cinema' in which, as I understand it, you discuss students' response to Saturday Night and Sunday Morning on the one hand and Rebel without a Cause on the other.<sup>3</sup>*

In a way it's a separate point to do with popular culture. Christine Gledhill was doing a course which I would describe as straight down the *Movie* line. She wanted to show the students *mise-en-scène* and so she showed them *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Breathless* and *Rebel without a Cause*. What I was really struck by was the students' response to *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, which was very direct. They really enjoyed it, it was very clear, and these were students who were untouched by all those debates, it was just the simplicity and directness and humour of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. In that context *Breathless* is a real smart-arse film. How is that going to relate to those students? So it was the sense of popular culture, the film, making a connection in a very direct way.

**Q:** *It doesn't have the ambiguity you might find in Rebel, but has that immediacy?*

Yes, and I came to think, which in a way I have always thought, that *Rebel* is very overwrought.

**Q:** *It obviously had a big impact at the time of its release. But perhaps that's as much to do with James Dean himself as with the film?*

I think it was James Dean. Stuart Hall and I actually hitch-hiked to London to see the premiere of *Giant*, because James Dean was in it! [laughter] There was no doubt about it, that's what we were going for.

**Q:** *An interesting element to the story! What are your feelings about mise-en-scène in criticism and theory today?*

I actually now think *mise-en-scène* is not a helpful notion at all.

**Q:** *Really? Why is that?*

First of all it's not very precise. I had an argument recently about whether the camera counted in *mise-en-scène*, and I then went to check up on this, and there's clearly some confusion. Some people talk simply about what's in front of the camera ....

**Q:** *That's partly the Bordwell and Thompson line. In Film Art they separate the mise-en-scène chapter from the cinematography chapter, which I think is a big mistake. One of the interests of research like mine is that it involves thinking about the different ways of conceptualising mise-en-scène. In Movie the emphasis is very much on directorial realisation and camera movement and framing are crucial, whereas they wouldn't be at all for Bordwell and Thompson. There's also that interesting Robin Wood definition of mise-en-scène in Definition, which includes editing and sound.*

But then it becomes style.

**Q:** *It does.*

And that's the other ambiguity, it seems to me. You're talking about style, about being in charge of the whole film – I wonder where 'direction' is considered in all this, it seems to be a hidden word?

**Q:** *It's interesting that Victor almost never writes about mise-en-scène. He almost always talks about direction.*

That's interesting, I didn't realise that. In some respects, it sounds right, when I think about it.

**Q:** *He uses it in Oxford Opinion, but barely since. Perhaps we can rephrase the question. How important do you think a detailed consideration of style is to criticism and theory into the next millennium?*

Well, what a question!

**Q:** *My impression is that with the advent of theory, it gets displaced to a significant degree. Perhaps it's in the nature of theory to talk in general rather than in particular terms, but it seems to me that detailed criticism tends to be pushed to one side.*

I think that's probably right. In a sense what theory has produced is ideological criticism. I don't actually think it's very different from a lot of the sociology we were objecting to at the BFI. People endlessly interpret films in terms of feminism or ethnicity, in terms of ideological meanings, without that stylistic sophistication, when it comes down to it, because that's the real preoccupation of those social, political kinds of readings rather than style.

**Q:** *It strikes me that the anchoring of those things together is potentially very fruitful, but that doesn't often happen.*

It doesn't often happen, but I think there is a real problem which goes back to reading. If you say that style is very important, and you're really curious about political and social meanings, you have to ask yourself what kind of readings are made by audiences who see it once, like the people who go to the multiplexes. Now a lot more would need to be discovered, but I would guess most people do not make careful readings of camera movements and compositions.

**Q:** *I quite agree this is a continually vexed question. Camera movements and compositions might be shading their*

experience of what it is that's on the screen, shaping one's response even if one isn't always aware of it.

One would have to have an account of that shaping of consciousness by style. That seems to me to be missing. In a way, it seems in part what they're trying to do in Wisconsin now.

**Q:** *Except, that Bordwell himself has this ambition to divorce interpretation from his discussion of style. He's trying to talk about the way in which we understand style, but he's very resistant to interpretation. And there's also a danger of the Wisconsin work becoming rather mechanistic in that kind of discussion.*

I think that's a big problem with their position. As far as I understand that position, it depends on a notion of the mind in mechanistic terms: rather like a computer, seeking cues, a very rational kind of process.

**Q:** *That strikes me as one of the most difficult things to do – to write about the balance of different feelings that a really complex piece of film can engender. I'm sure it's very difficult to build that into your film, but it's also very difficult to write about.*

I think there's a question whether what you're looking for all the time are meanings. That seems to me a very powerful notion. And it might well be that the influence of camera movements and sound (the other thing that mise-en-scène forgets about) is not to be talked of in terms of meanings but in terms of some kind of emotional affect or quality ....

**Q:** *I'm certainly very resistant to the idea, and I think Movie were too, that film is about a simplistic conveying of messages. I want to be able to talk about camera movement and sound shaping and qualifying, and about dramatised themes ....*

But at the end it's themes or meanings, something like that? However sophisticated it is, at the end you are trying to discern themes or meanings.

**Q:** *It's true.*

What's at stake, I think, is an understanding of what art is. There's a strong feeling that what makes art is themes and meanings, they give it weight and importance.

**Q:** *We're returning to the debate circa 1960 by a round about way! But what's your perspective on this question?*

I think you have to think not in terms of meaning, but a different sense of affect, emotion, excitement, why people are moved to tears. All the things a mechanistic account of mind can't deal with at all.

**Q:** *What's really interesting in those terms is when you have those conflicting, changing impulses. Andrew Klevan gave a very stimulating paper at Reading on Tin Cup, and it included a very useful elucidation of the scene at the end where he keeps trying to hit the golf ball over the lake, the whole complex of emotions which are in play and shifting delicately over the sequence. That's one of the examples I can think of where someone has managed to write successfully about that kind of complex experience.*

But words like 'complex' have such a long history, they're Leavis words actually. I think you always have to ask yourself whether an audience who sees *Tin Cup* is actually involved in this complex experience.

**Q:** *My feeling is that they are.*

Well then I think you need to be able to demonstrate that. In talking about this I'm reacting to Victor. Listening to Victor talking about *Strangers on a Train* which he has seen about 30 times, and the detail which he goes into – you can't possibly expect anybody to make that kind of detailed reading.

**Q:** *I suppose Leavis would say that criticism is about helping you toward that kind of reading.*

Yes, but that again raises big questions about what we are trying to do on a film course. Are we trying to create specialised readers, more attentive readers?

**Q:** *So what do you feel your chief ambitions for teaching film at the present are?*

I would say to increase enjoyment. The simplest thing I do is expose students to a range of movies, encourage them to appreciate that there's a variety of enjoyments. The old political impulse is still there in that I want students to be curious about audiences. (Despite a certain amount of discussion of audiences, there's a general lack of curiosity.) I do certain things like send the students to the cinema and tell them to write about the audience – what kind of people they are, and how they respond to the movies. I want that kind of curiosity about audiences, and the realisation that they as film students are different from people at multiplexes. Another major emphasis in my teaching, which is different from your concerns I guess, is an understanding of the nature of the film industry. Films cost money, and there are consequences as a result.

**Q:** *One further question about style, something I've asked the other people I've interviewed and which would be interesting to ask you. It's about the death of mise-en-scène, or that sense that post-classical films are not as rich. Can you say the kinds of things you might say about Hitchcock of today's Hollywood films, and if not, why not?*

That's a question I asked Victor. Why is it there is no film made after about 1960 which you think is any good? Is there a structural reason for this? This was a rather casual conversation we had in the staff room at Warwick a few years ago, and we never concluded the discussion. In terms of a straightforward response, I see no great difference now from 20 years or so ago. I don't think there's a decline in Hollywood at all.

**Q:** *What if you were to take an extract around the country with you? If you took Clementine and you took something else?*

Yes, what would I take? That's an interesting question .... I'm not sure I can answer it directly. To come at it a slightly different way, when I was teaching at Warwick a few years ago I saw *Frankie and Johnny*. I said to the students



– we were discussing the dominance of American cinema squeezing out British cinema – ‘in the end I had a really good time seeing *Frankie and Johnny*, not the greatest film I ever saw but I had a really good time, and in the end I don’t mind if there was no British cinema’. So if you were going to take a popular entertainment, the equivalent of *My Darling Clementine*, that’s an example. But with *Clementine* there was much more of a sense of ‘this is art’, which I wouldn’t want to say about *Frankie and Johnny*, I wouldn’t want to make the same kind of claim.

If you were to say to me ‘are there as good directors in Hollywood now?’ ... I don’t have so much of a pantheon. A name that comes to my mind is Jonathan Demme, I guess. I think he’s rather got caught up in big projects with cultural responsibilities recently, but the stuff he did before that we could argue in the same kinds of ways if you wanted to. But it is very hard.

One of the things that influenced me about *mise-en-scène* is sound. You have to talk about uses of sound now, I think, it’s really important. One of my colleagues, who is actually an ex-Warwick undergraduate, is doing a PhD on sound. In fact, he did an essay for me on sound when he was an undergraduate, which really woke me up to it. He recently went out to Hollywood and met a lot of big sound designers, fantastically interesting guys in their ability to talk intelligently about what they think they are achieving with sound, and shifting between artistic considerations and technical considerations.

**Q:** *That sounds very interesting.*

It’s very hard to fit that into *mise-en-scène*, and Hitchcock’s camera movements. The other way I’m disconcerted, is that I now believe precisely the opposite of the *mise-en-scène* attitude to the script. Nobody talks about the style of the script, because the thrust of *mise-en-scène* is that cinema is a visual medium and you must be able to deal with it as a visual medium – and then you just ignore scripts, which are taken as givens, they’re somehow literary and so on. But scripts are organised in certain kinds of ways.

**Q:** *It’s certainly the case that interesting things can be said about narrative structure. Of course, there’s a polemical history which explains why mise-en-scène doesn’t talk about the script, it’s everything to do with a commissioned cinema, or one’s impression of what a commissioned cinema might be.*

The auteur theory seems to be a total mess. I know I like particular directors, but there seems to be no proper account of authorship. Once you start to raise questions sound and script and so on, you start to lose the sense of the director in terms of somebody doing *mise-en-scène*.

**Q:** *I’m quite happy about some of the arguments about directors advanced on grounds of style ... but we’re not interviewing me!*

It would be interesting to hear what you think.

**Q:** *Well, I like that piece by Victor – ‘Authorship: The Premature Burial’.<sup>4</sup>*

Yes that’s very good, because it raises the key question that what you’re talking about is quality and not just personal expression. Just to see personal expression doesn’t necessarily tell you anything about whether it’s a good film or not.

**Q:** *No indeed. Just because a film is distinctive, doesn’t mean it’s distinguished.*

Exactly. ... I think the question of value is often ignored because of the old opinion of mass culture. The basic assumption is that we live in a mass anonymous society where anything personal is to be valued. That seems to me almost part of the intellectual framework that everybody inhabits: people talk about shops in towns, we don’t want all these anonymous Marks and Spencers everywhere, we want small distinctive shops. And then you get a criterion of value that personal expression is valuable.

*Extra information from correspondence:*

Arnold Wesker didn’t have much of an impact on *Definition*. He was a friend of Dai Vaughan’s and I think

attended what was then the London School of Film Technique. I only got to know him later when he created Centre 42. He was part of the web which connected *Definition* with the Royal Court Theatre and Free Cinema.

<sup>1</sup> (1957) ‘The Scholarship Boy’, *Universities and Left Review*, 1. 2, 33–4.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The British Cinema: The Unknown Cinema’, paper presented to the British Film Institute Education Department Seminar, 13 March 1969. A revised version of this paper was published as (1972) ‘The Unknown Cinema of Britain’, *Cinema Journal*, 11. 2, 1–9.

<sup>3</sup> (1997) ‘The British Cinema: The Known Cinema?’, in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*. London: BFI, 235–243. (p. 242)

<sup>4</sup> Perkins, V.F. (1990) ‘Film Authorship: The Premature Burial’, *CineAction!*, 21/22, (Summer / Fall), 57–64.

# AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

## Three Video Essays on Lighting and Time

Watching a narrative film is a richly temporal experience. We anticipate what happens next; we are surprised when things turn out differently; we remember the beginning when we watch the ending. An appealing feature of the video essay as a form of scholarship is its promise to deepen our awareness of film's temporality. Here, I offer three video essays about light unfolding in time. The first examines *You Only Live Once* (Fritz Lang, 1937); the second, the films of Josef von Sternberg with Marlene Dietrich (1930-1935); the third, *Umberto D.* (Vittorio De Sica, 1952).

Like George M. Wilson, I see the 'three headlines' scene as a key to the interpretation of *You Only Live Once* (1937: 16-38). Awaiting the outcome of Eddie's trial, two newsmen ponder which headline they will use. Wilson analyses this scene to develop a larger argument about the potential unreliability of Lang's cinematic narration. I propose that the scene develops a contrast between photography and cinema. Each photograph offers a single depiction of Eddie, lit to appear friendly or cruel, as if character were permanent and therefore visible at a glance. But the film represents character dynamically. Eddie changes, and so does the lighting. Lighting may make Eddie look good or bad momentarily, but we should refrain from passing absolute judgement on

him because he is innocent in some circumstances and guilty in others.

The early films of Josef von Sternberg similarly employ lighting as a tool of characterisation, shifting in style to suit the changing mood of each story. His collaborations with Marlene Dietrich develop a new approach to lighting, exploring variation as a principle for its own sake. As Deborah Thomas and George M. Wilson have explained, von Sternberg's films encourage us to see Dietrich as Dietrich – as a star playing a role. Rather than taking us out of the story-world, the resulting dual awareness enriches our understanding of her characters' transformations (Thomas 1990: 13; Wilson 2011: 174). Shifting from moment to moment, the lighting of the Dietrich movies encourages us to appreciate the performer's contributions to the films' malleable compositions. The actor's movements energise each shot, generating suspense by obliging us to wait for the privileged moments when her face catches the light perfectly.

We might expect Neorealist lighting to depart from the careful modulations that characterise certain Hollywood films, but many Neorealist films also depict light changing over time. As Christopher Wagstaff has argued, the idea that Neorealist lighting was natural is a myth; even the early classics combine natural lighting with artificial illumination for aesthetic purposes (2007: 100-104). In *Umberto D.*, one sequence represents the gradual transition from evening to night. The cinematography is just as careful as that of a Hollywood film, but the purpose is different. In *Strangers on a Train* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951), the gradual shift from evening to night plays on our anxieties about whether the villain will accomplish his goal on time or not. In *Umberto D.*, the gradual shift expresses an attitude – an attitude of respect for the nuances of the everyday world. These nuances are worthy of representation, whether they generate suspense or not.

### PATRICK KEATING

Patrick Keating is an Associate Professor of Communication at Trinity University in the USA, where he teaches film studies and video production. He is the author of *The Dynamic Frame: Camera Movement in Classical Hollywood* (2019).

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### Watch the audiovisual essays here:

Three Headlines: Lighting and Time in *You Only Live Once*  
<https://vimeo.com/282748346>

Dietrich Lighting: A Video Essay  
<https://vimeo.com/268916255>

From Evening to Night: A New Look at Neorealist Lighting  
<https://vimeo.com/275646845>



*You Only Live Once* (1937)

# AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

## 'Say, have you seen the Carioca?' an experiment in non-linear, non-hierarchical approaches to film history

This essay is one of the outcomes of the *IntermIdia* project (2015–19). *IntermIdia* was jointly funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) and involved a team of researchers working between the University of Reading in the UK and the Federal University of São Carlos in Brazil. As the full title of the project indicates – Towards an Intermedial History of Brazilian Cinema: Exploring Intermediality as a Historiographic Method – the aim was to investigate the potential of intermedial approaches for film history within and beyond Brazilian cinema. The project pursued this goal in a number of ways: publications and conferences, a season of *Tropicália* films at Tate Modern, a Brazilian music film season at Reading Film Theatre and the staging, in São Paulo and Reading, of two silent movie prologues – live dramatic and / or musical performances which were presented as a prelude to feature films – originally performed in Rio de Janeiro in 1926.

Audiovisual essays weren't among the proposed outputs for the project but they quickly became important, with six members of the team collaborating or working individually to produce research in this form. One of the reasons audiovisual essays proved attractive is that they have intermedial

qualities themselves and researchers on the project have explored this potential in various ways. One *video essay* looked at Brazilian musicians' appearances as supporting players in Hollywood movies. *Another* reflects on the relationship between photographs, freeze frames and the moving image in Brazilian cinema.

'Say, have you seen the Carioca?' explores the potential of intermedial methods to offer non-linear and non-hierarchical approaches to film history. It moves between film, popular music, histories of dance and cinema exhibition practice, looking at relationships between different historical periods and national cinemas afresh. The argument is itself expressed intermedially, drawing on photography, film, theatrical performance, music, voice-over and on-screen caption. The essay draws on many of the aspects of cultural history which the *IntermIdia* project has explored: silent movie prologues, *Tropicália*, the musical exchanges of the Good Neighbor policy, and a range of different art forms. In doing so, it moves away from the evolutionary chronologies of more traditional histories, and the old oppositions between classical and modern, centre and periphery, Hollywood and everyone else.

Being able to work with the material features of the films and other media, and to employ some of the formal qualities of film (and video) in shaping the essay's argument, enables the connections which the essay seeks to explore to come to life in unexpected and revealing ways: drawing on the abrasiveness of a cut to emphasise a challenge and jump to a very different production context (as between *Footlight Parade* and *Macunaíma*); split screen to emphasise an overlooked connection (between 'Sittin' On A Backyard Fence' and 'Cat's Meow'); the opportunity to rewind, pause and replay providing new ways of thinking, for instance, about the back-projected settings of *Notorious* and what they might reveal about different dialogues between Brazil and Hollywood.

The motif of a mind map offers a direct way of establishing the non-linear connections which are integral to the research. A mind map charts journeys and relationships which are neither geographical nor chronological. This map was not created for the video: I chose to use the notebook page on which I had jotted down the different

connections as they revealed themselves. In turn, the informal map acts as an image in which the research journey is introduced as one of the structuring elements of the video. It also indicates a number of potential reference points, not all of which are exhausted, finding a form which captures the open-endedness of a non-linear, non-hierarchical history and contributing to ways in which the essay opens up further areas for enquiry and research.

### JOHN GIBBS

John Gibbs is Professor of Film at the University of Reading. His publications include *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation* (2002), *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (2017, co-edited with Douglas Pye) and a number of *audiovisual essays*.

Watch 'Say, have you seen the Carioca?' here:  
<https://vimeo.com/335268992>



Cinelândia is the area of Rio where marquee cinemas were constructed in the 1920s



# MOVIE

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