

V.F. PERKINS

The phantom thread of Victor Perkins

Introductory Note: What follows is, substantially, the text I read out at Warwick University, 5 September 2018, at the close of the conference *Film as Film Today: On the Criticism and Theory of V.F. Perkins*. Three years on, I have taken the liberty of revising some of my language for the sake of greater readability on the page, re-inserting a passage I had to drop because of time constraints, and updating the bibliographic references. However, I have wished to retain, to a large extent, a certain quality of oral delivery that dictated the style and structure (a flow without section divisions) – not to mention the personal tone – of what I presented on the day.

They err not from the excess of theory, but from lack of it. They have failed to study the material question of their art. Simone Weil, 1937 (2018: 38)

Here is a possibly provocative question. Would Victor Francis Perkins have liked Paul Thomas Anderson's *Phantom Thread* (2018)? Now, since only a very elaborate séance – one that includes the possibility of screening the film to Victor in the best possible projection conditions, of course – could



Watch the audiovisual essay here: ['The Dressmaker and the Cook'](#) by Cristina Alvarez Lopez & Adrian Martin

give us an answer to that question, I am going to offer you my response via a displaced, indirect route. It is a short video made by Cristina Álvarez López and myself, the audiovisual treatment of a brief written text of which you will hear (essentially) the start and end: a very appreciative review of *Phantom Thread* by Alain Masson (now in his late 70s), published in *Positif* magazine (2018). We took the title of Masson's article as our own: *The Dressmaker and the Cook*.¹

Masson's piece illustrates a key principle of his own critical system (as set out most fully in Masson 1994), and it's a principle that I believe significantly overlaps with Victor's approach to film analysis. For both of these critics, the start of a film, its opening scene or simply its opening moments, can gently *instruct* us as to how to read, to explore, to view and listen to everything that follows – if we are sensitive to these

hints, if we know how to pick up on them and integrate them into our experience of the unfolding film, as we watch and rewatch it. So, in *Phantom Thread*, Masson searches for the suggestion of a logic, what he calls a 'rule of style' specific to this film (2018: 9).

In any conference, seminar or published dossier devoted to the legacy of Victor Perkins, this is what, in some sense, we're all looking for: some kind of thread, perhaps only semi-visible, that unifies, that gives a logic, to his various writings, teachings, statements about film. Now, straight away, this question of what is visible or semi-visible, invisible or *phantomatic* in a created work (whether a movie or a body of criticism) is precisely one that Victor himself deeply pondered. Responding to the common assumption that interpretation of films is all about finding their coded meanings or

their hidden secrets, Victor, in a now justly famous passage of his 1990 essay 'Must We Say What They Mean?' (reprinted, as with much of what I will be quoting, in the invaluable *V.F. Perkins on Movies*), laid it out.

I suggest that a prime task of interpretation is to articulate in the medium of prose some aspects of what artists have made perfectly and precisely clear in the medium of film. The meanings I have discussed in the *Caught* [Max Ophüls, 1949] fragment are neither stated nor in any special sense implied. They are filmed. Whatever else that means (which it is a purpose of criticism and theory to explore), it means that they are not hidden in or behind the movie, and that my interpretation is not an attempt to clarify what the picture has obscured. I have written about things that I believe to be in the film for all to see, and to see the sense of. ([1990] 2020: 248)

Nonetheless – and I passionately agree with Masson on this point – *all coherence is mysterious*. This includes the coherence of 'what there is in the film for all to see,' as well as the very act of seeing it (and seeing the sense of it). I began working on this talk under another title: 'What to Look For in a Film? (And How to Know When You've Found It?)'. That's a two-step move: the first step is that Victor has, absolutely, helped us to know what to look for in a film, and we have surely already done some respectful, objective accounting of that. His great 1972 book *Film as Film* is the monument to that knowing what to look for. But my title, in its second

step, also registers a doubt, one that we have all felt at some moment or another: how do I really *know*, how can I really be certain, in my viewing, my analysis, I have really hit upon what is central or crucial or significant in that film? How do we establish what was once called a *principle of pertinence* to guide our gradual analyses of film – or is that the wrong way of looking at the matter? After all, Victor himself once expressed his belief that analysis can never be closed, finite or exhaustive, never 'complete'.

That is because completion would have to consist of accounting for all the data, but what will come to count as data cannot be known. I cannot now tell what may in the future come to notice as needing to enter into my understanding. (2020: 250)

Or, as George Toles once remarked to me: plenty of things once seemed impertinent in a film ... that is, until they became pertinent.

Now I want take you back to a kind of primal scene – it was, at any rate, an important and formative moment for me. It was when, at the age of 21, I first read Victor's essay 'Moments of Choice' in the encyclopedic project of weekly serial instalments, *The Movie*, serving up an 'illustrated history of the cinema' that I actually was able to buy at my local newsagent in suburban Australia for one-dollar-fifty a pop. In his essay, which kicks off the issue of *The Movie* devoted to 'Triumph of Style,' Victor poses a problem or question to us that the director Nicholas Ray could well have posed to

himself in the course of making *In a Lonely Place* (1950). Here's how Victor puts it.

Suppose that you were planning the first few minutes of a film whose central issue is to be the uncertainty of emotion, a story of passion dogged by mistrust [...] You want to establish that neither hero nor heroine is sure whether the man's embrace is protective and loving or threatening, murderous.

That was Ray's problem at the start of *In a Lonely Place*. His answer was to give the same gesture to three different characters within the brief space of the scene that establishes the film's Hollywood setting: each of them approaches another character from behind and grasps his shoulders with both hands. ([1981] 2020: 215)

These statements by Victor are then followed by further words and frame reproductions that summarise and demonstrate the detail that Ray somehow arrived at to establish the 'ambiguity of gesture,' and the uncertainty or multivalence of emotions that this gesture arouses. Victor was obviously proud of the analysis, because the same frame-grabs re-appear, eleven years later, in his contribution on *In a Lonely Place* to *The Movie Book of Film Noir* in 1992 – although the eagle-eyes among you will notice that one version of this (the later, 1992 one, in fact) has the third image's left and right incorrectly reversed. Here are the screenshots that I have taken to approximate Victor's choice of frames.



Let's attend now to the simple captions on the 1992 version (Victor, I presume, had a hand in composing them). The introduction runs: 'Ambiguities of gesture – three shoulder-clasps in Paul's restaurant at the start of the film.'

- 1) Has-been writer Dix greeted by wealthy hack director Lloyd Barnes and watched by agent Mel Lippman.
- 2) Dix greets ex-matinee-idol Charlie Waterman.
- 3) Dix becomes a pedestal for Junior boasting about preview success in Pasadena. (1992: 226)

Let me immediately attest to the fact that, if you are ever addressing an audience of hardnosed filmmakers or trying to teach very practically minded filmmaking students, Victor has already helped you out immensely with the tools he has just handed out here. Because talking about *problem solving* and *choices* (choices out of numerous possible options) that have to be made on set or in the preparation of a movie or in post-production – that's what a certain kind of filmmaker (or aspiring filmmaker) fully *gets* and relates to: not symbolism, or codes, or layers of meaning, or unconscious drives, or ideology, or any of that kind of wonderful stuff you and I love to talk about. *Problems* are things that filmmakers can understand, and *choices* are actions to which they can (hopefully) commit.

Essentially, in the primal scene of film criticism that I'm evoking here, Victor has convincingly managed to *think his way* into the head of Nicholas Ray. He brilliantly intuits and articulates the problem – a problem of both craft and art, exposition and expression – that Ray faced and resolved. And the pedagogical approach suggested by Victor has saved my ass in many a public situation. When I was once asked by an irate audience member after doing a detailed, microscopic scene analysis on Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945), 'But did the director really *intend* everything you've read into his scene?', I was able to answer – thinking of Victor and his moments of choice theory – 'Well, whether or not he consciously intended it, it's *there* on screen, and Lang obviously made a choice for it to be there'. Or I could have replied: 'I'm talking about things that I believe to be in the film for all to see, and to see the sense of'.

But let me now take this from another angle, and get nearer to the heart of what I want to propose to you today. What Victor saw in this scene of *In a Lonely Place*, and how he arrived to the point of seeing it, what he noticed, is not necessarily what anyone else in the world might ever have noticed, *without Victor doing it first*. You cannot teach anyone to see exactly *this* detail, three variations on the same significant hand-clasping gesture. You can encourage them, of course, to search inside a film, to look for patterns, to think about the possible systems or logics of those patterns, and you can indicate broad 'fields' to search in, like gesture, colour, framing, and so on – that's what any teaching or transmission of film analysis (or film criticism in its highest sense) is all about, and it's at least partly what *Film as Film* as a textbook is all about, too.

But true *insight*, the flash of a critical perception or intuition, cannot really be taught. It's fundamentally a mystery, like the mystery of coherence. Such insight can only happen – or *not* happen – depending on the individual, and on the relationship they establish with the film they are studying. There is something magical about this; it's the result of a strange and intriguing alchemy of mind, person, film and the surrounding culture. Sergei Eisenstein (1970) was absolutely right on this point of inspiration: he once proposed that, after experiencing an intuitive flash, we can probably generate some principles of analysis, even some laws of the cosmos, from it. For example, the 'ambiguity of gesture' that Victor mentioned could be extrapolated into a general idea, a concept, a potential principle of analytical film watching ('watch for repeated, everyday gestures'), and maybe even a philosophical position ('all human gesture is ambiguous' – Giorgio Agamben has probably written a book on that theme). Perhaps, alongside Laura Mulvey (in her own conference keynote), we could think of these extrapolations as *Post-Perkins* extensions, elaborations or rewritings.

But such general principles will not, alas, ever lead you back to the moment of a new and totally original insight of the kind that Victor experienced in front of that film by Nicholas Ray. Critical / analytical intuition is a mystery, and

it's something very rarely addressed as a phenomenon. There's a leap, a spark that takes place which is difficult to account for, or even to pinpoint in any material way.

Barbara Le Maître is among the very few film scholars to have reflected in depth on the role of what she terms 'analytic intuition'. The flash of intuition strikes like a sudden *haiku* in the brain, she suggests, not a haiku that floats suspended in its poetic mystery, but one that offers a 'basic formula of a meaning to come, something like the promise of a position on the film' (2006: 44). Up to this point, we are not terribly far from the way Victor himself may have considered or evaluated the role of intuition. Le Maître's ultimate conclusion in her piece is also something Victor might have nodded assent to: for her, intuition is 'a formula capable of lasting beyond the analysis, beyond the production of specific "statements". [...] [It] is beyond any single proposition of comprehension to which it contributes' (2006: 50).

In place of the idea that a sole, primary intuition leads to a subsequent, rational analysis, Le Maître prefers to conjure intuition and analysis as constantly going-along together, in a kind of tandem relay race, or even what she terms a 'continual struggle', a back-and-forth conflict (2006: 41). She cites a marvellous piece from 1911 by the philosopher Henri Bergson on the workings of intuition, and on what I call the *temperamental*, even polemical edge involved in flashes of intuition. Here's my free translation of the Bergson passage.

Faced with all the currently accepted wisdoms, the theses that appear self-evident, the affirmations that had hitherto passed as scientific, intuition whispers in the philosopher's ear these words: *it's impossible, it just won't do*. Impossible, even as all the facts and reasons seem to invite us to believe that it's possible and real and certain. Impossible, because a particular experience, possibly confused but decisive, speaks to you in my voice, telling you that it is incompatible with the facts as presented and reasons as given, and that therefore the facts must have been poorly observed, and the reasonings false. [...]

Isn't it clear that philosophy's first method, even while its thought is still poorly worked out and there's nothing yet

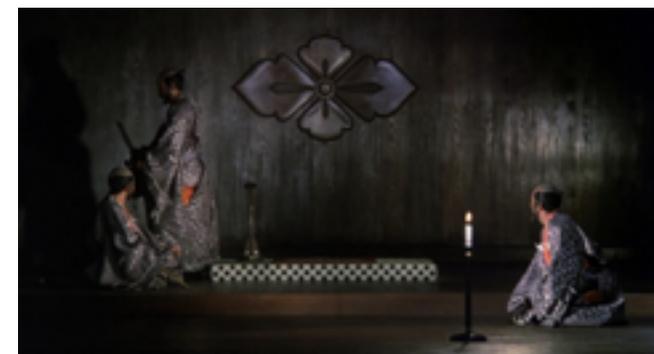
definitive in its doctrine, is to *reject* certain things definitively? Later, we can adjust what we shall affirm; but we will almost never vary in what we deny. And if there is some adjustment in the affirmation, that will still be by virtue of the *power of negation* that is *immanent to intuition*. (Bergson [1938] 1999: 120. Translation author's own)

Le Maître adds to this account the idea that, alongside intuition as negation of some already-well-established, professional certainty, there is also the cry, from that little voice in the ear, of 'that's enough!' (2006: 44) – enough, that is, of what has already been said, the critical clichés that are already glued to a director or a genre, a style or a work.

Le Maître then offers her own account of an intuitive analytical journey through fragments of two films: the prologue of Akira Kurosawa's *Kagemusha* (1980), and a number of details in James Whale's *The Invisible Man* (1933). And this is where our fun starts. The start of *Kagemusha* (a statically framed, wide, long take lasting six and a quarter minutes) shows three men, warriors, almost identical. Their stylised, curiously interactive movements begin to unfold. Where Nobukado, on the left, mimics (after a few moments delay) each movement of his brother Shingen in the centre, nonetheless it strikes Le Maître that, on the visual and pictorial plane, a strong diagonal draws a line of force, a powerful connection, between the outsider, Kagemusha on the right, Shingen, and Shingen's shadow on the wall (the shadow moves with him as he eventually exits the frame).

Le Maître wonders, as she notes these subtle shifts and changes in the image: who really is the mimic, who is the shadow, and of whom? Her intuition is prompting her: 'It cannot be that that these three creatures are all the same' (2006: 48). She reaches the point of musing that 'Kagemusha is not a figure relating to the order of imitation, but a figure relating to an entirely different order, which I can't quite yet name, but which has something to do with automatic reproduction, and with the singular relation that connects the shadow as an image of the body to the body as a referent' (48–49).

A later, completely unrelated viewing of *The Invisible Man* then reconnects her to the *Kagemusha* intuition. The Invisible Man himself explains that fog or rain – or, indeed, the action of digesting food – render him partly visible. Le Maître flashes



in her mind to the dark hands impressed on the walls of pre-historic caves. '[My] intuition surges once more', she writes, 'but now I can begin to formulate it: Kagemusha and the Invisible Man, whatever their differences, are so many manifestations of the same plastic problematic: the *imprint*' (49).

She lays this process out in review: 'In a first phase, watching *Kagemusha*, intuition allowed me to identify a discrepancy and specify the difference between visually identical elements. In a second phase, intuition helped me to define the plasticity of James Whale's character: an anthropomorphic creature rather than a true human form, naturally, but above all a creature whose imprint constitutes the major, crucial regime of appearance within the representation' (49). She sums up by declaring that this intuitive analysis constituted, for her, 'the elaboration of a reflection on a problem of representation' (48).

Now, what I find most arresting about Le Maître's case study (whatever else can be made of it) is that it is a universe away from anything Victor Perkins might ever have formulated in a similar play of analytical intuition and reflection. It has absolutely nothing to do with the inner emotions of fictional characters or our engagement with these characters as people, and only a little to do with the creation of a fictional world framework. Problems of plastic representation (as exemplified here) bring in a whole other perspective on cinema as an expressive medium. I personally like this multiplicity of perspectives, and I think it does well to bear them in mind. I shall return to this point later.

I had yet another secret, generative title in my head for this talk, and it is based on a famous 1975 book of philosophical and scientific speculation by Paul Feyerabend: *Against Method*, which is subtitled *Outline of an Anarchist Theory of Knowledge* ([1975] 2010). Now, Victor was not exactly an anarchist in his approach to film (or knowledge), but I do believe he was, in a deep sense, against method, at least any strict, systematic methodology of film analysis. So, 'Victor Perkins Against Method'? He said as much. Just as he took his distance from the idea that films were mysterious in some fuzzy, ineffable, wholly indefinable way, he also fought shy of an entirely teachable, transmissible, testable method. When asked, in the course of a fascinating 1995 interview by Jeff

Crouse, about his 'approach', Victor responded in what was a generous but also cagey manner: 'Obviously over time I've gathered a sense of the repertoire of things one might look to in trying to answer the questions the film sets up' ([1995] 2004: 23). Then he offered Crouse the following list of four points or observations.

It all seems to me that stillness is very eloquent in film, so I tend to look to moments of stillness and think about them; That one should never ignore the relationship between the sound and the image, and trying to puzzle that through opens many doors about what the film is doing; The way sequences end can often tell you an awful lot about what's the defining content of that sequence; That within a general conviction there is *nothing* you can't explore in trying to get to the depths [of a film's meaning] so, for example, that the lamp shades are a particular design may be something that offers you important clues about what this film is. (23)

This is a terrific and useful list. But there are at least four things to note about it. First, it's very *personal* to Victor and his own relationship to films. Second, it's *tentative*, 'things one might look to'. Third, it's *eccentric* (in the best possible way), because it's very precise and partial, and cannot be generalised or abstracted into any kind of system or method. Take a look at it: stillness; sound and image; and the end of sequences – that's like the Jorge Luis Borges gag (from his 1942 'John Wilkins' Analytical Language') about a certain Chinese Encyclopedia, the *Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, which classifies animals along a mad continuum from 'those that belong to the Emperor' and 'those included in this classification' to 'those that have just broken the flower vase' ([1942] 2000: 231).

What Victor's list proposes, finally, and in complete seriousness, is something like this: look and listen hard, and you might stumble upon a few things like these that I have personally found. Which doesn't get us much further along with the properly pedagogical question: what to look for in a film, and how to know when you've found it?

Here, I think we need to make a comparative distinction between what it is that Victor does in analysing a film, and what a lot of other people (myself sometimes included) do.

Film studies has often been tempted by what I'd call a spectre of the *finite*, of the calculable, and of the systemically definable. The clearest example of this came in the period of structuralist semiotics of cinema in the 1960s and 1970s – but the dream of that period lingers on, I assure you, in most undergraduate film courses around the world today. I am referring to the essentially semiotic idea that a film is the sum of certain codes – complex codes, certainly, and complex in their interaction – and that the task of research and analysis is to arrive at that sum, that total outline and volume of a work. It's the drive of the Dressmaker, rather than the Cook.

In film study and teaching, the designated codes, levels, elements, and so on, tend to be distributed into particular categories: *mise en scène*, editing, acting performance, soundtrack, and maybe a few others. Textbooks are still written on this basis, and I can understand why: what are you going to use as the building-blocks of a curriculum, otherwise? We can see this model at work in David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art* textbook (12th edition in 2020); but also in the major work of a very different critic-scholar, and one who was very responsive and sympathetic to Victor's *Film as Film*, namely the French surrealist and philosopher Gérard Legrand, whose remarkable 1979 book *Cinémanie* ('Cinemia') shapes its 'initiation' section around topics like 'Degrees and Elements of *Mise en scène*', 'The Cutting-Up of Space and the Importance of Photography', 'Toward a Determination of Cinematic Styles', 'Exhaustion or Renewal?' in film history and, lastly, a finely detailed, 30-page case-study that would have pleased Victor no end: 'Fritz Lang the Exemplar'.

It seems to me that Victor, certainly in his writing, took very little recourse to favourite film-study terms like *mise en scène* and montage (I myself remain pretty fond of these terms, for various reasons) – although, of course, he was incredibly alive to details that you or I may sometimes feel compelled to class within such categories. Victor, I propose, had an approach to film that privileged the *singular*: the singular film, and the singular details within it. Singularity and *particularity*: a special word that Victor sometimes did use. Film analysis – of a particular, singular film – is all about, for Victor, 'trying to answer the questions the film sets up'. And

these questions are absolutely *not generalisable* across multiple films, genres, nations, social conditions or anything else.

We all know that it is hard to teach cinema, the history of cinema, cinema as art or cinema as institution, one film at a time – and to imagine that we could get to the end of that impossible survey before the very End of Time. Yet Victor's approach, his temperament – his mad dream, in one sense – was to isolate a number of films (and directors) to which he felt especially attracted in his lifetime, and keep working on them, working back over them. He did not believe there was any finite horizon to the analysis of any truly great film. He commented on this in 1995.

Basically I'm against methodology because I think that there is nothing [within a film] that could not turn out to be relevant. I'm in favour of following the process of one's own interest wherever that path goes [...]. One never does more than *bettering* one's understanding because one could never claim that it was perfected. (Crouse [1995] 2004: 23)

Victor defined or described the process of film analysis in a very particular way, and it is a definition with which I agree. You start with your personal, emotional response to a film you see – and that response doesn't have to be love or admiration or breathlessness (as cinephilia is so often caricatured these days), it could as easily be hatred or exasperation, perplexity or irritation, as Victor acknowledged – and then you track that response back to the material details of the film, to see what, *in* the film, created or prompted your response. And in that unfolding process of analysis as investigation, you test and refine and maybe reformulate your initial response. I think this is a good, minimal definition of what all decent film criticism is – or, at least, where it starts. Here is how Victor himself put it.

So what I'm really interested in is: Why do I find this film so stirring or beautiful? What's the rhythm and reason of this film being of one piece? Why does this aspect – whatever it might be – belong in the *ensemble*? So it's attempting really to account for a response by reference to what is physically present in the images and sounds of what the film is composed of. (Crouse [1995] 2004: 23)

Now, let us say in passing – maybe it doesn't even need to be said – that not everything that goes on under the umbrella of film study, whether inside or outside the academic university institution, follows Victor's particular lead or preference. Not all film study is about the appreciation of singular films. Even in the analysis of singular films, particular qualities and attributes that Victor valued above all – like (in this quotation) the coherence of a film being 'of one piece', an *ensemble* – is not what we are all after all of the time. He knew it, and we know it. It is not a question of one 'school' – film aesthetics, say – getting back its lost, exclusive, totalised territory on some intellectual and political battlefield of tendencies, chapels and sects. Already, when John Gibbs and Doug Pye organised their conference at Reading in 2000 on 'Style and Meaning' (see their subsequent 2005 edited book), I heard dark mutterings in certain quarters about how this apparently rearguard movement to bring back aesthetic attentiveness (of the kind that Victor practised) was an obviously conservative and nostalgic strategy to brutally displace the newer, more radical methods in film historiography, film philosophy, film theory, and so on. I didn't believe it then, and I don't believe it now. Honouring Victor and his work, today, has a lot more to do with finding the complex value in a particular dream, a singular search, an individual passion. That is not a small or simple thing. And it's pretty much what we do, after all, when we investigate any film director as artist or auteur. Critics are artists, too – or can be, and Victor certainly was.

I'll add here that there's one aspect of Victor's work, and the legacy extending out from that work, which I think still needs deeper investigation and discussion. Basically – and I say this not in the spirit of some grand-slam ideological critique – Victor's film criticism and analysis takes place within the frame of what we might call a *humanist aesthetics*. By this, I simply mean that what ultimately meant most to him was a human content, an 'eloquence' (as he often called it) arising from the depiction of fictional people in fictional worlds. (This is what I have elsewhere [Martin 2016] called the 'dramatic' level, but it could also be, as easily, the comedic level.) Now, there's nothing wrong *per se* with humanist aesthetics:

it's a great and wide tradition, and it ties tightly (as many would argue) with common sense, and the common person's experience of fiction in any medium.

But I offer this simple comparative observation: Victor writes, at a crowning moment of his book on *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1942) that, in this film, as in the work of Jean Renoir or Max Ophüls, 'you need to free yourself from the standard expectation that the characters are there to be liked or admired; but you can find, if you allow yourself to dislike them, that you come to love them' (1999: 18). I feel that statement (however much any of us, maybe all of us, might deeply agree with it) is a *substantively, qualitatively different* claim about a film (any film) than what Alain Masson found in *Phantom Thread* when he concluded on that line about the mysterious coherence 'of a work of art, of a couple, of an omelette'. Masson, too, is fully responding to the fictional beings in *Phantom Thread*, their emotions and relationships, the fabricated consistency of their fictional world, and so on. But these are not the exclusive or even central things for him in formulating the film's ultimate value, and its particular profundity. The omelette and the artwork are as ontologically and philosophically primary for him, in the final accounting of *Phantom Thread*, as the fictive lovers!

Let's take the case of Max Ophüls. What Victor sought and found in his films is (again) qualitatively different from what Laura Mulvey and Miriam Hansen (both in 2009) or Frieda Grafe (in 1968) variously found, through their no-less patient work of analysis, to be most striking in his work.

Ophüls frames abstract and structural problems: the relation of desire to narrative drive, or death to narrative's termination, and these problems cannot be detached from the movement of the cinema itself, the destiny of the motion-picture machine, in which the narrative function of emotion is to enable the film to blossom into sequences of pure cinematic movement. (Mulvey 2009: 18) Looking at Ophüls' films from the vantage point of our present makes us realise that they not only foreground the role of technology and exchange in the production of spectacle. They also engage with earlier moments of historic

transition – the dynamics between old and new media, as between traditional and technologically mediated arts, and the conflicted cohabitation of different forms of publicness and spectatorship. (Hansen [2009] 2012: 24)

Ophüls' films are historical films – not because they set out to reconstruct the past (this is precisely what they do not do), but in that they mediate between historical periods. In *Lola Montès* it is not only the relationship between the present and the past of the characters that is fluid, but even the past in which Ophüls' films appear to be set is open to the present of his audience. [...] Ophüls encourages his audience to become aware of the present in the past, and to see that established practices had been subject to development. His critique of the present is a critique of the past that allowed that present to come about. (Grafe [1968] 1978: 53, 54)

I'm not making any spurious division here between, say, humanism and formalism. The people I've just quoted speak about Ophüls films being 'heartbreaking' (Hansen [2009] 2012: 24), as possessing 'great psychological poignancy and complexity' (Mulvey 2009: 16), and of Ophüls himself as ranking among the 'unacknowledged geniuses' of cinema (Grafe [1968] 1978: 51). However, I am asserting the need to make necessary discernments between different models and emphases in film analysis that have been arrived at by its diverse high-level practitioners. What we have in Victor's work is, in short, a *particular sort of particularity* (if I may put it that way); and we could see it encapsulated in the conclusion to his essay on *In a Lonely Place*: '[W]hat has come to an end is not the finest of romances but a brief creative respite from looking at the world with anger and receiving its glance with shame' ([1992] 2020: 349) – a summing-up which is anchored in an immersion in these specific characters and their emotional situation, in this level and conception of the film's particularities, and deliberately, knowingly, nothing more generalisable than that.

At any rate (and to shunt my track yet again), Victor did attend, over the long haul, to what Simone Weil called, in my prefatory quotation, 'the material question of their art' – in this case, the art or medium of film (and Victor was not shy, by the way, in frequently using the term *medium*). This is especially clear, I feel, in his book on Orson Welles' *The Magnificent*

Ambersons – and, let me add, I find Victor's analyses particularly fascinating when he is dealing with the directors who are resolutely high in his canon, but who simultaneously are more evidently formalistic, exhibitionistic or ostentatious in their cinematic styles; here the primary cases would be Welles and Lang. As Victor notes of *The Magnificent Ambersons*: 'We are invited to share in pleasure at the plasticity of image and sound, their openness to interruption, displacement and manipulation' (1999: 38). That statement marks, I suggest, an emphasis that is new in the aesthetic context established by Victor in *Film as Film* in 1972.²

Comparing the language and rhetoric of a wide range of critics (a long term project of mine), I have stumbled upon a litmus test that allows me to make some preliminary distinctions between different critical methods. In a nutshell, it's this, spanning three options. Option 1: does the critic say *first* what, in a general, thematic sense, what they think a film is *about* before they get into its details, its particulars – usually to arrive at some concluding, more elaborate and complex position as to what the film is really, finally about? Or (second option) does the critic speculate on the general theme at pit stops throughout the detailed analysis, perhaps reformulating that summation by degrees? Or (third basic option), does the critic try to *never* start with or even pause along the way for the proposal of a general theme – and if so, only to heavily qualify, perhaps even dismiss the folly of any such reductive statement?

Putting the theme first and then working it through is a pretty standard teaching practice, and many fine critics have used it, including Robin Wood, Judith Williamson and Andrew Britton. Reformulating it along the way happens in Stanley Cavell, Raymond Durnat, André Bazin and Frieda Grafe. Avoiding any general statement until perhaps the very end of an essay, or perhaps forever is, in one camp, the style of Manny Farber and his many imitators; and, in another mode altogether, it is the method of Shigehiko Hasumi or Victor Perkins. Of course, these are not definitive divisions, or absolute characterisations of the total output of any of these critics. (I myself, for example, tend to switch between Options 1 or 2, depending on the film, or the occasion for writing on it.)

Nonetheless, the model gives us a way to get into a critical text. The structure of Victor's book on *The Magnificent*

Ambersons is very careful, and very revealing. After an opening, prefatory account of the 'production and destruction' of Welles' work (1999: 7-18), Victor starts at the opening of the film, and spends 26 pages evoking and interrelating precise details of imagery, vocal intonation (of the actors and especially of Welles himself in the voice-over narration), performance, shot composition and editing. This is indeed a virtuosic demonstration of what Victor, in his little handy list of tips, advised about never ignoring 'the relationship between the sound and the image.'

During this extended analysis of the start, Victor gives us only the merest indication of a theme or general subject of the film. So, on page 19: 'Our concern is to be with family' – and you can't get a much more generic signpost than that. On page 43, we have one those along-the-way formulations: Victor points to what 'will only gradually emerge in [the film's] drama, the conflict of knowledge and sentiment, judgement and feeling, of which as a young man George Minafer will become the focus.' Finally, two pages before the end of the book, Victor at last walks the plank of a summing-up formulation: 'A movie about loss. A movie that works on, thinks about, film's production of an image haunted by the places and beings from which it derives' (71). And he also formulates here, at the very end, what might be, really, his only true statement of method: 'So the key question remains at the completion of a movie story as it was throughout, that of the relation between event and viewpoint' (72-73).

I would now like to consider another of Victor's analyses – his discussion of the opening minutes (really just the first 70 seconds after the credits) of Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937), which originally appeared in the 1992 *Movie Book of Film Noir*. For, in this example, we get some different inflections of the idea of critical intuition.

First major point: quite differently to the *In a Lonely Place* case, Victor does *not* begin from his own, original flash of insight. He begins, for a change, from someone else's. He builds – as he says 'anyone who wants to write usefully' ([1992] 2020: 460) about this film must do – upon George Wilson's analysis in his 1986 *Narration in Light*, a book that Victor regarded highly. Indeed, Victor admits, by way of introduction, that Wilson 'opened my eyes to *You Only Live Once*, a movie that I had previously found opaque' (460). What Victor then takes

on board from Wilson is an overall understanding of what Lang's film is about and how it works: it questions our comprehension and evaluation of appearances, and of the various stories that are told about those appearances (very Langian concerns). From this point of departure, Victor embarks on an analysis in order to uncover what he calls the 'purpose in its meticulous design' (460).



Victor walks us through the first three 'establishing' shots of the film's opening sequence. He notes two intriguing things about them. First, they offer a clear case of Lang the master narrator (the enunciator, as another critical tradition would say) overtly organising this introduction into a place and a scene – rather than hanging this introduction on a typically 'natural' device like a mailman entering the building and the camera following him in. Second – and here again is something *only* Victor could have noticed with his analytic intuition – all three shots '[display] a symmetrical structure [i.e., a public entrance, an inner office door, and a desktop] whose lines could easily be matched to the screen's rectangular format' (468). But this is exactly what Lang chooses *not* to do: instead, he angles and tilts the frames, forming an unusual pattern across the shots. Victor sums this up: 'The symmetry of the objects is marked in an image that displays them asymmetrically' (468). Why? He discerns in this progression of still-life images 'a visual metaphor of tilted scales' – alluding to the scales of justice – that is imbued with a certain irony that is already questioning the process of justice (a major pre-occupation of Lang's film).

Here, and elsewhere in this opening sequence, Victor compares what Lang has actually, materially done to what

might probably, conventionally, have been done in the direction of a such a scene. So (this is my second major point about this case study) critical intuition has to leap to a different level. It's not only about discerning the director's specific choices, his or her 'design', but also about grasping those decisions in relation to what are the basic conventions governing the type of scene (whatever type of scene it may be). I see a connection here with David Bordwell's method (especially as he has practised it in recent years) of the *historical poetics* of film style: that is, proceed by establishing the pertinent conventions that inform a typical scene or action or bit of business, in order to gauge, and then evaluate, the inventiveness (or otherwise) of the *deviations* from those conventions. I think this is an area of research focus that Victor announced already in a 1975 *Movie* magazine editorial discussion, when he declared the following.

In order to recognise particular sets of choices, one has to have some sense of available choices. [...] [I would look] to systems of rhetoric and viewpoint, concepts of plot construction, and, particularly, of continuity; then in the ideological area, to what can function as a focus of dramatic interest, and under what conditions. (1975: 13, 12)

Whether we choose to call this analytical method historical poetics or something else altogether, the name or label matters less than the fact that even this allusion to convention also already requires a certain skill of intuition. Despite what we can usefully discover in the screenwriting manuals, studio notes and occasional written reflections of practitioners from the classical Hollywood era, we will *never* have a comprehensive, objective list of all the conventions in play, explicitly or implicitly, when a film was made. We still have to try to make that imaginative, intuitive leap into the conscious and unconscious minds of the creators. So we can only begin to have a working sense of those conventions – and the possibilities they open up – by watching, over time, an awful lot of movies.

Back to Lang and the *You Only Live Once* scene. Victor differentiates between what he calls an 'abstraction' of its 'meaning' – the poor apple seller's narrated, acted-out woe as a little, premonitory allegory of the failures of law and justice

– as distinct from the scene’s ‘particularity’ ([1992] 2020: 470). In his view, this is a distinction between what a scene thematically *illustrates* and what it truly *shows*. And this showing is intricately material, based at every split-second on those ‘moments of choice’ mentioned earlier.

When Victor gets to the detail inside the office, he carefully notes all the ways in which Lang does *not* give Sylvia Sidney a conventional ‘star introduction’; and, equally, how he does not even properly (in conventional terms) map the entire space of the office – since he withholds the fact of another person (an assistant) in the room until near the very end of the 70 seconds. Another curious detail: Victor has mentioned that the scene could have started with the entrance of a mailman – and here, sovereignly displaced by Lang, is precisely a mailman, used in a completely different way to interrupt the flow of the scene.

All throughout the scene, Victor notes how – to bring in terms he used in other essays – Lang works with the respective, comparative *scale* of gestures, such as the fruit seller’s extravagant histrionics versus Sidney’s careful administration of papers and tasks. Lang also works with the finely judged guidance and balance of our mobile attention between the respective elements of the situation. As Victor rightly remarks: ‘The scene has been constructed with great skill’ (472). Which is, again, no small or simple thing.

Before I move onto my closing case study (another audiovisual essay), I’d like to mark the very particular position – I think of it as a very particular freedom – that Victor enjoyed as a critic and analyst of cinema. He seemed never to have been obligated to play the academic game of ‘publish or perish’ in scholarly journals; he really only committed himself to publishing (as far as I can tell) what his friends and colleagues asked him to contribute, and what he found congenial to spend his time on. Unlike virtually all film reviewers in any of the mass media, Victor never had to keep up with the latest releases. But he was also unlike the more contemporary model of the ‘roving intellectual cinephile critic at large’, like Kent Jones at *Film Comment*, Amy Taubin and Erika Balsom in *Artforum* and *Frieze*, or Raymond Bellour in his 2016 book *Pensées du cinéma* – since he was never publicly hooked up to the ever-churning culture of film festivals, cinémathèques



and art events. In fact, I find it quite remarkable that, beyond the early issues of *Movie* in the 1960s, Victor rarely mentioned in any depth any film made beyond his evidently preferred period of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. He quickly gravitated to the old *Cahiers du cinéma* line of a ‘policy of enthusiasm’ (see Crouse [1995] 2004): exert your intellectual energy on the films you like and value, not those you dislike; stick – for decades on end – with the films and filmmakers you most want to understand and appreciate, in the deepest and most

comprehensive way possible. How many of us could even dream of following this model, Victor’s very own model, of the critic’s activity today?

Still, it’s a grand and inspiring dream. I would like to end with a phrase of Victor’s from the 1982 *Movie* magazine editorial discussion of Max Ophüls and *Lola Montès* (1955), in which he invokes three criteria of achievement in cinema: he praises this great director’s ‘creative energy’ and, within that, his films’ commitment to ‘variety, surprise and delight’

(1982: 116–117). Now, I believe that Victor was a fan of Ernst Lubitsch, even though he never published anything on him; and at the moment Victor died in 2016, my first thought, with my partner Cristina, was to make a tribute video to him which would be about Lubitsch's testamentary 1946 film *Cluny Brown*, an audiovisual essay titled precisely *Variety, Surprise and Delight*. In the event, that opportunity passed us by, I did a written tribute instead (Martin 2016), and we finished our audiovisual essay a little later, under the title *Plumbing* (2017).

So here is a little of what I have learned – or better, what I was inspired to try to intuit – in my own way, along all these years, from reading Victor Perkins.

'Thanks for lettin' me watch, Cluny'. And thanks for letting me read you, Victor.

Adrian Martin

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Watch the audiovisual essay here: 'Plumbing' by Cristina Alvarez Lopez & Adrian Martin

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1. My English translation of Masson's text is available exclusively through the Patreon campaign supporting my website, as part of a Level 1 Bonus titled *Selections from French Film Criticism 1948–2018*: www.patreon.com/adrianmartin.

2. In my own work, I have subsequently explored, in collaboration with Cristina Álvarez López, the aesthetics of plasticity in cinema – and specifically in the cinema of Nicholas Ray. See Álvarez and Martin (2021), and our 50-minute multimedia lecture (2021) on *They Live By Night*, available for rental or sale via Vimeo On Demand (<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/multimedialecturesonfilm>).

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