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Perkins, Gombrich and Criteria

The starting point for this paper was a very brief reference to the art historian E.H. Gombrich in Victor's extended notes for an unpublished 2003 lecture called 'Criteria in Film Criticism'.¹ But what I recognised in the reference took me much further back. It alluded to an essay that was used with first year undergraduates when we worked together at Bulmershe College, now part of the University of Reading, in the 1970s. Gombrich doesn't feature in writing about Victor's work and I wanted to see where that link back in time might lead – curiosity fueled at least in part by nostalgia.

Victor tells us, in a 1997 interview (Gibbs 2019), that Paul Mayersberg² introduced him to Gombrich's work in the period after he left Oxford (probably around the time that *Movie* was launched in 1962) and that he read quite a lot when he first started teaching at Bulmershe in 1968. He says:

[I] 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. (2019: 50)

This is broadly framed but the emphases on the concrete and on a better balance between the specific and the general couldn't be more significant in Victor's work.

Particularly striking was the context in which the reference to Gombrich occurred: in a lecture on criteria in film criticism that begins quite dramatically. Victor quotes the opening of *Film as Film* (1972): 'This book aims to present criteria for our judgments of movies', and he then writes: 'In time I came to doubt whether that was what the book did'.³

His second paragraph begins:

Since then I have become less and less convinced that criticism does or should proceed through the use of anything that can reasonably be described as criteria.⁴

Which seems quite a remarkable claim. Doesn't criticism inevitably imply criteria?

The lecture notes then outline other contexts that prompted suspicion of criteria:

My disenchantment with the notion to some extent corresponded to the growth of demands for statements of criteria both in Film Studies and in the University Institution as a result of the ever-to-be-lamented rise of managerialism and management studies. Nothing promotes scepticism about the usefulness (or indeed the genuineness) of criteria as powerfully as the bureaucratic demand for transparency in such matters as university admissions or degree assessment. The attempt is *to wrap the fact of judgment in the appearance of a reliable and unvarying procedure* (my emphasis). A criterion is something that can be stated in sufficiently concrete terms that it is hoped to put beyond dispute the question of whether or not it has been met.

It's an objection to criteria being used to disguise what he sees as the reality, which is the inevitability of judgment in these processes. And then, specifically in the case of film:

In Film Studies the demand for a statement of criteria often presented itself as an argument against evaluation, and thus as part of the field's recoil from aesthetics [...]. Anti-evaluation – tendency to polarise objectivity and subjectivity, as [if] a completely whimsical personal taste

were all that remained if one agreed that a critical judgment could not be a matter of fact and proof.

The introductory notes end by juxtaposing two kinds of evaluation:

Evaluation as pass/fail or good/bad

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Evaluation as [the] effort to define kinds of value.

In the second, what counts as value is not predetermined but remains to be uncovered, in a process of which the outcome – taking 'effort to define' – will be uncertain.

The next section of the lecture, entitled 'Excellence' begins with the note that includes Gombrich: 'Then not single criteria but reconciliation of competing values: lifelikeness and composition (Gombrich) or clarity and suggestion (Renoir)'. Gombrich had remained significant enough for Victor to invoke him alongside Renoir in developing terms for a discussion that had evolved from his unease with aspects of *Film as Film*.⁵ Yet, 'reconciliation of competing values' was not an emphasis that had just surfaced as Victor formulated his doubts about criteria – it's a resonant phrase in relation to approaches that were in fact already deeply embedded in *Film as Film* itself, and to which I'll return.

The word 'criteria' certainly rings through the early pages of the chapter 'Form and Discipline', which begins to develop the book's substantive approach: 'The search for appropriate criteria [...]'; 'Hence we can evolve useful criteria [...]' (1972: 59); 'I hope to present criteria [...]' (1972: 61). And this is a chapter that introduces the concepts of 'coherence' and 'credibility', which have attracted a good deal of debate.

Reading *Film as Film* with Victor's doubts in mind, it's not difficult to see why the emphasis on criteria later made him uncomfortable – it risks creating an impression that's at odds with the argument of much of the book. In earlier chapters he criticises 'orthodox theory' for being '... most emphatic where it should be most cautious, in imposing obligations on the artist [...]'; and for treating '[...] artistry in terms of methods rather than of works, as if a "correct" use of the medium would itself provide both a guarantee and a standard of excellence' (1972: 26). He then begins 'Form and Discipline': 'I do

not believe film (or any other medium) has an essence which we can usefully evoke to justify our criteria' (1972: 59). What follows is that: 'Criteria then *relate to claims which the critic can sustain* (my emphasis) rather than to demands which he must make' (1972: 59). Victor's auto-critique in the lecture notes is in effect a way of freeing the implications of that sentence from the stress on criteria. The opposition he makes there can take us back to Gombrich.

When Victor mentions the 'reconciliation of competing values: lifelikeness and composition (Gombrich)' he's evoking the essay on Raphael's 'Madonna Della Sedia', from the 1966 volume *Norm and Form*. I can't now recall which of the team suggested that we should require students on the foundation course of their Film & Drama studies to read Gombrich's reflections on a renaissance painting, but my strong hunch is that it would have been Victor.

Gombrich's theme is what he calls 'that most elusive of problems – the self-contained classic masterpiece', and, characteristically, he pursues it by thinking about the traditions within which Raphael was working. He responded, Gombrich writes, 'to the challenge of a problem he had found in tradition' (1966: 69), and he traces Raphael's explorations of how, within the conventions for representing Virgin and Child with St John, he could create 'this remarkably intimate grouping'.

[...] when we discuss such configurations in classic art we imply that they are achieved within the convention of classic representational style [...]. Would it not help us sometimes if we spelt out this implication? For if we did we would draw attention to the fact that we have here two mutually limiting demands – that of lifelikeness and that of arrangement. It would be easy to increase either at the cost of the other, but what Raphael does is to find an optimal solution which does justice to both postulates.' (1966: 74).

In a way that Victor might well have found applicable to developments in film studies as the 1970s went on, Gombrich also writes:

[...] unless I misread the signs of the times, we are in danger of cultivating or encouraging a kind of critical monism which may impoverish our awareness of the plenitude of

great art. It is the danger of all 'isms' that they go all out for one postulate, and it is the danger of much writing on art, that by singling out one aspect it makes people forget the others. I think that that may be the reason that the concept of the whole has become so elusive. (1966: 75)

He then turns back to Aristotle, 'who took it for granted the perfect work of art' was one 'that did justice to a variety of such critical demands' (1966: 75). And he alludes to the evolution, through succeeding centuries, of these ideas that 'wholeness' in art involves satisfying such demands. Later in the tradition, he argues, such ideas became discredited:

[...] the notion that works of art can be defined by certain enumerable demands has resulted in paintings that are quite properly known as academic machines. Academic theory certainly overrated the value of rules and definitions, and underrated the creativity of art.

And further key sentences:

We cannot deduce its potentialities beforehand from the nature of the task and the properties of the medium. Each creative discovery upsets previous calculations⁶ (1966: 76).

For all the shortcomings of the classical approach, which at times made 'enumerated demands sound like technical specifications', the value he finds is 'the suggestion that the solution of certain problems requires an optimal order of elements' (1966: 76-77). Raphael, working within the tradition of Western religious painting at a particular historical moment, confronted the problem of combining within a devotional image, 'maximum formal organisation' with 'accurate draughtsmanship', (1966: 76). These were 'mutually limiting demands' (or mutually limiting *orders* as he refers to them elsewhere in the essay) which for Raphael came with the territory. It's the relationship of the artist to those mutually limiting demands or orders, and the creativity involved in finding an 'optimal solution' that Gombrich is concerned with as a way of thinking through the vexed question of 'wholeness'.

Some of Gombrich's emphases were clearly shared by Victor. As we've seen, he rejects the idea that any art has an essence that can be used to justify criteria. His resistance to criteria as rules to be followed parallels Gombrich's criticism of 'enumerated demands that sound like [...] specifications'.

Although in *Film as Film* he is less overtly preoccupied with the idea of tradition than Gombrich, in 'Form and Discipline', he writes:

'Unless a wider relevance is explicitly claimed, the reader should assume that arguments are meant to apply only to the cinema of photographic fiction. [...] I shall offer no case about the usefulness of other forms, nor will my remarks be relevant to the qualities of work outside the range of my definitions' (1972: 61).

The first paragraph of the lecture notes concludes by echoing this point:

I came to think that what was of value in the book was its delineation of a genre (the mainstream fiction movie) and its articulation of the values and aspirations embedded in the genre's typical procedures. I continued to think that it did not do a bad job of outlining the kind of achievement represented by a film like *Psycho* or *River of No Return*.

Victor doesn't use the phrase 'Mutually limiting demands' but he poses the challenges of the fiction film in parallel terms. Initially: 'The fiction movie exploits the possibilities of synthesis between photographic realism and dramatic illusion' (1972: 61). A page or so later:

For if there are no rules by which every movie can be bound, there are forms which, once adopted by the filmmaker, impose their own logic both on him and on the intelligent spectator, since the opportunities of the form may be realised only at the expense of other, attractive but incompatible, possibilities.

[...]

In a hybrid form the quest for purity is much less important than the achievement of an ideal compromise, a meaningful resolution of inherent conflict (1972: 62).

Victor also held throughout his career to a firm belief in creativity – what in his early writings he sometimes simply called 'talent'.⁷ The positive examples in *Film as Film* exemplify, as the Raphael does for Gombrich, remarkable creativity within a tradition. He writes later in the book, using what is for Victor an uncharacteristic sporting analogy:

A game may be played in strict accordance with the consistent body of rules yet remain a dull game. The rules

provide a basis, not a substitute, for skilled and exciting play (1972: 123).

The focus on the opportunities and achievements of work within a tradition may be the dimension of *Film as Film* that's attracted least sustained attention. But it's what underpins the recurrent formulations of conflicting demands/orders/directions:

The narrative picture, in most of its forms, submits to the twin criteria of order and credibility (1972: 69).

The shot is a beautiful example of the balance of action and image that skill can achieve. This balance, this delicate relationship, between what is shown and the way of showing it [...] (1972: 78).

It is Preminger's skill, as it is Minnelli's and Polanski's in the examples quoted, to annul the distinction between significant organisation and objective recording (1972: 97).

Critical and creative problems arise from the attempt to balance requirements of equal weight but divergent tendency (1972: 120).

The movie is committed to finding a balance between equally insistent pulls, one towards credibility, the other towards shape and significance. And it is threatened by collapse on both sides (1972: 120).

And what, in a way, is a direction to the critic, he evokes, as Gombrich does, the problems the artist confronted:

The hallmark of a great movie is not that it is without strains but that it absorbs its tensions; they escape notice until we project ourselves into the position of the artist and think through the problems that he confronted in the search for order and meaning (1972: 131).

Implicitly, problems the artist encountered and the critic must identify within specific traditions.

The contexts and objectives of the two writers were of course markedly different. For both, however, their enquiries are emphatically concrete and specific: whether it's Raphael, Renoir or Ray, understanding and judgement are rooted in a grasp of the problems artists confronted and the detailed solutions that make up the work. This is the implication of that line from *Film as Film*: 'Criteria then relate to claims which the critic can sustain rather than to demands which he must make' (1972: 59). Claims that can only be defined

and sustained by detailed critical engagement with the film. The claims can only emerge from – are formulated in – that engagement.⁸

In *Film as Film* the term 'criteria' is pervasive. In Victor's later thinking it takes on a much reduced role. Criteria are peremptory, 'called on to put an end to argument,'⁹ as he puts it in the 2003 notes; criticism ('the claims which the critic can sustain') 'is all about argument or, better, conversation. Criticism does not produce a judgment in anything like the sense of a verdict; it has none of that finality.' In turn, that implies that criteria (in the sense of prescription or imposed standard to be met) have no place – but equally shouldn't be allowed in by the back door, as it were. Following a section in the 2003 lecture notes in which he'd discussed an extract from *La règle du jeu*, he writes:

La règle du jeu like other great works sets a standard not in the sense of establishing tests to which other movies must be submitted, but in the sense of showing what is possible – for instance in finding a coherent form for the presentation of chaos and uncertainty.

What does this criticism without criteria actually involve? Victor's evocation of the critical process in the 2003 notes is:

Accuracy in description. Adequate grounding of interpretation in the concrete sights and sounds of the film, so that it is possible for the reader to understand what kinds of observation would count to qualify the interpretation or to call it into question. Needs to show how the interpretation and the evaluation relate to the description.

But how and what to describe? What counts as significant? Or as the original title of Adrian Martin's symposium keynote put it: 'What to look for in a film? (And how to know when you've found it)?' (see revised and retitled version in this dossier). In relation to the 'doubts that surely we have all felt at some moment or another' Martin asks:

[...] how do I really *know*, how can I really be sure that, 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 [...]? (Martin 2022, 36).

Without such a principle, are we left up the critical creek without a paddle? If we don't have that, do we at least have a method to guide us? In his symposium paper (in this dossier) Robert R. Ray (Ray 2022) juxtaposes the approaches of the journals *Screen* and *Movie*:

But while *Screen* offered a portable method that could be used on many movies, the *Movie* approach seemed harder to *use*. After studying Perkins' analysis of *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), would a student know something about the cinema or just one film? Wouldn't that student have to start all over again with the next movie, which would present a different set of problems? If *Screen* offered 'scientific', generalised propositions, the *Movie* writers seemed to have intuited Wittgenstein's rejection of such grand explanations and his advice that 'in order to see more clearly [...] we must focus on the details of what goes on; must look at them *from close to*' (2022: 85).

He writes of *Film as Film*: '[...] as with Wittgenstein's later work, the book's commitment to description and examples made its basic argument elusive' (2022: 86). This is not a criticism, it's important to add – but a way of pointing to what is distinctive and challenging about Victor's own critical practice.

That Victor's criticism doesn't tend to help us by signposting the methodological way is also central to Adrian Martin's paper. Whereas many other writers approach a work via, say, a concept, theme, or an outline of what they take it to be about – some way of providing an initial orientation – Victor often doesn't do that.¹⁰ This may spring from the same impulse as the rejection of criteria, a deep resistance to pointing the way, or clouding the view. As a critical practice it might also seem to define the 'disinterested attitude' that's sometimes taken to characterise the 'aesthetic' approach. Andrew Klevan notes that this doesn't imply indifference or detachment: 'It need only imply attention to the work with no prior or ulterior motive, or broader practical, theoretical, or sociological interest or purpose' (Klevan 2018, 33).

Victor knows perfectly well, of course, that we don't come to a movie with empty minds – we are likely to bring a great range of experience to our viewing, and with this a variety of expectations. Part of our experience will include more or less

sophisticated understanding of how movies tend to work. In what's almost a throwaway remark in the 2003 lecture notes, just after the passage on *La règle du jeu*, we find: 'There would be no point in denying that we come to Renoir's film with already-formed experiences of what others have shown to be possible within the relevant genres – drama, comedy, movie etc.' In effect, we're likely – intuitively or more consciously – to try and place the work in relation to traditions of various kinds – how does it fit? Or, as Victor argues in a 1970s discussion from *Movie*, quoted by Adrian Martin:

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. (Perkins et al 1975: 13, 12)

In the final chapter of *Film as Film*, 'The Limits of Criticism' he writes: 'What we see here [in film criticism] is very much a product of what we look for.' (1972: 187). We can decide whether or not to concern ourselves with any medium for its own sake. Films may be admired according to the political, religious, racial, or other objectives of the viewer. We can respond, if we wish, only to what we take to be such attitudes of the work. The question for rational discussion, though, Victor argues, should be how far 'the functions we assign are appropriate to the matter in view'. Our concerns may be important to us but an emphasis on film as film implies that our judgements should respect the medium and form within which the film is operating and not impose other conventions, values and criteria not applicable to its form (1972: 188). To avoid this, criticism should present 'a positive statement of the achievements it claims to have located and a clear definition of the formal discipline which made the achievement possible' (1972: 191).

What we perceive, the principles of organisation we posit, must be capable of discussion and debate. We're not up the critical creek without a paddle but what we may look for, or expect, or desire – the expectations, experience and knowledge we bring with us – should be open to qualification

or challenge in an attempt to grasp what a film is actually doing within its specific formal discipline. And in a wonderful passage towards the end of the chapter he writes of the responsibilities of the critic working in such ways:

[...] we shall at any one time define the perceptible by what we ourselves actually perceive and what can be demonstrated to others. We cannot evade the necessity for critical integrity and intellectual honesty in the claims we make; nor can we sustain a refusal to judge those qualities in others (1972: 191-192)¹¹.

What he doesn't say, and we need to acknowledge, is how very difficult this is.

I've moved some distance – though I hope not too far – from Gombrich. In revisiting the Raphael essay and pondering its place in Victor's thinking, what claims can we sustain? He tells us that Gombrich was significant to him during the 1960s, and the parallels between aspects of *Film as Film* and the Raphael essay are striking. When he asks criticism at the end of the book for 'a positive statement of the achievements it claims to have located and a clear definition of the formal discipline which made the achievement possible' (191), Gombrich on the relationship between the work and tradition doesn't seem far away. We can't know exactly when Victor read the essay but *Norm and Form* was first published in 1966 and it seems very likely that it formed part of his Gombrich reading around the time he began teaching at Bulmershe College. This was of course also the period in which he was working on what became *Film as Film* and the essay might well have become part of the rich mix that fed Victor's thinking during the book's long and difficult gestation. It would certainly have chimed with the critical practice he had already evolved and it's appealing to think it could have helped to confirm the critical principles he was working to articulate. What struck me when I read the 2003 lecture notes was that the thread remained unbroken, as it were. Gombrich's approach remained important enough – over thirty years later – for Victor to evoke 'reconciliation of competing values: lifelikeness and composition (Gombrich)' as a benchmark (though not of course a criterion!) in his reflections on criticism and criteria.

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- ¹ The lecture notes are dated June 2003 but there is no indication of where the lecture was given. One extended section is on 'badness', a topic which preoccupied Victor for many years, and on which he lectured several times (one version is published in *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* Issue 8, June 2019, 34-37. https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/scapvc/film/movie/8_badness.pdf)
- ² Paul Mayersberg was a member of the Editorial Board of *Movie*. He is a writer and director, known for *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1978), *Croupier* (1998) and *The Last Samurai* (1990).
- ³ In an interview 12 years later (Chan and Law 2015) Victor returned to the theme of the earlier lecture:
- 'I think one of the mistakes *Film as Film* made was to claim that it was advancing criteria for judgment. I don't think that's what it did most interestingly but it was the claim that it made that somehow falsified its line...'
- And then:
- 'I think in a way because I conceived that it was a book about criteria then the kind of things I emphasised ... were those things you can turn into criteria, coherence most notably...'
- [My thanks to Hoi Lun for allowing me to cite the unpublished interview here].
- ⁴ In the previous sentence Victor begins to contextualise his discontent. He writes that partly he'd become dissatisfied with the handling of the negative examples in *Film as Film* – 'the sense that these had a tendency to seem to present rules for filmmakers to follow [...]'. The negative examples include, for instance, *The Children's Hour* [UK *The Loudest Whisper*] (William Wyler 1961), *La notte* (Michelangelo Antonioni 1961), *The Criminal* (Joseph Losey 1960) and *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein 1921). Dominic Lash discusses these and other negative examples in a wide-ranging and stimulating article on *Film as Film*, in which he also considers the vexed question of coherence (Lash 2017).
- ⁵ I gathered from conversations at and after the symposium that it was not unusual for Victor to mention Gombrich in his teaching at Warwick.
- ⁶ Gombrich has much of value to say about those creative processes within tradition.
- ⁷ For instance: '[...] Losey had no peculiar advantage over any British director – except his talent. It was talent, and determination, which turned the stupid story provided for *The Criminal* into a deeply

personal comment on, among other things, the horrors of the British prison system [...] (Perkins 1962).

- ⁸ The implications of this approach for critical practice are far reaching, as perhaps they are for ways in which aspects of *Film as Film* have been understood. For instance, Andrew Klevan has raised with me the intriguing question of whether Victor's apparent criteria (not least of course coherence) could be reconceived in terms of 'reconciliation of competing values'.
- ⁹ Discussion of criteria in criticism of the arts has a long and varied history and the concept carries accretions of the many contexts in which it has figured and uses to which it has been put. Informed by this history, a range of interesting discussions could be developed around what might be considered Victor's relatively narrow application of the term in the lecture. To the relief of the writer, for the purposes of this relatively narrow paper these temptations can be resisted.
- ¹⁰ Adrian Martin reflects at length on questions of method and Victor's critical practice.
- ¹¹ The arguments here and the challenges they pose for the critic are echoed at the end of the last article of Victor's to be published, a remarkable analysis of Frederick Wiseman's *High School* (Perkins 2017). To quote very selectively, Victor writes:
- When analysis serves a critical purpose—one that goes beyond cataloging to touch on the significance of a work or the achievement of its makers—it must be held answerable to a true experience of the movie. The analyst must ask what case can be advanced with sincerity and conviction. Readiness for conversation and correction is a vital discipline.
- And he concludes: 'Sincerity and introspection have not been terms privileged in the philosophy of film, but close reading cannot prosper without them'.