

Use No Hooks:
Maurice Pialat / Manny Farber



In the audio commentary over an episode on DVD of the American TV series *Mad Men* (Season 1, AMC, 2007), the very crafty ex-critic Tim Hunter informs us that direction, in the conventionally professional sense, is mostly a matter of working out how people are going to detach themselves from a clench or a group, in order to move in and out of a room or a shot – with all the problems of logistics, fluidity, plausibility, ease, pacing and timing this seemingly banal bit of business poses when you actually ‘block’ it with a cast in front of a crew. Because, as it turns out (and everyone who has ever tried to direct anything for the screen or stage knows this), the simplest movements can look awkward, inelegant, ridiculous or boring.

Great classical filmmakers like Ernst Lubitsch and King Vidor had a way of fixing this problem: they choreographed their unfolding scenes in such a way that the two or more actors more-or-less freeze, periodically, into quite static, fixed arrangements, during which important dialogue is delivered; and then, in-between these arrangements, sometimes as the camera deftly reframes the shot, there are swift movements of bodies in and out of the frame.

A scene from Vidor’s *Ruby Gentry* (1952) provides a handy example: here, the director solves for himself the problem of how to elegantly film a long dialogue delivered in a parked car. The performers (Jennifer Jones and Charlton Heston) freeze, speak, and then rearrange themselves – with the camera performing a swift dolly-in that reframes them centre-screen each time.

Or take the masterly, five-minute opening scene of Lubitsch’s *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) which, with very slight alterations of camera, framing and action, takes us through successive variations on static groupings of one, two, three, four, five, six and even seven characters at a time. Note the particular set-up of these groupings: basically, everyone is visible, and visible to each other, often in a semi-circle, standing at more or less equal height



(except that the star, Jimmy Stewart, is taller than everyone else when standing) – well-balanced in the frame, and all able to look each other in the eye.

But since at least the 1970s, this *mise en scène* method runs the risk of looking unrealistic to audiences – or, worse, stagey. The contemporary director is burdened with the curse of using more movement (of the camera and of the actors alike) simply for its own sake – and this increases the blocking problems.

So, according to Hunter, you need to figure out such base-line stuff, in rehearsals and on the set, before you get to any of the lofty, expressive levels of creativity that most critics and scholars generally assume as constituting the act

of filmmaking. Basic questions such as: how will your actor get up from a table? How will he or she move around that table to get to the door? How much will this movement reveal or conceal the other players in the scene? How much or how little of this action can be shown, in and out of the frame, and in the ultimate *découpage* of a scene? And what will this motion do to the initially set, pictorial composition of the frame, and to the camera's perspective on the scene? In recent years, David Bordwell (2011) has been among the few specialist commentators to focus on such questions *for their own sake*, as part and parcel of film *craft* within the classical tradition – not merely as a quick, obligatory, preliminary stepping-stone to the analysis of film *art*.



But there is more to cinema, of course, than classicism. For there is an army of directors who deliberately do *not* make it easy for their actors to move around – inside a set, or inside the frame of a shot. The lieutenants of this army include Rainer Werner Fassbinder, John Cassavetes, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Elaine May, Carmelo Bene, Larry Clark and, especially, Maurice Pialat (1925-2003). In the works of these directors (and as the accompanying screenshots from a range of Pialat's films 1968-1991 illustrate), the space in which the actors are given to perform is cramped and strewn with obstacles. The performers cannot easily turn to look at and address one another. They are lined up along axes and oriented in directions that confound contact. Each setting is a kind of labyrinth. And, in particular, one cannot make a move across or in or out of the shot without stepping across the position or path or another actor, often in an ungainly, awkward or even impossible manner. And this is, as yet, saying nothing about the framing strategies that are likely to decentre any actor almost completely out of the shot – blotted out by another body, or left with just one eye still in frame.

John Cassavetes once said to his actors that a scene has to be a little difficult, hard to manoeuvre in, for it to become

an interesting scene at all. According to this account, there has to be at least a grain of sand in the dramaturgical machinery of the scene that makes it that little bit hard to play, retarding and complicating it. Getting to that door, from your seat at the table, should present a problem. There could be interruptions to the movement; there might be a counter-movement from elsewhere. Perhaps even some external machination of the plot can intervene, if necessary – some shock, like a sudden phone call, or a cry from off-screen. But plot is secondary to my principal subject here: the delay, the trouble, has to arise from the innermost *texture* of what has already been set up before the camera – the total *event* formed by the action, in concert, of the pro-filmic scene and the camera that frames and records it.

Carmelo Bene (1937-2002), in his stage, film and TV productions alike, erected an entire barrage of obstructions for his actors to deal with, putting the performers at war with the words they simultaneously spoke, and the simplest trajectories across the set or stage that the text ordered them to perform: some mannequin had to be taken apart and put back together again while a soliloquy was delivered; and there would be a maze-like array of props that offered no straight line to anywhere. Jean-Luc Godard did something



similar in the 1960s, when he decreed that his actors should be able to fry an egg, read the newspaper and deliver a scripted monologue all at the same time, as the camera rolled in a single, merciless take. You can see on screen that, for instance in *Pierrot le fou* (1965), Jean-Paul Belmondo could do exactly this rather well.

So, in this special group of mischief-making filmmakers, the canny detonation of a certain definition of movie craft – the heavy molasses of a *mise en scène* when the normally fluid, elegant motions stop happening, or never get to be arrived at or formed in the first place – *becomes* the new terrain where cinema is shaped, each awkward, painful micro-gesture at a time.

In the case of Fassbinder, the American critic and painter Manny Farber (1917-2008) was alert to this aspect of deliberate difficulty created within a *mise en scène* when he wrote, in collaboration with his partner, Patricia Patterson: ‘The essence of Fassbinder is a nagging physical discomfort’ (1998: 313). A full comparison of the respective works and aesthetics of Farber and Maurice Pialat – who, very crucially, were both painters – must wait for another occasion; here, I want specifically to offer an approach to Pialat through the lens of his soul brother, Farber, and some others that Farber influenced or directly collaborated with in writing and / or teaching, such as Patterson and the filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin.

Soul brothers? Pialat was almost certainly unaware of Farber’s existence over there in America; but, near the end of his life, Farber came to regard Pialat’s *Van Gogh* (1991), which he watched many times over, as one of the greatest films, and certainly *the* greatest film about a painter and his art. Although Farber had finished writing about cinema by the late 1970s in order to devote himself more fully to painting, one of his final public appearances, in 2004, was an introduction and discussion of this film.

learn to live inside the discord, the irritation and the nagging physical discomfort.

As viewers, we should all be made to suffer (often) through this scene, just as the characters suffer through it – and, especially, as the actors were made to suffer through it, in the space of the room and in the unfolding time of its duration. I offer here a short, selective account of the scene. Pialat stages an everyday yet difficult interaction between a mother (who will be soon felled by a degenerative disease) and her adult son. It possesses intimacy and distance, familiarity and awkwardness. We know a great deal from many sources (such as Pascal Mérigeau’s 2003 biography) about the often harsh and demanding ways that Pialat worked on his actors to get the dramatic textures and effects he wanted. Elements of improvisation and psychodrama, plus multiple, ever-varied takes as in Stanley Kubrick’s work, were used to play on the element of surprise. At times, Pialat would exploit precisely the *lack* of real affection between the assembled players forced together into scenes: one or both actors might have unforeseen questions to pose to their co-performer during an interaction, questions sometimes uneasily weirdly poised on a fuzzy border between fiction and reality. In this case, the character names already cue us into the fuzziness: Philippe and Monique, the actors’ own first names.

So when, in this fictive context of *The Mouth Agape*, Philippe suddenly asks Monique, ‘But you cheated on Dad too, didn’t you?’, you can tell that the real actor is searching, in this split-second, for an answer, a response as the camera rolls – there are just a few frames of intense, expressionless stillness and concentration, ‘out of the flow’ of her character (one can see similar moments in Shu Qi’s performance in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Millennium Mambo* [2001]). This is the ambiguity inherent to all interactive improvisation, yet so often hidden or smoothed over with a



Now we are inside a scene directed by Pialat. It is a *plan-séquence*, a long take, sequence shot lasting an agonising eight and a half minutes, from near the beginning of *The Mouth Agape* (*La gueule ouverte*, 1974). Two actors (Philippe Léotard and Monique Mélinand) are in a small, cramped, dining room, a space crammed with all sorts of bric-à-brac heaped up everywhere, in no good order. So much to distract the eye, as always in a Pialat room, decentering the gaze in a niggly, even deliberately irritating way. Busy patterns on the walls, sometimes in the clothes and on the tablecloth, as Farber’s protégé in San Diego, Jean-Pierre Gorin (2004: 36), pointed out: colours and patterns that are unashamedly garish or vulgar in the eyes of some viewers, kitsch – but not in a way that can be reclaimed and recycled as glorious camp or excessive discord. In Pialat’s cinema, we, like the characters, have to



hundred, different acting tricks: Monique here is forced, almost, her to think and speak as herself, a real person, for a precious moment. And then these players plunge back into the fiction: the interrogation rolls on, back and forth, raking over the intimate past.

Let us pay attention to the staging here. *Mise en scène*, at least in its classical mode, never seems an especially appropriate term to describe what Pialat does in scenes like this (see Martin 2014 for a discussion of changes, across film history, in *mise en scène* approaches). He does not direct in the time-honoured and tradition-honoured Max Ophüls or Vincente Minnelli sense of laying out lines and paths, choreographing the movement of bodies, adjusting and modulating the frame as the action proceeds. Direction is something else for him: Gorin (2004), once again channelling the lessons of Manny Farber, calls it

manoeuvring. Manoeuvring actors into place, sometimes a bad place, and forcing them, like Bene, to try to wriggle their way out of there as best they can – with the relentless and largely static long-take camera recording their successes and failures in this campaign alike. Manoeuvring also involves those dialogue strategies I have already mentioned: setting the actors at cross-purposes, having them struggle, in real time, with their words and their replies, their actions and reactions.



Look at how these two characters, mother and son, are seated for their afternoon meal or snack: in the most uncomfortable and discomfiting way imaginable, or possible (and which, on another level, is a sign of the characters' excessive familiarity with each other). Not across from each other at a table, even a small table – which would allow the usual shot and reverse shot set-ups for the camera and the crew; and not in a way that allows these two actors to easily look at each other, regard each other in the eye. That is the kind of film craft that Hunter talks about, and that he (as an excellent exemplar) achieves so well. But Pialat stomps on that craft – just as he is known to have literally stomped on costumes or props that his Heads of Department brought in if he decided, impulsively, that he did not like them. Pialat makes the scene difficult to work, difficult for everyone – and the long take exacerbates that difficulty, refuses to smooth it out into some Béla Tarr-type transcendent virtuosity. I want you to notice that even the shirt that Léotard is made to wear here is obviously too small for him, prompting the nervous expectation that he is about to pop its buttons at any moment!



As the song title says, please don't let me be misunderstood. Everything that I am pointing to in Pialat has very little to do with realism – in the sense of an enhanced reality-quotient arising from observation, and then transparent recording, of the everyday world. Pialat used observation as a tool or method, but not in the conventional, documentary sense; rather, his 'gaze' is of the type

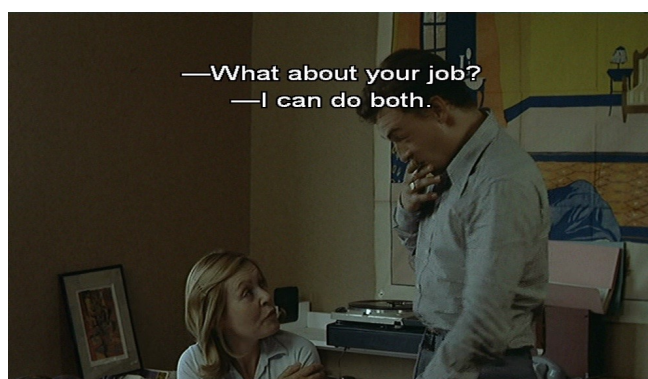
meditated upon by John Berger (2007) and Michael Taussig (2011), a mode of reactive and creative looking filtered through the eye-to-hand, transformative processes of sketching, drawing and painting. Pialat was not, I believe, the naïve type of realist which he is sometimes – although less so today than during his lifetime – taken to be.

Manoeuvring, in the sense that I am seizing on this notion, begins at the idea and scripting stages of filmmaking, long before the cameras roll. Manoeuvring is a way of thinking about the kinds of actions and situations that are going to constitute the life and texture of a film. In Pialat, these are always painful and bitter situations, involving the memory or the consequence of betrayals, abandonments and blocked desires: that is the tissue of family melodrama that constitutes this particular film, *The Mouth Agape* (see Martin 2009 & 2010).

Let us now look at the frame – to that slightly shaky, nervously mobile, reframing camera-eye in the sequence-shot at hand. And also to the balance of light, the tricky use of intense natural light through the window, a sign of celebrated cinematographer Nestor Almendros' work with Pialat on this film. This effort with framing and lighting does not add up to an equivalent to 'action painting', or any familiar form of screen dynamism. The scene has much more to with waiting, with *temps morts*, an eternally awkward pause as the two characters sort-of listen to a record that Philippe decides to put on half-way through the scene as a distraction from the enforced intimacy of the dinner-table positioning. The camera's framing itself gets awkward as the scene proceeds in these fits and starts, with the camera trying to cope with the resultant trauma.



Each time Philippe stands up, he upsets the two-shot composition – knocking a hole in it, creating an empty, ugly, brownish wall space in the right-hand or left-hand upper-half of the screen that cannot be easily filled, pictorially speaking. When Pialat manoeuvres Monique's head into the very bottom of the screen, you can even see



the visible discomfort of the English subtitled, who is forced to move the printed words up to the top of the screen for a while so as not to obliterate her face.

This recalls Farber's idea (1998) of *negative space*, derived from painting – that element of pictorial emptiness which modulates, sets things off, vectorises a new movement. But Pialat's brand of negative space, the pictorial dissymmetry he favours, is not galvanising or transformative, as it is in the films of Otto Preminger, Michael Mann or Tsai Ming-liang. In this scene, Pialat just keeps resetting the mother-son tableau at the table whenever the latter sits back down, over and over – just a little more shakily each time. Nothing really 'moves' or changes, for a very long time.

What is the event, the action, the fiction of this scene? Where does it turn, how does it reach any kind of conclusion? Scenes do not just peter out in Pialat, as they do in so much 'slow cinema' of today, draining away with the winds and the tides. His cinema is always very eventful, even brutal. At first, it seems that the scene will engineer or manoeuvre its concluding turn through a sudden phone call that Philippe leaps up to answer. But once that is done, the shock comes from elsewhere: from Monique's sudden weakness as she tries to stand, her quick collapse and just as quick recovery: a catastrophe of just a few frames, hard to catch even in a screenshot. That provides the seed, the nucleus, for the full, painful decline of body and mind that is to follow in the movie.



Let us return to Gorin's definition, inspired by Farber, of manoeuvring; and his crucial distinction between this process and another, closely related filmmaking process. Manoeuvring relates to everything that leads to the process of (hopefully) capturing something on film – trapping 'lightning in a bottle', as the critic Kent Jones (2008) says of Pialat. But manoeuvring is only half of the aesthetic picture here. The other half is what Gorin calls *working* – working the material. This is the process of placing the elements, editing and treating them, playing with the image / sound relations in the form in which they will be ultimately fixed – in order to extract an extra, surplus value out of them.

It is easy to forget or overlook the fact that Pialat, like Cassavetes, was an extremely rigorous editor. Sure, Pialat, like Cassavetes, like Terrence Malick, Stanley Kubrick or Ken Loach, shot a great deal of a material: dozens of takes, and many variations on each scene. But that does not mean he (or any of the other directors just listed) is lazy or sloppy. Pialat's editing collaborator Yann Dedet speaks (in Philippon, 1996) of how he and the director would take apart and reassemble scenes in montage many times over, making one character and then another the possible centre of the scene. Even in the case of a long take scene of the

type just described, there is the question (as in Hou's work) of how much more of it there could well have been before the beginning that is cut into, and the ending that is cut out of. How great it would be if, like in our age of digital editing, we could consult all these successive drafts of a Pialat scene! The mind boggles as to the types of radical experimentation this process must have entailed.

The trace of that radicality is richly evident in Pialat's cutting: both within and between scenes, indeterminate ellipses, as well as spatial shifts and disorientations, rule. According to his sometime cinematographer Willy Kurant (2004), Pialat angrily, dismissively regarded almost everything to do with shot or scene continuity as merely 'anecdotal' (i.e., serving a purely narrative function), and hence irrelevant to his process. Consider a sequence of consecutive set-ups from *Naked Childhood* (*L'enfance-nue*, 1968). After an exchange between the elderly, kindly foster-parents who feature prominently in the film, we have an enigmatic shot of a little girl who is in no way 'placed' anywhere or in any way in the rest of the story: she is just *there*, forming an enigmatic transition or bridge between sequences, and between rooms in the house (where, we come to understand, many orphaned kids dwell, now and again).



Then there is a scene between the central character, François (Michel Terrazon), and an elderly woman, Madame Minguet (Marie-Louise Thierry). It starts, conventionally enough, with a view of the music book through which they are leafing. Then there is a two-shot, probably a tiny fragment from a great deal of footage filmed; the little jump or shift in the boy's position in the following set-up tells us this.



At a certain point, Pialat begins his typical work of dissecting the event, multiplying and decentering its details, thus creating the possibilities for a radical montage: François from the chest up, displaced to the right of frame,



and then from the chest down, in a frame that concentrates on Madame Minguet. Then back to the upper realm of this bisected set-up – and soon the scene is over, abandoned in mid-flight. There is little here that resembles conventional, classical *découpage* keyed to effects of continuity and fluidity; rather the scene, like many Pialat scenes, is a *working* of fragments.

There was once a post-punk band, back in my hometown of Melbourne some thirty years ago, who brilliantly called themselves Use No Hooks. The pun comes from taking a phrase from the craft and industry of crate shipping – do not use a hook to lift this – and fusing it with the popular musical meaning of a hook: some likeable, catchy, repeatable, easy riff, something that will serve to hook the listener in.

The post-punk motto was the perfect negation of this: use no hooks, do not make it easy on the audience, make them work for what you're giving them. Just as Cassavetes used to say: people should pay a thousand dollars for the privilege of seeing one of his films; why should he make it easy for us to consume it? Now, Maurice Pialat and Manny Farber were, each in their own, indelible ways, a couple of punks. Difficult, grouchy characters – *ornery*, as the Americans say. They translated their grouchiness into their art.

That is not to say there was not also intense, in fact bottomless moments of intimacy, tenderness and affection in their respective works. Remember, Pialat titled one of his harshest films about family life *To Our Loves* (*À nos amours*, 1983); and he was, in his own, intransigent way, some kind of Romantic. In *Van Gogh*, it takes over 150 minutes of hard, niggling, sibling exchanges between Vincent and Theo to arrive at a simple, silent moment of a shared look, shortly before the artist's death. Pialat does nothing to underline the immense significance of this moment in the film, to dramatise it, milk it with music or a camera movement or any similar trick in the usual arsenal of direction. He does not pile on any epiphanic message

about forgiveness, redemption or seeing the ultimate meaning of life's journey. 'No effects', as he declared to Kurant (2004), referring to effects of any sort: dramatic, narrative, stylistic, camera effects or lighting effects.

Pialat uses no hook: he just manoeuvres us here, to this frame, this look and this moment, over a long, slow, unstressed unfolding. This could serve as one definition, or elaboration, of what Farber famously called *termite art*, the art of details – as opposed to white elephant art, which is always heavily underlined and signalled in its effects for the spectator.

In Farber, a customary terseness in his critical prose also led us, if we are ready and willing, to similar pay-offs. The words are always very carefully chosen – at least as carefully as Pialat's framings. Like when he and Patterson said of Fassbinder, after enumerating a little taxonomy of the director's favourite stylistic moves, that in his films 'the shopkeepers of life [are] treated without condescension or impatience' (Farber 1998: 301). Of course, the same goes for Pialat's films. Not just literal shopkeepers, mind you, but the *shopkeepers of life*, shopkeepers of every kind – and the implied rebuke that what we, and what films, usually bring to them is not only snobbishness and snap judgement but, above all, *impatience*: a veritable aesthetic of impatience, of



whittling something down into an easily manageable sign or cliché and breezing past it as swiftly as possible within the course of a film.

As I suggested earlier, the opposite of cliché (and of hooks) is not unvarnished reality: rather, it is a texture, a rhythm, an art. In Robert Bresson's *Mouchette* (1967), which Farber also saw as (like a Pialat film) a portrait of 'excruciating physical discomfort' (Farber 1998: 231), he praised 'some of the most important things movies can do' – thus producing a wayward, anti-programmatic list that includes a minor character who is 'barely caught [...] backed into through gesture and spirit, rather than direct portrayal'; and 'the simple effect of a form' – in this context, he means a human figure – 'briefly lit by a truck's headlights' (1998: 232). Always a question of depicting, of manoeuvring and working: the Maurice Pialat / Manny Farber question to cinema.

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