

MOVIE

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ARTICLES

Pinning down Hou Hsiao-Hsien's red balloon

It is a risk for a filmmaker to establish an inanimate object as a crucial agent of meaning. This is not because objects (on film) lack the capacity for meaningful resonance, but rather that their significance can all too easily seem to be externally bestowed. As viewers, we attempt to interpret the words and actions of people on screen because attending and responding to other people is how most of us navigate the social worlds in which we live; but these worlds are often perfectly navigable without us having to interpret the objects, too. (A common claim in writing on objecthood suggests that 'things' claim our attention, as things, only when they malfunction or break.) When a film positions an object as significant, and significant beyond its immediate utility, it tends to be an *assertion*. A sustained close-up of a human face may be offered to viewers as something to consider in their ongoing interpretation of a scene or sequence, but a sustained close-up of a coffee cup or a vase or an electric fan is invariably offered for more than consideration – one could say that our activity in these moments, as viewers, nudges from *watching* to *reading*. (This effect is often particularly pronounced when the shot arrives as a cut-away, or when a human character leaves the frame and we are invited to focus on something left in their wake. Both techniques carve out an opportunity for contemplation which is not available to the scene's characters.) Needless to say, a great many filmmakers have chosen to assert the significance of objects and achieved extraordinary results and effects by doing so. But the risk is nevertheless a real one; might conspicuous emphasis on a particular thing short-circuit the delicate relay of meaningful exchanges and patterns elsewhere in the scene, or the film?

Flight of the Red Balloon (Hou Hsiao-Hsien, 2007) runs this risk more than most. A reimagining of *Le Ballon Rouge* (Albert Lamorisse, 1956), Hou's film is about a beautiful, bold-red sphere. This balloon is more substantial than the kind associated with children's parties, but just like them it moves constantly and apparently without purpose or predictable direction, permeating the movie. It is addressed in its first spoken words, and its final song; it is the subject of its opening and closing shot; it is, more than once, followed by the camera in sustained long takes; a number of sequences imply a fantastical connection between it and one of the main characters (Simon, played by Simon Iteanu); it is filmed by another main character (Song, played by Fang Song); its likeness appears painted on a Parisian wall, by which Simon and Song walk; another likeness appears in a painting (*Le Ballon* by Félix Vallotton) housed in the Musée d'Orsay, a painting which is not only *shown* in the film, but is actively interpreted and discussed; even the balloon's colour is repeated and distributed elsewhere in the film – particularly in the decor of the department where much of the film takes place, but also in the clothes of Suzanne (Juliette Binoche), in street furniture, and in posters and pictures adorning interior and exterior walls. The balloon functions in almost opposite terms to those written about by George Toles in his essay about 'world particles' in film, which he describes as 'easily overlooked, seemingly inconsequential peripheral details' (2022: 46). Were we to somehow quantify the optical and rhetorical emphasis placed on things in films, I can only imagine that *Flight of the Red Balloon* would emerge as an outlier, a movie which is unusually preoccupied by – and possibly led by? – a specific object.[1] The balloon is asked to bear considerable meaningful weight.

But to what extent is this 'bearing of weight' purely metaphorical, a means by which criticism articulates the elusive qualities of rhetorical and expressive devices, and to what







extent do the physical and material properties of the balloon actually come into play when we consider those devices? That is the primary concern of this essay. The invocation of tactile qualities as a means of making sense of a film is so common as to seem unavoidable and unremarkable; a critic need not







be deliberately haptic in their approach to describe a movie as uneven, or rough, or heavy, or unbalanced, or finely poised. Often these judgements or descriptions have no ostensible relation to the physical properties of what is in the film, though sometimes one is struck by an unerringly apposite account of a film's meaningful physicality (Raymond Durgnat is especially adept at this). *Flight of the Red Balloon* is not only an opportunity to put such thoughts to the test, but it could be said to *require* the critic to venture some kind of reconciliation between the film's physics and its expressiveness, given the potent disconnect between the meaningful weight (or burden) of the balloon and its literal, quintessential lightness. One commentator demonstrates the flights of interpretive travel which seem to be permitted by the film's eponymous object:

> The red balloon itself is an allegorical stand-in for the hallucinatory and unstable intersubjective status of the transitional object as an adequate substitute for the good enough mother. It stands for the presence of a sympathetic observer, the magic of digital technologies, and the ways in which special effects can visually incarnate the intersubjective, intergenerational experiences and memories of childhood all at the same time. Not diegetic nor anthropomorphic as it was in Lamorisse's film, the red balloon exists in an intersubjective and intermediate, nonphenomenological space—between people's fantasies and experiences, between analog cinema special effects and digital cinema's transformation, between cinema history and cinema practice, between adults and children, between the laws of gravity and the laws of fantasy. (Liu 2011: 449-450)

And yet it seems to me that the film avoids the mistake which it initially appears to make – of relying too heavily on the balloon as an all-purpose receiver of projected meanings – by positioning other things in its action and its mise-en-scène which relate to and inflect, or balance, the balloon and its role. These other things are less prominent than the balloon, but careful attention to them is vital, and can help us understand that Hou's film is not quite so reliant on the 'floating signifier' as might first seem the case.

The very term 'floating signifier' of course seems almost too apt. The notion of a sign being untethered from its referent, too free to function in a coordinated system of meaning-laden relations, too loose and too unpredictable in its movements and suggestiveness – what could fulfil and illustrate this role better than a balloon? Frederic Jameson claimed much the same for the shark in *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), describing it as a feature of the film whose very 'vocation' as a symbol 'lies less in any single message or meaning than in its very capacity to absorb' multiple interpretations (142). To help me better understand what is happening in *Flight of the Red Balloon*, I would like to have known more of Jameson's thoughts on the shark's capability to hold and maintain this role *as a shark*; does its speed, its elusiveness, its status as desperately-sought prey, qualify it for this vocation? (Or to phrase this another way; would a coffee cup or a vase or an electric fan function just as well, were a filmmaker to deploy it accordingly?) Jameson's argument does not lead him in this direction because he is more concerned with the ideological ramifications of 'allowing social and historical anxieties to be folded back into apparently natural ones' (142). But even here we get a sense of how a thing's basic characteristics (the shark is an animal), and not just its associations (sharks seem ugly and threatening), affect its capacity for making meaning.

Lesley Stern also writes about the expressive and rhetorical role of a film's non-human agents in terms which lend themselves to a reading of *Flight of the Red Balloon*. I hope it is not cute or flippant to draw on Stern's writing about 'two modes of cinematic operation' – *inflation* and *deflation* – when considering Hou's balloon (324). It would, I think, be disingenuous to read Stern's words here as anything other than vivid descriptors for a film's tendency to 'play up' or 'play down' the meaningful force of an object, to be 'ostensive' or 'intensive', and her main examples – raindrops and teardrops, leaves blowing, kettles, cigarettes – unsurprisingly have nothing to do with the filling or emptying of objects with air.[2] What matters more to my discussion is the subtle but significant shift or sleight undertaken by Stern, whereby she studies not what a thing in a film means, but rather what is involved in the acquisition of its meaning. To think in terms of in flation and deflation, writes Stern, 'signals a shift away from a problematic of representation, an orientation more towards rhetoric, towards the potentialities and actualisations of filmic language (how worlds are conjured into being, ideas shaped, emotions solicited, viewers interpellated and touched)' (325-326). My claims for *Flight of the Red Balloon* are indebted to Stern's essay, but as well as attending to the 'potentialities and actualisations of filmic language' through which we apprehend the

balloon, I will explore how the balloon's objecthood is related to *other* things in the film. (Stern's taxonomic approach limits the potential for this kind of interpretation.) The most acute question this then leads to is whether the camera itself can reasonably, or usefully, be understood as one of those other things.

Suzanne and the balloon

Simon may be considered the main character of *Flight of the Red Ballon*, though his child-minder Song and his mother Suzanne each have a claim. (As with other Hou films, 'centrality' does not seem like an appropriate figuration for articulating someone's position in the story.) He is an apparently likable young boy, affectionate and imaginative, and as far as we can glean, he is not especially frustrated with the adult-centric conditions and expectations – school, close living quarters, absent family members, his mother's work commitments – which set the parameters for his experience of the world. In many ways, he is quite inscrutable, and Hou's decoupage does not give us much to work with in the realm of facial expressions. But there are 'facts' about Simon's engagement with this world which are made clear by the film, and the most pertinent to my essay are as follows: that he sees the balloon and registers its unusual behaviour and its potential sentience; that he is not disturbed by this; and that he does not seek to share his experience of the balloon with anyone else.

These features of Simon's relationship with the balloon are established very early on in the film, and remain relatively undeveloped for its remainder. At the very beginning, Simon is at the entrance to a Metro station, ostensibly alone but talking to a (the) balloon offscreen. It ignores his invitation to join him on the train, but the subsequent sequences seem to show the balloon 'tracking' Simon's journey onwards to another station, where he glances it through the train window. He will shortly meet for the first time Song, who mentions in passing Albert Lamirosse's *Le Ballon Rouge*, and that it tells the story of a young boy and a red balloon – but Simon rather mysteriously makes no discernible or conscious connection between this and his earlier encounter. Even if we suppose that this is not the first time Simon has seen the balloon (and I struggle to identify any evidence in the film suggesting one way or another, that this is the first time or part of a pattern), the coincidence would seem to warrant some kind of reaction – but none transpires. What effect emerges from this odd combination of flagrant artifice and narrative inconsequence, or rather what effect emerges that has anything to do with the balloon's specific and inherent qualities?

Simon's seeming indifference to the subject of the balloon, once it has passed from his sight, is in part a resignation, a concession to the fact that the balloon – however compelling, and seemingly attentive – is now by its nature most likely to have passed through his life, not to return. Simon does not know that he is in a film named after the balloon, and even if his new companion mentions another film with a similar name, this too cannot be expected to attract or secure his interest as much as it might ours (who are more likely to know the full extent of the connection with Lamorisse's film, including the Parisian setting). In other words, while Simon might have experienced some private moments of fantastical communion with the balloon, he would also be more likely than us to have simultaneously felt, or assumed, its ephemerality. The film's viewers have seen, as Simon has not, the balloon descend from the sky into a Metro station just seconds before a train arrives, and then hang in mid-air on the platform, as if waiting to greet a passenger. This is not simply a matter of film narration granting viewers access to events unknown to characters (though it is this too); rather the film guides us to follow and linger with something that the character would be helpless to deliberately seek out even if he wanted to. *Flight of the Red Balloon* is in many ways a tender portrait of Simon, but it keeps its distance from him. In these opening scenes of the film, we encounter – and begin to interpret – the balloon according to very different parameters than those offered to him.

Attention and significance seem to be lavished on this object from so early on in the film that first-time viewers are unlikely to have the knowledge of, and insight into, other aspects of the film world necessary for understanding, or even supposing, quite what warrants that attention and significance. Knowing virtually nothing of the emotional or material conditions of Simon's life leaves us somewhat helpless when it comes to speculating about the balloon's presence and status – what does it offer, or promise, or stand for?[3] But in a fascinating structural manoeuvre, the film then takes leave of the balloon for approximately 40 minutes, during which time our understanding of Simon is 'filled out', and we have the chance to connect this emerging narrative texture with the balloon. (The question of whether viewers are, cognitively speaking, *likely* to strive for these interpretive connections, in the way that they are likely to fill in standard spatial and temporal ellipses, is intriguing to say the least, but beyond the scope and expertise of this essay.) Most significantly, we are introduced to Suzanne.

Simon's mother is a tender but distracted woman; she is sweet and honest and open with other people on a moment-by-moment basis, and there are few serious questions raised by the film about her dedication to Simon, but the cocktail of pressures she encounters – single parenthood, fractious relations with neighbouring tenants, professional duties, marital separation – take their toll. She is frazzled. Juliette Binoche brings to a number of screen performances a remarkable combination of bodily energy and poise, and in *Flight of the Red Balloon* the balance certainly swings towards the former, with just a small handful of moments allowing Suzanne (and us) respite from her apparently routine state; harried, adrenaline-fuelled, absent-minded, pressed upon. She seems often to be slinging bags and scarves on and off her body, fiddling with or re-arranging the clutter of her apartment, and if not on the verge of leaving a space, her mind always racing ahead to her next appointment. (Her professional work as a puppet voice-artist is a significant, pointed exception to this.) When she drives Song to Simon's school for their first meeting, Suzanne rushes out of the car and quickly heads down the street to the school gates, forgetting to unlock the passenger door and leaving Song momentarily trapped in the car. Suzanne apologises, but can't talk for long; she needs to hurry back to her rehearsal.

We become acquainted with Suzanne during the balloon's hiatus. When it eventually returns, at virtually the exact halfway point of the film, the re-introduction is striking (and more 'inflationary' than its appearance at the film's start). The camera looks skywards, holds the balloon in the centre of



the frame against a blue but cloud-speckled sky, and then by following its movement downwards, reveals a cluster of chimneys and rear walls and skylights of the kind that have become (through films by René Clair, Jean Renoir, Jacques Rivette and Olivier Assayas, for example) a kind of cinephilic alternative to more conventional, touristic icons of Paris. A cut to Simon inside the apartment, holding Song's video camera and aiming it towards the window, suggests – without confirming – that he is watching and recording the balloon (which we do indeed see hovering outside that same window a minute or two later). Of course this moment once again raises questions posed earlier about Simon's understanding of, and feelings towards, the balloon's presence; but this time there emerges something else, namely a clear opportunity or invitation to contrast the balloon's tentative grace with Suzanne, who before long comes clattering through the door. She is late to meet her lawyer and friend Lorenzo (Charles-Edouard Renault), who has waited with Song and Simone for her to return, and issues scattershot apologies and greetings as soon as she is inside. An engine of excitement and nervous energy, Suzanne casts off her satchel and keys and coat and belt, passes Lorenzo a gift-wrapped bottle of wine, and throws the resultant empty plastic bag across the table. She also thrusts gifts towards Song and Simon, and in a particularly delightful grace note, bumps the low-hanging ceiling lamp as she reaches across the table towards her son. For the 20 minutes of screen time which have so far taken place in the apartment, this lamp has been a constant and steady source of warm light. Hou's approach to staging and framing (minor variations on a gently mobile, frontal master shot) has kept it in a more or less central position. This then allows the apparently minor gesture of an accidental nudge of the lamp to be felt and seen as genuinely disruptive; Simon even gently upbraids his mother, and the wobbling light now casts an unstable, jerky glow across the room.



When Simon regards the balloon, in the two sequences I have described, there is quite simply insufficient visual or narrative evidence to suppose with any confidence what he feels about, or values in, the encounter. But in the second of these, we watch them 'meet' equipped with knowledge about his mother, a near-frantic presence in his life whose loudness and unsteadiness and general precarity seem to sit in almost direct, oppositional contrast to the balloon. The fact that the balloon seems to attract a gentle pull towards Simon, silently floating just beyond the window moments before Suzanne crashes back into his orbit must be understood as an expressive strategy through which the balloon accrues meaning, even if we stop short (due to the film's complexity or tentativeness) of 'pinning down' the meaning as such. In considering the deep relationship between gesture, film style and material affect in cinema, Lesley Stern proposes that:

> the more that fiction films observe "documentary integrity" and adhere to the quotidian propensity (deploying deflationary operations with regard to editing and narrative drama) the more likely they are to frame gesture, and this gestural attention is likely to elicit a certain quality of thingness (an inflation of gesture and of things). (328)

Flight of the Red Balloon vividly bears this out. Hou's style most certainly tends towards the deflationary, and Suzanne's gestures are given ample opportunity to take place as a visible part of a larger spatial and temporal integrity. But while Stern writes mainly of films – such as *Umberto D* (Vittoria de Sica, 1952) and *L'Argent* (Robert Bresson, 1983) – in which gestures interact directly with the objects in question, Hou's film offers us something different: parallel planes of object and gesture, Suzanne and the balloon, whose coexistence ensures that the balloon never floats too freely from the human drama.

The piano and the balloon

If the balloon can be said to physically 'answer' or contrast with Suzanne's bodily and gestural tendencies, and through this contrast offer Simon feelings and experiences which are currently unattainable with his mother, then this is a claim which requires quite a careful navigation of the film's human drama. (For instance, it would seriously patronise Suzanne to suggest that she *ought* to float through life more serenely!) A less emotionally complex, but nevertheless significant, counterbalance is achieved through Simon's engagements with the piano on which he plays, and which is moved from the downstairs apartment up to Simon's and Suzanne's home.

On their first day together, shortly after Song has brought Simon to the apartment, Simon's piano teacher Anna (Anna Sigalevitch) arrives. The lesson takes place *not* in this apartment, but the one immediately downstairs, and Hou rather uncharacteristically clarifies the spatial and temporal coordinates by showing us the three characters moving from one space to the other. As they arrive in the room, Anna reassures Song that she need not clear the mess in the apartment, and the three settle into a spatial arrangement whereby Anna and Simon sit closely together at the piano, and Song watches on from behind, near the room's opposite wall. The space is not large, but the camera's position (and long lens) makes it impossible for all three to be framed together; the camera is obliged to look, or choose, between them, and trains its attention on Song rather than Anna or Simon as the lesson begins.

But almost immediately there emerges in the doorway behind Song a figure entering the apartment. Flora (Floore Vannier-Moreau), the girlfriend of tenant Marc (Hippolyte Girardot), has forgotten about the piano-lesson arrangement,





and has returned home with her food shopping in preparation for a dinner party. She then swiftly and apologetically moves around the room, clearing its mess while trying in vain not to disrupt the aura of the lesson. Throughout her quietly anxious tidying, the camera follows Flora's movements with striking persistence, dynamically reframing in response to her gestures and her direction of travel, emphasising how different an energy she is bringing to a space that moments previously had been a peaceful gathering of three still bodies. (And even when Song had knelt down to begin picking up clutter before Flora's arrival, the camera had not tracked her movement, but instead retained its view of Anna and Simon at the piano. A rhetorical distinction has clearly been made.) The continuing sound of piano chords and warm-up exercises being methodically played out by Simon make for a lovely, gently ironic counterpoint to Flora's hurried motions.

What does all this mean for the piano's position in the film's arrangement of things and feelings? I think we can establish that *Flight of the Red Balloon* is here characterising the piano not as a means for performance or expression (nor inert, decorative furniture)[4], but rather as a domestic object which, through its allocated position in the rooms and routines of the film's characters, seems to be something of a permanent and well-used fixture. Anna's warm familiarity with Simon (she greets him with a kiss) and her assurance in the apartment, Simon's comfortable confidence to begin the lesson with very little direction or instruction, Flora's admission of 'guilt' for forgetting the lesson – these all speak of a constancy or deep regularity in the position of the piano and the piano lessons in these people's lives. Just as a balloon is not only light, but essentially characterised by its lightness, a piano has become established in film as quintessentially a heavy object.[5] So Hou's deployment of the piano offers Simon, and us, an unerringly direct and tangible contrast to the contingency and unpredictability of the balloon.

The balloon, though, is not immediately present, and the piano's solidity is more directly contrasted with other figures in the room. The starkest of these contrasts is with Flora, who, as we have seen, scurries between different corners of the room. Her restlessness and absentmindedness actually align Flora quite closely with Suzanne (though this scene precedes Suzanne's late and frantic return to her apartment, described above). We have no reason to believe this comparison occurs to Simon, but second-time viewers of the film especially are likely to sense here a patterning, or an opportunity to see different figures bringing different kinds of energy into Simon's environment.

And throughout, Song watches on. The balloon is absent, and will not be seen again for 30 minutes, but I think a strong case can be made for Song's positioning and demeanour carrying with it some trace of the red balloon, with which in many ways she has already been paired (a pairing which is strengthened if we suppose that the balloon entered Simon's life on the same day as has Song). It is unusual for a film character to observe the actions of others in the same room, silent and arms folded, and for the observation to be almost entirely *neutral*, though this seems to be the case. Song has no reason to be concerned or suspicious or even especially interested, although she perhaps brings to the scene the natural curiosity of a bright young person in a new cultural environment. Yes, the social expectations of the situation (the music lesson, Song's employment as a child minder) make it entirely plausible that she would stand still and quietly watch, but it would be equally plausible for her to leave. The significance of her presence is essentially non-psychological and undramatic, and seems to me dependent on qualities – attentive but carefully distanced, present for Simon but in a deeply unobtrusive manner – which suggest a strong alignment with the balloon, and in turn a contrast, and balance, with the piano. Although vividly achieved film narratives often stage and illustrate dramatic developments through the arrangement of physical properties and patterns (size, scale, texture, velocity), *Flight of the Red Balloon* is rare in the extent to which the 'arrangement' predominates, and bears meaning; in this scene, exchanges between heaviness and lightness, stillness and flurry, matter more than anything.[6]

The camera and the balloon

By the time of *Flight of the Red Balloon*, Hou Hsiao-Hsien had developed one of the most distinctive visual styles in global art cinema. That the project was commissioned by the Musée d'Orsay says a great deal about the cultural and critical esteem in which his work was held, particularly in France. (Some years before this, Olivier Assayas made the celebratory profile film, *HHH: Portrait of Hou Hsiao-Hsien* (1997).) Comparisons with Yasujirō Ozu were and are unavoidable, and in the context of this essay, the most striking correspondence between them is their shared willingness to provide non-human things with space and time to accrue meaning (and often pathos). One could make the case that this kind of object-oriented realism was shared by a number of other celebrated 'slow cinema' filmmakers of the time, for whom long takes, long shots and repeated framings came to constitute a familiar palette. But in Hou's films we encounter an irreality that has a lot to do with the manipulation of, and responsiveness to, light, as well as a camera style poised between weighted stillness and a kind of untethered potential.

The camera in his films tends to be still to the extent that it rarely moves to much discernible degree across a space (through tracking, dolly shots, etc.), but fluid in its almost constant reframing, through tilts and pans which accommodate the movement of bodies. This accommodation normally helps us see the characters' gestures, and to that extent is purposeful; but it can likewise feel wilful and arbitrary, following a certain character's activity at the expense of another, as in the example described above, when the camera studies Flora's clearing of the apartment rather than direct our attention to Song or Simon. Hou Hsiao-Hsien apparently grants quite a lot of leeway to his long-time cinematographer Mark Lee Ping Bing, who himself has spoken about surreptitiously introducing more camera movement into their collaborations. Whatever the on-set techniques and processes which enable this effect, one does watch these films as if their action is somehow filtered through an unobtrusive but unmistakable mediating intelligence and sensibility. The camera in *Flight of the Red Balloon* does not seem to guide or select or emphasise, but nor does it retreat to cold, hard indifference; it does not explore space as such, but neither is it fixed. I am tempted to say that it hovers.

This context gives me reason to suggest that the red balloon has a reflexive capacity, and that as well connecting meaningfully to other participants in the film world – Suzanne, Song and the piano – it also maintains a relationship with the camera which films that world. Reflexivity in film normally comes to us by way of more deliberate human activity, actions and gestures with discernible correspondences to filmmaking and / or film spectatorship, such as looking, interpreting, organising, manipulating, displaying. And of course *Flight of the Red Balloon* itself features at least one explicit reflexive manoeuvre, by featuring in its story a Chinese filmmaker who travels to Paris, and makes a film inspired by *Le Ballon Rouge*. But I find a richer and more distinctive reflexivity in the scenes where there emerges a kind of shared and mirrored watchfulness between camera and balloon. The aforementioned sequence of the balloon seemingly waiting for Simon at the metro station early in the film, its unpredictable swishes through the air answered by and captured in the camera's responsive movements, makes for an extraordinary 'dance' between the two. In









retrospect, it looks as though the film in its early stages is calibrating its way of looking at the world by way of the balloon.

This approach to *Flight of the Red Balloon* is informed by and indebted to Daniel Morgan's recent book about camera movement, *The Lure of the Image*. Morgan argues that film criticism and theory has tended to conflate camera movement with absorption, assuming through an analogy of camera and eye that 'the camera functions as our surrogate, our mode of access to the world' (9). It is no hard to recall examples of this process or sensation, wherein a mobile camera seems to grant us, its audience, a kind of proxemic involvement, however partial and restricted that involvement might be. But, Morgan writes, rather than a means of 'standing in' for us, camera movement is better understood as 'the contingent ways that specific cinematic techniques work with and make use of our fantasies [...] a desire to latch onto *this* thing' (45-46). His claim that an audience will want to 'latch on to a thing' is presumably phrased in such a way as to retain a degree of flexibility and looseness when describing the connection between film viewer and camera, and his decision to substitute 'thing' for 'camera', is part of his argument against apparatus theory – it is an invitation to think less mechanistically about the camera's particular way of mediating the film world, and to gather more clues from that world about the nature and effect of that mediation. Although Morgan's study does not argue for anything like an object-oriented account of camera movement and point of view, it does disentangle the camera's position from, on the one hand, the notion of viewer surrogacy, and on the other hand the notion of a character's point of view. It thus leaves a kind of vacancy, which we can only convincingly argue is taken up by other 'things' on a case-by-case, film-by-film basis. *Flight of the Red Balloon* is an unusual but telling instance of an object filling that role.

What does it mean to propose that a viewer of this film might 'desire to latch on' to a balloon rather than a camera? At a very basic level, it is worth noting that a balloon is the kind of object that permits or affords latching – an enthusiastic or purposeful connection that is quite different from how we would take up a relation with (for example) a coffee cup or vase or electric fan. It is already an object which shares some qualities with film cameras – for example how it can plausibly sit and operate at almost any height, and that its movement cannot be controlled without a good degree of effort and concentration – as well as an intertwining history, through early experiments in aerial photography over the skies of Paris.

But of course Hou's film has given us more localised reasons to engage its world in sympathy with its balloon. As a benevolent observer of Simon, a respite from Suzanne, and a confederate of Song, the balloon really does seem to offer a valuable position from which to understand these people and their experiences. Rather than symbolising something external to the film, the balloon is better understood as an entry point for seeing and knowing its drama. Extraordinarily, it seems to provide this *whilst inhabiting the story world*, a non-human guide which is in a physically dynamic relationship (but not lockstep) with both the camera and the people subject to the camera.

Conclusion

While I have chosen not to organise my argument about this film around rhetorical terms – such as metaphor, metonym, imitation and denotation – I think it helps at this point to turn to Nelson Goodman's term 'exemplification'. In *Languages of Art*, Goodman considers the range of ways in which symbols – across language, pictorial representation and music – refer outwards. For example, some symbols may possess qualities in common with their referent (as when a red circle on the Japanese flag refers to the sun), while others might function metaphorically by being applied to a referent not normally considered to be part of the same schema (as when Wallace Stevens repeatedly refers in 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds' to the ocean as a machine). Exemplification is slightly different to both of these; it is, explains Goodman, 'possession plus reference. To have without symbolising is merely to possess, while to symbolise without having is to refer in some other way than by exemplifying' (53). The exemplifying symbol will only share *some* characteristics with that of its referent. A mannequin possesses relevant qualities of the human body (approximate shapes and proportions) but not irrelevant ones (such as the nervous system). And it possesses those qualities of the human body *whilst also referring* to the human body; this is exemplification.

At the risk of trying to condense my reading of *Flight of the Red Balloon* by way of a single concept, 'exemplification' does serve to articulate the particular degree of connection I find between the balloon and other features of the film. (A degree of connection which is palpably different to, for example, that between the shark in *Jaws* and communism or dysfunctional masculinity, both of which it has been thought to symbolise). I have already claimed that Hou's balloon is not the vague and multi-referential symbol it might at first appear to be, and provided some evidence for this through my interpretation of sequences in the film. But I would now choose to revise some terms of my original claim, in which I suggested that Hou's film avoids overloading the balloon with vagueness of meaning 'by positioning other things in its action and its mise-en-scène which relate to and inflect, or balance, the balloon and its role'. Phrased like this, my reading projects onto the film and the filmmaker an order of play (the balloon as preceding other features) which is convenient but inadequate. Exemplification, as a critical term, instead helps us attend to the *simultaneous* sharing and referring which makes *Flight of the Red Balloon* so finely tuned. In Goodman, as in most accounts of symbolisation, there is an implicit assumption that the symbol is present to us, and the referent is absent – and a related implication that the referent pre-exists the symbol. I have tried to account for a subtle but significant variation on this in Hou's film, in which the balloon's referents are close to hand.

It is likely that I initially understood the balloon as existing prior to other things in Hou's film for the simple reason that *Flight of the Red Balloon* is in explicit dialogue with *Le Ballon Rouge*. Given the nature of Hou's project – described in the closing credits as an 'homage' to Albert Lamorisse and a 'free adaptation' of his film – I took the balloon to be a non-negotiable, foundational feature of *Flight of the Red Balloon*. But I suspect that this immovability of the balloon's importance challenged Hou to explore ways of changing the *nature* of that importance. And the difference is pronounced. *Le Ballon Rouge* has its balloon clearly exhibit a deliberateness in its action, moving decisively towards or away from people and things, isolating it in a film world which in all other respects betrays familiar qualities of physics and custom (not to mention a colour palette designed, unlike that in Hou's film, to contrast and offset the red of the balloon). In other words, it has agency and incongruity of the kind not really carried through in *Flight of the Red Balloon*. Both films seem to demand that special attention be paid to their respective balloons, but while Lamorisse has us pondering what kind of energy and associations his balloon has brought into the film world, Hou has the balloon help us understand more fully what's already there.

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1 I enjoy entertaining the possibility that there are many balloons rather than one, but find it difficult to identify evidence in the film for this. At most, it would certainly be an interesting creative variation on *Le Ballon Rouge*, whose climax is a gathering of many balloons.

2 Although Stern's first illustrative example upon introducing the terms, *An Interesting Story* (James Williamson, 1905), does include literal inflation.

3 This is another description of meaningfulness which draws on physical and material properties; is something less able to 'stand for' something else if it itself constantly moves?

4 During a memory sequence at around the film's halfway point, we see Suzanne watch on as Simon plays with his sister. The living space is bright and clutter free and full of whites and creams. In the background is a baby grand piano, adorned with framed photographs.

5 This is presumably rooted in popular film comedy – Buster Keaton suffers from the weight of a piano in *One Week* (Buster Keaton, Edward F. Cline, 1920), while Harold Lloyd mischievously transfers the load of a piano to an unsuspecting passerby in *Hey There!* (Alfred J. Goulding, 1918) – and when in *Flight of the Red Balloon* two men maneuver the piano up a staircase, minds are likely to turn, however fleetingly, to Laurel and Hardy in *The Music Box* (James Parrott, 1932).

6 David Bordwell's *Figures Traced in Light* provides a thorough and illuminating account of Hou's evolving approach to staging in the 1980s and the 1990s, taking into account a range of factors, including genre, lens length, and formative influences. Bordwell's claim that, in Hou's films, 'the action is designed to flow felicitously around our point of vantage,' is a valid and evocative summary, but I think perhaps misses the sense of flow *as* action, or proxemic relations *as* narrative matter.

STUDENT ESSAYS

The spaces of genre and power in *Audition* and *Midsommar*

Discussions of genre in film often refer to the limitations of individual genres, or the divisions between them, as 'borders'. Rick Altman notes that most generic criticism assumes that 'genres must have clear borders' (1999: 18), whilst Brian Taves' writing on the adventure film has as one of its aims 'to distinguish its [the adventure film's] borders from other forms with similar elements' (quoted by Altman: 18). I would contend that these 'borders' are often literal, physical borders; that genres can be to some extent signified by the spaces in which they take place. Not only do these spaces serve as recognisable visual signifiers for their respective genres and their aesthetics, they also work to help establish the figurative worlds of the genre – what is important in them, who has power, who has the audience's sympathy, and what values are affirmed. For example, the prairie homestead is a quintessential space of the western, conveying perseverance against the elements and the sanctity of the family; similarly, seedy nightclubs and desolate city streets under the high-contrast glare of neon lights are the cornerstones of film noir's lurid, paranoid worlds. Movements in space can even signify shifts in genre; in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), the film transitions from noir to horror as protagonist Marion Crane travels from the city (bustling, energetic, sleazy) to the Bates Motel (remote, shadowy, confining).

This essay will discuss the relationship between space and the dynamics of genre in the horror films *Ôdishon* / *Audition* (Takashi Miike, 1998) and *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2018). The horror genre is one with a particularly strong relationship to space and environment. The genre's plots typically involve elements of the supernatural, improbable, or inexplicable which we would tend to regard as unrealistic – demonic possession, hauntings, apparently human killers who seem all-seeing and can survive any injury. Often, films in the genre create a context in which audiences will accept these unrealistic or outright fantastical elements through the use of space – by styling (through production design, lighting, colouring, framing, and editing) the physical environments in which the story unfolds such that they appear menacing, uncanny, or otherworldly. Consider as especially prominent examples the intensely saturated Technicolor palette and labyrinthine architecture of the dance academy in *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1976), captured from extreme angles, or the circuitous, discontinuous lay-out of the clinically over-lit Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1979). Through such stylisation, many horror films situate themselves in a kind of nightmare reality, creating a visual shorthand in which the audience will implicitly accept improbable or paranormal events.

The two horror films here discussed partake of a complex relationship with space and genre, undergoing stark transitions in space which signal transitions in genre – and, with them, transitions in their central power dynamics. Through analysing the films' respective spatial trajectories, I hope to show the centrality of space to the creation of our narrative understandings and expectations of various generic categories and the horror genre's particularly potent ability to upset or disturb these spatial dynamics.

Both *Audition* and *Midsommar* begin in mundane, everyday locations, devoid of the kind of stylised or menacing flourishes which might serve as signifiers that we are in the macabre territory of the horror film. In these spaces, a relationship is established between the films' lead male and female characters, in which the former has power over the latter. This is reflected in the construction of spaces, which seem to visually privilege and empower the male character over the female.

Audition's opening scenes establish the life of widower Shigeharu Aoyama (Ryo Ishibashi) and the spaces that he occupies. A scene depicting Aoyama speaking to his friend Yoshikawa (Jun Kunimura), a film producer, at the latter's office, dwells for a long time on a medium shot of the two men standing on either side of a desk. The desk, covered in papers, and the shelves around it, are clearly visible, giving the setting a clear spatial geography. The back of the frame is taken up by the city skyline seen through a window – linking the space to a wider world, thus lending it a greater, more concrete sense of realism. As the men walk through the office, the camera follows them in a gradual, fluid movement, which makes the space feel continuous and self-contained. They discuss Yoshikawa's plan to find Aoyama a new wife – holding a mock audition to draw in actresses. Through this scheme, Aoyama meets Asami Yamazaki (Eihi Shiina), with whom he is immediately infatuated. Much of the first act is dedicated to establishing their unbalanced relationship, in which Aoyama has power over the sensitive Asami, who is unaware of the deception.

Asami and Aoyama meet for the first time when she enters the audition room. As in Yoshikawa's office, the mise-en-scène here is decidedly muted in terms of colour palette and furnishings – large looming grey walls, the room entirely empty save for a chair, a camera and a white desk behind which Aoyama and Yoshikawa sit. Their power over this environment has been illustrated by the preceding montage depicting the various actresses who attend the mock audition. This sequence employs a shot / reverse-shot pattern between Aoyama and Yoshikawa behind the desk, asking questions of the auditionees, and the actresses (all of whom are oblivious to Aoyama and Yoshikawa's plan) seated on the other side of the room, responding. The men, particularly Yoshikawa, behave in a domineering fashion, asking invasive, sexually charged questions. The actresses' responses are shown alternately in medium shots imitating Aoyama and Yoshikawa's point of



view, and through a camera set-up to the side of the desk. The visual schema of this montage serves to establish the space of the audition room as controlled by Aoyama and Yoshikawa, aligning it with their gaze, their power, and their desire.

Asami thus enters the room already in a position of vulnerability. As soon as Aoyama and Asami occupy the same space, the film's visual style stresses their inequality – her vulnerability, his power. As Tom Mes notes in his analysis of the film, the wide shot in which her entrance is shown 'makes her look very frail in the environment of the spacious room' (2006: 18) – alone at the centre of an otherwise empty frame and with an ominous black blind looming large behind her, she appears defenceless and fragile, isolated by negative space and minimised by the camera. Asami's audition begins in a long shot from the back of the room. Asami is positioned in the right foreground of the frame, her back to the camera, as she introduces herself, bows, and sits down. Aoyama and Yoshikawa, meanwhile, are seated in the shot's far background. While Asami is the most prominent figure in the mise-en-scène here, her positioning does not grant her significance so much as continue to emphasise her vulnerability and lack of power in this space. Returning to Mes' comment, she still appears small and isolated in the wide, expansive audition room. The placement of the camera behind her back denies us access to her facial expressions as she talks, thus robbing her of visual expressiveness. When combined with her stiff, static pose – both standing and sitting she is poised and rigid – this framing renders her less as a character in the scene's drama than an element of the mise-en-scène, an object in space to be surveyed rather than a human being with agency or interiority.

Meanwhile, although Aoyama and Yoshikawa appear small at the back of the frame, they maintain a position of power as the figures looking out in the image, appearing to fix Asami in their gaze from across the room. The frame appears to extend outwards from their vantage point, reinforcing their status as the organising authorities in this space. As Asami talks, the camera begins to dolly forward, gradually moving past Asami (while still pointedly leaving her face obscured) and towards Aoyama and Yoshikawa, making the two men and their desk progressively larger and more imposing. The camera completes its trajectory by arriving at Aoyama's face in close-up, dwelling on his visage for an extended period as he continues to question Asami, gazing fixatedly at her all the while. The continuous camera movement from the wide view of the room, with Asami rendered as a posed object, to Aoyama's gazing face, cements Aoyama and his desires as the dominant force in this space, organising and controlling every aspect of it – including Asami. As Aoyama further questions Asami, his inquiries growing increasingly personal and obsessive, the scene returns to a variation on the shot / reverse-shot pattern used to convey Aoyama and Yoshikawa's mastery over the space and the women occupying it during the aforementioned montage. The close-up on Aoyama is alternated with centred shots of Asami responding to him, hemmed in on either side by two black blinds, between which she looks small and vulnerable in her white dress. Each time we return to this view of Asami, the camera is closer to her, creating the impression of her gradually becoming ever-more confined, her apparent capture by Aoyama's gaze and his deception conveyed by her increasingly claustrophobic framing within a space under his control.

In a later scene where Asami and Aoyama go out for dinner, the mise-en-scène once again emphasises his power over her. Aoyama is shown in close-ups in which he takes up most of the frame, exerting absolute authority over the space. Asami is shown in shots from over Aoyama's shoulder, marginalised to the back of the frame and appearing trapped between Aoyama's body and the table behind them. This scene upholds the portrayal of romantic and sexual relations as 'on the whole forced, unpleasant, and violent' (2006: 32) that Mes identifies across Miike's films; however, rather than the grotesque excess found in a film such as *Ichi The Killer* (2000), this sequence is resolutely grounded in its aesthetic. The colour palette is subdued, dominated by the white of the tablecloth and the light brown of the wooden table and the walls. *Audition*'s first act



thus weds Aoyama's patriarchal authority, and particularly his power over Asami, to a strictly realistic milieu.

Midsommar's early scenes similarly embed an unequal central male / female romantic relationship within mundane settings. The apartment where protagonist Dani Ardor (Florence Pugh) lives is one of the primary locales of the film's first act. The apartment is rendered in drab fashion, with dark blue walls, lit by a single bulb. Dani's laptop is also often prominent as a light source, firmly connecting the setting to modern technological reality – a contrast to the environments which the film will later explore, which derive some of their eeriness from their anachronistic styling, appearing as preservations of an archaic vision of country life cut off from the modern world. After receiving a worrying email from her distressed sister, Dani calls her boyfriend Christian (Jack Reynor) for support; the ensuing dialogue establishes the unequal nature of their relationship. He is dismissive of her concerns and subtly blames Dani for her own anxiety. Despite initial protestations, she eventually relents and agrees with Christian, even thanking him. The dialogue plays out in a continuous close-up on Dani's face which isolates and confines her. As Christian's tone grows more scolding and Dani capitulates, the camera pushes closer to her, making the frame even more oppressive. After the phone conversation,

Christian is first seen in a shot which opens on a close-up of his face then expands outward to reveal him sitting at a restaurant table with his friends. With dark grey walls and low lighting, this is another decidedly naturalistic, realistic environment, in which Christian appears comfortable and in control, at the head of the table and framed by his friends. Where such ordinary spaces confine Dani, Christian is at ease and in power in them. Furthermore, Christian is introduced in a shot which emphasises movement and spatial expansion, moving out from his face to reveal his environment, whereas our initial images of Dani in her apartment tend to be static, narrow close-ups; he appears free within space, she is contained within it. The contrasting natures of the two spaces in which Dani and Christian are respectively introduced also serves to illustrate the unequal nature of their relationship – she is isolated in private space, whereas he is in an open, free public space.

When Christian and Dani are finally in the same space, her weakness and dependency on him is made clear. Christian rushes to Dani's apartment after she receives the horrific news that her sister has killed their parents and herself. The camera slowly dollies toward them, she hunched forward and he upright with his arms around her. Dani's vulnerability is heightened by the arrangement of the décor such that it appears to be confining her: she is hemmed in by curtains, paintings and lamps on both sides, seemingly imprisoned by the suffocating symmetry of the space.

Both films thus begin by grounding their unequal, casually cruel central relationships in realistically rendered spaces ; their natural lighting, use of real locations, and the largely subdued mise-en-scène and editing used to capture them (no erratic editing or extreme angles) encodes them as straightforward representations or reproductions of reality and real places, as opposed to the heightened or figurative environments of genre cinema. Within these spaces, the primary male characters are visually situated in positions of power, privilege and ease, while the female leads appear marginalised and oppressed.

Both films' narratives explicitly enter the horror genre only as they transition into more stylised, menacing spaces – what I would refer to as *spaces of horror*. I will here define what





I mean by this term. These spaces are defined by a heightened style of mise-en-scène, which employs framing, lighting and colour in striking, extreme and sometimes deliberately disorienting fashion (examples of which are discussed later) to create a frightening, unnerving atmosphere – and by their jarring ruptures in narrative logic and continuity. I would contend that the sinister formal presentation and apparent disconnection from realism exhibited by these spaces defines them as *spaces of horror* – on a visual and narrative level, they are permeated with a sense of dread and uncertainty, of the nightmarish and unreal. They create an environment in which the viewer understands that bizarre, horrific and macabre events beyond the purview of ordinary life can and will unfold. In both films, the transition into spaces of horror results in a shift in the central power dynamic – the male character who initially held power finds himself disoriented; the initially disempowered female character, meanwhile, seems in tune with and empowered in these spaces.

In *Audition*, this shift begins when Asami goes missing. Aoyama goes in search of her, which leads him into increasingly bizarre locations and scenarios. As Mes notes, the film's visual style here shifts toward 'garish lighting and tilted angles' (2006: 187), jarring stylistic choices that cement these locales as spaces of horror. One such space is the stairwell to a bar where Asami once worked: Aoyama ventures here in search of information concerning her whereabouts. Aoyama's entrance is captured in a shot from the bottom of the staircase; this dramatic angle (the frame extending sharply upwards rather than being laid out before us) creates a sense of disorientation, while making Aoyama appear small and vulnerable at the top of the steep stairs. The identification that the film has established with Aoyama's experience of space is maintained, but now this experience is no longer defined by mastery and ease but by uncertainty and anxiety. This impression is heightened as Aoyama descends the staircase and the camera adopts his point of view in an unsteady shot of the stairs stretching downwards before him – an image of uncertain, vulnerable movement into the unknown. The palpable feeling of descent which this perspective creates combines with the hot, stifling colour palette of the stairwell's red walls and pink neon lighting to give the space a chthonic air.

Aoyama's entrance into the stairwell marks a shift into the surreal and the macabre. Aoyama is told by a passer-by of a grisly murder committed at the (now closed) bar a year prior – unbeknownst to him, perpetrated by Asami. As he receives this information, he envisions the gruesome crime scene, shown in quick flashes – including three severed fingers, an ear and a pulsing tongue in a pool of blood. This vision sends him doubling back in fear.

The scene closes on a high-angle shot of Aoyama framed between the walls of the narrow stairwell. This image of him hemmed in by space, the camera glaring down on him in an inversion of the low-angle shot in which he began the scene, illustrates the loss of control Aoyama undergoes as he enters the film's spaces of horror.

Aoyama's descent into powerlessness within spaces of horror culminates when he finds himself in Asami's apartment – a sequence which may be real or the hallucinatory result of his being drugged by Asami. The apartment is rendered in a





dramatic, high-contrast aesthetic. The main body of the apartment is brightly lit and has yellow wallpaper, whilst a room at the back is completely dark, with the night sky seen through a window. Here, reality and continuity break down, as Asami appears to morph into Aoyama's secretary (with whom he is heavily implied to have had an affair), his son's girlfriend and then into her childhood self. The fact that these visions may be caused by Asami's drugging Aoyama heightens her power over the film's spaces of horror – this is not just her domain, she dictates how Aoyama and the audience experience it.

Even more gruesome imagery occurs in this space, as a man missing three fingers, an ear and tongue emerges from a sack. Entering from the shadowy back room (aligning her with the space's darkness), Asami presents the man with a bowl of vomit – which he attempts to drink, in a harrowing held shot. Asami sadistically wields power in this moment of heightened grotesquery. Stumbling helplessly, Aoyama is left disoriented in this nightmarish new space – a site of horrific acts, over which Asami has control.

In *Midsommar*, this transition comes as the protagonists venture to Pelle's ancestral Harga commune in Sweden to attend a traditional midsummer festival. As if to signal a departure from reality, their entrance into the commune is captured in a series of unmoored camera movements which crane over and around their car, eventually tilting up to the sky, a disorienting flourish which departs from the subdued visual schema of locked-off medium shots and close-ups which the film has employed so far.

In contrast to the drab palettes employed in the first act's mundane spaces, the Harga commune is rendered in vibrant colours: the bright blue of the sky and the deep green of grass predominate, occasionally supplemented by pink and purple flowers. The rich, thick yellows of the sun saturate almost every image.

Where the spaces of the earlier scenes were modern in décor, the wooden structures of the commune, as well as the flowing white tunics and flower crowns worn by the Harga, are decidedly archaic. While seemingly idyllic – and, as Kim Newman points out, notably not the 'gothic ruin' one might expect from the rural domain of the antagonists in a horror film – the overwhelming brightness and anachronistic aesthetic of the commune are menacing in their incongruity (2019: 47). The effect of going from dark furnishings to fields of bright flowers, from scenes lit by lamps and laptop screens to ones lit by bright yellow sun, is jarring and discomfiting – immediately imbuing the space of the commune with a certain strangeness, a sense of unreality, which, I would argue, marks it out as a space of horror.

The power shift that occurs between Dani and Christian within the space of the commune is succinctly illustrated by two sequences late in the film. In the first of these, Dani competes with a group of other women in a maypole dancing competition, the winner of which will be crowned 'May Queen'. Set outside in broad daylight and centred on a floral maypole, the sequence sees the heightened nature of the commune's mise-en-scène in full effect. As Dani dances, she gradually grows more confident, smiling widely for the first time in the film in contrast to the claustrophobic close-ups of her anxious expressions in the earlier stages of the film. The camera remains focussed on her, following her movements – we experience the space *with* her. She is wearing the same white outfit as the other Harga, blending in with the group in wide shots, aesthetically aligning her with the space through costume. As the sequence nears its end, one of the other girls speaks to Dani in Swedish: Dani discovers that not only can she understand what has been said, she can also respond in the same tongue. She becomes one with the space's literal foreignness, is empowered and granted freedom to belong by its dreamlike illogic. After winning the contest, Dani is crowned May Queen. At the centre of the frame, she is surrounded by identically dressed revellers as she is adorned with a flower crown, ensconced in and harmonious with the space and its heightened aesthetic. One of the flowers on her crown pulses as if breathing, an uncanny touch which serves to both establish the space as one of horror and align Dani with it (her costume matching the environment). During her coronation, she is seated at the head of a vast table, in command of the





space around her. Christian, meanwhile, is sat some way down the table, shown only in fragmented close-ups, in an ironic reversal of his introduction at the head of a table. Where initially we experienced space through his point of view and saw him occupy a visually privileged position, he is now banished to the margins as Dani's perspective predominates.

The second of these incidents highlights Christian's disempowerment, as he is drugged and coerced into having sex with a Harga girl in a ritual. Once he snaps out of his trance, he flees through the commune – while still nude. Several wide shots show the naked, vulnerable Christian isolated in negative space and dwarfed by buildings; his disempowerment and humiliation are illustrated *spatially*. At the scene's conclusion, Christian is caught and given a paralytic drug by a Harga elder, his collapse to the floor captured in a shot from his perspective.

In both *Audition* and *Midsommar*, then, we can observe a transition in space which signifies a transition both in genre and in power. As the films begin to enter the horror genre, they transition away from mundane, drab, realistic settings into stylised, nightmarish spaces of horror: dramatic and high contrast in visual style, ruled by inexplicable illogic. Within these spaces, the male character who had been firmly in power in realistic, everyday spaces finds himself disoriented and disempowered by the strangeness of his new environment. The previously subservient and oppressed female character, meanwhile, is attuned to and able to exert power over these spaces of horror. In both cases, the films' climax consists of the humiliation and punishment of the male character by the female for his transgressions against her, in a sequence wherein the visually menacing and dreamlike nature of space and the female lead's power over the male are at their height.

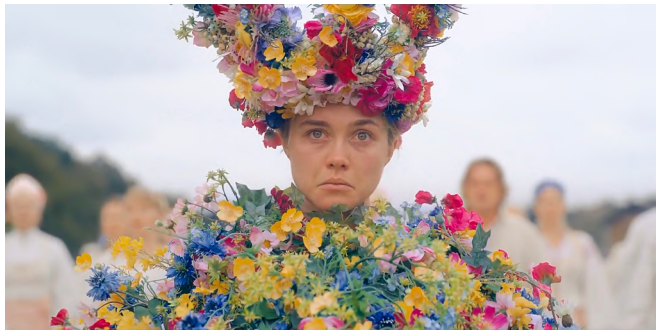




In *Audition*, this sequence comes when Aoyama awakens from his drugged reverie to find himself paralysed on the floor of his home. Asami, now clad in a black apron and gloves, stands over Aoyama. After berating him for failing to love only her, she tortures him. Although Aoyama's home was initially a mundane, realistic space, here its mise-en-scène shifts toward the dramatic and sinister – its flat lighting replaced by a dramatic *chiaroscuro* created by a single orange bulb, casting a furnace-like glow (evoking the aesthetic of the stairwell). Its former realistic aesthetic replaced by a striking high-contrast glare, Aoyama's home is transformed into a space of horror – thus completing the film's spatial transition. Where once Aoyama was at ease in the home in the film's early scenes, he now 'lies more or less castrated on the ground' (Jeng 2015: 19) while Asami stands over him, in command of the frame. An initially mundane space is thus visually transfigured into a space of horror – and with it Aoyama's authority overturned by Asami.

As the torture takes place, Aoyama's body is captured in close-ups of individual, distressed body parts – his torso filled with needles, his foot as piano wire saws through it. As Jonah Jeng notes, this has the effect of 'turning the male body into an object' (2015: 19), reducing Aoyama to suffering flesh with no agency. This reverses his earlier objectification of Asami and also prevents identification with his perspective. Aoyama is eventually rescued by his son, who subdues Asami. The film closes on canted, off-centre shots of Aoyama and Asami lying





on the floor, as dialogue from an earlier romantic exchange between the pair is heard in non-diegetic voiceover – a final, surreal rupture in continuity. Even as Asami is seemingly defeated, then, the film ends still firmly situated in the spaces of horror (bizarre in appearance, unbound by conventional logic) with Aoyama still helpless. There can be no escape back to normality – or to patriarchy.

In *Midsommar*, the film's climax sees Dani, now as May Queen, called upon to select a sacrifice for a traditional ceremony of the festival. Enraged after witnessing the ritual, Dani selects Christian. At the scene's beginning, Dani is at the centre of a wide shot, while Christian sits on the margins of the frame, still immobilised – in this composition, she is the master of the space, he its prisoner. He is unable to speak or move and the camera largely remains distant from him; he is deprived of agency and of perspective. As she makes her decision, she and Christian's faces are shown in alternating close-ups – he staring blankly ahead, she tearful with hurt

and anger. Christian's close-ups show his face claustrophobically confined suggesting his helplessness, while Dani's face is surrounded by flowers from her dress and crown, putting her in visual harmony with the commune's pastoral aesthetic. (Note that both women wear dramatic costumes matching the heightened aesthetic of their surroundings during the climax.)

As Christian is prepared for sacrifice by being stuffed into the disembowelled corpse of a bear, his paralysed body is positioned at the side of frame, with the bear at the centre – marginalised and insignificant within a bizarre tableau. As he and others to be sacrificed are placed in a church-like structure which is then set alight, the space is captured in a shot from above, depriving us of a humanising view of Christian's face as he burns and further stressing an impression of his helplessness. This is followed by a closer shot of the burning Christian, his face now obscured by the flames. Like Aoyama, he is reduced to just a suffering body, robbed of interiority or subjectivity – this is compounded by his literal dehumanisation through the bear skin. The film's final shots are a series of dreamlike dissolves toward Dani's face as she gazes at the conflagration; surrounded by flowers and at the centre of the frame, she begins to smile, in tune with the space's sinister nature – and in control of it. Here, the dreamlike, bizarre nature of the commune reaches its pinnacle, through the use of dissolves to erase any clear sense of time and continuity, bizarre images such as sacrificial victims with their eyes replaced by flowers, and hordes of Harga revellers screaming in terror and ecstasy in front of the burning temple. Dani's alignment with and power over the space of the commune is at its height here, too; the final dissolve from the collapse of the burned temple to Dani's face as she begins to smile affirms her belonging within the space and her agency over the nightmarish events occurring therein – her status as the creator and orchestrator of the violent, vibrant images of the inferno. Similarly to *Audition*'s closing scene, the final shots of *Midsommar* cement the irreversibility of the film's shifts in space, genre and power; by ending on images of Dani euphoric and triumphant, looking upon a horrific scene she has created, the film offers a final affirmation of both her newfound power and the film's situation within spaces of horror – allowing no escape from either.

Both films thus conclude their spatial transitions with a complete immersion in spaces of horror and the punishment of the male lead by the female in specifically horrific fashion.





Despite their seeming disparities, then, *Audition* and *Midsommar* display similar usage of space in relation to genre and dynamics of power. Beginning in realistic spaces – ones defined by their muted visual style and use of real locations – they establish an unequal male-female relationship embedded in said spaces; they privilege *him* over *her*. They both then progress to heightened, sinister and irrational spaces as the film more overtly enters the horror genre. These spaces are rendered in a stylised, menacing fashion and are prone to lapses into inexplicable, dreamlike narrative logic divorced from realism. Within these spaces the male is overcome and disempowered by their nightmarish aspect, which the female character is in harmony with and empowered by. Both films climax in spectacular, surreal sequences wherein the female character exacts violent punishment upon the male – thus bringing the transfer of genre and of power to culmination.

Furthermore, I would argue that the relation of space, genre and power in these films shows the subversive potential of horror – it is, after all, the specifically *horrific* aspects of space that result in the overthrowing of the male's authority and the empowerment of the female in both films. I would contend that, as a genre built on the inverted and uncanny, horror has a particularly strong capacity to carry out spatial and generic disturbances – to invade and disrupt cinematic spaces and subvert their power dynamics, to pull films into new and bizarre spaces which overturn their initially established realities.

MILO FARRAGHER-HANKS

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MICHAEL WALKER 1942 – 2022

A tribute

Michael's long and productive association with *Movie* began in the 1960s and he remained a member of its editorial board until the journal's final issue in 2000. Together with other *Movie* veterans, he then became a founding editor of its online successor, co-editing two early issues. He recalled that, from its first appearance in 1962, *Movie* helped to guide his viewing as a student film enthusiast and led him a few years later to attend courses in London taught by Ian Cameron and Robin Wood. It was through Robin that an essay he had written as coursework on *Pierrot le fou* was accepted for the second edition of the *Movie* paperback on Jean-Luc Godard (1969). Michael's article on Bergman's *Shame* appeared in *Movie* 17 (Winter 1969/70), and the first of what became his many works on Hitchcock in *Movie* 18 (Winter 1970/71). He contributed to another *Movie* anthology, *Second Wave* (1970), and – the highest profile of these early publications – he co-authored the *Movie* paperback on Claude Chabrol (1970) with Robin Wood. By the end of the 1960s both Michael and Jim Hillier, his equally film obsessed contemporary at University College, Oxford, had been invited to join the editorial board and became major contributors to *Movie* 19 (Winter 1971/72), the issue on Elia Kazan, which proved to be the last in Ian Cameron's original design. It was an impressive opening to a remarkable writing career.

Important aspects of Michael's writing are already present in these early essays. His arguments are developed with extensive and meticulous reference to the detail of films and marked by authoritative cross reference and comparison to a director's other works. It seems clear not only that he had rapidly mastered notetaking in the dark (a skill he attributed to Ian Cameron's teaching) but was able to create from the viewing notes rich resources for his writing to draw on, processes that laid the basis for lifelong, highly systematic record keeping. As he would cheerfully acknowledge, his scientific training and an early job in the civil service involving systems analysis left their mark, as they would on the ways in which he increasingly thought and wrote about movies.

Movie reappeared after a three-year gap, in a new format and design, with issue 20 in 1975, and a further six issues were published through the rest of the seventies, a period marked by the challenge and stimulus of new forms of film theory and approaches to criticism that rapidly began to dominate the emerging film academic world. Michael started teaching in further education in 1973, the time in which film was being developed as a wholly new subject within the formal O and A level examination system, and he later commented on how the pressures of work began to erode his previously free evenings and curtailed his cinemagoing. Yet it's clear that through this time he was also formulating and researching what became a major change of direction, responsive in part to new debates and forms of analysis.

Michael attached particular significance to his article on *Black Narcissus*, published in *Framework* in Winter 1978-79. Probably owing to the uncertainties of small magazine publishing, it appeared before his article on melodrama, to which it refers, but it belongs firmly to the phase of work that followed, although as the sole essay on a British film it can seem something of an outsider. Countering dismissive accounts of the film, it is rooted in an appreciation of *Black Narcissus* as remarkable melodrama and develops an intricate, extended psychoanalytical reading, the combination of approaches central to what followed. The basis for this work appeared two years later in the first of Michael's longest articles to date, both published in the double issue, 'Max Ophuls and Melodrama' (*Movie* 29/30 Summer 1982).

'Melodrama and the American Cinema' marked a significant departure from his previous writing, which had focused largely on individual films and directors, and signalled a direction that his interests would increasingly take, in tracing continuities and transformations within the rich traditions of popular cinema. It is also one of the most valuable discussions of a form within Hollywood history that was increasingly absorbing film scholars as critical attention moved from what Michael, absorbing great swathes of Hollywood cinema into one multi-faceted grouping, called 'melodramas of action' to those of 'passion'. The article sets out to provide a theoretical grounding for the gathering interest in melodrama by drawing on and developing approaches from several sources on theatrical and literary melodrama but adapting these in a remarkably wide-ranging consideration of Hollywood movies from their earliest days. He cites literally dozens of films and, as was clear from any conversation with Michael about his work, none was included casually – he could happily discuss each at length.

Significant in 'Melodrama and the American Cinema' and its 'provisional model' of melodrama are ideological and psychoanalytical perspectives that, absorbed into the detailed analysis of movies that was always the foundation of his writing, would remain vital aspects of Michael's work. Much of 'Ophuls in Hollywood', the other major piece from *Movie* 29/30, develops his approach to melodrama into detailed analyses of specific movies, the theme that Michael explored further in several articles published in the early 1990s, notably on films that had previously received limited extended discussion, such as *All I Desire*, *Secret Beyond the Door* and *King's Row*. The group also included a remarkable comparative analysis of *Orphans of the Storm* and *The Searchers* under the heading of 'Melodramatic Narrative'. Who else but Michael would have come up with that unexpected juxtaposition?

This article and *Kings Row* were published in *CineAction*, the journal Robin Wood and colleagues had established in

Toronto, and which had warmly welcomed contributions from several other *Movie* writers. This was a period, from the 1980s into the 90s, during which *Movie* appeared irregularly, with gaps of up three and four years, before the final and much longer gap until its final issue, *Movie* 36, at the turn of the century. Michael contributed to the end, with a fine piece on Ophuls' *La Signora di tutti* in *Movie* 36. During this period, however, a number of major *Movie* books were developed. Michael was central to *The Movie Book of Film Noir* (1993), for which he wrote the introduction and two other chapters, and he contributed a long exploration of the westerns of Delmer Daves to *The Movie Book of the Western* (1996). Two other *Movie* books – on Alfred Hitchcock and Fritz Lang – were planned and largely written but never published, their essays appearing in other publications over the next few years, including several on Lang in Issues 2 and 3 of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, which Michael co-edited.

Throughout, in addition to continued appearances in *CineAction,* he wrote substantial articles for *The Hitchcock Annual* and over 40 shorter contributions to *Film Dope* which cover a striking range of Hollywood directors, actors, writers, and cinematographers, plus a sprinkling of names from other traditions.

It was after he retired and free from the demands of teaching that Michael was able to devote time to longer projects and in the following years he produced innovative books in three very different fields: *Hitchcock's Motifs* (2005), *Modern Ghost Melodramas*: *'What Lies Beneath'* (2017), and *Endings in the Cinema: Thresholds, Water and the Beach* (2020). All are linked, though, by Michael's long preoccupation with motifs in film and by his characteristically detailed and searching comparative study – the latter two making cross-cultural comparisons that range across movies from America, Europe and, in *Ghost Melodramas*, South Korea and Japan.

For Michael, there were always new projects and two, both intended to become *Movie* e-books, had preoccupied him for some time. He worked extensively on the 'persecuted wives' cycle of films in 1940s and 50s Hollywood, and we hope it will be possible to publish material from this study at a later point. The second, *Modern Female Agent Thrillers*, was nearing completion when he died, and we are hoping to publish it shortly as part of our tribute. From forty years earlier, we include here the key article, 'Melodrama in the American Cinema', one of Michael's many contributions to *Movie*, and an article that deserves to be better known. Thanks to Jill Hollis' generous permission, we are able not only to include it but to reproduce Ian Cameron's splendid design for *Movie* 29/30.

We have focussed here mainly on Michael's writing, but we also remember him – some of us across many years – as a friend and as a colleague in *Movie* and *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*. He was passionate about movies and loved sharing his enthusiasms. Exchanging work in progress with friends was invariably part of the writing process for Michael; he genuinely welcomed comments and was generous with comment and critical support for others. He was intensely serious about his work, but one of his charms was that for him thinking and talking about movies were clearly also fun. Although for years he suffered from a serious lung condition, he remained apparently tireless, pursuing new projects, watching movies (rarely missing either Bologna's *Il Cinema Ritrovato* or Pordenone's *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto*), and always keen to talk, exchange views and argue. In a field in which debate has often become very strident, Michael had firm opinions but invariably remained calm and good-humoured, his wonderful smile and a laugh never far away.

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

With thanks to Alex Jacoby



MICHAEL WALKER 1942 – 2022

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Melodrama and the American Cinema

Although a great deal has been written in recent years about film melodrama, there has been little attempt to theorise it. To do this, it seems necessary to take into account the history of the melodramatic form, which evolved as a popular dramatic genre in the late eighteenth century and which then dominated nineteenth century theatre. Thomas Elsaesser's seminal essay 'Tales of Sound and Fury' in *Monogram 4* (an issue devoted to melodrama) sketches in the main lines of the complex set of determinants which contributed to the evolution of the form. Whilst I am much indebted to the article, particularly for its insights into the family/small-town melodrama, my concern here is with a wider notion of melodrama and is more generic-thematic: I shall take the ingredients (structures, characters, themes, motifs, etc) of traditional popular melodrama as a starting-point from which to trace the melodramatic tradition in the American cinema.

The most useful short account of theatrical melodrama I have found is James Smith's monograph 'Melodrama' (1973, No 28, in the Methuen Critical Idiom series; it contains a valuable bibliography). A more detailed account and a historical perspective is provided by Frank Rahill's 'The World of Melodrama' (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), which traces the evolution of stage melodrama in France, England and the US. Such accounts of melodrama stress its vitality, richness, range and popularity. Even Allardyce Nicoll in 'World Drama' (Harrap, 2nd edition, 1976), although writing within the Anglo-Saxon critical tradition of the inherent inferiority of melodrama, cannot but acknowledge its significance for more respectable drama: 'it is not too much to say that the line of development towards Ibsen proceeds from the fount of melodrama' (p 364). And, just as it now seems irresponsible to avoid serious consideration of such a vital form of popular culture on the grounds that it 'isn't art', the common practice of film critics (see for example 'Dossier on Melodrama' *Screen*, Summer 1977) of ignoring the history of the form and simply concentrating on certain films of Ophuls, Sirk, Minnelli, Ray *et al* as melodramas seems too convenient a let-out. Melodrama is arguably the most important generic root of the American cinema. But until it has been located more theoretically as both a dramatic structure and a historical form, our grasp of its relevance will remain restricted and confused.

Tragedy and Melodrama

A theoretical approach to melodrama has been proposed by Robert Heilman in his books 'Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience' (University of Washington Press, 1968) and 'The Iceman, The Arsonist and the Troubled Agent' (Allen & Unwin, 1973). In her article on Sirk and melodrama in *Movie 25*, Laura Mulvey refers briefly to Heilman's ideas. Whilst it becomes necessary, in the light of the evolution of the melodramatic form in the American cinema (Heilman restricts himself to the theatre), to refine Heilman's model, it is a useful starting point. His model proposes that tragedy and melodrama be viewed as two alternative *structures*, determined by different kinds of 'dividedness' (dramatic conflict). In tragedy, *man* is divided, torn between conflicting values and desires. In Meredith's words, 'We are betrayed by what is false within'—tragedy has no need of villains; it is the forces within himself with which the hero must grapple. In melodrama, however, it is the *world* that is divided—between good and evil, weak and strong, oppressed and oppressors. The hero of melodrama is himself undivided, 'whole', free from the tensions of choosing between conflicting loyalties, imperatives or desires. The forces with which such a hero must grapple are external: oppression, corruption, villainy in general, 'natural' disasters.

Elaborating on these basic alternatives, Heilman writes that in tragedy there is 'freedom, choice, acceptance of guilt, tensions that pull men in opposite ways, . . . inclusiveness of personality, a sense of the ambiguity and contradictoriness in reality (of the good-and-evil in values and character): in sum, a fundamental complexity and a concern with the ordering of the self.' Hubris and self-knowledge are subsequently added to these characteristics. But in the divided world of melodrama, there is a sense of innocence rather than guilt: 'sometimes . . . accompanied by littleness, weakness, inadequacy, deprivation, grievance; sometimes . . . by the spirit of blame and indignation, the finding of scapegoats and the punishing of the guilty: in sum, a concern with ordering the world.' 'In one [of these forms] we see evil as coexisting with good (Lear, Macbeth) and we contemplate it through the eyes of a doer with whom we are identified in the capacity for choice (of good or evil) and knowledge and self-judgment; in the other we see evil as independent, as out there, as a disaster (Richard III, Nazis, earthquakes, epidemics) that we contemplate from the vantage point of innocence, whether we simply suffer from it or actively contend against it. The latter is the realm which, because of its internal diversities, has not been known by an inclusive term (it comprises aspects of . . . "drama", "serious play", "problem play", "propaganda play", "naturalistic tragedy" and . . . even of "romance") but for which melodrama is the rational designation.' ('The Iceman', Chapter 2)

The advantages of Heilman's model are i) its rehabilitation of the term melodrama: he insists that it refers to a structure, and has no qualitative overtones (nevertheless, the tragic structure obviously permits a greater complexity of character), ii) the insight it provides into the two forms, each relating to distinctive patterns of experience/ways of experiencing and hence, in the finished work, two *types* of structured 'world', iii) the insight it provides into the works themselves. The forms, as Heilman characterises them, describe structuring patterns/tendencies within works, and should be applied to a finished work only if one of the forms can be shown to dominate. The forms 'are often found in the same play; there is a sense in which they may compete for the play . . . But if we are to understand the generic mode that mainly organises a play—or even the doubleness or irresoluteness in a play's interpretative angle of vision—then we need first to look at the pure forms more fully.' ('The Iceman', p 25). At the same time, the model, whilst fitting the 'standard' tragedies and melodramas, in recasting plays such as 'Richard III' and 'Romeo and Juliet' as melodramas, enables one to make more sense of them dramatically than was possible with traditional, untheorised views of them as 'tragedies'.

Accepting that the model requires some reformulation to accommodate, say, 'fifties Hollywood melodramas, in which the characters are frequently 'divided', it nevertheless has a more problematic weakness. Its purging of such notions as 'tragic feeling' (as a subjective reaction to something) is double-edged. One gains in terms of precision (whereas, traditionally, one man's tragedy could be another man's melodrama) but this could diminish our sense of what is 'tragic'. The 'tragic sense' as a structure of feeling has—despite acute difficulties in being precise about it—an undeniable significance for drama, as writers from Aristotle onwards have stressed. But, for Heilman, the model necessarily mediates the structure of feeling. Whereas, according to the model, only characters with the ability to gain moral self-awareness can properly be described as tragic, we might feel as tragic the very inability of a character to gain such self-awareness: for example, as Robin Wood has pointed out to me, Hammond in the final scene of *Mandingo*.

Whilst this potential split between 'tragedy' and 'tragic feeling' raises problems too wide to be considered here, with melodrama there are fewer problems. Our sense of 'the melodramatic' derives primarily from the features of the eighteenth and nineteenth century plays commonly referred to as melodramas, and these readily fit Heilman's model, as James Smith, who utilises Heilman's concepts, demonstrates. Heilman himself, anxious to preserve the neutrality of the term melodrama, tends to disparage such works as '"popular melodrama", which implies a stereotyped and substandard version of a form capable of better things' ('The Iceman', p 23). But, within popular theatrical melodrama, there was a great range of quality, as Rahill shows. And the cinema was fed by the whole of the nineteenth century melodramatic tradition, theatrical and literary, including such respected literary works as the novels of Dickens, Hugo and Hawthorne. Investigation of the melodramatic tradition in the American cinema needs to begin historically, with the 'appropriation of melodrama' by early film-makers. In discussing this, and the ways in which the tradition subsequently evolved, I shall keep to Heilman's structural model, but indicate, where appropriate, such modifications as seem necessary to sustain its usefulness. I shall also introduce other models to supplement Heilman's at points where they seem to contribute to a greater understanding of the ways in which melodrama functions in the American cinema.

Melodrama and the Silent Cinema: D. W. Griffith

One can see this appropriation of melodrama especially in the works of Griffith: indeed, *The Birth of a Nation* (1914), *Way Down East* (1920) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) were adapted from theatrical melodramas, the last with 'additional material' from Dickens's 'A Tale of Two Cities'. But all Griffith's films—like the vast majority of silent movies—display the typical features and forms of traditional melodrama, as described by Rahill, Smith and others. Looking at Griffith's movies thus enables us to characterise many of these features, although my use of his films in particular is as much a reflection of my familiarity with them as a wish to place them in privileged position.

1) Characters: the patient, suffering heroines; the upright, but often somewhat ineffectual heroes; the unscrupulous, scheming villains, usually with sexual



Still: D. W. Griffith's Dream Street*—Spike (Ralph Graves) and Gipsy Fair (Carol Dempster).*

designs on the virginal heroines; the saintly mother-figures; the stern 'Victorian' father-figures—converted to benevolence at the end of *Way Down East, Orphans* and *America* (1924) but irredeemably brutal in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), in which the role merges into the villain's—and an assortment of comic characters. *True Heart Susie* (1919) even contains a 'bad, sexual' woman. All these characters are typically 'whole', untroubled by inner conflict. The last minute conversions of the fathers seem to betoken a limited amount of 'self-awareness', but the conversion is essentially from one stereotyped (undivided) stance to another.

Whilst, on Heilman's model, such 'reformed' characters would certainly not qualify as 'tragic', they do raise the question of the missing ingredient in the model: the concept of ideology. The conversions are the product of ideological factors: a way of accommodating these characters in the (reconstructed) worlds at the ends of the films. A more interesting example of this process is supplied by the Christian-articulated conversion in *Dream Street* (1921), in which Spike, who has behaved like the villain, aggressively forcing himself on the heroine, experiences a Christian 'awakening' and becomes the hero, his lust transformed into love. Here the conversion is an aspect of the film's explicit ideological project (it is an allegory showing the triumph of Good over Evil) but, more importantly, it arises from attempts to resolve the tensions set up by the casting of Carol Dempster as a sexually provocative heroine. The characters in *Dream Street* are put through a series of shifts as a result of this initial 'problem', resulting in contradictions and unresolved tensions.

One can accordingly suggest the first point of reformulation of the Heilman model: where the characters are simply 'acting-out' (expressing) ideological projects, tensions or contradictions, then the question of self-awareness does not genuinely arise and the mode is still effectively melodrama. (In her article, Laura Mulvey makes a similar point.) To achieve 'full tragic awareness', the characters must in some sense come to understand the nature of the forces which impel them, the choices which confront them. Otherwise they remain characters of melodrama, acting 'blindly', to a greater or lesser extent at the mercy of the ideological forces, even when the consequences are not as drastic as in *Dream Street*, but 'simply' oblige the characters to behave in certain ways. This is not to claim that tragedy is 'ideology-free' (how could it be?) but rather that the self-awareness of the tragic character brings with it a greater freedom from the constraints of the ideology (e.g. the freedom of choice), even though the options themselves may be ideologically determined.

The character-types of melodrama derive from a complex of sources: historical, ideological, mythical, psychoanalytical. In 'Anatomy of Criticism' (Princeton Paperback, 1971), Northrop Frye writes: 'The romancer does not attempt to create "real people" so much as stylised figures which expand into psychological archetypes. It is in the romance that we find Jung's libido, anima and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine and villain respectively' (p 304). One cannot simply reapply this formula to melodrama—primarily because the latter operates more in Frye's low mimetic mode, with a hero with considerably reduced powers—but melodrama preserves a similar archetypal quality of character, into which the classic Oedipal family relationships have also been projected. And, given a certain puritan ideology, sexuality is necessarily displaced from the pure hero and heroine on to the villain and vamp (hence the *form* of Spike's conversion) and this, together with other ideologically-loaded projections of feared 'otherness' (racial, class, religious, etc) effectively creates these character-types. But this sexuality, along with other villainous attributes such as ruthlessness and deceitfulness, regularly endows these characters with powers greater than the all-too-good hero and heroine. (It is a clear measure of the ideological bias in Griffith's characters that only when the hero is enacting some ideological project dear to the director's heart—as in *The Birth of a Nation* and *America*—do we find a 'strong' hero. Most Griffith heroes are no match for the older, more powerfully built villains.) Thus, since most melodrama ends with the defeat of the villain and/or villainess-vamp—i.e. the ultimate suppression of these greater powers—there is an ideological contradiction at the heart of the structures. (The equivalent contradiction in *Dream Street* is that the hero is 'strong' because he was originally the villain!) Conversions of the villain (equivalent conversions of the vamp are almost unthinkable, unless linked to her death: ideologically speaking, she is simply too dangerous) are one way of defusing his sexual powers, but, as Richard Griffith and Arthur Mayer write in their useful primer of Hollywood's archetypes, cycles and genres, 'The Movies' (Spring Books, Hamlyn, 2nd edition, 1971) it is 'much more satisfactory to shoot [him].' In any event, these character-types of melodrama clearly act as prototypes for the more complex characters which evolved in the American cinema. Even the vamp, the most aberrant and caricatured of these character-types, converts readily into the (less 'exotic', more 'natural') *femme fatale*. This whole area of transformation of archetypes is interestingly discussed in Edgar Morin's 'The Stars' (translated by R. Howard, Grove Press, 1960).

2) Structures, themes, motifs. In 'Aspects of Melodrama' in *Monogram 4*, David Morse lists a number of characteristics of traditional melodrama, citing tendencies towards a) privileging the hero and heroine, b) strong audience identification, c) ranking characters in terms of good and evil rather than class, d) climaxes 'for their own sake', e) spectacle, dramatic action, suspense sequences, f) 'the unmotivated, unprepared, unexpected and immediate' and g) wish-fulfilment, which evades rather than resolves dramatic conflicts. With reservations (class is more significant to melodrama than Morse suggests; wish-fulfilment I discuss later), I would broadly accept these, and would like here to follow up Morse's suggestion that 'much of what we value in the American cinema today stems from this melodrama tradition in general and from Griffith's specific translation of it into the film medium.' Morse himself speaks of 'the immediacy of the relationship which an audience establishes with a star,' of the American cinema's 'readiness to risk strong, sentimental, even embarrassing scenes, to resort to and go beyond cliché. The American cinema has been heavily self-censored . . . yet it has been strangely uninhibited. For in the cinema, love, hate, grief, joy, eroticism, violence cease to be concepts and verbal encounters and become realities which the spectator must confront and reckon with.'

Whilst fully concurring with this line of argument, I believe it is also possible to be more specific about the significance for Hollywood of the achievements of Griffith and other major directors of the early years, such as DeMille, Sjöström, Stroheim. In the 'unashamed melodramas' of these directors, one finds that the way in which the melodramatic structures, sequences and moments are translated into film invests them with an intensity and power which makes them paradigms for future film-makers. This is not to claim that later film-makers necessarily saw and copied the great moments of the pioneers, but rather that these directors had such a grasp of the potential of melodrama that, to achieve similar effects, other film-makers necessarily followed similar lines.

Consider, for example, the sequences of climax and suspense in Griffith's movies which are centred on threats to the heroine: both the famous last-minute rescues and those extraordinary scenes of hysteria in which women go berserk, faint dead away (Mae Marsh trying to keep her baby in *Intolerance*, 1916, Lillian Gish in the closet in *Broken Blossoms*, the street/balcony meeting of the adopted sisters in *Orphans of the Storm*), lose their reason (Lillian Gish wandering on the battlefield in *Hearts of the World*, 1918) or even commit suicide (Mae Marsh fleeing from the Negro Gus to jump to her death in *The Birth of a Nation*). Andrew Sarris has pointed out in 'The American Cinema' (Dutton, 1968) that the bird-in-a-cage telephone-booth image in *The Birds* (1963)



duplicates the way in which Griffith shows Lillian Gish in the closet. But a more instructive example is provided by the way in which the ending of *Cathy Come Home* (1966, UK) reprises Mae Marsh's helpless fight to keep her baby. Now, any scene in which an innocent young mother is forcibly deprived of her child(ren) is bound to be upsetting for an audience, and so the similarity would seem to be of limited interest. But there is a deeper, ideological structure which Griffith here, and Sjöström and Frances Marion in their equivalent scene in *The Scarlet Letter* (1926), clearly grasped, however intuitively. *Intolerance* and *Cathy Come Home* are both melodramas of protest (see later) and so it's important that the child(ren) are legitimate, that the



Frames: Griffith heroines. Above—Lillian Gish in Hearts of the World. *Left—Mae Marsh fighting to keep her baby in* Intolerance.

husband is likewise a victim of the hostile society and that the child(ren) are actually removed from the mother's care. However, in the scene in *The Scarlet Letter* and *its* echo in *Johnny Belinda* (1948), where the attempts to remove the child are *un*successful, a significantly different set of factors are brought into play. In these films, the child is illegitimate and the father is unknown to the society—but not, of course, to the mother—and himself takes an active part (anti- and pro-removal respectively) in the scene. And so we are not just concerned here with an indictment of an unjust, intolerant society, which the film of *The Scarlet Letter* views far more scathingly than Hawthorne's novel, but also with a (more challenging) view of male cowardice and duplicity, in which the woman vigorously triumphs.

An obvious inheritor of the Griffith tradition is John Ford, whose westerns and family/community films are steeped in melodrama. Yet Ford critics have scarcely recognised this. McBride and Wilmington in 'John Ford' (Secker & Warburg, 1974) can, for example, write a long sympathetic article on *The Sun Shines Bright* (1953) and yet virtually ignore the central (melodramatic) plot of the return home of a 'fallen woman' seeking her lost daughter, and the latter's place in the 'classic' hero-heroine-villain configuration in the film. Andrew Sarris in 'The John Ford Movie Mystery' (Secker & Warburg, 1976) actually has an aversion to the 'excesses' of melodrama—see his review of *Pilgrimage* (1933)—which perhaps accounts for his dismissing *Drums along the Mohawk* (1939) on the grounds that it 'never recovers from Claudette Colbert's whining performance at the outset of her ordeal in the wilderness,' since this 'whining' (which is, rather, an expression of genuine fear and distress) follows on from a hysterical outburst of a frenzy and intensity no less extraordinary than those in Griffith. But, unless one comes to terms with what caused the outburst and its tearful aftermath, one is refusing to acknowledge a major factor in Ford's work. It is the result of the heroine's first encounter with an (in fact friendly) Indian, and its quality of sheer hysterical panic is the exact equivalent of Mae Marsh's when propositioned by Gus in *Birth of a Nation*, who,again *pace* Sarris, this time in an essay in 'Focus on "The Birth of a Nation"' (ed. Frank Silva, Prentice Hall, 1971), doesn't just want to talk, but says he wants to get married! Although Ford's Indian is 'friendly' (i.e. Christianised!), the hysteria of his heroine is not presented as a comment on her but as an expression of the very real fears of women in the wilderness, no less so than the equivalent racial fear in Griffith's movie. *Drums along the Mohawk*, like Griffith's *America*, is a film about the War of Independence. Accordingly it is not surprising that its climactic sequence (the attack on the fort) is an almost exact repeat of the climax of *America*. And, in the ideological forces which are called into play in these climaxes (American against English/Tory; Christian against heathen; civilisation against savagery; white against Indian), the significance of the presence of the Indians—who, rather than the Tories, represent the real threat—cannot be overestimated. Just before the hero arrives with troops to the rescue, the Indians are seen 'manhandling' hysterical white women. Although Ford's racial attitudes are certainly far more ambivalent overall than Griffith's, such links emphasise how deep-rooted certain racialist assumptions are.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of the persistence of melodrama in Ford's films is to be found in the links between *Orphans of the Storm* and *The Searchers* (1956). One would expect films with a quest structure to have aspects in common, along the lines of the mythical structures analysed by Joseph Campbell in 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces' (Abacus, 1975). But the links are more complex and detailed than this, to the extent that Ford's film actually seems to have been based structurally on Griffith's, with the climactic scene in which the adopted sisters meet, only to be torn apart again, being recreated in Marty and Debbie's meeting in the desert. Yet it seems unlikely that Ford and Frank Nugent (the significant changes from Alan LeMay's novel all bring the film of *The Searchers* closer to *Orphans of the Storm*) have performed such an



Still: D. W. Griffith's America *—the Indians break into the fort.*

operation, consciously at least. Accordingly, it would seem to be a task for a theory of melodrama to help elucidate such connections.

The fear of rape, or of the forcible separation from a loved one—clearly what is being expressed in the examples of 'female hysteria' are certain very basic fears. This immediately suggests that a psychoanalytical model may help in the analysis of such moments. It is notable that, in melodrama, rape is a greater fear than death, as the expression 'a fate worse than death' implies. And so it is not surprising that certain threats of death are 'really' expressing the threat of rape. This is quite explicit in *Broken Blossoms*. After Burrows has smashed through the closet door with his axe (clear psychoanalytical imagery for rape), his beating to death of Lucy is filmed by Griffith as if it *were* a rape. Likewise, behind dozens of film murders of women during the Production Code years, one can discern the (necessarily suppressed) threat of rape as the underlying source of terror. The psychoanalytical significance of such fears has proved a contentious issue for feminists: see Juliet Mitchell's 'Psychoanalysis and Feminism' (Penguin, 1975). But the *prevalance* of the fears is not in doubt, being clinically well attested.

Whilst the threats to the heroines are almost invariably elaborated into suspense sequences (as in the last minute rescues), the misfortunes that befall the heroes are often very sudden and shocking. Again, examples in Griffith's films have served as cinematic paradigms. In the Modern Story of *Intolerance*, the hero is falsely accused of murder—a standard melodramatic device. But the way in which this is sprung upon him is a marvellous example of dramatic construction and timing. The hero is (unsuccessfully!) fighting the villain; suddenly the latter is shot and the gun thrown into the room. Disbelievingly, the hero picks up the gun (his own!) and is thus caught in a three-fold evidential trap: with a motive, holding the murder weapon and standing over the body. Subsequent uses of the device are equally dramatic: an enraged Lory (Charles Laughton), determined to 'settle with' Lambert (George Sanders), bursting into the latter's office and virtually tripping over the body as the Nazis storm in behind him (*This Land is Mine*, 1943); Michael (Orson Welles) walking into the arms of the police bearing both gun and a signed confession as Grisby's (Glenn Anders's) body is solemnly wheeled out (*The Lady from Shanghai*, 1946); Thornhill plucking the knife out of Townsend's back in sheer incredulity as everyone gapes at him in *North by Northwest* (1959). Each of these moments produces a complete dramatic switch: suddenly the hero has only two options—arrest for murder or flight. This underlines the strategic weakness of the device when used at the

Frame (below): The Birth of a Nation – *Elsie (Lillian Gish) menaced by Lydia (Mary Alden). Still (right):* Broken Blossoms – *Burrows (Donald Crisp) hauling Lucy (Lillian Gish) out of the closet*





end of *Frenzy* (1972). In terms of ingredients, the usage is inspired: having been framed by Rusk for the neck-tie murders, Blaney breaks out of jail to seek revenge and, arriving at Rusk's, proceeds to batter the figure in the bed, only to discover that it is the body of Rusk's latest victim—enter Inspector Oxford. But the moment is reduced to pure *frisson* as, seconds later, Rusk returns to be incriminated.

Other moments in Griffith's films which anticipate the highlights of future movies may be cited: friends/relatives, fighting on opposite sides, suddenly coming face to face on a battlefield (*Birth of a Nation*) repeated in *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) and *Shenandoah* (1965)—even the delirious 'meeting' of the hero and heroine on a battlefield in *Hearts of the World* is echoed in an extraordinary sequence in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952); tensions between the hero and the heroine's father exploding into violence which kills (*Broken Blossoms*) or maims (*America*) the father repeated in *Home from the Hill* (1960), *El Cid* (1961) and *Missouri Breaks* (1976).

In seeking to explain the impact of all such moments relating to the hero, a psychoanalytical model is here particularly suggestive. In a psychoanalytical analysis of *North by Northwest*, Raymond Bellour (*Communications 23*, summarised by Kari Hanet in Edinburgh '76 Magazine) argues that the film has an Oedipal narrative, with Townsend as a father-figure whom the hero apparently kills. Whilst not wishing to comment on the overall argument, I would like to focus on the hero *feeling accused of* the murder of Townsend. At first it looks suspect that Townsend can be seen as a father-figure; however, if we look at the other examples, it is striking that—with the exception of *Frenzy*—the dead characters are either a bad (sexually aggressive) father-figure (*Intolerance*) or sexual rivals in a narrative with fairly clear Oedipal overtones (*This Land is Mine, The Lady from Shanghai*), with the twist in the Welles that it is a death that enables the father-figure to exact a punitive revenge on the hero for his Oedipal transgression. So it would seem that part of the power of the syndrome does lie in buried Oedipal fears: of parricide or punishment. To demonstrate this convincingly would, of course, require detailed analysis, but it is notable that overtones of parricide are conspicuously less buried in the final examples above, complicated further, in these instances, by the at least implicitly incestuous father/daughter feelings.

Dramatic re-encounters are a favourite motif in melodrama; not just the *reconnaissance* discussed in Rahill (long-lost relatives/lovers finally being identified to one another) but equally the sudden, unexpected meeting of two people for whom the re-encounter is highly traumatic, such as the villain and someone he 'deeply wronged'. (Both represent melodramatic forms of Aristotle's discovery scenes.) A marvellous example occurs in *David Copperfield* (1934), when Ham, swimming out to get a line to a wrecked ship, clambers aboard to come face to face

Still: North by Northwest – *Thornhill (Cary Grant) meets Townsend (Philip Ober).*



with Steerforth, the man who 'ran off with' and then abandoned Emily, Ham's sweetheart. In the *reconnaissance*, we see the operation of (usually) uncomplicated wish-fulfilment, but here there are brought into play a more complex set of impulses whose efficacy depends, I suggest, on the extent to which the re-encounter dramatises 'the return of the repressed'. The *David Copperfield* example is powerful, not just because of the way it is handled, but also because it presents *both* men with a form of 'the return of the repressed', the confrontation arising structurally out of the recent trauma of Emily's death. The first group of battlefield encounters has a similar structural-dramatic complexity. In particular, in the two Civil War examples, the characters experience not just the shock of seeing that an enemy is in fact a friend (underlining the 'tragedy' of *civil* war), but something more. In *Shenandoah* it is the fact that the encounter of the youngest son is with a young Negro friend from the family farm—in context, a *racial* return of the repressed, despite the film's attempt to keep the family 'innocent' by insisting on its non-slave-owning ideology. In *The Birth of a Nation*, it is a shared death which Griffith handles *erotically*, suggesting a *gay* return of the repressed, the implications of the extensive earlier horseplay between the two friends surfacing at the moment of death.

The battlefield 'reunion' of hero and heroine in *Hearts of the World* is even more remarkable. Retrospectively, the sequence actually reads 'like' a dream: the heroine magically finds her sweetheart (wish-fulfilment) but believes him to be dead (her worst fears) and afterwards only partly remembers what happened. And the fact that she lies with him all night, her wedding dress wrapped around her—it was to have been their wedding night—adds a quite Bunuelian dimension. The reunion in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* is virtually 'presented as' wish-fulfilment: an injured Cynthia (Ava Gardner) prays for Harry (Gregory Peck) to find her; he does. And, in their subsequent separation, when Harry is shot in the leg by his own officer for attempting to go with her, we see an extraordinary expression of the military (the law) as a 'castrating' power.

The psychoanalytical model is here employed as a means of making sense of the effectiveness of certain melodramatic structures and motifs, on the assumption that much of their inherent power lies in the way they dramatise, however unconsciously, key psychoanalytical processes, such as the Oedipus complex or

Frame (below): 'as if in a dream', Lillian Gish finds Robert Harron on the battlefield in Hearts of the World. *Still (right):* Orphans of the Storm*—Lillian Gish and the French Revolution.*





'the return of the repressed'. (See, for instance, Robin Wood's 'The Return of the Repressed' in *Film Comment* July/August 1978, which argues that this process underpins and structures the whole of the horror genre. For a detailed application of this concept to a film, see my article on *Black Narcissus* in *Framework* 9.) The battlefield reunions are special examples, in which the 'emotional logic' of the films' narratives can be likened to that of a dream, with the battlefield as the terrain of the unconscious. But the general rationale for the use of the psychoanalytical model is that melodrama can be aligned, not just with dreams (the simplest expression of which is in the oft-noted wish fulfilment aspect of the form), but also, as a *popular* cultural form, with myths and folk-tales which have been fruitfully investigated along such lines. Moreover, melodrama has always worked to elicit an intense emotional response, along the lines specified by David Morse, which 'opens a way' for psychoanalysis.

3) Settings. Theatrical melodrama covered an enormous range of historical, geographical and cultural settings. But certain settings were evidently inherently more dramatic than others. Stroheim's films illustrate one general principle: that there is more dramatic potential in upper-class settings (opulence leading to intrigue, decadence and vice) and lower-class ones (poverty leading to suffering, crime and violence) than those of the middle classes, which rose to an equivalent prominence later, in the family/small-town melodramas. Griffith's films, in some cases demonstrate the same principle (*Broken Blossoms, Dream Street, Orphans*), but tend rather to follow the spectacular tradition of melodrama: the narratives are set against a background of momentous historical events, massive conflicts and upheavals which are spectacularly recreated—the American Civil War (*The Birth of a Nation*), the Fall of Babylon and the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre of the Huguenots (*Intolerance*), the First World War (*Hearts of the World*), the French Revolution (*Orphans of the Storm*), the War of Independence (*America*). But, whilst the opportunities for spectacle are fully exploited by Griffith, the crucial function of these background settings, as in all good melodrama, is to provide a succession of events which threaten, disrupt or violate the way of life, security or happiness of the central characters. And at the heart of the central characters we find 'the family': a network of family relationships whose ties dominate the character interaction. The family was, of course, an important ingredient of traditional melodrama, but Griffith reinforced its centrality. Thus *The Birth of a Nation* tells its story of the Civil War almost exclusively through the war's impact on two families, one from the North, the other the South. But, of course, this very emphasis on the family introduces fundamental psychoanalytical and ideological tensions into the narrative which in turn provide much of the dramatic interest of this area of melodrama.

American film melodrama also took over the basic pastoral polarity between city and country: the former a place of violence and corruption, the latter of the Arcadian 'good life'. It is a village community which is the chosen ideological material to represent the sufferings of a people at war in *Hearts of the World*, fusing the close small-scale community (families and friends) with the appropriate pastoral

images. (In the equivalent world of *Drums along the Mohawk*—frontier American—images of sheep are inserted into the narrative at appropriate moments *purely* to create a pastoral atmosphere, being otherwise disconnected from the diegetic world.) If a Griffith heroine goes to the city, she suffers some terrible villainy: seduction through a fake wedding (*Way Down East*); abduction, bondage, imprisonment, etc. (*Orphans of the Storm*). In other films, the city can of course be equally dangerous for a 'country boy': *Sunrise* (1927), *Hallelujah* (1929). As regards class, Griffith's films are archetypally bourgeois: the upper-class worlds (*Way Down East, Orphans of the Storm*) and the lower-class worlds (*Broken Blossoms* and again *Orphans of the Storm*) afford little but exploitation and misery for the suffering central characters who, when 'rewarded with' a happy end, tend to be placed firmly in an idealised middle-class, preferably upper middle-class, setting (*Way Down East, Dream Street, Orphans of the Storm*). The villains likewise almost invariably come from the non-bourgeois classes, or, of course, are characterised racially. But silent film melodrama wasn't exclusively a 'bourgeois' form any more than theatrical melodrama had been, despite Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's assertions (*Screen*, Summer 1977). Melodrama should be seen rather as a structure, which can be applied to proletarian, bourgeois or upper-class dramas, each with their different settings, characters and ideological emphasis. In nineteenth century popular melodrama, as Frank Rahill shows, there was an honourable tradition of proletarian heroes, who may similarly be found in the silent cinema, e.g. in the films of Walsh, Vidor and Dwan.

4) Tone. Rahill stresses the moral preaching in melodrama as popularised by Pixerécourt: 'Preaching is scattered thick in the plays; and, as in *drame*, maxims occur on virtually every page' (p 64). I argue below that this 'preaching' tradition was incorporated in quite complex ways into later film melodrama, but Griffith's films seemingly continue the tradition quite openly—with their 'moral' inter-titles and quaintly instructive opening legends. Like their stage predecessors, the films seem designed to edify and instruct. However, it should be emphasised that the naivety of the inter-titles is frequently contradicted by the complexities of the visuals, which accordingly set up a resistance against such simplifying.

Rahill also attempts a definition of melodrama (quoted in full in Smith) which concludes: 'It is conventionally moral and humanitarian in point of view and sentimental and optimistic in temper, concluding its fable happily with virtue rewarded after many trials and vice punished.' This is perhaps the conventional view of melodrama, but it doesn't really do justice to the complexities of tone in the works themselves. The peculiar fusion, in different

Frames: Mae Marsh and Henry Walthall in The Birth of a Nation. *Below—the Ku Klux Klan flag is revealed as the banner for the South to rally around after the Civil War. Right—the death of an innocent which serves to rouse the Klan to action.*





combinations and/or rapid succession, of sentimentality, wistfulness, comedy, moral earnestness, pathos, passion, triumph, despair, high drama and sheer corn (a by no means comprehensive list) makes the tone of melodrama unusually difficult to 'catch' and respond to; indeed the high brow reaction (intellectual 'sophistication' tyrannising emotional response) commonly rejects these different textures to treat it all basically as comedy. But Rahill's description is also deficient in another respect, as he himself later acknowledges. *Most* melodramas may be optimistic, but melodramas *can* be highly pessimistic, with unhappy or even bitter endings, as in *Broken Blossoms*.

Triumph, Defeat, Protest

In this respect, James Smith, still working within Heilman's model of melodrama, has proposed some useful categories. He distinguishes between three groups: melodramas of triumph, defeat and protest. Melodramas of triumph end happily, 'with virtue rewarded after many trials and vice punished', e.g. *Way Down East, Orphans of the Storm*. But melodramas may end in defeat: usually with the death of the hero and/or heroine, e.g. also *The Scarlet Letter* (a film which actually follows through the 'logic' of the villain's superior strength). Smith characterises as melodramas of protest those which set out to attack established ideology, to expose injustice, to champion reform or even to incite revolution—the tradition, indeed, of protest theatre. This category merits further discussion, since it survives, its structures virtually unchanged, to the present day.

Of Griffith's films, *Intolerance* is of course the famous melodrama of protest, with its four parallel stories each designed to protest at 'man's inhumanity to man'. But it is *The Birth of a Nation* (particularly the second part) which is more instructive in this respect and has had such an emotional effect on audiences throughout the film's history. In the second part, Griffith expresses his outrage at what he feels were the iniquities of the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. The details of this, and the furore the film has caused, primarily as a result of its racialism, are well documented (see 'Focus on "The Birth of a Nation"'). Less investigated are the mechanisms whereby Griffith structures his 'protest'. In particular, he utilises one of the key melodramatic devices of melodramas of protest: the death of an innocent (here the 'little sister' played by Mae Marsh) which serves as a focus, a pretext, even a symbol (here she is explicitly a symbol of the Confederacy) to rouse 'the people' (here the Klu Klux Klan!) to action.

The significance of this device may be gauged from its lineage. It is crucial to *Battleship Potemkin* (1925, USSR), *Mrs Miniver* (1942), *This Land Is Mine*, *Roma Città Aperta* (1945, Italy), *Z* (1968, France) and *Blood of the Condor* (1969, Bolivia)—all, whatever else may be said about them, melodramas of protest on the Smith/Heilman model. In these films, as in



Stills. Above: the Germans come for Charles Laughton in Jean Renoir's This Land Is Mine, *with Maureen O'Hara. Right: Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) in Milos Forman's* One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.

The Birth of a Nation, the world depicted is completely polarised, and our sympathies are enlisted unequivocally with a group of people—defined by race, nationality, class or political creed—who are 'innocents', victims of persecution, exploitation or oppression. The oppressors/exploiters are usually heavily caricatured, like the German aviator in *Mrs Miniver*, the Nazis in *Roma Città Aperta*, the Americans in *Blood of the Condor*. Like all melodramas of protest, these films are in effect propaganda. They all use the death of the 'innocent', or, indeed, innocents (in *Battleship Potemkin*, both Vakulinchuk's death and the Odessa steps massacre are focal points) as an emotional device, to rouse not just the people in the film, but those in the audience as well.

Smith asserts that the melodrama of protest must end in triumph or defeat. In fact, none of the above sound films ends in either, but rather in affirming the determination to fight on. (Except, perhaps, *Roma Città Aperta* which, in comparison with the other World War II movies, has an uncharacteristically down-beat ending, although earlier in it, Pina's death is explicitly linked, via a dissolve, to a partisan uprising.) And so, to fuel this affirmation, the deaths tend to occur at the end: *Mrs Miniver, This Land is Mine, Blood of the Condor*. Even Preminger, a director noted for his 'ambiguity and objectivity' has used the device in its conventional form at the end of *Exodus* (1960), where it includes, for instance, virtually all the key elements of the final church scene of *Mrs Miniver*, and in a more complicated sense at the end of *Hurry Sundown* (1966). And, even though these two films do not show such a clear-cut, rhetorical view of the world as the others I have cited, in an important sense they, too, are melodramas of protest.

Perspective on the power and durability of the form may be gained from looking at two impressive recent examples, both TV series: *Days of Hope* (1975, UK) and *Roots* (1977). *Roots*, clearly, is a classic melodrama of protest: the twentieth century's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' (according to Rahill 'the world's most successful melodrama'), with the necessary radical shift in the characterisation of the Negroes, and also, of course, a long-delayed 'answer' to *Birth of a Nation*. It employs, no less shamelessly than other melodramas of protest, exactly the same sort of emotional devices to put over its message; it relies crucially on 'the family' as its primary source of identification/continuity from episode to episode. When screened in the US in January 1977, it was a phenomenal success. *Days of Hope* is a marvellous example of the 'anglicisation' of the form. The structures are still essentially all there—even the focus on the family—but everything is muted. In the first episode of *Roots*, Kunta Kinte, captured by slave-traders, thrashes around in chains in violent protest, but in the first episode of *Days of Hope*, Philip, a conscientious objector conscripted into the army, stoically endures the repeated punishments and humiliations. Unexpectedly, not one of the protagonists of *Days of Hope* dies. And, even though the series did not appear to catch the popular imagination to the extent of *Roots*, its unusual impact was nevertheless strongly felt at the time. In particular, there was agitation in right-wing circles at its showing, which led, as Colin McArthur observes in his BFI Monograph 'Television and History' (1978), to a special edition of *Tonight* which 'debated' the series' 'merits'. As with *Roots*, it seems probable that one can largely relate such an impact to the inherent emotional power which the form, when effectively articulated, carries. That the form has been especially well grasped by Loach and Garnett may be deduced from the observation that all their combined projects—*Cathy Come Home, Kes* (1969), *Family Life* (1971), *Days of Hope*—are melodramas of protest: crudely, against 'authority'. And all end in defeat. *Roots*, of course, ends in triumph.

Within the framework of Smith's categories, one may critically examine the notion that melodrama offers audiences wish-fulfilment: for example, Michael Booth's observation in 'English Melodrama' (Herbert Jenkins, 1965) that melodrama creates 'a dream world, inhabited by dream people and dream justice, offering audiences the fulfilment and satisfaction found only in dreams.' Here a psychoanalytical approach reveals the limitations of such a view. Whilst the basic thrust of a melodrama of triumph is indeed towards wish-fulfilment, it is clearly necessary to be able to account for the effectiveness of the threats and obstacles that operate on the road to the final triumph. And to grasp, in psychoanalytical terms, the effectiveness of a melodrama of defeat, would seemingly lead one to a consideration of Freud's theories of the death instincts. The melodrama of protest also seems more problematic: can the notion of wish-fulfilment be applied to a form which derives its force from a series of patently unwished-for events operating against the protagonists? However, if one shifts the point of view here—as Freud does to uncover the dream-thought behind the dream-content—one can discern, behind the injustices, atrocities, etc, the dominant wish for the *film*: to show that the authorities (or whoever) are so 'inhuman' that they would stoop to such acts. Which is, of course, the project of the melodrama of protest: to activate a sense of outrage in the audience. Why, exactly, such a sense of outrage is so readily activated is a more difficult question and dependent on the little-understood mechanisms of character-identification. But, again, psychoanalysis suggests a clue: could such narratives work because they 'reactivate' the childhood aggressions that all have felt towards the earliest authority-figures (parents, teachers) who behaved, or were seen to behave, oppressively? Consider *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), commercially the most successful film melodrama of protest. First, the connection between Nurse Ratched and Billy's 'castrating' mother is







Stills: John Ford's The Searchers. *Above: the Edwards family—Ethan (John Wayne) with Martha (Dorothy Jordan), Lucy (Pippa Scott), Debbie (Lana Wood) and Aaron (Walter McCoy). Right: Ethan after the funeral.*

highly suggestive. Second, it only requires a shift in *degree* to see the patients in the ward as like children in a kindergarten, disrupted and exhilarated by one 'bad boy', who shows them ways of subverting the 'ridiculous' rules insisted upon by the repressive female teacher/nurse.

Even though Smith's categories help elucidate certain films, they are based in traditional theatrical melodrama. For the American cinema, however, we need to be able to relate notions of melodrama to the various genres, and these were fed by the whole range of literary and theatrical traditions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in a variety of combinations and a complex of multiple determinations. To trace the roots of the various genres this way is complicated, as Thomas Elsaesser's article indicates, and I shall refer only to the most obvious or significant sources.

Action/Passion

Appropriating these terms from Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's *Screen* article on melodrama—in which he employs them rather differently—one can use them to distinguish, albeit crudely, between two broad categories of melodrama which have operated from the earliest (mostly pre-cinematic) emergence of the distinctive generic forms:

1) Action melodramas—swashbucklers, war stories, westerns, crime thrillers, adventure stories—in which the basic story is concerned with the hero or heroes in conflict with the villains/the enemy/the bad guys/a hostile environment (with a resolution of triumph heavily emphasised in American culture, at least) and in which the 'love interest' is to a greater or lesser extent peripheral, with the strongest emotions, for both characters and audience/reader, reserved for the excitement and suspense of action and conflict. Some of these groups (e.g. the western) came to develop their own rich tradition of generic characteristics, within which melodrama played its part (consider the archetypal western characters) but only as one of a number of contributing factors. Others (e.g. the adventure film) have not yet been written about in generic terms, but it seems likely that, if this were done, melodrama would provide the key. These genres' popular roots are in the dime novels/pulp magazines (US) and penny dreadfuls/schoolboy magazines (UK) which proliferated in the second half of the nineteenth century, a pulp literature which, after the birth of the movies, flourished in a dialectical relationship with the cinematic genres, each both contributing to and drawing from the other.

Although these genres are mainly action dominated, it is preferable to view the action melodrama as a structure, which individual works can possess to a greater or lesser extent. It is then complemented by the second broad category, which should similarly be viewed as a structure.

2) Melodramas of passion, in which the concern is not with the external dynamic of action but with the internal traumas of passion (the emotions), audience involvement being held and articulated through the 'agonies and ecstasies' of intense personal feelings and relationships. Although one finds elements of such concerns in most films (the cinematic melodramas of action find more opportunities than their pulp predecessors to introduce a love interest, for example), four generic groups are *essentially* melodramas of passion. i) Melodramas in which the narrative focus is on a woman. The simplest designation for this group is 'woman's melodrama', with the 'woman's film' as its cinematic form, although I use the terms with the reservations expressed by Molly Haskell in 'From Reverence to Rape' (Penguin, 1974). ii) Romantic melodramas, in which a love story provides the main dramatic concern. These first two groups are the heirs of the eighteenth century sentimental novel/drama, and the romantic melodrama has a particularly close relationship with popular romantic fiction, which also burgeoned in the second half of the nineteenth century. iii) Family and/or small-town melodramas, in which the interaction of a group of people—defined in relation to one another in family, social, sexual or racial terms—is dramatised in emotional terms. iv) Melodramas in the Gothic horror tradition.

The action/passion division is a way of focussing on the second category—which has been the main area of interest in discussion on melodrama and is my main concern here—although the hero-centred action melodramas are no less part of the melodramatic tradition. And, although 'action' and 'passion' are to an extent labels of convenience, certain general observations on their use may be made. In the action melodramas, whilst passion is evidently not absent, it tends to be channelled into the dynamic path of the hero: melodramas of revenge—*Rancho Notorious* (1952), *The Big Heat* (1953), *The Searchers*—provide a good illustration. Similarly, in the melodramas of passion, 'explosive action' may well occur, but the characters are generally much more constrained: by gender (as women), social position, psychological make-up (the heroes in this category are more prone to impotence, inner torment and neurotic fears) or simply the environment in which they move. Another characteristic of this category is that, though the groups do represent different structures of concern, they may overlap. *Queen Christina* (1933) is both a woman's film and a romantic melodrama, while *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) is both a woman's film and a family/small-town melodrama; in both films the structures which represent the different groups are to an extent in conflict.



Films in the second category are melodramas in the Heilman sense when the protagonists are 'whole', battling against external threats—monsters, oppressive societies—or the prohibitions and repressions of parents and other authority-figures: the laws of patriarchy. Where the protagonists are 'divided', torn by conflicting loyalties or impulses, more careful analysis is required to determine whether, according to the reformulated model, they can then genuinely be described as 'tragic', or they are no more than 'blindly' acting-out ideological tensions in the material. Also relevant here is Laura Mulvey's notion of melodrama as a safety valve for ideological tensions in society: the extent to which the films dramatise 'sensitive areas of sexual repression and frustration'.

Generic Groups

Despite its roots in the sentimental novel, woman's melodrama did not surface on the Victorian stage until 'East Lynne' in the 1860s. Whilst suffering heroines were, by then, a staple ingredient of melodrama ('Maria Marten', for example, dates from 1828), 'East Lynne' marks a radical break with the melodramatic tradition of action (Rahill even feels that it is not a 'true' melodrama) by shifting to the bourgeois ladies' world of home and garden and the more internalised 'concerns of the heart'. But the heroine remains a victim, suffering the 'awful consequences' of submitting to the villain's deceptions. 'East Lynne's' rival in popularity at the time, 'Lady Audley's Secret', centres on a villainess-heroine, an embryonic *femme fatale*, but the former established in a single character the archetypes which survived: the 'wronged' heroine and the suffering, sacrificial mother.

However, it would be a mistake to see the archetype(s) as 'simply' appropriated by the woman's film. The latter is able to investigate the ideology of patriarchy—the very structures which locate women as victims—far more searchingly than was possible on the Victorian stage. Thus, if one compares 'East Lynne' with *Stella Dallas* (1925 and 1937), one notes the crucial difference: the villain has been eliminated, and in his (structural) place is the amiable, working-class Ed Munn, from whom Dallas recoils with such refinement. Here it is Dallas, the husband, who 'wrongs' the heroine, in his bland assumption of patriarchal arrogance, and if both versions finally slot Stella into the sacrificial mother role, *en route* the Vidor version (at least) has ruthlessly exposed the contradictions in the material.

In general, the woman's film does *not* show the heroine as a passive victim in the traditional melodrama vein, but as a victim of patriarchy. For example, the early 'thirties cycle of 'confession films' (to borrow Griffith and Mayer's description) in which the heroines suffer 'the wages of sin', exposes the double standard which inscribes women as 'fallen' once they have indulged in 'illicit' sex. Later, the genre goes further, as films explore to what

extent and in what ways a woman —the heroine—*can* act in a man's world. However, heroines in these films never surrender their personal feelings to participate, in an uncomplicated sense, in the 'man's world'. Actions, ambitions, success are always complicated for them by emotional commitments and entanglements and so the woman's film remains firmly within the melodrama of passion category. Even in *Stage Door* (1937), a remarkably subversive woman's film in that all the men are discredited, one finds that the big opening night success for Terry (Katherine Hepburn) is the result of a personal trauma: the suicide of Kaye (Andrea Leeds).

In romantic melodramas, the hero and heroine can feel equally passionately about the love affair, as in *amours fous* (*Peter Ibbetson*, 1935, *Wuthering Heights*, 1939), doomed love affairs (many Garbo movies, *One Way Passage*, 1932) or films in which the director has a 'genuine' commitment to romanticism, notably Borzage's romantic melodramas. But also within the province of romantic melodrama are all those films in which a major interest of the narrative lies in a love affair, and this is viewed seriously rather than as comedy. In romantic melodrama, audience interest and involvement is anchored to the emotional dynamic of the narrative through the intensity of passion invested in the love affair, together with the 'inevitable' complications (frustrations, misunderstandings, jealousies, suspicions) to the way of 'true love'. In themselves, such complications are rarely viewed in terms of a tragic dividedness, but rather as an expression of the emotional confusion and 'excess' generated by passion, which is of course viewed somewhat suspiciously by the ideology (hence the 'unthinkable' concept, in a Hollywood movie, of *l'amour fou* in marriage). But the components of romantic melodrama are regularly found in other generic forms, including, of course, melodramas of action, which may raise the classic conflict between love and duty. In fact, in most films, the two are not really in conflict, but are compartmentalised within the plot, which then has a happy ending, (re)uniting the lovers. Conflict occurs where the hero or heroine's call to duty and his/her romantic commitments are necessarily incompatible, as in certain historical romances/swashbucklers, such as *Mary of Scotland* (1936), *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1937 and 1952), *The Exile* (1947). Now, in such films, it is virtually predetermined, for ideological reasons, that duty will prevail and that the hero or heroine will, ultimately, give up his/her lover. (In *Queen Christina*, in which Garbo dares to put love before duty, she is punished by the death of her lover.) Whether or not this is felt as 'tragic' depends on the extent to which the hero or heroine, in making this final 'decision', is genuinely committed to love and is thus genuinely torn. And so the potential for tragedy here is not just a function of the plot, but of the way in which it is handled.

Stills. Left: the discredited male—Adolphe Menjou romances a bemused Ginger Rogers in Stage Door. *Below:* Stella Dallas *(1925)—Dallas (Ronald Colman) refuses the hand of Ed Munn (Jean Hersholt).*



Certain romantic melodramas centre on an extra-marital love affair: *Anna Karenina* (1935), *Intermezzo* (1939), *When Tomorrow Comes* (1939), *That Hamilton Woman* (1941), *Now Voyager* (1942), *Humoresque* (1946). This tendency to privilege the adulterous relationship over the marital one—and *Break of Hearts* (1934) is the only example I know of a *romantic* melodrama which clearly swings the other way—necessarily generates ideological problems, which the films are obliged to try to resolve in their endings. (And one notes the very different fates of adulterous wives and adulterous husbands!) But the syndrome itself is the product of ideological tensions: the tendency, by no means confined to Hollywood, to desexualise marriage, with its logical consequence of the lure of the lover. (This derives, of course, from the courtly love tradition, likewise the product of ideological tensions.) And yet, despite the endings, the love affair is what primarily concerns us in these films, and it is not in itself 'discredited'. The films' potential for subversion lies in the extent to which the love affair disturbs the coherence of the ideological position the films are obliged—under the Production Code—to adopt: 'The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld'.

Other films move towards a criticism of romanticism, for example those in which the love affair is heavily one-sided: *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945), *The Heiress* (1949). And these films bring to a head the contradictory notions about passion and romance inherent in romantic melodrama. On the one hand, the single-minded passion of the protagonist who commits him/herself to love is criticised: it tends towards masochism (in the first two of these films) or undergoes a self-destructive metamorphosis into neurotic possessiveness (*Leave Her to Heaven*) or bitterness and revenge (*The Heiress*). On the other hand, the films' emotional commitment to this protagonist criticises in turn the emotional detachment/shallowness/indifference of the recipient of such passion.

In the 'forties, two further, important, generic groups in the melodrama of passion category emerged: the *film noir* and the psychological melodrama. The former, as an elaboration of the crime thriller, certainly has significant action components, but its greater interest lies elsewhere. In 'Women in Film Noir' (ed E. Ann Kaplan, BFI, 1978), which contains a number of useful essays on the area from a feminist perspective, Christine Gledhill writes: 'Rather than the revelation of socio-economic patterns of political and financial power and corruption which mark the gangster/thriller, *film noir* probes the secrets of female sexuality and male desire within patterns of submission and dominance' (p 15). It is in these films that the power of the *femme fatale*—the *dangerous* form of the 'sexual woman'—is most fully elaborated. By contrast, the hero is frequently correspondingly 'weak', as, for example, in the films which structure him between the *femme fatale* and the 'good woman': *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Out of the Past* (1947), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *Angel Face* (1952), *Human Desire* (1954). In all but the last, his attempt to liberate himself from the *femme fatale* fails, and she kills him. In these and

Still: Leave Her to Heaven—*the possessive heroine (Gene Tierney), excluded from the family group, watches her husband Cornel Wilde chat up her cousin (Jeanne Crain).*





other *films noirs*, one also notices the prevalence of a displaced Oedipal structure: the hero rivalling the *femme fatale*'s (usually much older) husband or husband-figure: see also *The Killers* (1946), *Gilda* (1946), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946). (That the equivalent 'rival' in *Angel Face* is the heroine's father is a typically Preminger variation.)

For the purposes of analysis, the *film noir*, like other generic groups, should be seen as a complex of structures, which may interact or even compete with authorial structures, or those arising within other generic areas. Similarly for the psychological melodrama, arising, as Thomas Elsaesser observes, from America's discovery of Freud. Certain films feature psychoanalysts/psychiatrists and are directly concerned with mentally disturbed characters: *Spellbound* (1945), *The Dark Mirror* (1946), *Possessed* (1947). But a particularly significant group-structure Elsaesser isolates is the wife-in-distress cycle initiated by *Rebecca* (1940) and the British *Gaslight* (1940) (which he rather misleadingly dubs 'Freudian feminist melodrama'). In my Ophuls article, I discuss this structure as one of a number of generic components of *Caught* (1948). In general, the 'forties were a particularly rich period for the over-lapping and combination of different generic traditions in individual Hollywood films.

Still: Letter from an Unknown Woman—*Lisa (Joan Fontaine) and Stefan (Louis Jourdan).*

The awareness of Freud feeds, in turn, into the family/small-town melodrama, and analyses of this area of cinema readily resort to psychoanalytical models—see, for example, the 'Dossier on Melodrama' in *Screen*, Summer 1977. In fact, since it contains a number of the films considered to be the finest Hollywood melodramas—notably those of Sirk, Minnelli and Ray—the 'fifties family/small-town melodrama has occasioned some admirable analyses, e.g. the articles by Thomas Elsaesser and Laura Mulvey. The group has a peculiarly American tradition, excellently charted by Andrew Britton in his *Mandingo* article in *Movie 22* and his *Meet Me in St Louis* article in *Australian Journal of Screen Theory 3*. And here the scope of the tradition allows for significant action components within the films: e.g. the planes turning the pylons in *The Tarnished Angels* (1957), the hunting scenes in *Home from the Hill*, the chicken run in *Rebel without a Cause* (1956). In these scenes, the tensions and conflicts within and between the characters are externalised, which aligns them—on a distinction Thomas Elsaesser makes between the western/adventure film and the domestic melodrama (by extension, the action melodrama and the



melodrama of passion)—with a central characteristic of the action melodrama. However, the *form* of the externalisation is not 'simply' what Elsaesser calls the 'unrelentingly linear course' of the action melodrama protagonist. In these films the scenes of action, as cathartic experience, tend to be ironised and undermined. Not only does Roger Schumann fly in circles round the pylons, he dies doing it. The success of Theron's first hunt is rendered ironic by the success of his second, which ends with his killing a man and going into self-imposed exile. Jim's victory in the chicken run (like Theron's boar hunt, an initiation ceremony, and hence emotionally 'charged') is at the expense of another's death. Again and again in the



Stills: Robert Stack as Roger Schumann in The Tarnished Angels, *with Dorothy Malone, and as Kyle Hadley in* Written on the Wind.

family/small-town melodramas, scenes of action channel the obsessions and tensions towards self-destruction, humiliation and defeat.

Divided Characters

Now, in these films, the protagonists are frequently flawed and divided: torn within themselves. Accordingly, they may usefully be considered along the lines of the suggested reformulation of the tragedy/melodrama model. *A propos Written on the Wind* (1956) and *The Tarnished Angels*, Sirk himself refers to the characters played by Robert Stack as 'split'. And, as Laura Mulvey suggests, Kyle Hadley and Roger Schumann do indeed seem like tragic figures. Kyle has the fears of Othello, but they are much more complexly founded. And though, like Othello, he is denied full tragic awareness (in Heilman's words), we are conscious that he similarly has the *power* to see what he's doing—to himself, his wife, his best friend—even as he neurotically refuses to do so. (Reference to Robert Wilder's novel is instructive: Kyle's prototype is a much weaker figure, conspicuously lacking any such power.) This, the familiar 'blindness' of the Sirk protagonist, is shifted further towards tragedy with Roger, who *does* see, but won't admit it: it is to Burke Devlin that he says 'The blind man isn't blind,' whilst Laverne remains a victim of his fears and obsessions—until the magnificent reconciliation, just before his death. (Even here, Fred Camper—*Screen*, Summer 1971—has argued that Roger is merely *pretending* to understand. Whilst this is a moot point, it nevertheless endows Roger with an alternative tragic characteristic, hubris: in Camper's words 'Roger makes the mistake of having pride, of thinking he can be human . . .')

By contrast, Theron and Jim are characters of melodrama. They are trapped within ideologies which oblige them to behave in certain ways whilst denying them the possibility of either understanding why (Theron) or of freeing themselves (Jim and his friends). Theron's rite of passage from 'boy' to 'man' merely inscribes him totally within a given ideology, defined for him by his father and 'the men of the town', and he acts out his destiny in this role (from impregnating his girl-friend to killing her father in revenge for the death of his own) with a sense of helplessness, unable to comprehend what's happening to him. Jim, less blinkered, at least asks questions, but, receiving at best evasive answers (from his parents) is obliged to try and find his own



Stills. Above: Rebel without a Cause—*Plato (Sal Mineo). Below:* Home from the Hill—*the chain of patriarchal ideology. Under the memorial to their fathers, the men of the town decide to play a trick on 'Mamma's boy' Theron (George Hamilton). A scene cut from the British distribution print.*

way out of his moral dilemma. But the conflict of imperatives—his duty to society, the code of honour of his peers (thou shalt not squeal)—is weighted so that he is not really 'torn' (as he would be, for example, if they were all his friends) and instead he becomes a 'victim' of both the local kids and the law, the latter betraying him in not trusting him to handle Plato. Yet, as a portrait of a society, *Rebel without a Cause* has definite tragic overtones, the society creating the very conditions in which, out of fear, it kills one of its children, just as Kyle's misplaced violence against Lucy leads to the death of the child which would have been his. Both *Rebel without a Cause* and *Home from the Hill* have 'hopeful' endings, in which the generations are in some sense



reconciled, but the more stable future to which they look is one from which the more obviously problem characters have been eliminated, whilst the societies, of course, remain the same. However critical the small-town melodramas are of their societies, there is rarely the sense that anything can be done to change them. From this point of view, however, *Written on the Wind* follows the pattern of classical tragedy: with Kyle, his father and his unborn child all dead, the Hadley dynasty is doomed to extinction.

In his article, Thomas Elsaesser writes: 'In the Hollywood melodrama characters made for operettas play out the tragedies of mankind (or at least those of American civilisation).' If one translates this into 'characters of melodrama' playing out the tragedies, the argument above about *Rebel without a Cause* illustrates his point. But this, clearly, contradicts the Heilman model. Thus one arrives at a second significant point of reformulation, where one takes into account the point of view of the work, independently of that of the protagonists. Where, in a portrait of a society, we see, not just the point of view of the victims, but the society creating, through its own failings, anxieties and ideological 'flaws', the very conditions which lead to there being victims, then we can speak of a 'tragic' view: of the society. This may be illustrated by comparing *Roots* and *Mandingo*, both centrally concerned with the tyranny of slavery. In *Roots*, the world is polarised such that we *do* only see and identify with the point of view of the victims: the melodramatic perspective. But in *Mandingo*, there is a broader view, in which the white oppressors, rather than being simply characterised as 'villains', are presented more complexly, as a group of people 'blinded' by a monstrous ideology. In the violent climax to the movie, we see the self-destructive consequences of this ideology, the society (the Falconhurst plantation) tearing itself apart as a result of the tensions generated by its racial (and sexual) exploitation and oppression. Here we have a tragic perspective. And this may, in fact, focus upon a character who becomes, even in his/her blindness, the vehicle whereby the tragic view is expressed: Hammond, Theron. Not in themselves tragic characters, they nevertheless serve to express the films' tragic view of the worlds they inhabit. (It would be a neat solution if this were to account for the 'tragic sense' I mentioned in *Mandingo* as being a problem not allowed for on Heilman's model. However, other examples would need to be investigated along these lines before one could be confident of accounting for all shades of 'tragic feeling' in terms of structural models.)

Female Protagonists

For female protagonists in small-town melodrama, an area of potential dividedness is the conflict between husband and lover. In these films, the lover-figure is not the hero (as he is in romantic melodrama and

Still: Home from the Hill. *Hannah (Eleanor Parker) and Rafe (George Peppard) at his mother's grave. Another scene cut in Britain.*





certain woman's films) but presented rather as a threat to the marital relationship: *Cass Timberlane* (1947), *Madame Bovary* (1949), *Beyond the Forest* (1949), *Clash by Night* (1952), *All I Desire* (1953). (Lover-*figure* is the appropriate term, since the plot may contrive to keep the heroine from having sex with him, as in *Cass Timberlane*.) The lover-figure here is the descendant of East Lynne's villainous seducer, but with a significant modification: he now offers the heroine a (usually) *desired* escape from the entrapment of marriage. Following Laura Mulvey's notion of melodrama as a safety valve for ideological tensions, the lover-figure can be seen as a character created in response to the frustrations felt by married women in small-town society. However, the 'sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home' is clearly threatened by such a figure, and so it is not surprising that the films' endings demonstrate the Code-approved resolution at its most reified and repressive: recuperation into the marriage/family for wives who repent; death for those who don't. Equally, one would not expect the heroines to experience too great a sense of dividedness over their actions. Adultery, according to the Production Code, is simply wrong, and in its puritanical rigidity on such matters the Code fits the observation of Moses Hadas in his introduction to 'The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca' (Norton, 1968): 'Christian tragedy is impossible; when there can be only one right, the man who defies it is a villain'. Thus the heroines scarcely agonise over their transgressions (a partial

Still: Madame Bovary – *heroine (Jennifer Jones), lover (Louis Jourdan) and husband (Van Heflin).*

exception is Mae in *Clash by Night*): they tend rather to be shown as acting on impulse, careless of the implications. To agonise would be, in some sense, to debate an issue (adultery) which is officially undebatable, whereas the heroines' out-of-control desires can, in theory at least, be censured, tamed or disavowed.

However, the films are by no means so readily contained by the ideology. The heroines do not seek a lover simply out of sexual frustration, but from a desire for something more than small-town marriage. In the first three films, the lover-figure offers a passport to another world (the city/aristocracy): that is his attraction. And the Stanwyck heroines in *Clash by Night* and *All I Desire* have themselves sought that world: both films deal with the problems posed by the heroine's return to the small town after a ten-year absence. All these films show the heroines as driven by much more powerful emotions than the men: by a greater appetite for life. This provides the films with their central trajectory and equally their emotional complexity. These are women who prove 'too much' for their husbands and/or societies and, even as this leads to their becoming, to a greater or lesser extent, victims, their aspirations/energies/feelings are strongly set against the restrictions and repressions of the worlds which surround them. Even Rosa Moline in *Beyond the Forest*, the most problematic of these heroines from the point of view of audience



Still: Clash by Night – *cuckolded husband, frustrated wife; Jerry (Paul Douglas) unable to control the alarm clock, Mae (Barbara Stanwyck) watches.*

sympathy (not least because she reacts to the pressures with murder) achieves a 'heroic' death as she literally drives herself beyond endurance.

Thus, once again, the films are at least implicitly subversive of patriarchal ideology. And one could argue that it is the very lack of dividedness of the heroines—the directness of their challenge to patriarchy—which constitutes, here, the films' subversive edge. It is ultimately a *class* challenge: all the heroines are from lower-class backgrounds. (Archetypally signalled, in the American small town, as from 'the other side of the tracks'.) And, whatever their reasons for marrying, their findings are very similar: that middle-class marriage constricts and frustrates their energies.

The effectiveness of the films' subversive edge is, however, ultimately dependent on the film-makers' control of the material. *Cass Timberlane* simply disintegrates into incoherence in its last fifteen minutes as the ideology, belatedly and melodramatically (the device of the car accident is discussed later), attempts to contain/censure the heroine's sexuality. By contrast, *Clash by Night* recognises and dramatises the irreconcilable tensions: Mae's aspirations for a 'better' (richer, more exciting) life and the decisions she makes out of fears of loneliness and insecurity are never resolved, and the ending, in which her husband firmly returns her to the role of mother ('Go take your child home') is obviously profoundly unsatisfactory. Both films illustrate the disrupting of narrative 'closure'—the attempt of the ideology to fix a final, 'safe' reading of the film—but the incoherence at the end of *Cass Timberlane* is very far indeed from Fritz Lang's conscious dramatisation here.

At their most exciting, however, these films use the 'passions' of the heroine to mount an attack on the petty-minded small-town ideology. The heroines outrage moral decency, violate propriety and generally upset the patriarchal order, but in a way which reveals the sheer intolerance, exploitation and repressiveness of the order. *Madame Bovary* may, on the surface, cast Emma as a victim of her romantic fantasies, but underneath we see her as very much a victim of male exploitation of those fantasies. *All I Desire* mounts a double attack. On the one hand, Naomi scandalises the censorious small-town society, on the other she challenges and *re-vitalises* her hitherto rather conservative family. Remarkably subversively, the film shows her actively (and successfully) encouraging her daughter Joyce's sexuality. And so, Naomi's decision to stay at the end is surely not the 'false' happy ending that Sirk critics invariably assert. (There are problems with the ending, but they relate to other issues, such as what happens to Lily's dreams of becoming an actress.) Without Naomi, life would return to its former state; with her, the family she has so remarkably

transformed offers a challenge to the prurient puritanism of the small town. In asking her to stay, Henry has already risked his position in the community: a rare example of a hero putting love before duty. And so, while her leaving would be a defeat, both for her and the family, her decision to stay ('They'll have us to face; the two of us together') is an act of courage and commitment.

A rare example of a *tragically* divided heroine is Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life* (1959). Determined to be seen as 'white' in a bid to escape from the position of oppression accorded to Negroes in American society, she can only achieve this at the expense of denying the person closest to her, her mother. The considerable intensity of the second half of the film derives almost entirely from this situation, complicated and ironised by Sirk's insistence that Sarah Jane's route of 'escape' is nevertheless into oppression—that of women at the burlesque end of show business. Yet, although she is desperate, Sarah Jane knows what she's doing, and it is part of Sirk's audacity that her grasp of her predicament should be contrasted so forcefully with the total lack of awareness of Lora, the official (white, star-enacted) heroine. Moreover, he follows through the hopelessness of Sarah Jane's position. Stahl's 1934 version, 'contained' by the ideology, ends by recuperating Peola (Sarah Jane's predecessor) who goes off, after



Stills. Right: Imitation of Life – *Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner) and her mother (Juanita Moore). Below:* Madame Bovary – *Emma (Jennifer Jones) in her attic.*





Still: Imitation of Life–*Sarah Jane escapes into another form of oppression.*

her mother's funeral, to the approved 'Negro School down South'. Sirk's film ends bleakly, and the image of Lora 'becoming' the white mother that Sarah Jane had always wanted (a point missed by Richard Dyer in his description of the final car scene in *Movie 25*) seems, in the light of Lora's personality, little more than a final irony.

Ideology and Melodrama

In summary, the two points of reformulation of the Heilman model are that it should take account of 1) the operation, in given works, of ideological discourses, and make a distinction between films in which the protagonists are impelled, 'blindly', by these discourses (melodrama) and those in which a protagonist is able, *in some sense*, to grasp the implications of the conflict within him/her, which opens up the possibility of tragedy, and 2) the point of view adopted overall by the *work*, which, in cases where a society is viewed 'in the round', may present the social/ideological tensions such that the audience is able to grasp the implications of the divisive conflicts: the tragic perspective. Whilst this clarifies the structure of melodrama on one grid (tragedy/melodrama), it doesn't elucidate the complex of ways in which melodrama, once distinguished from tragedy, functions in the American cinema. Smith's categories are sometimes useful here (*Waterloo Bridge* (1940) as a melodrama of defeat; *King's Row* (1941) as a melodrama of triumph) but tend to be overshadowed by the generic categories. Only the melodrama of protest has survived as a melodramatic category which dominates and subsumes the generic groupings, its power to arouse emotional reactions undimmed, as *Midnight Express* (1978, UK) and *The China Syndrome* (1979) have in their different ways recently demonstrated.

In formulating a model for Hollywood melodrama, the concept of ideology provides a useful starting-point. In general, the American cinema gravitated to melodrama, in the historical/Heilman sense so far described, for economic and historical reasons (the structures proved commercial, as they had been in the theatre; the tradition was there to be pillaged) as well as complex social/ideological ones. The aesthetic which evolved, dominated by action, spectacle, dynamic narrative, theatrical heightening and the externalising of emotions, is *formally* 'melodramatic' (see Mark LeFanu's *Pageants of Violence* in *Monogram 6*) and is designed to arouse the same kind of intense emotional involvement as traditional melodrama—hence the relevance of David Morse's observations. But, in particular, the melodramatic tradition in Hollywood movies is articulated by the ideology and *vice versa*. (For my conceptualisation of 'ideology', I am indebted to Stuart Hall's article 'Culture, The Media and the "Ideological Effect"' in 'Mass Communication and Society', 1977).

For instance, extending the Hadas quote from Christianity to the Production Code, one could argue that, just as Christian ideology provided a structuring melodramatic framework for traditional melodrama, so the Code 'ideology' imposed a similar framework on Hollywood movies, tending to render them as melodrama. (Production Code here refers not just to the published contents of the Code, but also the whole range of attendant restrictions and prohibitions, whether insisted upon by the Code Administration—colloquially, the Hays or Breen Office—or by studios not wishing to 'upset' the Breen Office. See Murray Schumach's 'The Face on the Cutting Room Floor' (Da Capo Press, 1975), which refers to the whole complex of censorship operations on Hollywood movies.) The Code embodies an ideology in that it insists upon a circumscribed, morally inflexible 'view of the world'. And a significant effect of this was to suppress tragedy as a dramatic mode. In a complex sense, this was the inheritance of the preaching tradition of melodrama, mapping out the world in 'moral' terms for audiences. Tragic dividedness implies moral choice, whereas, officially, such choices rarely existed. A tragic flaw suggests a defect of character with which we sympathise, whereas, officially, such defects were censured. Accordingly tragedy here emerges as a progressive form, working against the strictures of the ideology, as the example of Sarah Jane suggests.

Still: Herbert Biberman's Salt of the Earth–*the mine-workers' picket.*

However, the primary function of the Code—whose effective period of control was approximately from 1934, when the Seal of Approval was introduced, to 1966, when the format was radically altered to give the Code Administration more 'discretion'—was to reinforce crucial aspects of the dominant ideology. It policed the films, censoring areas 'sensitive' to the puritan sensibility and containing potentially subversive elements. (And where the Code stopped, the religious and other pressure groups—or Hollywood's fear of offending these groups—often took over the policing: see Schumach.) Within those dates, only films made outside 'the system' could openly subvert the dominant ideology. A famous example is *Salt of the Earth* (1953), a melodrama of protest which a) dramatises the oppression of the poor Mexican-American and white mineworkers and their families at the hands of American capitalist bosses and their minions (including the officers of the law) and b) adopts a strongly feminist perspective. The film was virulently suppressed. Within the system, the Code dates do mark discernible boundaries of control. However, even outside them, although films do register a greater ideological freedom, the dominant ideology usually to a large extent holds sway.

But the dominant ideology is not an achieved, coherent formation. In presenting itself as the ideology for the society as a whole—its assertion of 'ideological hegemony'—the dominant ideology is forced, in Richard Dyer's words in 'Stars' (BFI, 1979, p 3) into a 'ceaseless effort to mask or displace



both its own contradictions and those contradictions to it that arise from alternative or oppositional ideologies.' Since films are a key instrument in the assertion of ideological hegemony, these efforts are constantly manifest in them: in the ways characters are constructed, narratives patterned and ideological tensions and contradictions resolved. But, in American movies in particular, such operations are not simply in play, but are *dramatised* by the melodramatic aesthetic of the movies: the formal heightening mentioned above. In effect, the ideological operations are rendered as melodrama, or, at least, lie behind the melodramatic structures and strategies in the films. Thus ideological analysis may be used to illuminate these structures and strategies.

A Provisional Model

The model that emerges is best viewed in terms of 'levels' in an individual film. (This is partly to get away from the less helpful notion of different ideological categories of film, proposed by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni in 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' in *Cahiers du Cinema* 216, translated in *Screen*, Spring 1971. At the very least their categories should be seen as structures, which may compete with one another in the same film.) These 'levels' are purely critical constructs, derived from analysis of the film. It is assumed that each film will be organised to present a dominant ideological perspective, but that this may not hold sway over *all* the elements in the film. Then, in brief, one may see a film as comprising a dominant level (level I), representing its diegetic 'surface' and consisting of material relating to its dominant ideological perspective, and a number of subordinate levels which function as sub-texts. The two main sub-texts will normally be i) the ideological, incorporating material which is not 'contained' within the framework established by the dominant ideological perspective, and ii) the psychoanalytical. However, other sub-texts may be generated, consciously or unconsciously, in the way the narrative is dramatised, such as mythical/allegorical sub-texts. (One would nevertheless expect such sub-texts to be ideologically inflected.)

In almost every Hollywood movie, level I registers the extent to which the film is in the service of the dominant ideology, with any contradictions and problems generated by the process of dramatisation safely 'contained'. The level is thus constructed by the film's inflection of the dominant ideological discourses operating in society, an inflection effected 'safely within' Hollywood's established codes of representation. Hence, in addition to a general conformity to the technical codes (eye-line match, 'invisible' editing, 30 and 180 degree rules, etc) one would tend to find, at this level, a) a conservative use of narrative and generic conventions (so that the audience is not 'confused' by complex narratives or 'inappropriate' generic mixtures), with particular emphasis on narrative closure, b) the construction of character-types to affirm certain stereotypes, or similarly ideologically-loaded 'types' and c) the use of the star personas to embody certain general 'ideals': toughness, expertise, charismatic authority for male stars; attractiveness, realiability, emotional commitment for female stars. (The sexist implications of such 'ideals' are immediately obvious.) In particular, the inflection of the dominant ideological discourses will generally be analysable in terms of a dramatisation of a specific ideological *project* (or cluster of projects) in the film. Whether overt (e.g. crime does not pay) or covert (e.g. Rick/Bogart 'representing' the US in *Casablanca*, 1942), these projects will normally serve to reinforce some aspect of the dominant ideology.

However, as indicated above, it may not be possible for the dominant ideology so to contain a film. In the pre-Seal-of-Approval years it was in fact occasionally possible for a Hollywood film to subvert the dominant ideology openly. In *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), Harlow's Lil seduces her way to affluence, shoots—albeit not fatally—her boring husband and nevertheless receives a happy ending. Here the subversiveness is such that it 'takes over' level I, usurping the dominant ideological discourses. The film's *main* project is to affirm Lil's vitality at the expense of the town's stuffy middle-class. Predictably, the film was banned in Britain. (*Salt of the Earth* is a different kind of exception, being made outside the system from the perspective of an oppositional ideology.)

Within the area of control of the Code, attempts to challenge or subvert the dominant ideology met with strict censorship—before, during and after production. Particularly in the (generally less conservative) melodramas of passion, however, subversive elements persisted. The ideology did its best to contain these: killing off *femmes fatales*, recuperating erring wives, preserving the institutions of America (the law, political system, church, etc) from contamination by the corruptions of individual representatives. But the films' very dramatisation of such material resulted in tensions and problems. Whilst, on the surface, a film (e.g. through its overt project) necessarily demonstrated its adherence to the (Code) ideology, underneath a very different message may be communicated. This is the province of the ideological sub-text. Whether this takes the form of an unconscious reflection of ideological tensions in the material, or a conscious attempt to ironise, criticise or subvert the dominant ideological discourses (and potentially construct an underlying project *against* the 'dominant' project), this sub-text should be viewed as *in competition with* the dominant level I. The retrospective readings of the (often highly significant) sub-texts of films hitherto analysed purely along the lines of level I (Andrew Britton's *Meet Me in St Louis* reading is an excellent illustration) tend to reveal a wealth of material which constantly threatens to undermine the apparently ideologically 'safe' surfaces.

On the other hand, ideological analysis of a film may reveal that its sub-texts are in fact supportive of its dominant ideological perspective, perhaps even structured to reinforce the film's project (as in *The Exile*, discussed in my Ophuls article). In such cases (the *Casablanca* example is another instance), the film's project is apparently 'powerful' enough to articulate, not just the film's level I material, but also that relating to its 'deeper' levels. One finds this particularly with war-time productions with a war-time or similar setting, which almost invariably possess such a strong propaganda project that this effectively processes the film's different levels. However, this very processing may generate problems elsewhere in the material—e.g. in *Casablanca*, the unresolved question of the history of Rick's relationship with the country he is ideologically 'representing'. (In *The Exile*, the film's use of the 'romance' plot to reinforce its dominant project makes the romance itself problematic.)

The ideological sub-text is not a precisely defined area, but a complex ensemble of elements which lie outside the space defined by the dominant level I. One element of potential significance here is *mise-en-scène*, in the sense that it can be articulated, consciously or unconsciously, as an aesthetic 'discourse' which comments on/ironises/undermines the coherence of the dominant ideological discourses. (This is, of course, just one way in which directorial authorship can significantly affect a film.) One would also include as part of the province of this sub-text the (subversive) use of certain conventions. The time-honoured melodramatic convention of women as victims is used, as mentioned, to expose the very structure which locates them as victims: patriarchal ideology. The nightmare world of *film noir* is not confined to representing realms which are safely 'other' (the underworld, mental illness etc) but, in certain films depicting soldiers returning from World War II, is used to characterise the America they



Photograph: a publicity shot for King's Row *– Gothic lighting for Claude Rains as an evil doctor.*



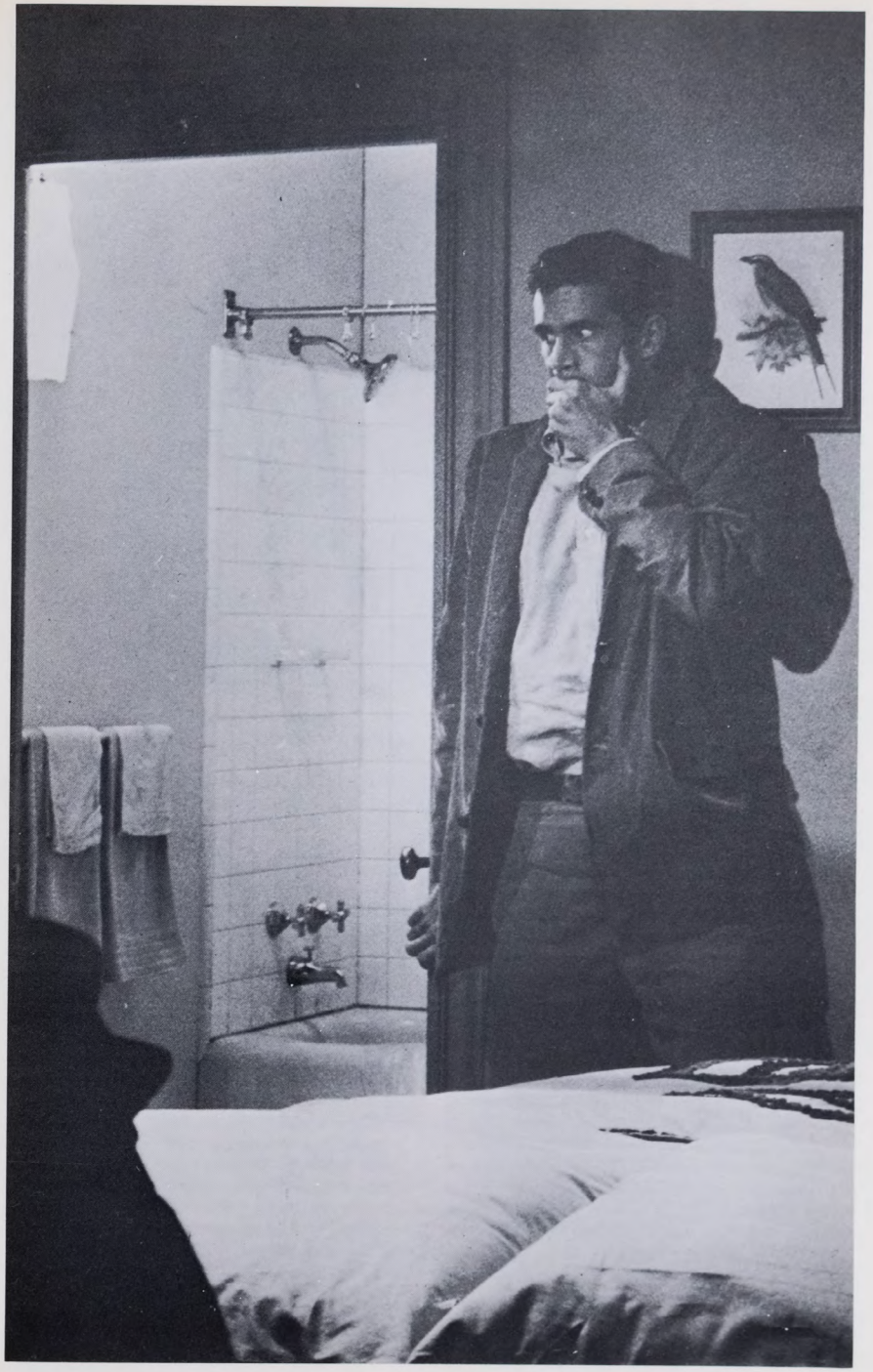
return to: *Somewhere in the Night* (1946), *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), *Crossfire* (1947), *Dead Reckoning* (1947). Certain family/small-town melodramas, as Andrew Britton suggests, make similar use of the Gothic tradition: as a way of characterising 'the repressed' which lies *under* the 'civilised society' the films officially affirm. This use of the Gothic occurs as early as *King's Row*, which implicitly makes the link with the Frankenstein horror tradition (which, in the movies, had hitherto insisted that such evils only occurred elsewhere—*outside* America) to signal the arrival, in the American small-town, of the sadistic doctor/scientist.

Equally, the formal conventions of melodrama (emotional excess, dramatic coincidence, etc) may come into play at this level. They may be used crudely, as a convenient way out of 'difficult' situations, e.g. the resort to car accidents purely as a means of punishing/killing off erring/dangerous characters: *Dangerous* (1935), *Cass Timberlane, Dead Reckoning, Walk Softly, Stranger* (1950). (This is not to discredit the car accident as a device: those in *Intermezzo, Love Affair* (1939) and *Magnificent Obsession* (1954) are no less 'melodramatic', but they are not used merely as an escape-route from the film's ideological problems.) The formal conventions may equally, however, be used more subversively. The court-room 'outburst'—usually a woman rushing to the front to say whodunnit, thereby relieving the pressure on some poor innocent on the stand—is a very common device. In its earliest manifestations, in *The Cheat* (1915) and *Dream Street*, it is used conservatively, to rescue the hero from nobly 'taking the rap' for someone else, with the additional effect in the DeMille of triggering an uproar against the Oriental villain. Later, however, one finds the device used to resolve the tensions set up by the proclivity of *justice* for accusing (*The Lady from Shanghai, My Forbidden Past*, 1951) or vilifying (*Johnny Belinda, I Confess*, 1952) innocent persons. In *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), the outburst not only occurs in the US Senate, but highlights the gullibility of the great American public: the 50,000 telegrams which have just arrived attacking the hero.

The question of the construction of alternative or subversive character-types, and of the extent to which characters and star personas can become 'problematic', the repository of conflicting ideological impulses, is discussed in Richard Dyer's 'Stars'. Finally, under the ideological sub-text, it should be noted that the operations of melodrama can disrupt narrative closure. The instances cited earlier arise partly from ideological contradictions—unconsciously registered in *Cass Timberlane*, consciously dramatised in *Clash by Night*—and would fit Laura Mulvey's description of the way in which the melodramatic form generates 'overdetermined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being nearly settled in the last five minutes'. But, specifically, what is 'disturbing' here is the heroine's sexuality, and the 'excess' generated by this threatens closure in a different sense. In Sheila Whitaker's words (*Framework* 9): 'The . . . excess produced by sexual containment is shown as leading to apparent hysteric symptoms when the repressed threatens to rupture the surface.' This leads to the pyschoanalytical sub-text.

Melodrama, for the reasons already suggested, allows freer access to psychoanalytical discourses than, say, the realist aesthetic of much European cinema, which is more trammelled by preoccupations with plausibility, psychological coherence and a conscious articulation of a view of the world. However, the discourses function as a sub-text because, although they can affect the character-construction, narrative patterns and emotional operations of the films, this is an unconscious process, requiring a psychoanalytic approach to reveal them. These discourses, too, are subject to transformation under the operation of censorship mechanisms, which repress, mask and displace material to render it 'acceptable'. In other words, the discourses are processed by the ideology. For example, no Hollywood movie could present a 'pure' Oedipal narrative, *Psycho* (1960) perhaps being as far as it is possible to go. But *displaced* Oedipal narratives are very common: e.g. the hero rivalling the father/older husband of the heroine (examples cited earlier); the heroine rivalling her step-mother/father's fiancée (*The Furies*, 1950, *Angel Face, Bonjour Tristesse*, 1958), to name but two of many possibilities.

Where a film explicitly handles Freudian themes, e.g. through the medium of a psychologically disturbed character, as in *Spellbound, Secret beyond the Door* (1948), *Whirlpool* (1949), *Marnie* (1964), a great deal of psychoanalytical material is organised, according to the requirements of the film's project, in level I. This should not be confused with the psychoanalytical sub-text of the film. In these examples, the



Stills. Top: Bonjour Tristesse—*Deborah Kerr and Jean Seberg. Right:* Psycho—*Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) about to clear up after Mother.*



Still: Marnie. *Therapeutic concern–Marnie (Tippi Hedren) and Mark Rutland (Sean Connery).*

project affirms that, with the appropriate therapeutic concern of a committed partner and through the appropriate psychoanalytical processes, the disturbed character is curable. However, the sub-text, which in such films tends to have to accommodate an excess of psychoanalytical material generated by the explicit concerns, may well set up disturbances to such a reading. And so this sub-text, too, needs to be seen as in competition with level I. One should also note how 'loaded' the projects themselves are. For a hero (*Spellbound, Secret beyond the Door*), the process of psychological recovery is carried through until he is at least well on the road to a cure; for a heroine (*Whirlpool, Marnie*), it is sufficient merely for her to have openly confessed/expressed her mental disorder and surrendered herself, child-like, to a man (her husband).

As suggested earlier, a psychoanalytical model—suitably recast—is of particular value in interrogating characters in states of emotional crisis. This is facilitated by the melodramatic tendency to *dramatise* the effects of the tensions and pressures operating on the characters: the 'theatrical heightening' of the form. Whereas, in the action melodramas, the dramatisation takes the form of outer-directed action (enacting vengeance, fighting wars, combating villainy, etc), in the melodramas of passion the resultant expressions of emotion tend to be inner-directed. Frequently a male character reacts to a certain kind of stress with (usually 'inadvertent') self-laceration: archetypally, the sudden breaking of a glass in his hand: *Blood and Sand* (1941), *Secret Beyond the Door, Frenzy*. Almost invariably, such moments can be read as expressing castration anxieties. Other moments may similarly be read as a 'surrender' to the death instincts: for example, the heroine who lapses into psychosomatic illness in response to the traumatic loss of her lover/fiancé: *Fury* (1936), *Waterloo Bridge, Madame Bovary, A Place in the Sun* (1951). In my Ophuls article, I discuss Ohlrig's heart attacks in *Caught* from such a psychoanalytical perspective.

The hysteric symptoms mentioned by Sheila Whitaker—the return of repressed sexuality—may on occasions disrupt a film's coherence to the extent of rendering its closure problematic. In *Cass Timberlane*, the multiple displaced expressions of the heroine's sexuality (a cat; flying a plane with the lover-figure; surrendering to the 'excitement' of New York) testify to the film's increasing problems of containment, and coherence breaks down in the end because the ideology resorts to ever-more-desperate measures to regain control. But, more usually, psychoanalytical discourses are 'held' within the narrative of a film and do not 'rupture the surface'. This is because generic forms have been found to accommodate such discourses, and the key to these forms would seem to be melodrama. The psychoanalytical discourses find expression in melodrama,

from the basic structures of the horror film to the sophisticated dramatisation of the return of repressed sexuality in *Black Narcissus* (1947, UK). Thus such discourses are as vital to a model for melodrama as the ideological discourses.

The above model can be applied *within* the different generic groupings, to analyse their emphasis and 'appeal', as well as across them, to investigate the ideological and psychoanalytical forces which have generated these groupings, and their common structures and motifs. Application of the model should also determine more precisely the relationship (or the permutations of relationships) between the various levels I have specified, as well as the place and importance of other levels (discourses). Nevertheless, it would be premature to consider that this model will exhaust the field of melodrama. The melodramatic tradition covers a vast range of material, relating both to form and content, and some of this material will almost certainly require further conceptual categories to organise. The model also needs to be related to the various authorial discourses which may be identified in individual films and which interact with the melodramatic forms and conventions. These discourses are not just directorial, but may relate to stars (Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Garbo), scriptwriters (Casey Robinson, Frances Marion), even producers (David Selznick, Ross Hunter). And the interaction may take a number of forms: a full-blooded use of the conventions (Vidor, Seznick); their foregrounding—in Sirk's case to criticise and subvert the material, in Russ Meyer's to parody it hysterically—or the deliberate creation of an aesthetic distance from the material which serves to 'comment on' the melodramatic conventions (Ophuls, Preminger). The model may, of course, help elucidate the ways in which such authorial discourses operate: the conservatism of Selznick (in my Ophuls article I discuss *Since You Went Away* (1944), which he scripted *and* produced, as an example of a 'level I movie', completely in the service of the dominant ideology); the ideological subversiveness of Sirk and Minnelli; the psychoanalytical subtexts to Penn's (see Terence Butler's article in *Movie* 26) or Minnelli's movies. On the other hand, insofar as the authorial contributions introduce an aesthetic dimension, which needs to be analysed according to different criteria, they are clearly not contained by the model. *Mise-en-scène* is not only of interest when it is working against the dominant ideological discourses.

Historical Development

Missing from this account is a proper historical perspective on melodrama, particularly on the evolution of the genres. The melodramatic tradition was itself continuously developing, with new forms being produced through dialectical interaction with the historically evolving generic groups. A few exemplary developments may, however, be cited.

1) Whereas, in traditional melodrama, the villain provided what Smith calls 'the motor power' of the form (but for the villain(s)—or, more rarely, 'natural' disasters—there would be no story), in later Hollywood melodrama this vital function is taken over by ideological 'institutions': the laws of patriarchy (especially, as mentioned, in woman's melodrama); class structures (especially in small-town melodrama). The prohibitions and repressions which these generate are in the place of the villain's wicked deeds. And such a shift inevitably introduces problems. On the one hand, the ideology endeavours to affirm the laws of patriarchy, the class and gender determined positions, as 'good', and punishes transgressions; on the other, audience sympathy is usually with the transgressing characters. When the punishments, most often directed against female characters, lead to the same sort of sufferings as in traditional melodrama, the ideology is unconsciously functioning as the villain.

2) The characters are still, to an extent, at the mercy of 'fate'. Morse's characteristic f)—the unmotivated, unprepared, unexpected and immediate—is transformed into a formal dramatic structure, but one which still suggests that events 'have a life of their own'. Thus one encounters frequent anticipations/premonitions of what is to happen (the prologue of *King's Row* is a brilliant example), situations are repeated at different stages of the drama, particularly the beginning and the end (emphasising the circularity of movement of the characters in melodrama), and occasionally, all the way through the film: *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. The 'cruel' intervention of fate is manifested above all in the 'if only . . .' aspect of woman's melodrama: 'If only that hadn't happened when it did, all would have ended happily . . .' *Back Street* (both 1932 and 1941) and *The Passionate Friends* (1949, UK) actually have fantasised 'if only . . .' sequences and the feeling permeates the whole structure of *Waterloo Bridge*.

3) Rahill describes a standard structural device of traditional melodrama as 'a figure out of the past, returning to his familiar haunts after a long absence in disguise or changed beyond recognition, his reappearance serving to bring to a head a situation growing out of his disappearance' (p 32). In traditional melodrama, this situation invariably related to villainy, either suppressed in the past or in action in the present. Whereas, in the family/small-town melodrama, the device (without the disguise) serves to force into the open suppressed feelings, emphasising the sublimations and suppressions which have gone on over the years: *H. M. Pulham, Esq* (1941), *All I Desire, East of Eden* (1955), *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956), *Some Came Running* (1959). With suppressed past parental conflicts, the effects of which erupt and traumatise the children in the present (*Pursued*, 1947, *East of Eden*), the device of the returning character is not even necessary: see *Home from the Hill*.

Comedy

Another omission in this account is a perspective on comedy. It is only since completing the account that I have read Heilman's latest work, 'The Ways of the

World: Comedy and Society' (University of Washington Press, 1978), in which he deals theoretically with comedy in relation to his tragedy/melodrama model. Although open to the same objections as before—that he takes no account of ideology—the results are fairly promising. Like melodrama, and unlike tragedy, comedy is social in concern, dealing with 'the ways of the world'. Thus it should be distinguished at once from farce, which is identified by its sense of play, its 'immunity to real-life rules' about damage done, pain caused etc. (p 29). Comedy is distinguished from melodrama, however, in its attitude to the world. Heilman quotes Anthony Burgess: 'Comedy has a meaning in terms of—not of content, but effects: elation, acceptance of the world, of the fundamental disparateness of all the elements of the world. The test is, it makes one, if not laugh, at least consider laughing. One feels one can push on.' (pp 47-48).

Extending this acceptance of the world from an effect on the audience to the attitude adopted by the characters in a drama, Heilman distinguishes what he calls 'comic acceptance' (a coming to terms with the world, despite all its faults and frustrations) from different types of non-acceptance, all pertaining to non-comic forms. Thus, he distinguishes comedy from satire, which censures rather than accepts, as its 'central style is that of hostility and rejection' (p 84) and from melodrama: 'in melodrama the central action or style is almost never one of acceptance (the exception is that rather rare situation in which defective personalities accept defeat, as in 'The Iceman Cometh'); on the contrary the melodramatic mode is one of protest, resistance, challenge, opposition, combat, war' (p 94). In making acceptance (a conveniently general term, accommodating a range of responses) his comic yardstick, Heilman points out that certain things, such as genuine evil, are inherently unacceptable, and thus unamenable to comic treatment. Equally, however, comedy can transform certain sensitive areas, such as illness and death, so that they are seen, not in traditional 'sentimental, melodramatic or tragic tones', but as 'standard, inevitable, and much like all discomforts and disadvatages' (p 91). And Jewish humour 'manages to treat hostility, irrationality, and injustice as if they were of the ways of the world that receive comic placement', rather than with the melodramatic emotions of 'grief, anger, rebellion, bitterness' (p 178). Arguably, however, acceptance can go too far: Heilman rather neatly characterises black comedy as *over*-acceptance: 'acceptance of the unacceptable' (p 86).

Such a model for comedy characterises it as an inherently reactionary form. It is melodrama that protests, resists, challenges and so on; comedy finds ways of accommodating, compromising, learning to live with 'the ways of the world'. Of course, *how* reactionary would depend on the particular features

Still: All I Desire—*the family breakfast; Henry (Richard Carlson) announces that Naomi (Barbara Stanwyck) is to stay. Lily (Lori Nelson), Lena (Lotte Stein) and Joyce (Marcia Henderson) react.*



of such 'ways of the world' in a given drama, and hence the ideological implications of 'acceptance'. Heilman's failure to understand the operation of ideology (a necessary failure in view of his own political position) leads him simply to ignore this issue. Accordingly, to link his model for comedy to the reformulated tragedy/melodrama one, it, too, needs to be 're-thought' in ideological terms. The resultant triple-sided model for drama can then be investigated for its potential for the cinema.

From the point of view of categorisation, e.g. the distinction between comedy and melodrama, the model seems useful. In a small-town family melodrama, such as *All I Desire*, the characters clearly do not accept the 'ways of the world', and do indeed protest, resist, challenge. By contrast, in a small-town family comedy such as *Meet Me in St Louis* (1944), the characters basically do accept. Mr Smith's sudden announcement that the family is moving to New York produces an initial chorus of protests, and breaks up the family gathering, but it is only a short time before everyone re-groups, thereby signalling their coming to terms with the proposal. This may be contrasted with a parallel scene in *All I Desire*: when Henry breaks up the happy family breakfast by announcing that Naomi is staying on with them. The family here never re-groups, and the film finds no way of accommodating Lily's frustration at having lost her opportunity to get out of the small town.

However, Andrew Britton's reading of *Meet Me in St Louis* points to the *cost* of such acceptance by the characters in the movie. (A cost which may equally be seen in other 'acceptances', e.g. Esther and Rose's acceptance of their marital destinies under patriarchy.) While, on the one hand, the film's dominant ideological discourse, in keeping with the comedy mode, 'contains' the familial tensions and frustrations, on the other, a persistent challenge to the mode and the process of containment is provided by Tootie and the energies she releases. It is Tootie who changes Mr Smith's mind about moving, by her attack on the snow people: her resentment at the move displaced into an angry assault on symbolic parent-figures. Now, this is clearly an incursion of melodrama into the movie. It ruptures the comedy tone, but it also changes the course of events: for the sake of the family, Mr Smith decides that they should remain in St Louis. (In other words, he, too, 'accepts' and the cost here is registered in the uneasy tone of the ending.)

Thus melodrama, in this instance, is indeed the mode that effects change. And, although it is a change that reinstates the old order, it is also one that defies the patriarch: a balance of reactionary and progressive impulses. But the more general point about the 'incursions of melodrama' that Tootie instigates in the movie (e.g. also the Hallowe'en sequence events, including the 'killing' of Mr Brockhoff and Esther's assault on John) is that they provide an outlet for the frustrations felt by the characters as well as a sub-text to the film which constantly threatens the process of containment. In this respect, they may be contrasted with the songs in the film, which, as Andrew Britton argues, 'suggest moments of licence' but which are rather more firmly 'contained' by the dominant discourse. (This would not necessarily be true of all musical numbers in film musicals. Certain numbers in, for example, *The Pirate* (1948) suggest such a powerful release of sexual energies that they function very similarly to the incursions of melodrama into comedy.)

Extending these observations to Heilman's (mainstream) comedy mode in general, one would anticipate that the very effort of accommodating and compromising in the interests of accepting 'the ways of the world' would necessarily generate a surplus of suppressed, frustrated energy under the surface. In ignoring this problem, too, Heilman argues himself into a highly reactionary position, in which 'acceptance' is seen as an ideal, 'civilised' response. Few American film comedies would seem to be so 'civilised'. Dramatic revelations of/outlets for the frustrated energies are almost invariably found. In addition to the strategies adopted in *Meet Me in St Louis*, one could mention as manifestations of the cost of 'comic acceptance' characters being reduced to hysteria (e.g. Mortimer Brewster in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, 1944), having nightmares (e.g. Stanley in *Father of the Bride*, 1950) or getting histrionically drunk (e.g. Doug/Dan Dailey in *It's Always Fair Weather*, 1955). And occasionally a film will register a spectacular example of 'the return of the repressed', e.g. the monster soapsud eruption in *The Thrill of It All* (1963), testament indeed to Gerald (James Garner)'s sexual frustration. In Billy Wilder's comedies, the protagonists regularly go to absurd lengths to accommodate themselves to the ways of the world, often to the extent of assuming false identities. They are then obliged to live out the consequences of this over-ambitious accommodation: *The Major and the Minor* (1942), *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *The Apartment* (1960), *Irma La Douce* (1963), *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964). The results may be (though not unequivocally) liberating, as in *Kiss Me, Stupid*, but they may, equally, be traumatic, as in Baxter's

Still: Irma La Douce—*Nestor (Jack Lemmon).*



discovery of Fran's suicide attempt in *The Apartment*.

Although Heilman's discussion of comedy extends further than I have indicated, American film comedy is in general richer and more wide-ranging than its theatrical counterpart and thus in need of a different set of models for investigation. An example would be the model Wes D. Gehring constructs (in 'The Journal of Popular Film and Television', Vol 7, No 1) to contrast the rational world of the crackerbarrel Yankee hero (as in Capra) with the irrational world of the screwball hero (as in McCarey). And the crazy comedy of the Marx Brothers, Frank Tashlin and Jerry Lewis, which frequently violates the very conventions of spatio-temporal, verbal and narrative logic, demands a very different theoretical perspective (see 'Frank Tashlin', edited by Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, Edinburgh Film Festival, 1973).

For theoretical distinctions between comedy and melodrama, however, Heilman's model, suitably furbished, provides a useful starting-point. Since tragedy seems to have been largely expelled from the American cinema, these are the two main generic areas of interest. In *Pageants of Violence*, Mark LeFanu writes that the cinema's 'formal basis is still over and above everything intensely *theatrical*.' This would seem to be especially true of the American cinema, and this discussion, while necessarily sketchy, has been designed to further theoretical debate of the area which seems to me to have some of the closest links with a theatrical tradition and to occupy a central generic place in American film history: melodrama.

Michael Walker

Still: The Apartment—*Baxter (Jack Lemmon) finds the overdosed Fran (Shirley MacLaine).*



Ophuls in Hollywood

Rather than considering Ophuls's American movies from an auteurist perspective, this article looks at their place in the 'melodramatic tradition' traced out in my melodrama article. Its primary focus is on the complex of determinants (archetypal, generic, ideological, psychoanalytical) feeding into each of the films, with the place of Ophuls as *auteur* within this complex as a secondary consideration. One industrial consideration should be borne in mind: none of the films was the (direct) product of one of the Hollywood 'majors'. *The Exile* and *The Reckless Moment* were made by independent producers: Douglas Fairbanks Jr and Walter Wanger respectively. *Letter from an Unknown Woman* was made by Rampart Productions, an independent company formed by Joan Fontaine and William Dozier, her husband, and, although the company operated under the 'umbrella' of Universal, both it and John Houseman as producer indubitably mediated the studio's control. *Caught* was the last film made by Enterprise, a small and short-lived studio which employed a significant number of left-wing people (see Allan Eyles's article 'Films of Enterprise' in *Focus on Film 35*). And, although there were 'problems with the studio' on *Caught*, especially regarding the script, it is to the credit of Enterprise that the movie was made at all, even though the ending is clearly a botched-up job. (The official studio synopsis of the movie also describes a completely different beginning.)

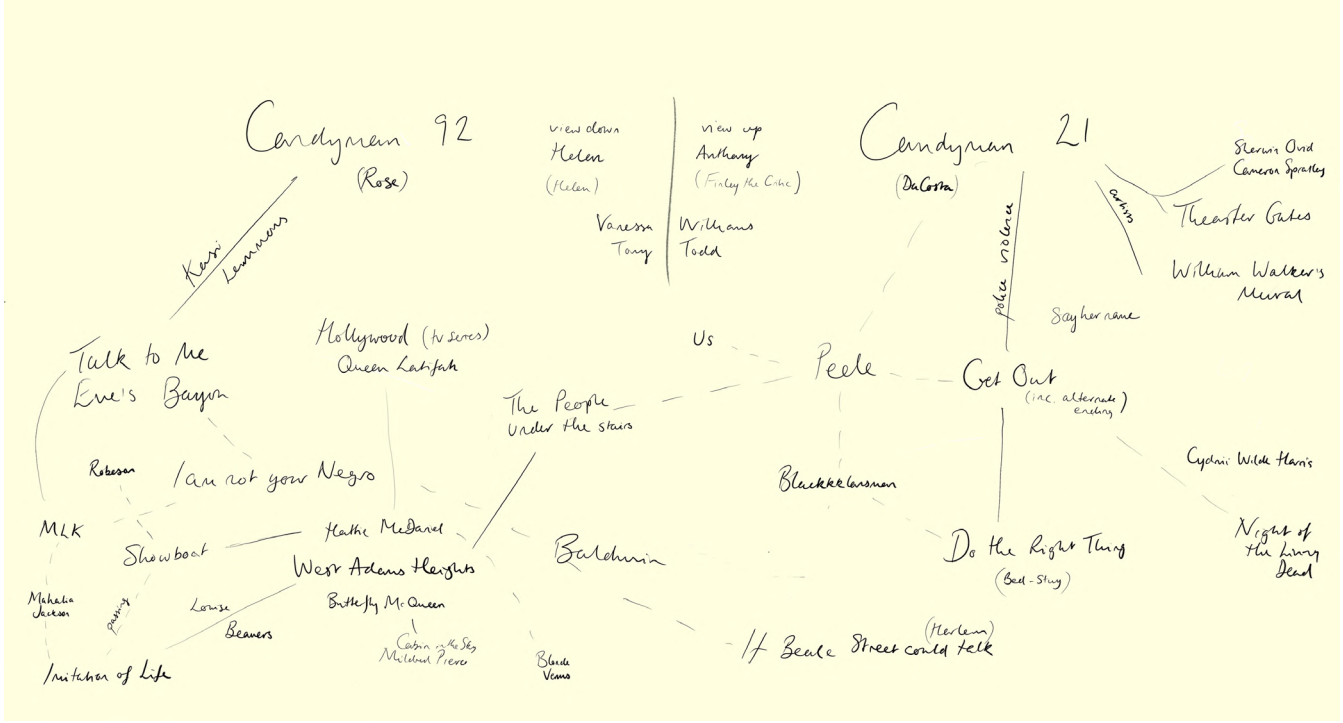
But, until more is generally known about the industrial set-up in Hollywood, it is difficult to gauge the consequences of this relative freedom from studio interference. Certainly the fact that Ophuls had 'sympathetic' producers must have lent him a certain amount of artistic freedom, although the producing-and-starring combination (Fairbanks, Fontaine, Joan Bennett in the sense that Wanger was her husband and regularly produced her films) must equally have complicated this to some extent—evidently to a large extent on *The Exile*. But Ophuls, like Renoir—and unlike, say, Lang or Sirk—never really became 'integrated' into the Hollywood system. His films are not mainstream products, and thus have rather more space to stand back from and comment on such products.

The Exile (1947)

The swashbuckler as a generic form is rooted in nineteenth century melodrama. In 'The World of Melodrama', Frank Rahill devotes a chapter to 'The Cape-and-Sword Hero' who swept to popularity in the 1840s, stimulated by (*inter alia*) Dumas's dramatisation of his own 'The Three Musketeers'. In *Focus on Film 27*, Jeffrey Richards traces the evolution of this tradition, through Dumas's literary successors (Hope, Orczy, Sabatini) whose works were similarly successfully dramatised, the introduction of the genre into the cinema via Fairbanks Sr, the major swashbuckling cycles of the 'thirties and the post-war years to the recent (largely parodic) revival of the form. And, although Richards does not say so, the characteristics he isolates in the genre are essentially those of the melodramatic tradition. He describes the genre's romanticisation of history; the displacement of historical events by 'a ritual of action-pieces (duels, chases, escapes)'; the stylisation of form and content (e.g. the balletic sword-play, the romanticised settings); the archetypal characters—hero, villain, damsel in distress; 'the triumph of good over evil and the meting out of punishment to evil-doers'. He also stresses the ideological conservatism of the form. The swashbuckler has its archeological (mythical) roots in romance and the chivalric code, with its gentleman hero who 'fights for King and Country, believes in truth and justice, defends the honour of a lady' and its villains are frequently attempted usurpers of the fixed, hierarchical order. With the 'rigorous enforcement' of the Production Code from 1934 this conservatism became completely reactionary. The French Revolution was now virtually taboo as a subject; when it did appear, it was 'depicted in terms of dictatorship rather than democracy'. Films featuring the British Civil War invariably favoured the Cavaliers and even outlaws were recuperated: they fought the injustices of petty tyrants rather than

AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

Creative Geography, Creative Connections: *Candyman*



This audiovisual essay foregrounds creative connections and overlooked histories in the relationships between a number of films, their creators and the spaces and social contexts with which they interact. Making use of a concept map – which proved to be a valuable structuring device for developing non-linear, non-hierarchical approaches to film history in 'Say, have you seen the Carioca?' – the essay centres on a film, *Candyman* (Rose, 1992), and its 'spiritual sequel', *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), the latter deliberately created in dialogue with the former and exploring related material from a different perspective. Our journey into the web of correspondences begins by foregrounding the mirrored qualities of this relationship, but later the map indicates further connections to explore, both within the artistic communities of the present and pursuing themes and structures into the past. As was the case with 'Carioca', the challenge is to find a form for the essay that is appropriately contained and complete while simultaneously indicating that more of these traces could be productively followed – and perhaps will be in the future. Mapping becomes an appropriate metaphor in another sense as the films, and the aspects of them foregrounded in this video essay, are concerned with urban space and the institutional racism of planning policy.

The essay embraces the fabric and materiality of the horror films it works with: a jump scare underlines a connection; some of the textures of the film and the phenomenological responses they might invite are important to the audience experience – all with a minimum of spoilers. Both versions of *Candyman* are unimaginable without their scores – if that is the right word for the soundscape created by Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe for the 2021 film – and the music provides plenty of scope for affective engagement with the material. Music is one factor in the rhythmic qualities of the material, both in its original context and in its recut form, and the rhythmic dimensions of editing, involvement and critical interjection are designed to play out dynamically for the viewer. Colleagues whose views I sought on the video prior to publication have commented on how detailed an argument is made while deploying a relatively small number of words. I am not against using words or voice over in an audiovisual essay – see, for example, this recent collaboration with Douglas Pye, which makes voices both central to the experience and part of the subject of the essay – but in this case it was important to let the films speak for themselves, and to each other, rather than imposing a commentary over them. And a voiceover in my British middle class accent would not have been an appropriate or effective means of contributing to the discussion. Instead, the richness of the material takes us a long way, its organisation in the essay amplified by selective captions which draw on a close engagement with the footage and the places it represents. I hope the result is an essay that successfully 'borrow[s] the aesthetic force of the moving images and sounds that constitute [the] object of study … for [its] own critical work' (Keathley 2020).

Ben Austen's excellent book *High-Risers: Cabrini-Green and the fate of American Public Housing* proved invaluable for this project and provided a source of inspiration for the 2021



Candyman's director Nia DaCosta and production designer, Cara Brower. *High-Risers* is wonderfully well-researched, with many interviews with Cabrini-Green residents as well as perspectives on the wider sweep of Chicago – and, indeed, United States – housing policy. Austen captures both the positive community experiences of Cabrini-Green and the terrifying consequences of poor housing policy decisions. The book includes a good passage on the original *Candyman* which recognises that the film responds to the disjunction between the real lives lived in Cabrini-Green and the irrational fears attached to its reputation. (2018: 179–83)

High-Risers provided information which I was able to triangulate with other sources – not least comparing footage from the films with archive photographs and contemporary views from Apple Maps and Google Street View – to chart the historical and geographical richness of the films.[1] Churches proved a way of anchoring the past of different neighborhoods to the recent present – successfully identifying Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church, where Martin Luther King Jr preached in 1966, was one of a number of rewarding moments of enquiry. Establishing that the view from Helen's picture window really does include high-rises at Cabrini-Green and appreciating, during the process of finding an appropriate form to emphasise this, that the tallest is also framed in a mirror on her wall was a moment of distinctively *videographic* research, a detail of the design I had not recognised in thirty years of watching the film. Then, moving to Los Angeles in the final stages of the essay, there was the excitement of realising just how proximate the houses of McQueen and McDaniel were, not to mention the shock of discovering how closely they sit to the encroaching freeway. The complexity of the films' relationships to the real spaces in which they are set is borne out by these connections to place, and matters of horror and fantasy map onto pressing real world concerns.

With these thoughts in mind, I would also recommend the fascinating article by Brower, '*Candyman*: The Art of Horror', which covers a number of valuable topics, and comments on the importance of *High-Risers* for her and DaCosta. The article describes how Brower advocated to use the remaining Row Houses for the new film, and made the case to use the Stranger's Home Church (formerly the site of Walker's mural) as a location (including interiors!). She also discusses how DaCosta had determined 'from the beginning' on setting Finley's home in Marina City, and the mixture of location dressing and set construction that were involved in achieving this. There is also a revealing section on how she and other colleagues – notably curator Hamza Walker – worked with contemporary Chicago artists on the film, providing another example of the way the film achieves what my colleague Lúcia Nagib (2020) calls 'passages to the real'. For those interested, this website (https://www.candymanmovie.com/impact/) provides more information about the artists whose work features in *Candyman* (2021), making available some of the materials which also feature in the DVD extras, including features on the score, a roundtable on Black Horror chaired by Colman Domingo, and an educational companion guide created with the Langston League.

Candyman (1992) begins, and this essay begins and ends, with an aerial view of an eight-lane urban road – the Dwight D. Eisenhower Expressway. This isn't a route which you would be likely to take to travel to Cabrini-Green from the Loop, but it is another example of a major infrastructure project driven through a minority neighborhood. In 1950 the Near West Side of Chicago was almost 40% African American, and residents of Greektown and Little Italy were also displaced by the construction of the road (Loerzel, no date). The University of Illinois Chicago's campus – including the now demolished Circle Forum, which features in both film and essay – was similarly created at the expense of these neighborhoods.

A final note in relation to an aspect of the 2021 film that features prominently in the essay: scholars of cultural anthropology and urban studies Jesse Mumm and Carolina Sternberg's recent article 'Mapping Racial Capital: Gentrification, Race and Value in Three Chicago Neighborhoods' provides a detailed engagement with the dynamics of home improvement, house prices and the perceived ethnicity. They conclude:

> In gentrifying neighborhoods of color in Chicago, the presence of white residents amid moments of increased white discourse on gentrification affect property value regardless of the built environment changes associated with material improvement. Conversely, and applicable to the three neighborhoods we have examined, material improvements in majority Black and Latino blocks are not equally reflected in the large gains in property value

> compared to blocks with more presence of white population. […] In sum, gentrification – as a social idea that affects property value – depends less on the sheer amount of properties upgraded as it does on the social value ascribed to the upgraders. That value rests today inordinately on the social construction of race. (2022: 31)

Though Cabrini-Green is not one of the neighborhoods studied, Mumm and Sternberg's conclusions provide plenty of support for Anthony's account of the gentrification process in his debate with Finley in Marina City.

Watch the audiovisual essay here:
https://vimeo.com/746837405

JOHN GIBBS

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[1] The use of mapping and imaging technologies for understanding other media is itself a developing Digital Humanities method. I used Street View, behind the scenes, in making 'Carioca', as discussed and illustrated in this article. Sustained uses of the methodology include Booth Wilson's video essay 'Landscape in Paradigms: Ford's Monument Valley' or, in another direction, the extraordinary work of Forensic Architecture.

V.F. PERKINS

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 Mayersberg[2] 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
>
> V
>
> 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 calculations[6] (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 themselves 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 be 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'.

ARTICLES

Realism and *Oppenheimer*: Notes on some Brechtian theses

May you now guard science's light
Kindle it and use it right
Lest it be a flame to fall
Downward to consume us all.
Yes, us all.
(Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, Scene 15)

I

Immediately striking on first viewing Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023) were the mannered style of much of the acting and the script's artificial exposition. Unusually for a Hollywood movie, *Oppenheimer* discourages unquestioning enjoyment of spectacle – plenty of which it intersperses on an epic scale among swathes of dialogue – and easy engagement with characters and their plight. A hermeneutic established in introductory titles – '1. Fission' and '2. Fusion' – which appear initially to function as chapter headings but are not followed up, further underlines emotional distancing. Rather like captions that establish three time scales and perspectives for one framing narrative in *Dunkirk* (Nolan, 2017), these inaugurate fragmented, interwoven accounts of J. Robert Oppenheimer's (Cillian Murphy) life: one, in colour, focalised through the titular protagonist who, it emerges, is summarising his life as context for his security clearance hearing; and one, monochrome, through a character whom Oppenheimer's intense interest in Jungian psychoanalysis, which the film shows, justifies reading as his shadow. 'Fission' splits Oppenheimer into interacting forces that shape his character, behaviour, ability to release and coordinate others' energies, and historical influence. 'Fusion' conflates contradictory energies into the single personality whom Lewis Strauss (Robert Downey Jr.) seeks to destroy. Comprising brief scenes and staccato flashbacks between times and places, these strands disrupt themselves and interrupt each other.

Sight and Sound's review, encountered subsequently, concurs. Jonathan Romney mentions Murphy's 'husky, often monotone intonations', thereby perceiving performance style in a filmmaking mode that supposedly predicates realism on invisibility. Such transparency may seem incompatible with spectacular celebrations of scale and special effects – Nolan frequently proclaims enthusiasm for James Bond films – but starring in action thrillers often embraces self-conscious irony, differentiating tone or modality from otherwise broadly similar treatments of serious political themes or historical injustices. Another journalist points to 'kooky characters, played by a list of famous people [...], with a lot of overacting in each of their limited time on screen,' before opining that Downey is 'terrific' and 'especially interesting': it is 'startling to watch Downey act as opposed to [...] be on cruise control with a persona he's done a million times,' the 'wisecracking likable rascal' (Ryan 2023). Romney spotlights representational inconsistencies: the 'sparseness of the realism' heightens 'more expressionistic moments', and 'naturalism intermittently disrupted by expressionistic flourishes' results in 'a film constructed on a principle of discontinuity' (2023: 71).

Commercial success and positive reviews suggest these narrational strategies work. 'Stilted talk' – Romney's description – functions differently from that in *The Da Vinci Code* (Howard, 2006), dismissed by Mark Kermode for, among other shortcomings, characters 'explaining the plot to each other' before 'doing a bit more explaining' (2006). Certainly, in *Oppenheimer*, Romney observes, 'Corridors-of-power expositions stretch for miles: party conversations begin, "I hear you're working on a radical new approach…"'. I would further argue that the dialogue downplays individuals' character, motivation or emotion. It resembles detached description of claims and conflicts summarised in a biography or encyclopaedia entry divided among the cast. Consider such lines as General Leslie Groves' (Matt Damon) question, 'Are you saying there's a chance we destroy the world?' or his exchange with Oppenheimer:

'Is it big enough?'
'To end the War?'
'To end all wars.'

Strauss quotes Einstein: 'God doesn't play dice.' Kitty Oppenheimer (Emily Blunt) delivers Hollywood's most portentous romantic subplot put-down: 'You don't get to commit sin and then ask us all to feel sorry for you when there are consequences.' Oppenheimer states of the atomic bomb, the nature of which he believes needs to be demonstrated, but not on civilians: 'They won't fear it until they understand it. And they won't understand it until they use it,' before spending his life trying to contain the technology. Further permitting Jungian interpretation – not my priority – Strauss insists: 'Amateurs chase the sun and get burned [...]. Power stays in the shadows.' Even granted these people's brilliance and monumental endeavours, this is hardly everyday speech, in reality or all but the ineptest movies. Consider how risible in another context would be Groves' barked orders, 'Build him a town – fast! Let's go recruit some scientists!', which did not preclude Best Screenplay award nominations. The tendency has another precedent, however, which adds gravitas to a film already freighted with weighty questions.

II

For me this became apparent with Kitty's declaration, 'Everything is changing. The world is repivoting in a new direction.' The last scientist whose work could justify such claims was Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), who overturned the Ptolemaic system with empirical proof of Copernicus' heliocentric theory. Analogies between Oppenheimer and Galileo are hardly new. More have appeared in responses to Nolan's film, no doubt because its source book *American*

Prometheus mentions some. One similarity at the most banal, factual, but also deeply symbolic levels is that both Galileo and Oppenheimer, as the film emphasises about the latter, had to shield their eyes to avoid blindness. Literally, Galileo's sunspot observations damaged his vision, and the Trinity personnel viewed the test through smoked glass; metaphorically, officialdom humiliated and restricted both for refusing to deny implications of their achievements. In 1954, Albert Einstein, himself a character in the film, described the hearing which removed Oppenheimer's security clearance a 'modern "inquisition"' (Rorrison 1986: ix), drawing comparison with Galileo's forced recantation of his treatise. Oppenheimer, *American Prometheus* explains,

> led the effort to unleash the power of the atom, but when he sought to warn his countrymen of its dangers, to constrain America's reliance on nuclear weapons, the government questioned his loyalty and put him on trial. His friends compared this public humiliation to the 1633 trial of another scientist, Galileo Galilei, by a medieval-minded church; others saw the ugly spectre of anti-Semitism in the event and recalled the ordeal of Captain Alfred Dreyfus in France in the 1890s. (Bird and Sherwin 2023: 6; see also 547)

The same book deems Oppenheimer McCarthyism's 'most prominent victim' (548). It likens Oppenheimer's representation in a German play, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (Heiner Kipphardt, 1964), based on the security board transcripts, to 'a modern Galileo, a scientist-hero martyred by the authorities in America's anticommunist [sic] witch-hunt' (578).

Oppenheimer is a biopic, a genre associated with non-fiction expectations and often prestige. It is also lauded as from a director whose work, including thriller hybrids, has embraced World War II (*Dunkirk*) and quantum physics (*Interstellar* [2014]). Given ongoing controversy, albeit muted in recent decades, surrounding nuclear deterrence, and the immediate climate of culture wars, any chink in credibility would attract condemnation. It needed a reputable source. *American Prometheus* supplies that: a Pulitzer prizewinner with glittering journalistic and academic credentials, it draws on 10,000 pages of files and interviews with 'nearly a hundred [...] friends, relatives and colleagues' (Bird and Sherwin, xii), and recounts hearings that 'addressed Shakespearean themes' (525). Another intertext, however, permeates and enriches Nolan's movie.

Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo*, first written in 1938 after the Nazis had revoked the playwright's citizenship, allegorically concerns the tribulations of Marxism. Brecht perceived parallels between Galileo's struggle against the Inquisition to change the world through science and his own frustration with Marxism's impediment by fascism. There is thus some connection with Oppenheimer's political beliefs, trade union activities, and association with Communists counting against him in the 'flawed' 1954 hearing (Broad 2022), even though evidence presented, apart from his opposing the hydrogen bomb, had been considered during his appointment to lead a crucial part of the Manhattan Project.

Marxism's dialectical materialism aspires towards scientific understanding grounded in empiricism; Brecht 'thought of himself as a kind of scientist and of his plays as experiments in human behaviour, and he initially shared the vision he attributes to Galileo of a world in which science can lighten man's burden' (Rorrison 1986: xxii). Brecht learned of nuclear fission from a 1939 radio discussion by Niels Bohr Institute scientists and enthused about it as an energy source (viii; xxi). (Nobel laureate Bohr was someone Oppenheimer venerated from his undergraduate days. An influencer of philosophy beside quantum mechanics, he joined the Manhattan Project, as Nolan shows, and subsequently campaigned with Oppenheimer to share knowledge internationally and against developing the Super Bomb.)

Brecht remained aware of ongoing hostility to his beliefs after Victory in Europe, particularly anti-Communism in America. Among many intersections and similarities is that, having completed with Charles Laughton an English version of *Galileo* (1945), centred on the astronomer's recantation, Brecht revised it after Hiroshima and Nagasaki to highlight scientists' social responsibility (Rorrison 1986: viii). Another, given the playwright's identification with Galileo, is that after the 1947 American productions starring Laughton, Brecht 'prove[d] himself a master of ambiguity when cross-examined about his communist sympathies' by the House Committee on Unamerican Activities (Rorrison 1986: ix). Strauss deems Oppenheimer 'Too slippery' for McCarthy. Doubts remain about Brecht's actions and also the enquiry's validity, as with Galileo and Oppenheimer. Uncertainty, together with alleged persecution, confirmed in Oppenheimer's instance by dependable witnesses, makes these real-life dramas compelling.

None of Brecht's versions assert absolutely whether Galileo recanted through cowardice or, as his protégé Andrea in the American script concludes (before Galileo disagrees), heroically to keep researching when denying heresy would have ended his life and precluded further discoveries (107). Having failed to institute 'the principle that the scientist had a duty to use science in the service of mankind' – essentially Oppenheimer and Bohr's position against nuclear proliferation – Galileo, in Rorrison's words, 'introduced the practice of making science subservient to the ruling classes. In Brecht's eyes his recantation is a crime, the "original sin" of the modern natural sciences' (xxii).

Brecht and Laughton's second version foregrounded this theme in terms of shaping modern warfare and, specifically, in relation to Nazi atrocities. The scientist's duty was not, as the play previously advocated, to 'Practice low cunning and survive'; rather to 'Stand up and be counted'. Previously unimaginable scientific, political, and military developments then supervened. Brecht later wrote, 'The "atomic" age made its debut at Hiroshima in the middle of our work. Overnight the biography of the founder of the new system of physics read differently' (Rorrison, xxiii). More precise appraisal was needed. On 1 December 1945, Brecht's diary proposes a new prologue:

> We hope you'll lend a charitable ear
> To what we have to say, since otherwise we fear
> If you won't learn from Galileo's experience
> The Bomb might make a personal appearance (Rorrison, 128)

The USSR knew enough by 1949 to detonate what American reconnaissance confirmed was 'a close copy of the Manhattan Project's plutonium bomb' (Bird and Sherwin, 416) and subsequently developed an H-bomb. Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) as the ultimate deterrent had been pursued by Edward Teller. The only scientist to oppose Oppenheimer's security



Figure 1. *MAD scientist: Teller (Benny Safdie) relishes the Trinity explosion.*

clearance, Teller features in Nolan's film as well as reputedly having inspired the titular character in *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Kubrick, 1964). Alone among grim-faced observers squinting through enclosed goggles or slabs of welder's glass at the Trinity detonation, Teller (Benny Safdie), wearing sunglasses like Peter Sellers' character, smiles sinisterly in its glare (Figure 1). His policy has become an existential suicidal threat for humankind. Brecht's advocacy of socially responsible science grew more relevant as he prepared a third Galileo (1955) for the Berliner Ensemble. According to Rorrison, Brecht's own interpretation 'makes *Galileo* directly responsible over the centuries for the atom bomb' (xli).

III

Historical and biographical similarities between the 'Physicist to the court' (Brecht, 82) and his counterpart in the US Government's war effort – both polymaths, theorists who adopted pragmatism, and, the dramatisations insist, sensualists – merely contextualise this study's main point: *Oppenheimer*'s relationship with realism. That slippery concept is meant not in terms of documentary veracity, which, as mentioned, seems impeccable. (Indeed, biographer Bird observes that David Hill, who in the film testifies against Strauss, was a Manhattan Project scientist whom his and Sherwin's 25-year investigation overlooked yet Nolan's research unearthed ['Meet the Press', Blu-Ray special feature 2023]). Neither is realism here concerned with Nolan's claim that IMAX is unprecedentedly 'Close […] to how the eye sees' ('Making of…', Blu-Ray special feature 2023); nor with filming at real locations. Rather it describes representational conventions and conformity to dominant beliefs. Narrational strategies indicate formal and thematic similarities and ideological implications between the film and Brecht's play.

In isolation, some echoes amount to little or, while highly suggestive, seem coincidental. For example, Galileo, insisting 'I betrayed my profession', refuses to shake hands with the idealistic Andrea (Brecht, 109). Teller apologises and shakes Oppenheimer's hand after testifying against him. Embedded in the film's last fifteen scenes – which alternate, with overlapping dialogue, between six locations and eight temporal events (some in Oppenheimer's imagination) – and after Strauss' aide (Alden Ehrenreich) has told him 'no one really knows' what Einstein (Tom Conti) and Oppenheimer 'said to each other' at a meeting the film portrays three times, Nolan dramatises an actual documented incident when Kitty stood 'stone-faced' as her husband 'grinned and shook Teller's hand' after President Johnson awarded Oppenheimer the Fermi Prize (Bird and Sherwin, 576). Another parallel – following convention whereby protagonists are constrained and silenced by lesser mortals claiming authority – is when Galileo implores, 'Listen to me, Andrea: don't talk to other people about our ideas', because 'The big shots won't allow it' (Brecht, 18): akin to the 'Compartmentalisation' protocol that contradicts Oppenheimer's instinctual interconnection of everything and precludes international sharing he advocated to prevent an arms race. (Oppenheimer's leadership encourages openness – ironic, in that meetings with Teller to keep him at Los Alamos enabled the hydrogen bomb.) Brecht has Galileo's former pupil, who introduced the telescope to him, wryly comment after the scientist's supposed improvements that gave Venice mercantile and naval superiority, 'I see you've made the casing red. In Holland it was green' (21). Oppenheimer too harnesses existing theories and technologies. Both characters end up in good health and, Galileo says, 'Corresponding comfort. The depth of my repentance has earned me enough credit with my superiors to be permitted to conduct scientific studies on a modest scale under clerical supervision' (103), mirrored in Oppenheimer's tenure as Director of the Institute for Advanced Study, writing and lecturing while producing little research.

Galileo's first scene shows the scientist using an apple to represent Earth in a vivid illustration of planetary motion. *Oppenheimer* too uses familiar objects to demonstrate ideas, including the goldfish bowl and brandy glass gradually filled with marbles to depict uranium and plutonium resources. A chemical chain reaction on an explosives freighter illustrates the nuclear bomb concept. Oppenheimer is always beside a



Figure 2. *What would later be called 'A-bombed trees', themselves prefiguring mushroom clouds, on Oppenheimer's curtains.*



Figure 3. *Poised between light and darkness, Oppenheimer (Cillian Murphy) tries on his signature hat and pipe as mushroom clouds obstruct his vision.*

blackboard when someone asks an administrative question, answered with a rapidly chalked diagram.

Specifically, *Oppenheimer* makes great play with an incident that starkly delineates its protagonist's ambiguity when – early in the film and his career – he leaves a cyanide-laced apple for his supervisor. Romney deems this 'an economical symbol of science turned toxic (Cambridge, Isaac Newton's apple – neat, no?)' (2023: 71). Both dramatisations mobilise it as a foundational symbol, from the Garden of Eden, of knowledge and its dangers. Oppenheimer's apple is side-lit, near chiaroscuro, resembling a planetary body. Poisoning it – the film's first motivated event – overshadows his persona from the start. This follows a montage of incandescent explosions and swirling plasma, light and heat, beginning with what is retrospectively a flashback to his younger self captivated by raindrops rippling a puddle ahead of subjective visions of cold blue particle traces. Internal symbols in a sustained image system, these link to ripples in a pond during the meeting with Einstein; in bathwater at his lover's suicide; debris falling into the sea after the chemical chain reaction; explosion shockwaves animatedly superimposed in his imagination on a map of potential targets; literal thermonuclear shockwaves when he imagines global conflagration; and metaphorically to conceptualise his work's geopolitical effects. The apparent murder attempt, then, in screenwriting terms is an inciting incident in the 'Fission' strand, casting doubt – including in Oppenheimer's own estimation – over his integrity; and in the 'Fusion' strand as a blemish, officially documented – as it was (Bird and Sherwin, 46) – usable as the first in a growing dossier to control him.

The weight of similarities hints that *Galileo* has inflected *Oppenheimer*'s purpose and strategies, undermining from within its 'Great Man' version of history. Kitty echoes this, repeatedly bucking Oppenheimer up, but whether as an ambitious Lady Macbeth or dutiful, supportive wife is unclear. On the other hand, the way science was harnessed, the bomb would have appeared under other leadership; yet wherewithal may have been lacking had Oppenheimer not introduced quantum physics to the USA.

Bird and Sherwin report that in the 1940s Oppenheimer became 'transfixed by' Henry James' 'The Beast in the Jungle': an enigmatic 'tale of obsession and tormented egotism in which the protagonist is haunted by a premonition that that he was "being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen"' (ix). They note his interest in Sanskrit texts and specifically 'karma', contrary to his humanist early education (101). Accordingly, the film's extraordinary production design implies some kind of teleology in Oppenheimer's existence even while, like Brecht's Galileo, he personifies wider forces. During the pivotal Chevalier incident, during which, as otherwise conflicting accounts agree, he rejected as 'treason' a casual dinner-party approach to share scientific secrets with Soviet contacts, a ginkgo leaf motif on Oppenheimer's kitchen curtains resembles mushroom clouds (Figure 2); moreover, that species – since known in Japan as *hibakujumoku* ('A-bombed trees') – would become famous for surviving Hiroshima. Again, when he occupies his Los Alamos office, trademark window stickers repeat the image (Figure 3). Incidental events, too, together suggest destiny. Oppenheimer at Cambridge accidentally breaks glass equipment, indicating ineptitude for laboratory work. He deliberately shatters wine glasses during introspective, undefined problem solving, which intimates that entities

once smashed cannot be reconstituted – including the pre-atomic age power balance or his reputation. When Kitty angrily urges Oppenheimer to challenge Strauss, she throws a whisky glass, narrowly missing him.

Galileo's observation, 'Everything is in motion, my friend' (6), refers to the planets and, as Brecht intended, figuratively the challenge to 17th century ecclesiastical authority and the 20th century arms race. Audiences to judge accordingly need to observe critically, reflectively, externally, not locked into dramatic tension or the psychology of the moment. The same is true when Strauss claims about Oppenheimer, 'He wanted to be the man who moved the Earth' or when Bohr (Kenneth Branagh) reiterates Kitty's point: 'It's not a new weapon. It's a new world.'

Conventional expectations of what commentators broadly call 'mainstream film' include that 'Skill in exposition means making it *invisible*. As the story progresses, the audience absorbs all it needs to know effortlessly, even unconsciously. The famous axiom "Show, don't tell" is the key' (McKee 1998: 334). That advice is antithetical to Brecht's interest in moving audiences to their own conclusions. Brecht's epic theatre, as he termed it, rather than constructing internally consistent, self-contained, incontrovertible demonstration of some claimed truth, *tells* by various means what playgoers need to know. This is to *show* them what he believes by means of their own logical processing of contradictions through which the play guides them.

While *Galileo* has only 15 scenes, these comprise numerous interactions, frequently interrupted and shifting between 52 characters and unspecified 'senators' and 'men, women, children' (3-4). Multiple modes of narration include lecture-style expositions and demonstrations; dramatic monologues; disputations; what Michel Chion in cinema calls 'textual speech' (1994: 172-176) – anonymous voiced prologues, children singing commentary, and, merging into diegesis, summary exposition by a ballad singer and his wife, alongside the protagonist's recounting of past events elsewhere; conventional dialogues; official proclamations; ceremonial addresses; readings of letters 'before the curtain' (98) – that is, by neither the writer nor recipient; banners; and projections of slogans, scene descriptions, and major preoccupations such as the image of 'Jupiter and its accompanying stars [...] on the cyclorama' as Galileo and Sagredo continue astronomical calculations overnight, indicated by the stage darkening (27). Didacticism begins with not only facts verbally imparted but Galileo's teaching of his pupil through the Socratic method so that audience members – with three hundred years of scientific hindsight – reach similar conclusions and so become potentially more amenable to the play's politics, presented rationally, while otherwise distanced emotionally.

Oppenheimer closely accords with principles that guide Brecht's Modernism. Brecht had met Sergei Eisenstein, a pioneer of montage techniques: these 'reveal parallel considerations to his own explorations in the epic theatre. What Brecht found congenial was the constructivist principle of cinematic montage premised on the idea of interruption and collision' that 'brings together images or shots that do not "fit" and insist on being "read" by the spectator' (Silberman 2009: 40-41). Vsevelod Meyerhold's theatre, in which Eisenstein had worked and which helped shape his filmmaking, 'offered', Sylvia Harvey explains, 'an interplay of discordant elements, and very little in the way of a single viewpoint, a unified position from which to see and judge the world as represented in the theatre.' Consequently, the spectator is 'not "formed" in an unproblematic way, invited to take up and accept a given position, but rather invited to take part in the construction of the play's meaning by working on the various discordant elements' (1978: 64). *Oppenheimer* exceeds what David Bordwell (2006) terms 'intensified continuity', a 21st century mode in which rapid editing prioritises action over immediate comprehension and is a contemporary resurgence of the early 'Cinema of Attractions' that valued spectacle over narrative (Gunning 1997). *Oppenheimer* could be described as 'fractured continuity'. Disorienting time shifts, within alternate narratives, utilising different stocks, force spectators to link events and work at conclusions concerning causality and morality. *Literal flashbacks in Oppenheimer function* as cinematic equivalents to *Galileo*'s spatial and temporal displacements accomplished through Chion's 'textual speech': images and events evoked verbally which 'accentuate the gulf between narrative speech [expository dialogue] and image and [...] create contradiction, gaps, discord between the two' (174). While Oppenheimer's and Strauss' focalisations inform 'Fission' and 'Fusion' respectively, both are contradictory and challenged by what is shown, spoken or already known. Almost subliminal flourishes, such as racked focus that converts what appear to be stars to raindrops on a train carriage window, convey Oppenheimer's intuition of universal interconnectedness. A speaking cast as large as Brecht's – *Oppenheimer* eschews composite characters – includes famous actors, some barely recognisable, in supporting roles, such as Gary Oldman as President Truman. Albeit an *Ocean's 11* (Soderbergh, 2001) kind of showing off, commercial valorisation of directorial status and the project's prestige, this undercuts assumptions casting brings through expectations accrued in star presence. Different from an unfamiliar performer, potentially this reinforces that this is a representation, open to scrutiny and criticism. Conversely, however, Murphy as Oppenheimer carries with him previous roles: almost exclusively as anti-hero, antagonist, villain or, at best, victim – characters not unproblematically sympathetic or typically admirable. Such contradiction will inform the present argument's conclusion.

Seemingly free association between events, until connections are forged, is demanding. Cerebral interaction with the film's formal and thematic logic is likely to continue beyond the screening, if only to make sense of it in recollection or discussion. This contrasts with emotional engagement with character psychology or prescribed cathartic reactions. These imply, Marc Silberman suggests, 'the problem is over, has been confronted, and the spectator can move on rather than dwell on an unresolved situation, a continuing social ill and be moved to do something about it – that is, to complete the fictional performance in real life' (2009: 38), notwithstanding Noël Carroll's insistence that 'artworks, in the standard case, command attention, not action' (1997: 201).

The 'Fission' strand's narration is akin to stream-of-consciousness. Oppenheimer's abstract thoughts and heightened perceptions feature visually and aurally, alternated with over-the-shoulder dialogue shots in which the side of his head exceeds the frame height yet, marginalised by the screen's width, is blurred by selective focus on what he experiences. Oppenheimer, ostensibly driver of – yet just another witness to – his own life, actively controls and passively responds,



Figure 4. *Extremely close over-the-shoulder shots and restricted depth of field align the spectator closely with Oppenheimer's (and, elsewhere, other characters') perspectives while maintaining separation. Oppenheimer is both central to and a witness to his own experiences.*

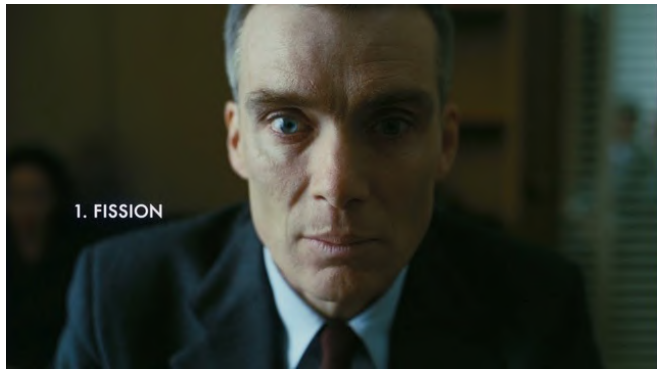


Figure 5. *Massive frontal close-ups reinforce Oppenheimer's magisterial status and authority yet expose him to scrutiny, while suggesting also a mirror to encourage reflection on ultimate responsibility for the world order his efforts ushered in.*

central to yet detached from events that quiver between internal and external focalisation (Figure 4). Close-ups render him larger-than-life, unfathomably God-like, looking down – presumably IMAX screening enhances this – suggesting objective scrutiny while connoting a mirror in which the spectator can empathise with his agitation and responsibility (Figure 5). (The script was first person, pre-publicity reported.) Disconcerting percussion, portending bottled-up forces, psychic, sexual, political, and atomic, functions as conspiracy-thriller soundtrack, maintaining tension, and as part of internal monologue. It recurs, for example, when a union meeting applauds Oppenheimer and later when he faces questions about Jean Tatlock (Florence Pugh). Momentary cutaways include fantasies such as flying home after bombing Germany as a V2 rocket streaks overhead; copulating with Tatlock at his hearing as Kitty looks on while he recounts his affair with the deceased woman; and standing, incongruously and anachronistically, dwarfed in the corner of the frame, among intercontinental missiles (Figure 6). His visions



Figure 6. *Split-second cutaways show how Oppenheimer (bottom right) in his imagination is dwarfed and marginalised by the enormity of what his science unleashed. Intercontinental ballistic missiles came after his involvement with nuclear research but are central to the Mutual Assured Destruction he anticipated and sought to prevent.*

alternate with newsreel associations of black-and-white footage dramatising Strauss' official, Government version. 'Fusion,' employing similar stylised, over-the-shoulder, shallow-focus shots for Strauss and others, is comparatively dull and objective. 'Fission' constantly tracks forward, homing in on Oppenheimer, through doorways, approaching mountainous landscapes or venerable buildings in aerial shots, revealing stars imploding or particles escaping, uniting the cosmos in an inexorable progress. 'Fusion,' reducing kaleidoscopic miscellany to monochromatic binaries, is shot mainly from Strauss' eye-level, often receding, maintaining distance (Figure 7).

Eventually identified as rapturous applause, the Los Alamos team's stamping feet after their project ends the war, the partly diegetic, partly non-diegetic din is ambiguous, not triumphant. 'Subjective-internal sound' (Chion 1994: 76) indicates Oppenheimer's anguish. As the wall behind him expressionistically trembles and shimmers, he struggles to voice platitudinous praise; with diegetic sound cut, as during the test explosion, he imagines radiation stripping skin from those before him, reducing them to charred remains. He perceives hysterical joy and relief as shock, horror, and despair; a man vomiting, perhaps from celebratory or reality-blocking alcoholic excess, recalls radiation sickness. Some I have

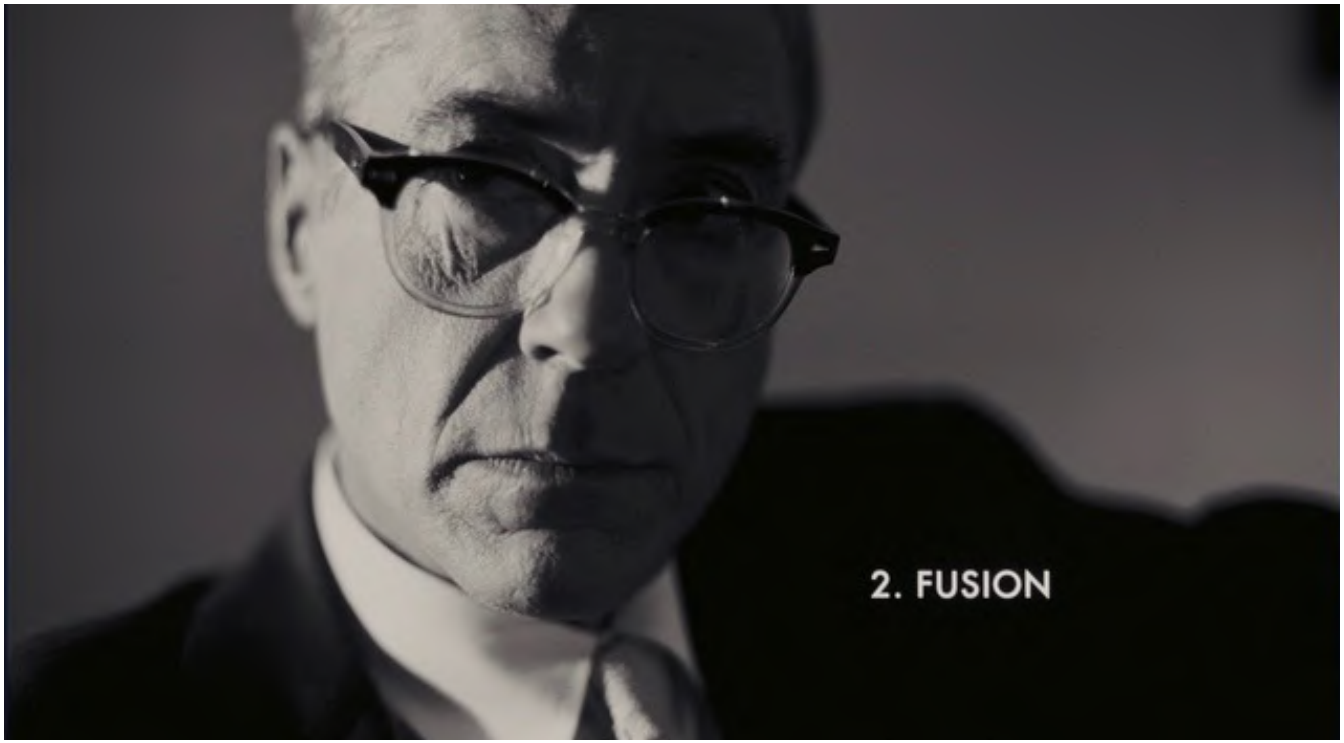


Figure 7. 'Fusion' observes Strauss (Robert Downey Jr.) externally. Monochromatic film stock, while distinguishing his narrative strand from Oppenheimer's, expresses his simple binary view of complex matters.

spoken to condemn the film for marginalising the bomb's Japanese victims. Yet Oppenheimer realises his accomplishment in terms of what he has done, and its consequences could do, to fellow humans he conceives as like himself, not caricatured or dehumanised as the politicians' and strategists' alien other.

As documentary drama, such details as flashes and traces of flames, alternated with close-ups, convey Oppenheimer's obsession with and visualisation of quantum particles, associated with energy and destruction, otherwise meaningless to most viewers. Delineating his character, they function too as further symbolism. Opening captions' identification of Oppenheimer with Prometheus recalls, in the life of a thinker enthused by Modernism, James Joyce's classical allusions to Daedalus and Ulysses. Yet the film is uninterested in his personal problems, individual character arc, suffering, remorse or redemption; or those of any other character, including Japanese victims. Kitty's alcoholism, clearly indicated, and portrayed by Bird and Sherwin as looming large in the marriage, is – irrelevant to wider consequences – never mentioned. As Jim McGuigan wrote concerning political television drama, 'emphasis on a single individual's experience' means 'a possible audience response is to sympathise with [that individual's] personal problems and regard him as just another individual in a difficult situation' (quoted by Tulloch 1990: 116). The film's concern is what events represent in human evolution and exposing Oppenheimer to scrutiny and judgment. Although, before opposing the hydrogen bomb, he insists he does his work and others decide its outcome, the film does not condone the equivalent of the Nazi excuse of following orders; he is shown squirming at projected images of nuclear devastation, although the obscene remains off-screen, as with concentration camp footage in *Judgment at Nuremberg* (Kramer, 1961).

IV

Colin MacCabe coined the term classic realist text (CRT) in an influential but contentious essay, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses' (1974). The term refers to a ubiquitous structure, rather than style or subject matter, that comprises discourses – ways of understanding – competing to establish a preferred truth, and that therefore is highly ideological. A narrative constructs this truth: a representation, not reflection or refraction of reality against which it can be directly compared but selective incorporation that marginalises inconvenient disruptions. It creates the illusion of allowing freedom to interpret while actually subjecting readers to a particular understanding. MacCabe starts with the 19th century British novel, then extends his argument to audio-visual media, especially film.

Conflict that drives any narrative arises from different ways of understanding and controlling reality. According to MacCabe, however, the classic novel does not set discourses against each other equally, leaving them to slug it out. It hierarchises them, favouring some more highly. In the realist novel, MacCabe claims, dialogue expresses competing views. Inverted commas mark speech as 'object language' (1974: 8). Additionally, a novel contains narration and description without quotation marks. The narrator's voice, even if anonymous, comments on and judges characters' opinions and behaviour, encouraging readers to approve some over others. This narrative discourse is a 'metalanguage', guiding understanding and response (8). In narrative film, MacCabe stresses, it is *literally* 'unwritten': cinematic technique, striving for invisibility, appears to show things as they are. Accordingly, film's ideological power is reinforcement of dominant assumptions, unquestioned because not stated.

In MacCabe's terms, the reader identifies with the metalanguage in a position of 'dominant specularity' (12): all-knowing, all-seeing, God-like above conflict. This

describes precisely *Oppenheimer*'s closing shots of global conflagration that illustrate the logical conclusion of MAD, confirming Oppenheimer's fears concerning the 'Chain reaction' he and Einstein unleashed. We look down and judge from a superior position, aligned with Oppenheimer in accord with MacCabe's thesis that dominant specularity occurs through visual narration, which *shows* the truth, transcending versions advanced in dialogue. But because the CRT ensures dominant specularity as closure, 'it cannot deal with the real as contradictory' (12).

However, the MAD scenario remains hypothetical, albeit a real and beyond terrifying threat: Teller and Truman's intention in developing the Super Bomb, and the nightmare Oppenheimer and Bohr opposed. That atomic annihilation has not happened confirms for militarists the logic of deterrence. That constant and undiminished danger preserves and defers likelihood of annihilation powerfully supports anti-nuclear sentiment. *Oppenheimer* ends with this paradox. Contradiction challenges spectators to formulate their position in light of those presented in three hours of dialogue. This advances beyond what MacCabe terms the 'progressive realist text' (22). These contest the CRT's assumed worldview, break new ground, address broader questions, and present alternative perspectives to those foisted by bourgeois drama. They offer a different angle but, like the CRT, attempt to bring interwoven discourses to closure to resolve contradiction.

Strauss' dullness, vindictiveness, conformity, and duplicity contrast with Oppenheimer's manifold talents, passions, evident flaws, and charisma. However, bigger themes suggest that *Oppenheimer* approaches 'subversive' cinema in offering no overarching discourse against which to judge characters' discourses (24). If MAD works, Oppenheimer was wrong, is one CRT closure; but while it remains, the annihilation threat he opposed overshadows everything. That Oppenheimer was right, if MAD fails to contain nuclear conflict, is another CRT closure; but nobody will know. A radically subversive strategy, MacCabe suggests – the 'revolutionary' text – would provoke viewers to participate actively in creating meaning (1974: 21). Self-reflexive filmmaking would encourage awareness of watching an artificial construction rather than seduction into an illusion of reality.

Contradictions the CRT and progressive realist text repress have counterparts in theoretical physics. MacCabe recognised this, likening the revolutionary text to a 'post-Einsteinian [...] conception of representation in which both subject and object are no longer caught in fixed positions' (25). According to Robert Jay Lifton:

> Oppenheimer had a series of conversations with Niels Bohr [...] [who] had developed the concept of 'complementarity,' [...] that two very different findings in physics can be equally true, depending on the vantage point or the instruments utilized by the observer (Rhodes 1986). (For instance, matter could be accurately represented by particles or by waves.) (2023)

However, one interpretation must be chosen to render observations useful. Oppenheimer and Bohr extended this principle to 'instinct and reason, free will, love and justice', according to science historian Jeremy Bernstein (quoted by Bird and Sherwin, 274). They applied it to the atomic bomb. Lifton continues:

> If used, it would bring a new dimension of destruction but would also create an equally new dedication to peace. As the biographer of the Los Alamos community put it, 'The bomb for Bohr and Oppenheimer was a weapon of death that might also end war and redeem mankind (Rhodes 1986).' (2023)

Analogously, *Galileo* scene 7 suggests, as Rorrison summarises, 'what one sees is not necessarily true, whereas what is true may not be perceived. So paradoxically Galileo's arguments for a materialistic universe are based on interpretative vision. Seeing is not believing.' (121) That principle – associated with quantum mechanics – as well as different approaches, for example theoretical and pragmatic, could apply to moral judgments concerning Oppenheimer. His multilingualism implies capacity to embrace diverse perspectives. Fractured narration presents him viewing Cubist paintings and reading T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' (1922). (Eliot became a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1948 at Oppenheimer's invitation [Bird and Sherwin, 377]). That disjointed poem concludes 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' (l. 430) before assertion of madness, amid quotations from Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Inferno*, interspersed with a storm and proclamation of subsequent 'peace which passeth understanding' (l. 433) from the *Upanishads*, which, the film shows, Oppenheimer keenly read. One might figure the 'World's greatest scientist' as the King on his quest – literally in the desert – risking making the planet a desert. Yet he is more a facilitator, as when shuttling between Teller, with whom he disagrees morally, and Einstein, whose relativity was incompatible with quantum mechanics, to establish whether a chain reaction could ignite the atmosphere and what the geopolitical consequences of that possibility might be. With the film's inconclusiveness, 'peace', which to Oppenheimer in the poetical context meant 'peace of mind' (Bird and Sherwin, 100), could be successful (within its own terms) mutual deterrence – or, after deafening thunder, a universe from which humankind has vaporised itself.

V

Unlike Galileo, forced to recant or face banishment from power, Oppenheimer actually 'never faced this sad choice […] because he always defended the decision to both build the atomic bomb and to use it' (Zachary, 2013). Kitty tells him, 'Stop playing the martyr.' Charismatic, naïve, arguably arrogant – to a security board member's comment, 'I thought Berkley had the leading Physics department,' he replies, 'Yes, once I had built it' – his ambiguity is expediently mythologised. The source book's subtitle, *The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, posits a double narrative to cast him individually, rather than humankind, as Prometheus. Contradictions, uncertainties, unanswerable questions, fascinate. These, which Bird and Sherwin liken to relative perspectives in *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1951) (195; 248), *Oppenheimer* keeps open, causing spectators to negotiate a view.

Teller informs Oppenheimer, 'No one knows what you believe.' Loved and admired, hated by others, Oppenheimer helped to deliver nuclear weaponry but also end the war. Lauded, he expressed doubts and self-deprecation. His security clearance guaranteed credibility but was removed when he opposed nuclear deterrence. Rorrison summarises the

position of Brecht's protagonist as presented in scene 14 of *Galileo*:

> Science, he says, is involved on two fronts. It seeks to understand the physical universe but also to better the lot of mankind and change society. The ruling classes seek to control the scientists and make them serve their interests. Galileo bowed to this control and threw away a unique chance to establish a 'Hippocratic' code of conduct for scientists and thus to secure the benefits of science for all of mankind. Galileo has betrayed his profession and spawned a breed of inventive dwarfs who will sell their discoveries to the highest bidder (xix).

Advocating arms control and advising the Atomic Energy Commission, Oppenheimer analogously failed to assert control over the technoscience he had served.

While Oppenheimer was extolled as God-like, 'the most respected scientific voice in the world', should one accept his statement to Kitty: 'We're selfish, awful people'? Was being 'father of the atomic bomb' just patriotic propaganda? Groves itemises Oppenheimer's faults at their first meeting, yet already recognises they are developing 'The most important thing [...] in the history of the world.' Do Oppenheimer's famous words, 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds,' express unimaginable remorse, or self-aggrandisement – indeed, according to complementarity, both?

Was Oppenheimer right to beat the Nazis in creating nuclear bombs, or were fears of German research unfounded? Was he a monster for unleashing that monstrosity or a saviour for preventing World War III? Biopics seek agency in personage, individualising and reinforcing contradictions their supposed revelation of truth promises to settle. Part of a nationwide effort, was Oppenheimer personally responsible or forced, 'with scores of other great minds', by the military-industrial complex 'into a conflict and pressured to find a solution' (Perfas 2023)? He accepts he 'Couldn't run a hamburger stand', yet coordinated some of the world's finest talents. Is he disingenuous to argue, 'Because we're building it doesn't mean we get to decide how it's used'? While he exercised scientific authority, could he influence strategy? Oppenheimer learns of Hiroshima and Nagasaki from the radio like everyone else.

'It was you on the cover of *Time*', insists Truman after Oppenheimer denies the bomb was his achievement. Yet when Oppenheimer expresses remorse about blood on his hands, Truman asks whether any Japanese survivor 'Gives a shit about who built the bomb'. Is he an American hero or a Jewish scapegoat? As Steven Shapin argues, a character of 'spirituality, of moral vision, and of cultural breadth', with 'steely blue eyes', can sell a movie whereas examining 'industrial organization and huge expenditures' would not (Perfas 2023).

That Oppenheimer provides ways 'to think about science and morality, science and politics, science and religion, science and philosophy, about the role of the intellectual in modern society' (Shapin, quoted by Perfas 2023), stresses the parallels with Galileo. (Crucially, each 'and' separates science as a supposedly pure pursuit somehow transcending morality, politics, religion and philosophy that guide and fund it.) In either case, the persona embodies what remains unresolved – not contested binaries but everything that might simultaneously be true, however contradictory: 'complementarity', as Bohr and Oppenheimer might have understood.

VI

Empty formalism made *Tenet* (Nolan, 2020) and *Memento* (Nolan, 2000), albeit impressive art-house variations on the high-budget thriller, films that rely on conventional chronology, consistency, and causality to make sense; each promises a classical narrative if the spectator can crack the puzzle of its narration. *Oppenheimer* plays with narrative more productively. Its storytelling demonstrates that as history it is multiply mediated: adaptation of a biography based on numerous sources that recount conflicting testimonies and speculations – interpretations of interpretations of interpretations. Oppenheimer, a conjuncture of forces and decisions, is akin to how Nolan is a name ascribed to a vision enabled, and compromised, by market opportunities and constraints that determine thousands of people's collaboration, competition, and cooperation on an enormously expensive, time-limited project. As Brecht thought Galileo exemplified his own status and responsibility, and 'Oppenheimer continually emphasized that science needed the humanities to better understand its own character and consequences' (Bird and Sherwin, 377), Nolan here exploits commercial clout to deliver entertainment that reminds world audiences of humanity's precarious existence while the Doomsday Clock – created by Manhattan Project scientists in 1947 – counts down.

'Bourgeois' theatre, Brecht believed, employs illusionism: a sense of events being self-contained, fully-formed, unchangeable, with fixed meanings, that positions the spectator through identification. He aimed instead for *verfremdungseffect*: 'estrangement', 'distanciation', or 'alienation' (Brecht 2001: 16; 23). Conventional theatre, he objected, created 'a substitute for life', someone else's problems experienced through a simulation of their response. Instead, Peter Wollen explains, Brecht advocated 'a representation – a picture, a diagram, a demonstration: he uses all those words – to which the spectator remained external and through which he / she acquired knowledge about (not gained experience of) the society in which he / she, himself / herself lived (not the life of another / others)' (1982: 201-202). The problem with experimental modernism as political strategy is reaching an audience. As Harvey noted, since the Russian revolution, again specifically after May 1968 – and always somewhere – debate has continued between 'film groups who saw the primary concern as being the search for new formal structures, and those who saw it as being primarily a question of swift and effective communication in a language already understood by the mass of the people' (1978: 56). *Oppenheimer*, far more than one troubled person's narrative, offers a timely reminder, after decades of apathetic individualism, of dangers and contradiction continuing from the politics that ensnared its protagonist. His experience of contradiction – internal as well as externally imposed – and its inconclusive resolution, is shared by the spectator by means of the self-conscious, overt narration of ostensibly a conventional blockbuster. If the film's institutional context compromises its ability to engage fully adequately with thematic and formal issues it raises, it is significant for raising them.

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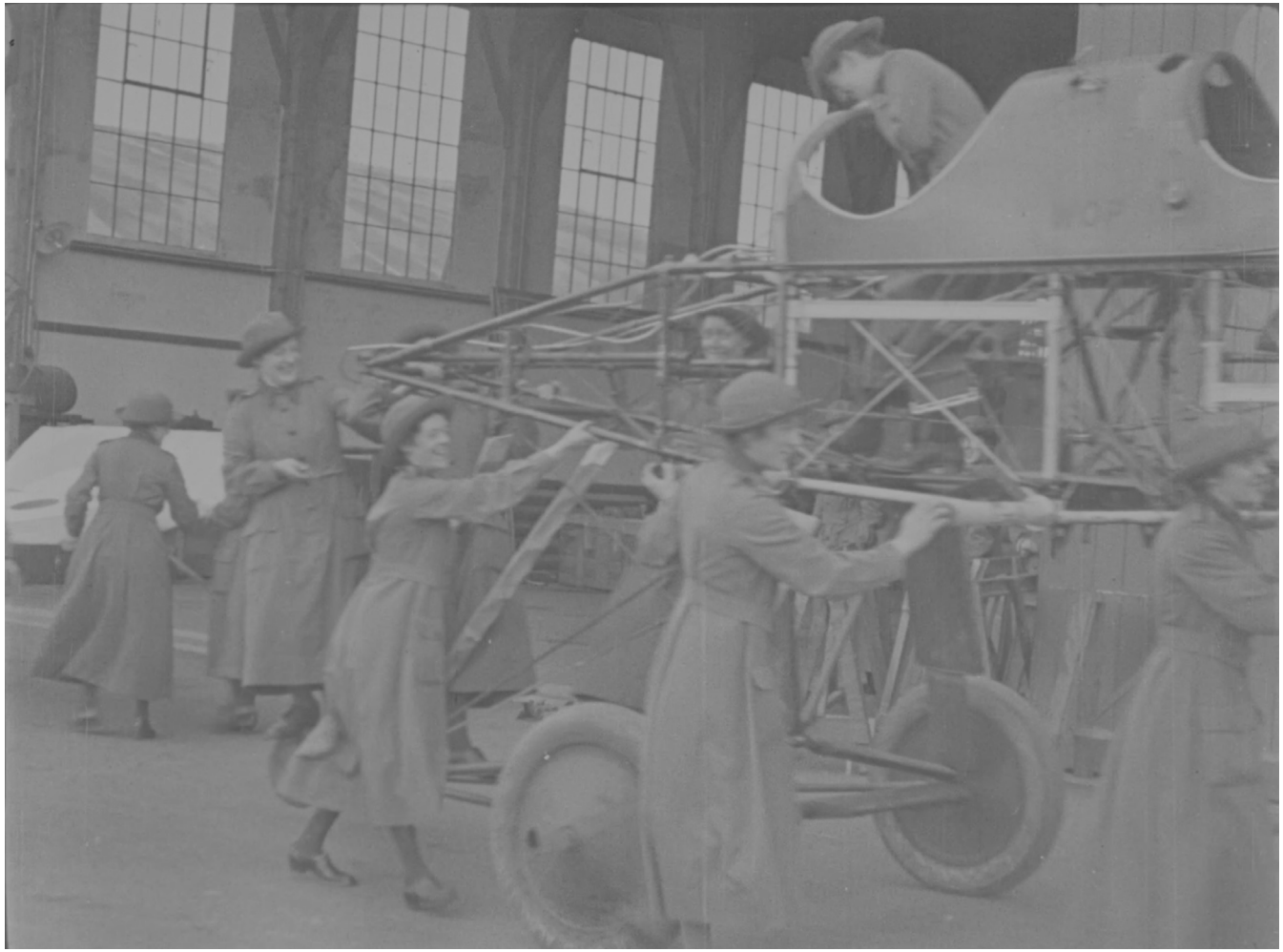
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AUDIOVISUAL APPROACHES AND THE ARCHIVE

Light Hands



> *[w]omen have a particular consciousness of their collective irrelevance to traditional accounts of history, as well as their collective absence from its construction.*
> Laura Mulvey (2015:27)

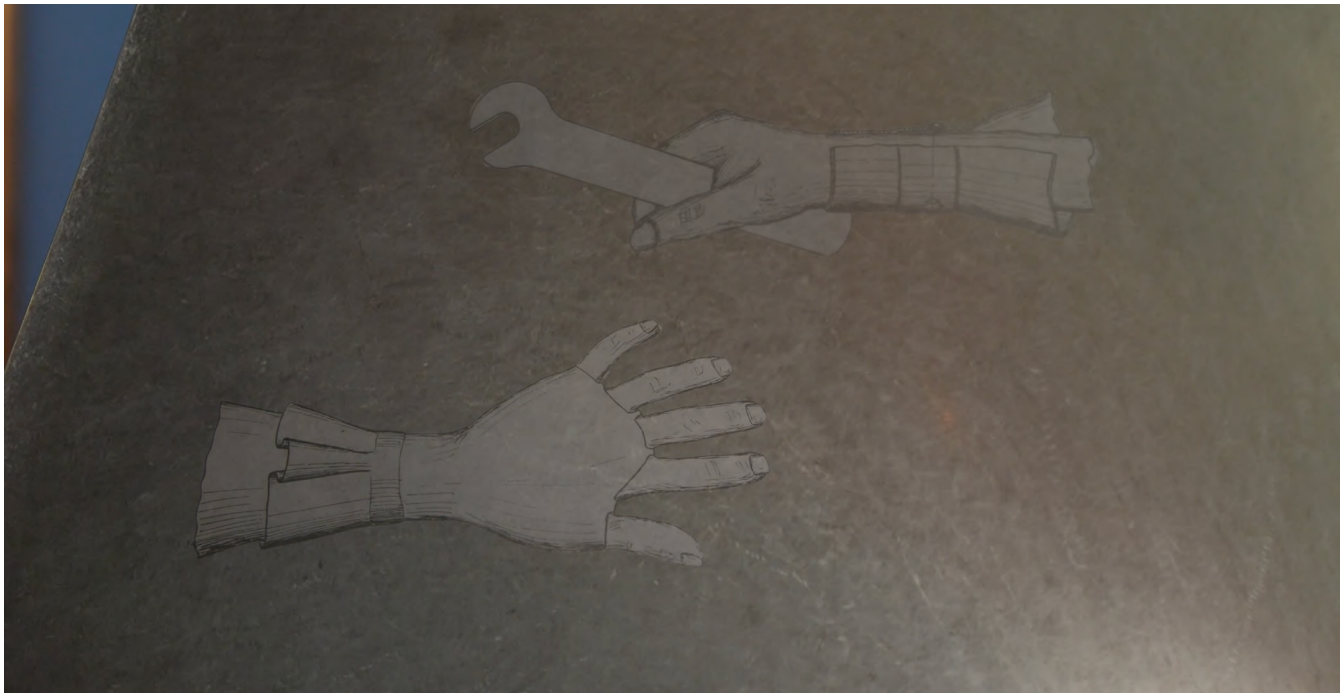
Light Hands presents an encounter, an audiovisual moment from my research into the early history of aviation. It is also an exercise in appropriation, taking material produced in a patriarchal setting and curating it anew with a feminist agenda. Thirdly, it is an effort to think with film, using video, sounds, and time alongside text, to initiate an investigation.

Source material

The filmed material examined here is newsreel and actuality footage held and digitised by the Imperial War Museum. It shows women working in aircraft manufacture in England during the First World War, and constitutes one of the principal sources of evidence of these activities. Aside from films and photographs, there is very scant documentation of women making aeroplanes. Hundreds of companies employed women, but there is little proof of this apart from some government figures, a couple of diaries, and some references in factory magazines.

Women abound in this imagery, in frames composed to set off their collectivity, rows of heads bent over workstations or a wing, or their slightness as individuals dwarfed by impressive machinery. The film segments were made for several purposes: to persuade employers to hire more women and increase wartime production, and to lighten up the newsreel programme. They would have been screened soon after filming, and play into a fascination with women doing men's jobs – both as novelty and as an expression of patriotic effort.[1] A journalist employed to hymn wartime production in print found purchase in analogies between the 'slight' and 'dainty' bodies and hands of the female workers and the light frames and delicate processes of the aircraft (Yates 1918: 29).[2]

The compositions both echo and reinforce the tendency at the time to denote these workers 'girls'. The word has connotations of maidenhood, innocence, malleability and silliness. It





distils a patronising and limited view of female agency, making it recognisable, manageable, to male supervisors, employers and policy makers. While there were evidently young girls working, there were also many older women with skills and experience. Female wartime work pushed to the fore social anxieties about changing femininity and the status of women, with efforts to discipline and protect workers pulling against a desire to maximise their utility in production.

There was certainly recognition during and after the war of women's participation in the workplace, with munitions being a sector of note. As well as news films and articles, we find songs, poems and novels about 'munitions girls'. But after the 'Restoration of Pre-War Practices' Act of 1919 required women to cede their positions to men, their contribution to the aviation sector seems to have been forgotten. The discourse around flight developed in two directions after the war – one looking back to the intense experience of military flying and dwelling on male heroism and camaraderie, subjects of dozens of 1920s and 1930s feature films; and one looking forward to the peacetime possibilities of aviation for nation and empire, with a minor part to be played by female passengers and the occasional lady pilot. Neither of these areas accommodated the fact that a third of the workforce making wartime aeroplanes had been female, and that there were over 120,000 women with experience in aircraft manufacture now unemployed (Jones 1937: 85).

Video methodology

Creating a video essay with this material enabled me to explore the affective qualities of the material while reflecting on my practice with a theoretical framework of recent scholarship on archive film and video research methodologies. On one level I was keen to recuperate the realities that the IWM's holdings evinced. On another, I was aware of being seduced by the 'knowledge effect' of archive film identified by Mary Ann Doane, of the risk of treating the footage too concretely as proof, as a transparent conduit back to a historical moment (2002: 21). My research into the production context of this kind of footage and photography made me very aware of the probable composition and editing decisions behind it that make it an imperfect source of knowledge about women's experiences.[3]

How then to force some openings in this material, to mine it for clues, to use it to create new stories? I have taken a stance of 'ethical possession', treating the source material as my own within this seven-minute duration (Cocker 2009). In curating and presenting fragments of the material, I wanted to separate moments from their production context and test them for connection. What other potential narratives could ensue? I used the digital editing space as a 'place to play', as Jyoti Mistry has recommended (2020). I explored pairings, both along and across the timeline. I sourced sounds for sentiment, and my own footage for interactions with historical artefacts.

For Catherine Russell, the essay form is one that 'requires the viewer to pass judgement' (2018: 24). The addition of British music tracks from different periods is intended to provoke the viewer to reconsider the visual information and adjudicate whether the sound worlds suggested are appropriate. They articulate my own responses of indignation and melancholy, cycling through shades of sexist glam rock and noughties feminist irritation before settling on a sentimental Edwardian song of the kind that may well have been played in the homes of some of these workers before and during the

war. While I have employed voiceover in previous research films, I chose here to use music alongside narrative intertitles as my authorial intervention so as not to privilege one woman's voice in a context where many women are seen and not heard.

Conclusion

This video essay serves as an entry point to my deeper archival research, examining women's interactions with aviation technology during the First World War. I hope to follow it up with a videographic case study on particular firms and processes, setting filmed material alongside archival documentation in order to better illuminate both. Here, in presenting fragments of moving image, I seek to engage viewers with the subject. I also use the essay as a space to examine my own encounter with the material, and disclose my interest. It allows for time to activate the archive film in a way impossible in a written piece, to make it do some of its original work under a layer of critical refraction. It is a promising space to make up for collective absences.

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Watch the audiovisual essay here:
https://vimeo.com/921996906

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1 In fact, aeroplane construction was one of the few areas of wartime industry where women were not directly replacing men, as the sector had been so small before the war. See MacKay 2018: 313

2 Similar rhetoric about women at work on other munitions can be found in the writing of Boyd Cable and Hall Caine.

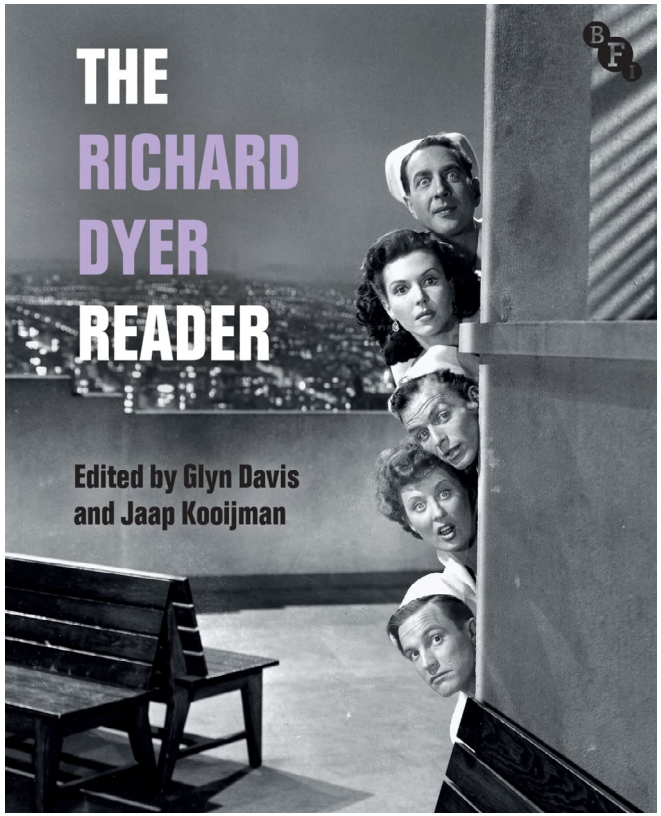
3 On the (entirely male) newsreel production teams see Ballantyne 1983 and Luke McKernan's articles for Screen Online 'Topical Budget: Women' http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/583946/index.html and 'Topical Budget: War and Propaganda' http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/583331/index.html (accessed 06/12/23); thanks to Luke McKernan for advice on researching this area. On the visual representation of women workers see Thom 2000: 37, 55 and Bowen 2008.

INTERVIEWS

Richard Dyer on interpretation, aesthetics and textual analysis; a dialogue with James MacDowell

Note: The following is a transcript of a conversation between Richard Dyer (Emeritus Professor, Kings College London) and James MacDowell (University of Warwick). It was conducted and recorded via video call, and originally made available to Warwick undergraduates taking the third-year module 'Film Aesthetics'. As well as touching on issues studied on that module, prior to the conversation James MacDowell invited students to submit their own questions for Professor Dyer. These questions punctuate their conversation. Ranging widely over numerous aspects of Dyer's work, the discussion maintains a consistent focus on theorical questions concerning the practice of interpretation – within film studies, aesthetic criticism, and cultural studies. Two of the key pieces mentioned during the discussion ('The Persistence of Textual Analysis' and 'Fond of Little Tunes: The Sissiness of Music in *Rope* and *Tea and Sympathy*') have since been collected in *The Richard Dyer Reader* (2023), edited by Glyn Davis and Jaap Kooijman.

James MacDowell: Thanks so much for agreeing to speak to me and the students, Richard. As you know, Warwick's 'Film Aesthetics' module was begun many years ago, and it's remained a staple of film and television studies undergraduates' final year. It used to be taught by Victor Perkins,



among many others. The way I currently teach it is to have students wrestle with some fundamental issues in the philosophy of aesthetics, often placing these questions in relation to different approaches to film interpretation and evaluation encountered elsewhere on the degree. Throughout, there's an ongoing concern with the different interpretive assumptions underlying different approaches to textual analysis. And one reason I've asked you to address this year's cohort is because I always think of your close textual analyses as striking an unusually delicate balance between what we might crudely call 'cultural' and 'aesthetic' criticism, which are sometimes opposed to one another.

But let's begin with this student question, which I thought it could be interesting to start with: 'Would you describe yourself as a theorist?'

Richard Dyer: No.

JM: And why not?

RD: I guess it's partly because the term was quite contaminated by the capital 'T' theory in the '*Screen* Theory' years, as it were. If I'm speaking with somebody in an art school context, say, then of course I *am* producing 'theory', comparatively speaking, because I'm not producing practice. But I don't feel I'm producing 'a theory' of film or culture, or whatever. So yes, my work is theoretically informed, but I suppose I think theorists *produce* theory, and I think I produce – studies, or something; I don't know what word to use exactly.

JM: Would you call yourself a critic?

RD: Well, probably not. I've got no word for what I am!

JM: A scholar?

RD: Yes, scholar actually, probably. Not 'critic', necessarily, because I feel that always implies evaluation, and I've never come to terms with evaluation. I accept that we all evaluate all the time, and it's important always to think about the criteria for evaluation; but I've somehow always backed off from taking responsibility for saying, 'This is better than that,' or, 'This is more important than that'; so that's why I tend to resist the term critic. Although, in the sense of Victor Perkins (and I certainly wouldn't compare myself to Victor) – that sense of an engagement with *a* film, and with reflection upon it in itself – I would recognise that as something I do. But I feel that the term critic always implies evaluation, in everyday usage; and I'm a great believer in bearing everyday usage in mind.

JM: That's interesting. But do you not think that that when you write about a film partly in terms of, say, its politics of representation, that's a form of evaluation?

RD: Yes, it is, undoubtedly. I think sometimes I have been explicitly saying, '*This* is an acceptable representation, within some political project, and *that* isn't.' So, obviously, that is a

judgment. But whether it's an *aesthetic* judgment is an interesting question. I used to think it would be interesting to teach a course on which one showed all sorts of films of which one disapproved – but which one couldn't help thinking have aesthetic merits. I mean *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffiths, 1915) and *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935) are obvious films that are, in their own ways, politically disgusting yet aesthetically remarkable. I remember once asking Victor Perkins about this, and he said of films like these, of which you disapprove morally: the fact that they have such disgusting politics (and he used that term, 'disgusting') means that they *can't* be valuable aesthetically. But I'm not sure if that's true …

JM: It's great that you bring that up, because the matter of moral versus aesthetic value is one of the questions students will be engaging with next term! For now, let's continue with another student question. This one is about an issue we've kept coming back to this term: the role that the concept of intention should or shouldn't play in interpretation. We started the module by reading Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' (1977), before considering some ways that we might somehow answer Barthes. We've thought about whether textual analysis might need to maintain some concept of intention, and – if so – what approach to it could seem most helpful: whether it be actual artists' stated intentions, or Umberto Eco's 'intention of the text' (1992), Wayne Booth's 'implied author' (1961), and so on.

So, this student asks: 'Throughout my degree, I've become very aware of the problems with the concept of the author. In addition to the fact of the collaborative and industrial nature of movie making, the author has also historically been identified with the figure of the straight white male. Thus, I understand the appeal of abandoning this concept, because it is arguably restrictive and oppressive. Nevertheless, how can we reconcile the "death of the author" with the simultaneous need to have spokespersons for underrepresented groups in art and media?'

This question reminds me of a lovely thing that you write in your chapter 'Believing in Fairies' (2001) about authorship (which I quoted for my students). You speak there about being happy to teach a 'John Ford film' as a 'John Wayne film'; but that when you're talking about – for instance – films directed by women, or non-white directors, you often become much more interested in directorial authorship.

RD: Yes, though of course that itself is a somewhat limited as a criticism of authorship as a general concept. It's true that it's been overwhelmingly associated with white and male authors. But there's that very good article by Linda Nochlin, 'Why are there no great women artists?' (1971) in which she said that there is, of course, a good reason why there have historically been fewer great women artists, and that's obviously to do with how many fewer women have been able to be artists overall – thanks to the structures of the cultural industries, and education, in relation to the politics of gender, and so forth. And it's clearly the same with the history of cinema.

But then the interesting thing about the collaborative nature of film is what I try to talk about in *Stars*: about not seeing the director as the only begetter, to use the Elizabethan term. I don't think you can just write-out authorship altogether, but you *can* have a more complex model, which de-centres the director alone (I think Victor in *Film as Film* [1972] is actually quite aware of this). Though then you also have to address another point, which is about who had what power. The only director I've ever actually taught a whole course on is Fellini. If you look at the history of Fellini's career, by the time of *La Dolce Vita* (1960) – because of winning Oscars and one thing and another – he had, not absolute power, but an enormous amount of clout, and he was very manipulative. So, if you take such things into account, in many ways you can attribute a great deal of what's in the film to him. Not everything, of course, and you can see how his films differ when he loses certain of his collaborators; nonetheless, you *can* attribute a great deal to him. However, that's to do with knowing the circumstances of production.

JM: It's something of an empirical question.

RD: Yes, it is. Also, for textual analysis I make no assumptions about Fellini as a person. One is tempted by gossip, of course. Fellini was famously a womaniser and yet famously married; but I also think one should usually avoid that. I'm always



surprised when scholars want to go into the question of what a director was really like as a person. I don't care what Fellini was like, or any of the people I admire, as a *person*. What are the *films* like? That's what matters for textual analysis.

JM: That goes back to that other canonical anti-intentionalist piece, 'The Intentional Fallacy' (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946), which we actually also began the module with, alongside 'Death of the Author'. In that article Wimsatt and Beardsley suggest that trying to read the poet from the poem is just a different discipline: it's biography – which is not necessarily uninteresting, it's just not aesthetic criticism.

RD: Yes, it's an explanatory discourse. It may explain why the text is like it is – but then, why should one necessarily be interested in that? Also, the trouble is – two things. One: on 'the death of the author' – well, it's clearly just not true! You've only got to look at everyday newspaper writing, which is obsessively about the author. Auteurism is film studies' greatest hit! But I also do think the argument was always a bit in bad faith, even in that piece; because the 'death of the author' was the birth of the author-Barthes: the birth of the author-*critic*. So there's something rather problematic about it, though it's clearly an important piece to engage with.

JM: And, coming out of a similar tradition, theorists quite quickly latched onto Foucault's answer, the 'author function' (1984), which was in some ways a work-around.

RD: Yes! The other thing is: at the level of intention – where the question is 'What did the author mean when they dressed the character in these clothes?' – I don't think intention is very interesting. On the other hand, does it rule out saying, for instance, 'This is *meant* to be funny'? This is something I grappled with in writing about pastiche: when is something *supposed* to be a pastiche? I think that is a legitimate thing to ask, because it's a question about genre, and cultural production, and so on. Some things *are* meant to be funny; which doesn't preclude that one can find things funny that *aren't* meant to be, which is a whole other issue. But I don't think one can leave out intention at that level.

JM: Yes, at that general kind of level the question is, what kind of thing does this want to be? In the philosophy of art this is sometimes called a work's 'categorical intention' (Levinson 1996). It's great that you raise the issue of things being funny that aren't meant to be, because on the module we actually first read those canonical anti-intentionalist pieces alongside a 'so bad it's good' film; and that's because 'so bad it's good' is a concept that I think logically causes problems for anti-intentionalism. The movie was Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* (2003) – I don't know if you've seen it or know of it?



RD: I know of it, I've never seen it.

JM: It's an interesting case. I co-wrote a piece about it with James Zborowski, which we called 'The Aesthetics of "So bad it's good"' (2013) because it was about how – despite cult film studies being often focused predominantly on reception – the concept of 'so bad it's good' also seems, perversely, to involve some quite traditional presuppositions about aesthetics, intention and value. For example, it assumes that viewers and critics can tell what the *original* intentions of a work were – namely: that it wasn't intended to be a parody of bad filmmaking! Because we can't laugh at something in a 'so bad it's good' fashion unless we assume it wasn't *asking* us to laugh.

RD: Yes, that's right.

JM: Also, if a 'so bad it's good' film *is* bad then doesn't that suggest that one criterion for artistic value is that works should, at a minimum, achieve their aesthetic intentions?

RD: Victor Perkins talked about evaluation – I think it may be in *Film as Film* – in terms of trying to judge a film by the degree to which it succeeded in doing what it set out to do. That obviously is an important dimension – though quite a bit of the problem lies in deciding what something set out to do. It's one thing to say it set out to be comic; it's another thing to say it sets out to offer a certain philosophy of the world, or even to create this degree of irony or not (which I know is something you have an interest in). These things are quite difficult to pin down as intentions. It does also leave out of the account films that, as it were, achieve something which they manifestly were *not* trying to achieve. So you also have the category of inadvertent intention, and perhaps that's the type you might be interested in with *The Room*.

JM: Yes, you're intuiting my logic! We ended the term with a couple of weeks on 'symptomatic readings' – ideas of unconscious ideology, and these sorts of questions. And one reason I started the module with *The Room* was to flag up these issues. Because I think that the sort of appreciation associated with *The Room* almost forces one to read symptomatically, in a way. Almost all its audience members engage with it on the level of, 'I can tell what this is trying to do, and it's also doing these *other* things – some of which are quite *dubious*, but rather interesting, or entertaining', and so on. It appears to have been made by someone with quite a misogynistic worldview, for example; but because it's all done so ineptly it becomes fascinating, partly because it seems unintentionally to present the ideology up for ridicule, in a way.

RD: Yes, but one thing that always worries me about that kind of reading is that there can be a kind of clever-dickery to it. I've thought about this in relation to the sing-along and the *Sound of Music* (1965) (Dyer 1992). It's not necessarily the case, and I think audiences can genuinely reappropriate something as camp; but camp can involve a kind of clever-dickery too. I think there's an interesting issue about readers positioning themselves as 'cleverer' than the text.

JM: Yes and, for the most part, what I would tend to call aesthetic criticism tries to avoid exactly that; whereas much 'symptomatic' reading by its nature tends to position the critic as 'seeing through' the text's façade. It can potentially breed a kind of false confidence.

RD: Yes, it may also mean that you avoid issues such as, 'Why is this funny?' Or, 'Why is this entertaining in these sorts of ways?' I often thought that about much criticism on the western, for instance; people would often say, 'Well, you may *think* it's all about excitement, but *really* it's about x or y …' And I sometimes think, 'Well, yes, but that means we're not actually addressing, say, what exactly *is* this particular form of excitement' – or whatever it might be.

JM: The challenge is often to account for both simultaneously, isn't it? I was recently rewatching your lecture, 'The Persistence of Textual Analysis' (2016; 2023), which is so good.[1] And in that you say something to that effect: that a lot of criticism can adopt an attitude of, 'This is what something *appears* to be, but don't you see actually what it's *really* about is this?' And your point is, 'Well, if it *appears* to be a certain way, there are probably good reasons *why* it appears that way, and we need to account for that as well.'

RD: Yes, that's right.

JM: I'd actually like to come back later to a concept you share in that talk: your definition of the meanings that a text 'makes available', which I think is worth probing (in relation to 'symptomatic' reading, in fact). But for now let's continue with the student's questions.

This next one is again explicitly about the problem of intention; the student asks: 'Do you believe that we can decipher the actual intentions of a director through the film alone?' You seemed to suggest earlier that perhaps we *could*, but that this alone isn't necessarily that *interesting*?

RD: I just think there's a limit to where you can go to with that kind of question. A lot of the time when an artist says, 'Let's dress them in red,' for example, it's because that just *feels* right; it's not necessarily tied to a precise intention – 'It should be red *because*…' It's often intuition. I think that what we're often doing in interpretations is, if you like, unpacking intuition. That is fraught with problems too, and to some extent you have to ask yourself, 'How much does doing this tell me about the *film*?' Because in the end what I want to know about *is* the film.

JM: This is precisely one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you, Richard: because of the way your work embodies these tensions between aesthetic and cultural criticism, and always wants to do justice to both approaches equally.

RD: Well, you have certainly understood my *intention*! That is very much what I try to do, but I think it's very hard to pull off. I think most times one falls too far on one or other side of that equation. To actually *really* synthesise them is very difficult. One of the only pieces that I feel did it fully is not actually that good of a piece, I think, and it's my piece on music in 'blaxploitation' films (2011). That's one of the times where I feel I somehow managed to talk about aesthetics, entertainment, affect *and* the politics in equal measure. But I also think it's not a very good piece – perhaps because being a white person writing about it probably meant I didn't get in deep enough; or maybe I lost patience, because once you've got beyond *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971), *Superfly* (Gordon Parks, 1972), and one or two others, I find many of them so unsatisfactory as films.

JM: Speaking of the approaches you take in your readings, the next student question relates to a particular strand of your research. So, they ask, 'What is your stance on the "death of queer theory"? As a student learning about queer theory, its having been repeatedly defined by its "radical unknowability" has been daunting. As well as this, 15 years ago, Sharon Marcus argued that, due to its proliferation and broad use, the term queer was becoming meaningless (2005). Yet the volume of literature on queer theory has only continued to grow since. I would love to know your opinions on the state of queer theory.'



RD: I didn't know it was dead! Maybe it is, I honestly just don't know. My problem with queer theory is the word 'theory', and with what I often felt was its investment in impenetrability. It can sometimes fall into that category of things about which you often hear people say, 'Oh, it was absolutely brilliant; I didn't *understand* it, but it was absolutely brilliant!' I've found myself saying that myself. But then one thinks, 'How can I be saying that? If I don't *understand* it, how can I possibly think it's brilliant?' Certainly there have been many times when I've grappled with things that I didn't initially understand and, once I did, I thought, 'Is that all there is?' Or, 'Didn't we know that already?' There can also be a certain tone to some modes of theory – and a politics to that tone and mode – that makes me resistant. So, I've never seen myself as part of queer theory. Though I do think there are plusses to the term queer, even though I don't in personal terms see myself in that use of it. I do think it has loosened things up: it's queried the whole issue of fixed identities, and that is excellent; I completely share that. So, I try to run with it, although I'm probably unable quite to adapt fully to it.

JM: I can't claim to be an expert in queer theory, but one way into it via some of the ideas we've already touched on is potentially via 'symptomatic reading', and issues of intention. Of course, a 'queer reading' can sometimes involve re-reading what could be seen as an apparently 'heterosexual' text *as* queer. Just the other week in my teaching I was using an example you've discussed: *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955). Now, this is a film that – however we interpret it – simply would not have been able to say almost anything that it might have wanted to say about sexuality, because of

the Production Code. In the case of a film like that, we might also bring in biographical details: there certainly were a number of queer people involved in that production. But in class I used a clip from the great documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (Rob Epstein & Jeffrey Friedman, 1995), in which you appear, where you say that, 'We know the Sal Mineo character is gay, partly because he's got a portrait of Alan Ladd in his locker.' Then they cut to the screenwriter, Stewart Stern, saying that the intention *wasn't* to have us understand Plato as gay. Of course, however, he's only the screenwriter! In the finished film there's also the performer, Mineo; then there's Nicholas Ray, the director; there's the set designer, and so on. In any case – regardless of any individual person's intention – the way that I'd ask the question, using some of the terminology we've been using, is: given all the choices visible on screen, can we argue that it's the '*intention of the text*' (in Eco's terms) that Sal Mineo's character should be interpreted as gay?

RD: Right, yes; although I always remember Charlotte Brunsdon teasing me, and herself, for speaking in similar terms – because, in a way, of course intentions are things that *people* have; so there's that kind of problem with the 'intention of the text'. Nonetheless, I do always find I want to say things like, 'What the *text* wants us to see is this or that.' In that particular case, I might say, 'The text *allows* us to see it.' But can we find another way of putting it?

JM: Well, one other way of putting it that some people use would be Wayne Booth's concept of the 'implied author' – or some other version of talking about the *apparent* intentions, seemingly *perceptible* intentions, which are implied by the way the work is constructed.

RD: Yes, and in *Rebel Without a Cause* there's the sheer unlikelihood of the filmmakers not being aware of the meaning implied by Alan Ladd appearing in the locker – of it being complete chance. People who appear in lockers are always coded as objects of desire, so it simply beggars belief that someone, somewhere, didn't intend this – even if not Nicholas Ray – despite it being virtually impossible to recover that information. But you see, there I'm drawing on a matter of *convention*: in films, and possibly in life, photos put up in school lockers represent objects of desire. So that's making a statement about a cultural tradition, and that's where the cultural studies side comes in to ground it. I've just written something about *Tea and Sympathy* (Vincente Minnelli, 1956)





and *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948), which are both really quite interesting in terms of intention (2023b). Are they *meant* even to address homosexuality? I particularly focused on the music, and a whole history of assumed associations between gay men and certain kinds of music, which we can see being drawn upon by these films. I remember when *Rope* was in the 'Images of Homosexuality' season at the National Film Theatre in London in 1977, I overheard two people saying to each other as they left the cinema, 'Why was *that* shown in this season?' Now, they may have meant something like that it was homophobic and wasn't positive representation; but they may have meant, 'There's nothing gay there: why should one even make that assumption?' I thought the music was a very interesting way to address this question.

JM: Yes, because in *Rope* isn't the piano piece that Farley Granger plays by Poulenc, who's known to have been gay?

RD: Yes, and the soundtrack of *Tea and Sympathy* is based on Ravel. That film, of course, is much more consciously suppressing the gay reference, but it sort of comes back – partly through the music, and through other things as well. So this is a cultural argument and, looking at this music throughout history, I was so pleased by how overwhelming was this tradition of associating a particular kind of late Romanticism

with a gay 'sensibility', as it would have been called. Of course, these arguments are based to some extent on the assumption that the people involved could have known these cultural references. The Poulenc reference being consciously intended is likely, because he's much more widely known, and Hitchcock was a sophisticated person – as well as Arthur Laurents, the screenwriter, who was himself gay. But, even without that, or even without people knowing a particular piece of music, it's about a particular *genre* of music. It's about rhythm and tone – rather uncertain, rather flowing, but not hard-line or modernist either; there is just such a long tradition of that association being made. Even Liberace: there's this lovely bit in one of his first film appearances, *South Sea Sinner* (H. Bruce Humberstone,1950), where he says, 'Isn't it wonderful, the way the harmonies *blend into* one another?' That's so much the way people talked about that kind of music.

JM: This sounds like the perfect piece to demonstrate what I was saying about your work marrying cultural criticism and aesthetic criticism. You condense this point on the actual form, style, and affect of the music – suggesting that we can somehow actually feel it *in* the music's tones and the rhythms.

RD: Yes, that's what's important, I think: we *can*; we're not obliged to, but it makes that available.

JM: In terms of the balance between cultural background and aesthetic analysis, I often think of a moment in Victor Perkins' article 'Must we Say What They Mean?', where he interprets a series of gestures that Barbara Bel Geddes makes in *Caught* (1949), when her character is speaking about learning etiquette in finishing school. He writes about all the different ways that aspects of her performance suggest various meanings and attitudes, and then he writes, 'My interpretation of [this] moment tries to define a set of internal relationships in the light of beliefs about the appropriate viewing perspective, which are grounded inevitably in history […] and values' – then he puts in brackets, '(about which I have said nothing)' ([1990] 2020: 255). So this brilliantly acknowledges that, while he hasn't focused on these contextual matters, his reading is plainly based partly upon assumptions about history, cultural attitudes – about what, in that moment and place, would have been *likely* to have been meant by these details. Yet, at the same time, this also shows his awareness that, if he were to talk much more about that, this would probably have to become a different kind of writing.

RD: Yes, that's right, and some of it is simply practical: you just can't talk about everything all of the time.

JM: I actually think that so much of our identities as critics effectively comes down to that. You've got *x* number of words in an article, *x* number of minutes in a lecture or conference paper: what kind of scholar do you want to spend most of your time being? And often the question becomes about what you think you are looking at the work *for*: is it primarily to tell you about a *context*, or is context primarily used to tell you about the *work*?

RD: Yes, that's absolutely right. I used to give a lecture at Warwick about text and context – about needing both, and the difficulty of getting the balance right. Obviously, we need context to understand texts; but then, in fact context itself in practice only consists of further cultural texts, so it's kind of infinite once you start. And, if your interest is the *film*, then how do you use the context while not getting into irrelevancies? So, does one need to study the history of etiquette in order to be able to understand Barbara bel Geddes' gestures in that scene in *Caught*? Probably not. Although, if someone said, 'No, that probably *isn't* what her gestures would have meant in this historical context,' then that *is* what you would



have to do – and it could be a big job. But, on the whole, often one can simply say that one's able to recognise meanings based on background assumptions about context. That's one reason why *Tea and Sympathy* and *Rope* are interesting, because in a way you *have* to delve into that history to see the significance of the music, because these are no longer associations that most people know about. But, at the same time, you don't want to *overwhelm* the text with context. I find sometimes people do huge amounts of work on context, plop it down, and then don't really show what it tells us about the text. So it's quite a hard thing to get right.

JM: Absolutely, and in a sense this was one of the challenges of deconstruction, wasn't it? One of its insights was that 'context' is potentially infinite, potentially ever-multiplying.

But let's move on for now to the last student question I have, which is a very interesting one. This student asks, 'Would you consider your work on sexuality and race a form of activism? Did you ever see it that way, or do you see the role of the critic as a completely different thing than activism?'

RD: That really is a fantastically good question. Yes, I *have* thought of it as a form of activism – but I also want to be *modest* about it. I don't think merely writing about something political makes something political *happen*; it has to then be used, and I haven't always been good at the second bit. In relation to gay politics, I did used to organise film seasons and discussions, leaflet films, and so on; so it wasn't that my work was never engaged in that way. But most of my professional life I haven't really engaged explicitly in activism; I've merely made these ideas available and hoped that someone else would do the activism, as it were. It's a *form* of activism, I think, because it's offering different ways of seeing the world, different perceptions – or ways of more clearly seeing what you might already know, which I think is what I'm doing much of the time. These can all be important as parts of a process of… making the world better, or however one wants to put it. And I do think that culture has an effect on how people's lives are circumscribed or liberated; also, an important aspect of culture is how we *feel* about other people, which is an important part of how both art and politics work. So, all of those things are true; but I still think that one should have modesty. I remember thinking this about the title of a journal called *Theoretical Practice*: on one level it simply meant the practice of writing theory, which is fine. But this way of thinking can also slide into saying that somehow writing theory is itself a practical intervention in the world. I think it can *enable* certain kinds of practical intervention, but I think one should realise that it doesn't quite do that in and of itself. So, yes, I do think critical analysis can be a kind of activism, but quite a limited one – or something like that.

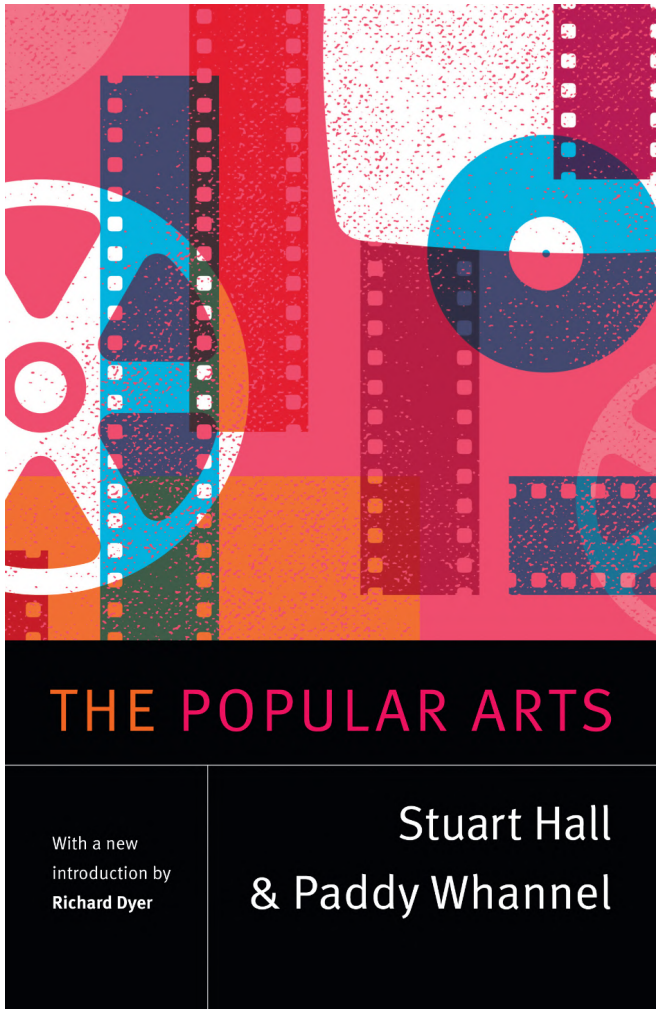
JM: Yes, we can believe in the cultural significance of criticism while not believing that it is in itself political action. Because, for one thing, if you fool yourself into thinking that cultural criticism itself is political action, then you might not do anything else politically – believing, 'I've done my bit'!

RD: Yes, yes.

JM: I'd be interested to get your take on this quite famous Stuart Hall quotation, which I've used a few times in my lectures. In a way I think Hall is probably somewhat joking here; but I find it interesting as a provocation. Addressing why he's interested in popular culture, he says it's because popular culture is 'one of the sites where struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged. It's an arena of consent and resistance. That is why it matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it.' (1981: 239)

I'm interested in what you think about this. Because I think it's useful as an extreme example – probably overstated even in Hall's own mind – of one way of conceiving the importance of art in almost exclusively cultural and political rather than aesthetic terms, if you see what I mean. I wouldn't imagine, at least, that you'd think that what Hall lays out here are the *only* reasons to give a damn about popular culture or art?

RD: No, they aren't. I mean, in one sense art and popular culture *are* places where power and all the rest are battled out. But they're battled out at the level of *feeling*. That's true of all art, I think, not just popular art. (I think it's been one potential fault of some cultural studies that it can focus too much on



meaning rather than feeling; but that's another issue.) Affect is much more obviously realised through formal qualities – and not just formal in the sense of colour and camera movement, but the way a person moves or smiles, you know, all those sorts of qualities. These are the things that *carry* all the politics. So in that sense the distinction is wrong to make. But I do wonder if there's a certain bad faith in Hall's answer, or a teasing; because enjoyment *was* important to him. I don't

think he was someone who did not enjoy art as art. At least in life (to be a bit intentionalist here), he certainly did take aesthetic pleasure in all sorts of popular art, including soap opera and all sorts of things. And if politics is not also partly about increasing enjoyment then that's a problem too; that *is* a problem with some politics.

JM: Yes, what's that famous quote – 'if I can't dance, it's not my revolution'?

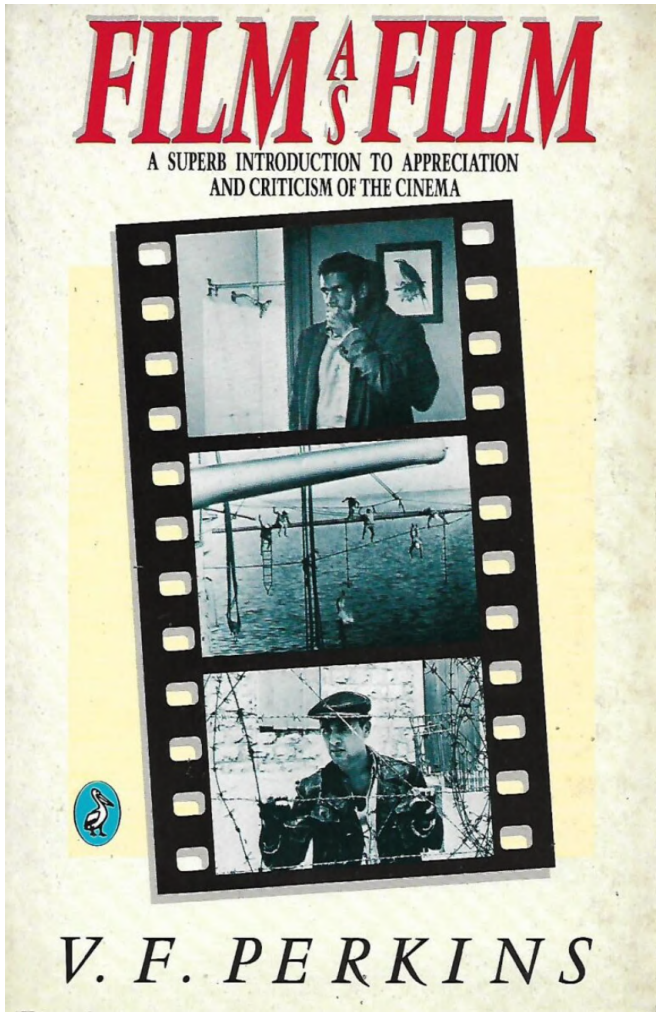
RD: Yes, that's Emma Goldman. But then – while you certainly want there to be enjoyment, you also want enjoyment itself always to be *considered*. So, for instance, at whose expense is that enjoyment? I recently wrote a letter to *The Guardian*, which they haven't published (I understand: they get 200 letters a day – I say, trying to pretend I don't mind!). But it was about a Republican politician, who was testifying about what she believed was the fraud involved in the vote against Trump in the 2020 election. There'd been a piece in *The Guardian Online* about it that used a bit from an American comedy show, which made fun of her, and where *all* the laughter is around the fact that she couldn't pronounce the word 'frightening'. And I thought, '*That's* not the reason to laugh at her'. I mean, I'm not at all thinking she's this poor woman, but there was a definite class dimension to the joke and the laughter. There's actually a similar thing with the style of Trump's *hair* that's very interesting – where there's potentially something quite problematic about laughing at this. You might say it has dimensions that are well worth laughing at: a particular sort of whiteness, and maleness, and vanity. But there's also a whole assumption about how nice middle-class men are supposed to be (like you!) honestly balding, so they have short hair. Whereas there's a whole tradition of working-class signifiers to do with 'bling' hair styling, you could call it, which is being mocked. So, I was trying to make that point. But then I thought, 'Well, I bet I'm coming across as someone who I don't want to be': someone who can't laugh, a sort of killjoy. So, it's so hard to get that balance right.

But, in relation to Stuart Hall's quotation: it's partly that you can't understand the politics without understanding the enjoyment; but it's also that the nature of the enjoyment is part of the politics. I tried to talk about this in my book about serial killing, for instance: what is it that is so enjoyable about all this nastiness? (2015). But, 'at whose expense is this enjoyment?' is an easier question, in a way. It's one that has to be asked, along with fully engaging in and with enjoyment.

JM: In terms of enjoyment and feeling, and the politics of feeling, I do think Raymond Williams and his 'structure of feeling' remains such a useful concept for trying to talk about aesthetic and cultural dimensions at once (1977).

RD: Yes, though I've always wished it wasn't *structure* of feeling. There's something about the concept of 'structure' that I think is problematic in relation to considering, say, colour or rhythm – or perhaps affect generally. In a way there's something a bit too architectural, or too linguistic, about 'structure'. But that's a minor detail, and of course I agree that how he elaborates the idea is absolutely terrific. Just going back the Stuart Hall quotation for a moment: the other thing that matters about popular culture is that it is *popular*. It's not just that it's *an* arena of consent and resistance – because that's also true of the avant garde, for example. And I'm certainly not saying that the avant garde is not itself important. But one thing that is very important about popular culture is that lots and lots and lots of people engage with it. Victor Perkins makes this point too. That's one the things that always used to annoy me about Victor: every time I thought of something that I thought was a great new idea I then found it in *Film as Film*! He talks there about the importance of grounding one's theories in films that are popular; I don't think he uses that word, but he emphasises the importance of thinking through ideas in relation to movies that were part of most people's ordinary experiences of going to the cinema.

JM: Well, that tees me up quite nicely for something else I wanted to raise, which is something Victor has said, and which I've related to definitions of what's usually taken to be involved in responding to an artwork aesthetically. Victor has this nice way of putting it – again in *Film as Film*, where he writes, 'One cannot analyse, or understand, an experience which one has refused. [...] To recapture the naïve response



of the film fan is the first step towards intelligent appreciation of most pictures. [...] One cannot profitably stop there; but one cannot sensibly begin anywhere else.' (1972: 157). This is very reminiscent of some strands in the philosophy of art, which emphasise that responding aesthetically must involve in some sense attempting to participate in the experience that the work *invites*. This is part of what Noël Carroll calls 'sympathetic attention' (2000: 195), which he regards as one

bedrock of aesthetic appreciation.[2] It involves almost *submitting* yourself to the work; and, of course, in certain strands of film theory and cultural studies it's precisely *submitting* yourself to a work that's regarded as having dubious connotations, and which can become viewed as something to be resisted. This position can then take you either to *resisting audiences* or *resisting critics*. As an audience member you could have what Stuart Hall would call an 'oppositional' reading (1980); or, for critics or theorists, this might produce a 'symptomatic' reading. I'm interested in asking you about these ideas in relation to what it is that you think you do in your writing. Because I would say that, again, you seem to be always trying to do both – trying to have …

RD: … Have my cake and eat it!

JM: Well – somehow trying both to pay a work sympathetic attention *and* put this attention in the service of a reading that is nonetheless revealing something about a broader culture. And perhaps your work suggests that you can only reveal these things about the broader culture *through* submitting yourself to the work – paying it sympathetic attention – in the first place.

RD: Yes, I think perhaps that's true. Obviously, there's a difference between what one actually does and what one thinks one *should* do. I think mainly I have tried to be sympathetic. Though, with some things – maybe in writing about Fassbinder or Pasolini – I've probably been more hostile, in a way. It's almost like I felt more happy to be hostile to so-called 'art cinema'.

JM: That's interesting; I can actually relate!

RD: Though of course I *love* a lot of art cinema; the last few days we've been watching only Marguerite Duras, who I think is wonderful. So it's not that I don't *like* art cinema!

JM: But I do know exactly what you mean, and doesn't it come partly from that impulse of not wanting to condescend? This is a strong vein running through so much of your work: basically, not wanting to condescend to the work, not wanting to condescend to its audience …

RD: That's really important, yes. In terms of sympathetic attention and giving oneself over to the work, I was just thinking about the whole thing about *surrendering*. This is of course very interesting in terms of gender. I remember during the time when *Screen* was at its most rebarbative: the critique was often so much about how awful it was to be *seduced*, to allow oneself to *have things done to one* – in a way that was so obviously so gendered.

JM: Well, that refusal was explicitly a part of the project of some '*Screen* theory' – like Mulvey's line about the 'Destruction of Pleasure as a Radical Weapon' (1975: 7).

RD: Yes, but you also get it in a lot of work on the 'classic realist text' (McCabe 1974) – that what's so awful about it is that you're caught up in it, you have to surrender to it, and so on. But I do think that in order to understand a work you have to give it that sympathetic attention.

JM: Yes, even if what you ultimately want to do is a symptomatic reading – because, as with 'so bad it's good', before you can read against the grain, you have to know in which direction the grain lies.

RD: Yes, you perhaps need to be sympathetically attached first. I suppose I'm interested in paying a bit more attention to the grain itself. There can be something very exciting about saying, 'Well, yes, that's the grain, but *actually* …' Whereas I think that one should often resist this pleasure of knowing better, and perhaps you need that sympathetic attention in order to *see* the grain in the first place.

JM: Exactly. And, although a lot of humanities scholarship seems now to have an *assumed* anti-intentionalism, I think it's actually unavoidably presuming things about intention all the time – whether it's 'oppositional' readings presuming 'preferred' readings; or presuming that one can see the grain itself, and so on.

RD: Yes, and then – what claim is one actually making for a reading 'against the grain'? So, for instance: camp. I've written about the phenomenon of gay audiences reading texts in camp ways, and of course I think people are entitled to do whatever they want with a text. I remember Andrew Britton was very upset with me when I talked about the camp perception of John Wayne – whereas I thought at that time it was a politically valuable thing to do (1992b).[3] So one can absolutely study camp as a reception strategy; but I do think there is a question about whether camp reading itself is actually a very good model for scholarship. The question is the status of the 'against-the-grain' within one's work. So, when I wrote about Judy Garland I was analysing the way in which a culture had, as it were, appropriated her star image and read it in a certain way (1987). But that wasn't *me* reading against the grain of Judy Garland; it was me saying, 'This is the way in which her image has been read.' Whereas, when a scholar themselves reads a film as camp, I can often feel it runs into the category of being clever at the expense of the text.

JM: This reminds me of Umberto Eco's distinction between *interpreting* a text and *using* a text (1992: 68-9). There's a certain kind of criticism that quite self-consciously *uses* texts; often, it's for the purpose of being combative against it.

RD: There's that point that Tania Modleski argues for, about one purpose of feminist criticism being to produce audiences that read texts differently (1982). So that's a slightly different thing again. She wasn't necessarily arguing there for insights into what the intention of the text was, nor was she making a claim about the way people actually do read texts; she was suggesting that she is trying through her interpretations to produce a different kind of critical audience, with a different way of looking at texts.

JM: I suppose one way to talk about an approach like that while continuing to focus primarily on the text itself is via the idea of the 'implied reader' – asking, 'Based on close analysis, what kind of reader does this text seem to assume, or want?' Once you've answered that, of course, you can then choose to compare this implied reader with the readings of actual

readers; or you could self-consciously acknowledge as a critic that you *aren't* the implied reader for this text, and choose to read it differently.

RD: Yes, though there is an interesting question about the knowledge value of that. If you're neither telling me about the text, nor telling me about how people *actually* read the text, then you're telling me instead only about how *you* read it, or how you feel it would be good for others to read it.

JM: That's true – although isn't there a sense in which we could say that's what all criticism is doing? I think even Victor says something close to, 'I am suggesting to you a particular way of understanding this.'[4] Isn't criticism in some way always suggesting a way of looking at something?

RD: Yes, it's true; but I do think there's something slightly different going on with a symptomatic approach like Modleski's – or perhaps something like Alexander Doty's queer readings. For someone like Perkins – and certainly in terms of my *intention* for my own work – I think one is usually trying to say, 'Here's a way of understanding what you may already know,' in a sense. When I used to teach the subject of music and film one very common thing that students said in feedback was, 'It's made me notice things I hadn't noticed before.' And a bit of me wants to say, 'Actually I think you *did* notice it, you just couldn't *articulate* it.' Or, put another way: 'You've now paid *attention* to it.' Which is not quite the same as saying, 'I'm asking you to read this *differently* from the way you initially did.'

JM: In relation to that, perhaps we could finally return to this formulation that you use in your 'The Persistence of Textual Analysis' lecture: the matter of the meanings that a work 'makes available.' I'm very interested in this formulation, because 'makes available' at once suggests certain limits on what can be usefully said about a text, but at the same time it isn't the same as *encourages* or *invites*. Some particular detail in a text might 'make available' a wide variety of meanings to any number of different readers, or critics; and if they're so inclined it might make available to them meanings that run very much 'against the grain'. For example, Victor has a lovely moment in *Film as Film* when he acknowledges that one can *choose* to watch a Marilyn Monroe film in any number of ways – including, say, for documentary evidence of a location, or as a documentary image of the actress Norma Jeane, rather than of the character she's playing (like that Godard point about every film being a documentary of its actors) (1972: 68). But of course, while a film may make that way of watching available, it can be very far from what it seems to be inviting or encouraging. So, I suppose I'm asking: when you refer to what a film 'makes available', do you mean 'offers *willingly*'?

RD: Clearly it's an idea that needs to be unpacked. One thing is that everything one does carries with it meanings that are made culturally – from whatever language you use, and so on



– and much of this you'll be unconscious of. (I don't mean that in a psychoanalytic sense, but simply things that you're not aware of, or not thinking of.) So that's why context is so important, because context allows you to talk about what meanings were available in a particular context. Now you might say, 'Well, something that in one context meant one thing can now mean something else.' For instance, the word 'gay'. Obviously there's the famous, much-discussed case in *Bringing up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), where Cary Grant says, 'I just went gay all of a sudden!' Did that just mean, 'I suddenly became fun'? Or did he – or someone involved in the production – know that this could have another meaning? It's debated; but certainly, at some point in time, that word would definitely *not* have carried that association – even though it might now look as if it does.

JM: It's funny you use that example: Eco actually uses the appearance of the word 'gay' in a Wordsworth poem to make a similar point about the 'intention of the text' (1992: 68-9), and the differences between interpreting texts and using them. With *Bringing up Baby*, as I understand it, there's a *chance* that it had a conscious double-meaning, because I think the term was starting to be used in that way at around that time?

RD: Yes – and, after all, he is dressed in women's clothes; so it's actually a very interesting example to try and unpick. But the general point is that I'm interested in what in the text is impacted by virtue of being made at a particular moment in a particular place. If you say what you're doing is a history of reception, and for that purpose you want to go *beyond* the meanings that were available at the time, that's fine. There's nothing at all wrong with studying meanings created through reception; you just need to be clear that that's what you're doing – and it's no longer textual analysis. In terms of my concept of what a text 'makes available', I think that textual analysis should probably stay with what was made available – what something meant, or felt like – at the time.

JM: Or could *conceivably* have meant or felt like?

RD: Yes, and this is what I tried to catch in my idea of 'structured polysemy' (1979), which is about the only bit of jargon that I released into the world that stuck (though sometimes I think it's misunderstood). My idea was that a star makes available lots of meanings and effects – but not just in a free-for-all, take-any-one-you-want, kind of way; because it *is* encouraging you to take some more than others. So, it's related to Victor's Marilyn Monroe example. The text is encouraging you to treat her as a fictional character in a fictional situation; of course, that's also made complicated because you know it's Marilyn Monroe, which may affect how you read

her character; but you're certainly *not* being encouraged by the film to think of her as an actress trying to remember her lines, or whatever. Incidentally, I once had the experience of watching *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945) for something like the hundredth time and suddenly thinking, 'This isn't Laura coming into the buffet and looking upset because she just nearly threw herself under a train; this is Celia Johnson, an actor.' And it was awful! I thought, 'Oh my God, I hope I'm not going to keep thinking this, because it's completely spoiling it for me!'

JM: That's so interesting, because in another sense that matter of being simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the text actually feels somehow fundamental to criticism. In a way, the job of the critic is always going to be to ride that line a little, isn't it?

RD: Absolutely. But, on the broader point: in general, I think that 'making available' – for textual analysis – would always need to keep in mind, 'makes available *when*?' And I think the 'when' is finally when the film was being made. I think everything else is reception – which can be very valuable, but it's a different thing. And the other thing is that this *isn't* a matter of all potential meanings being equal. I think that an analogy with weaving is interesting: all the strands are there, but the way they're arranged and gathered together encourages you to see some connections and not others. Now you *could* see others, because they're visibly there, so they are in that sense available. But they're not made *so* available.

JM: There's a lovely Wayne Booth quotation, which is something to the effect that: you can't ever reasonably say that it's only what's in the text that's important because – at every moment, when understanding the text, you're making assumptions about what the implied author is referring to in the world, and what they assume or think about the world; and you're also needing to take into account what you think they assume *you* know or think about the world.[5]

RD: That's right.

JM: I suppose – to kind of wrap up and somewhat oversimplify: if you're interested in approaching film primarily 'aesthetically', you'd likely be using such references to the wider world primarily to understand the work; whereas, if you're approaching it primarily 'culturally', you'd be using the work primarily to understand the thing it's referencing in the world.

RD: Yes, that's right – although, if you're interested *primarily* in discussing the broader world, then, in a sense, why would you even bother to look at a particular film?

JM: Yes, I would tend to agree; one doesn't want to do what you call 'Film Studies without films' (2023a: 405).

RD: Yes, that can be a problem!

A videographic piece inspired by one strand of the conversation is available here; it is titled 'Reading With the Grain: Queer Theory, Interpretation & the Hays Code'.

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1 This talk was given as part of the Kracauer Lectures in Film and Media Theory at Goethe-University Frankfurt, Germany, 26 January 2016; video online: https://www.kracauer-lectures.de/en/winter-2015-2016/richard-dyer/. Now published in *The Richard Dyer Reader* (2023: 400-11).

2 Carroll adapts his use of this term from Jerome Stolnitz (1960).

3 The piece in which Britton articulated his critique of Dyer was 'For Interpretation—Notes Against Camp' (1978-79).

4 Perkins writes of an interpretation constituting 'a description of aspects of the film with suggested understandings of some of the ways they are patterned' ([1990] 2020: 250).

5 The relevant quotation is: 'it is impossible to say that only what is "in the work" is relevant context, because at every point the author depends on inferences about what his [*sic*] reader will likely assume or know—about both his [*sic*] factual knowledge and his experience of literature. And the reader depends on inferences about what the author could assume' (1974: 99–100).

BOOK REVIEWS

Christian Keathley and Robert B. Ray, *All the President's Men*

The books that comprise the BFI Film Classics series, which began in 1992 with volumes on, among others, *Double Indemnity*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Stagecoach* and *The Wizard of Oz*, aim for a particular sweet spot in film criticism. Although the balance between production history, wider context, and detailed interpretation differs from volume to volume, each of them aims to provide a detailed engagement with a particular film – extensive enough to run to a hundred-or-so pages – that will serve the purposes both of scholars and of non-academic fans interested enough in a film to want to read something significantly longer than an article. They thus need to balance approachability with rigour, and to provide original arguments that open up, rather than shutting down, their readers' ability to delve further into the film. Christian Keathley and Robert B. Ray's volume on Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976) achieves this balance with adroitness and flair.

Although it includes plenty of pertinent information concerning the film's production history, gathered largely from secondary sources, the book's focus is on close reading and offering a fresh interpretation of the film; comparison with current events is studiously avoided. The book is consistently clear and always readable, with a fluent structure that finds another route through the film than simply moving linearly from beginning to end. One advantage of this approach is that the same scenes are analysed at different places in the book, attacking them from different angles and building up a sense of the procedures incrementally, rather than having to say everything about a given scene all at once. The frame enlargements and the occasional diagram are excellently selected and reproduced. (With what I assume is deliberate irony, the authors remark that 'even the most diligent viewer would find it enormously difficult to draw a map' of the *Washington Post*'s newsroom (44) before demonstrating their diligence by providing exactly that on the very next page.) The question of familiarity with the historical events that the film depicts – the investigations of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward into the break-in at the Watergate hotel on 17th June 1972 and the corruption in the Nixon administration that the subsequent investigation uncovered – is slightly more complex, and I will return to it below.

The book efficiently covers a broad range of topics concerning the production, aesthetics, and interpretation of the film, including casting, screenwriting, mise-en-scène, performance (making an intriguing distinction between 'personification' and 'impersonation'), and cinematography. The book ends by discussing the use of split diopters, presumably as a way of connecting the film's interest in pairs to the material specifics of its production and aesthetics. Thought-provoking insights and apt descriptions occur consistently. I like, for example, the claim that when Dustin Hoffman, playing Bernstein, has to improvise 'in the midst of a heavily staged scene' when he encounters a door that sticks, the result is that '[t]he Bookkeeper's stubborn, real front door has provided the movie with a vivid summary of all the scenes of Woodward and Bernstein being turned away from one door after another' (39). These observations are also productive of further thoughts. The book's reference to the bannisters through which the Bookkeeper is seen could be extended to discuss the fact that not only do we, and Bernstein, see her through them, but she – and we – also see *him* the same way. The comparison of the newsroom to a painting by Bruegel (55) is unexpected but illuminating, and the observation that the car park where Woodward meets Deep Throat 'looks like an abandoned *Post* newsroom' (87) is an example of that most difficult-to-achieve type of critical insight: something that seems entirely obvious, but only after it has been pointed out.





Who's trapped?

The book is very carefully observed, although I did notice a couple of errors. It's not true that the little girl near the front of the line 'faces the street, seeming to look across it' (19). She is in fact standing next to a woman and posing for a picture being taken by a man (presumably her father?) standing in front of her. I also cannot discern the jump-cut referred to on page 102. Page nine refers to 'Woodward' undertaking a promotional tour for *The Candidate*, which should have read 'Redford'. More substantially, I have some reservations concerning the book's deployment of the concept of the auteur. Although one fears to return to territory over which so much futile blood has been spilt, and it is certainly refreshing to see

reference to 'the French New Wave's auteur policy' (9) rather than 'Auteur Theory' ('author policy' is probably too much to hope for at this point!), the relationship between critical claims concerning intention and the specifics of the film's production history is not, in Keathley and Ray's presentation, as clear as it might have been. Certainly, the New Wave directors initiated (or, as Keathley and Ray point out, reintroduced) a model of absolute directorial control, but *critically* there is no paradox in the fact that the films that they wrote about in developing the idea of the director as author were Hollywood studio films. The book claims that *All the President's Men* 'does not fit [the] new auteurist model' of filmmaking that was emerging at the time – instead, it 'resembles a studio-era picture' (10) – but a case could be made that it fits the 'old auteurist model' perfectly. It all depends which model one is referring to: the critical model or the production model. The auteurs that the *Cahiers* critics first christened as such worked entirely within the studio system, and the claim for their ultimate aesthetic responsibility was based on watching and comparing the work to which they put their names, not delving into the archives to see who did what. Certainly, this approach can lead to critical and empirical distortions, but it is not fundamentally misguided. We are now so familiar with these distortions, and so forgetful of what it was that made such an approach appealing in the first place, that it seems to need pointing out that to say that making a film is a collaborative enterprise contradicts nothing that the original auteur critics wanted to argue.

This point is perhaps theoretical or historical more than it is interpretational, although it does have interpretational consequences. Of more direct significance for the interpretation that the book offers is that it conceives of film narrative as a matter of causation (clear in classical narrative; obscure otherwise). We read that '[c]onventional motion picture narrative proceeds by causal links, clarifying plot information as well as character actions and goals' (27). Aside from the fact that thrillers, which are surely often nothing if not conventional, frequently *don't* clarify either 'plot information' or 'character actions', or do so only misleadingly, it is unclear what precisely is being claimed as causing what. It is not that causes must be irrelevant to the discussion – it would be perfectly reasonable to say, for example, that the cause of Woodward and Bernstein's chastisement by editor Ben Bradlee (Jason Robards) towards the end of the film is their failure to establish that Sloane had named Haldeman to the grand jury – but rather that what is at issue can often be thought of more clearly in terms of *reasons*, rather than causes, and that there are different types of reason in play which it is important not to confuse. (This, precisely because they are so closely connected.) It is really a matter of answering quite different, albeit related, kinds of 'why' questions, such as, for example, 'Why did she do that?' Or, 'Why did they structure the script this way?'

These matters are of crucial importance for the interpretation of the film that Keathley and Ray offer, which as they rightly point out needs to come to terms with the question of how to 'make a detective story out of a case whose solution everybody knows' (8). The story of Watergate was recent history when the film was released, and it could be assumed that most of its audience would be familiar with it, even perhaps over-familiar. Keathley and Ray claim that the film deals with this challenge by enabling the viewer to 'provide the equivalent of the reporters' experience – the confusion, the impasses, the set-backs, the need to keep starting over – so that the viewer will share it' (25). This is entirely persuasive. Less so is the claim that this is achieved by using 'the processes of scripting and filming' so as to move 'from clarity to near illegibility' (31).

Certainly, Keathley and Ray make some valuable observations about the important fact that immediate clarity was not always an overriding priority for Pakula and Redford. For example, Woodward and Bernstein themselves suggested that it was confusing that the Bookkeeper (Jane Alexander) referred both to a list of fifteen names and to five names and that 'it would help if both references were to five – those who controlled the money' (32). But the change was not made. Nevertheless, the claim of 'near illegibility' is overstated. Nothing about *All the President's Men* indicates that it was designed to work for an audience totally unfamiliar with the story – as mentioned above, the challenge for the filmmakers was the opposite. Rather than a deliberate attempt to render the narrative illegible, the film's construction is better seen as an attempt to balance the audience's likely (over)familiarity with the general thrust of its narrative with a respect for the fine details of the historical facts about the investigation. I will briefly mention two examples which seem to me not best served by the book's analysis, and one in which their analysis is helpful but runs counter to the thrust of much of the book.

First, take the analysis of Woodward's visit, early in the film, to the arraignment of the Watergate burglars. On their analysis, a script which clearly singled out the lawyer Markham is rendered obscure in the film, making it mysterious how Woodward knew which man to approach. But one could also offer a different reading, one completely in keeping with the kind of account of classical Hollywood practice that Keathley and Ray claim that the film subverts. We hear Woodward being told that he doesn't know the lawyer's name, but that he is 'some country club type'. Then we cut directly to a shot of Markham, centrally framed and well lit, with only a couple of other men, out of focus and in relative darkness, behind him. What Keathley and Ray would call the 'causal link' motivating the montage here is surely productive of clarity. What would be really confusing would be if this man turned out *not* to be Markham. The answer to how Woodward knew who to approach is surely that he made an educated guess.

Second, in a detailed and very helpful analysis of the shot construction of the scenes in the *Post* newsroom, the book admits that in places the film 'comfortably orients the viewer to the spatial relationship between the reporters' desks' (48). But it goes on to claim that the viewer is more often than not 'unsupported by any clear and consistent visual clues, mak[ing] the characters appear as if floating, unmoored' (54). This does not represent my experience of the film, in which the relationship between Woodward and Bernstein's desks, so carefully established early on (as the book acknowledges), serves most of the time to keep us just oriented enough. One particular detail I admit is potentially confusing is that in the sequence analysed on pages 49-51 Bernstein, for some reason, moves between shots to the typewriter on the desk immediately behind his own: the position of his name plate gives this away. But, crucially, the film doesn't require us to answer the question that the book poses ('Where is [Woodward's desk] now…?') at this point. One could argue that this is perfectly classical: questions of spatial relationship that would

be confusing if we looked into them too closely are not so, because nothing about the film encourages us to do so at this point.

A more convincing analysis of the use of space in the newsroom, I suggest, would not link any confusion the viewer feels in these scenes so directly to the confusion that Woodward and Bernstein feel in their investigation, but would instead explore the ways in which the film expresses the fact that the reporters are *not at all* disorientated in this space that they know so intimately. Does our disorientation as viewers not in fact help to give us a sense of their *orientation*, serving by contrast to emphasise the ways that the characters, although often experiencing 'perplexity, confusion and illegibility' (24) in their investigations are, unlike us, *at home* in the newsroom? This would mean that Keathley and Ray are right about the 'mimetic function' that they claim for the 'helter-skelter editing and camera repositioning' (54); but confusion per se isn't the object of the mimesis. This could be connected to the apparently excessively detailed nature of the expensive newsroom set. Viewers who had actually worked in that newsroom did not feel the same disorientation as the rest of us. At issue is precisely the contrast between the cinematographer Gordon Willis asking the reporters, 'How the hell do you work in this place?" (54) and the *Post* editor Leonard Downie, Jr., saying: 'At the beginning of each scene, I could tell the hour of the day and the day of the week by what was happening in the background.' (35-6). What is fascinating about the newsroom and its representation is not its 'near illegibility' but the way it negotiates between legibility and illegibility.

Such strategies are characteristic of the film as a whole; it is crucial to its wonderfully distinctive flavour that it manages somehow to be clear and obscure at the same time. Once one can follow the names (either on repeated viewing, or if one already knows the story well), it's beautifully linear. Events that could well have been split up are presented directly one after another: Bernstein is talking to the man from the phone company, then immediately he's in Miami following up the lead he's been given; Bernstein and Woodward walk away from Kay Eddy (Lindsay Crouse), Woodward deciding not to press her to try and get a list of CREEP (Committee to Re-Elect the President) employees from her ex-fiancée, and then immediately it's the next day and she's dumping the file on top of Woodward's typewriter. Keathley and Ray do not appear to view the film this way; as we have seen, they regularly make remarks such as that 'the changes at these successive stages – adapting the book into a script, revising the script, filming and editing – often served to obscure what was originally clear', and that 'throughout *All the President's Men* […] causal links are routinely omitted or obscured' (27). Let us look at a final example, one in which the film (very gently) manipulates the historical facts, and see whether or not it 'obscure[s] what was originally clear'. The announcement by the Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern that Thomas Eagleton was no longer to be his running mate – which the film shows other members of the *Post* staff attending to in the background of Woodward's conversations – happened on the same day as the initial conversations with Republican donor Kenneth Dahlberg and CREEP chairman Clark MacGregor, but not simultaneously with the phone calls (see Bernstein and Woodward 1974: 42-48). By combining all of these events the film creates a scene that is tense and exciting even if one can't follow all the details. That Dahlberg has conveyed a crucial piece of information is entirely clear; the juggling of phone calls combines with the McGovern announcement in the background to evoke the difficulty and delicacy of what Woodward needs to do, of how easily it could all go wrong if the distractions get the better of him or he says the wrong thing to the wrong person. When one becomes clearer about the historical events (whether, say, by reading Bernstein and Woodward's book or simply by watching the film more than once) this confusion becomes much more legible. Combining the three strands – the Dahlberg and MacGregor phone calls and the McGovern announcement – conveys information about the sequence of events and which of them were broadly (albeit not literally) simultaneous, while the mise-en-scène bluntly but undemonstratively conveys that the story the majority of the *Post*'s staff think is currently the most important will soon be superseded by Woodward and Bernstein's investigations. (The staging quite literally relegates the McGovern story to the background.) The film's invention in this scene is remarkable both for its drama and for what repeat viewings reveal to be an elegantly economical clarity.

Nothing in the previous paragraph contradicts anything that Keathley and Ray say in their analyses of this particular scene, which do not concentrate on confusion or obscurity (15-16; 98-101). They convincingly argue, for example, that we should not 'underestimate' Redford's 'skill at appearing natural before the camera' (15), as well as pointing out how the film manipulates its soundtrack in the interests of clarity (101).[1] Their book's repeated insistence on the film's illegibility, however, distracts from the ways that their analysis is equally illuminating about how it achieves clarity. An alternative analysis of *All the President's Men* might concentrate on the film's efforts to be *legible* at the same time as keeping any manipulation of the facts to a minimum, as well as maintaining, all the while, the grip and the tension of a thriller. But it would be necessary for such an analysis to engage in detail with the claims put forward in this admirable book.

DOMINIC LASH

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[1] I would, however, quibble with their description of the gesture of 'raising his two forefingers to his closed eyes' as Woodward's way of 'distill[ing] his excitement' (16), which doesn't quite pinpoint the tension in the gesture and the sense it so brilliantly conveys that one wrong move could mess everything up. Yes, Woodward is excited, but he'd almost rather have had Dahlberg call back a little later – the risk is now that the conversations with *both* MacGregor and Dahlberg will be stymied.

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