MOVIE

A JOURNAL OF FILM CRITICISM

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The Lumet touch

Sidney Lumet is nobody's idea of a neglected talent. During a fifty-year career, he directed a cluster of films enshrined in the Hollywood canon, from *12 Angry Men* (1957) and *Serpico* (1973) to *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Network* (1976) and *The Verdict* (1982). His oeuvre has received careful attention from scholars and critics.[1] And during his lifetime he was widely venerated as an 'actor's director'. Yet despite this recognition – both of Lumet's general significance and of his particular prowess with actors – a key performative trait has gone unexplored: namely, a reliance on players' hands, not only as a major dramatic and expressive resource, but, more specifically, as a locus of dramatic equivocation.[2] My purpose in this analytical essay is to highlight, by reference to a range of examples, the forms and functions of this distinctive authorial tendency.[3] As I hope to demonstrate, Lumet deepens character complexity, sharpens thematic meaning and enhances narrational effects (such as suspense and surprise) by imbuing hand gestures with ambivalence and ambiguity.

This tendency shines through in Lumet's first film, *12 Angry Men.* A cadre of disparate jurors, jammed together for hours in a sultry, oppressive jury room, reach a decisive juncture in their deliberation. A vote is set: the men, some of whom have vacillated in their judgments, must pronounce on the defendant's guilt or innocence. Lumet presents the vote through a montage of hands and arms poking up from the lower frame line. Such repressive framings effectively anonymise the vote. Granted, Lumet helps us to identify one or two of the hands' owners, as when a porkpie hat creeps into view at the bottom frame edge of one shot; and when an elderly juror, whose return of 'not guilty' comes as no surprise, is granted an oblique facial close up. But Lumet generates ambiguity, and no small measure of suspense, by amputating most of the hands that rise into the juxtaposed frames.

Moreover, the hands themselves register varying degrees of ambivalence. While one hand enters the frame stridently, another droops limply in mid-air, a dangling organ of equivocation.

Some hands, embodying conviction, stick into the frame fast and true; others jerk haltingly into view, as if under duress. This brief suite of images yields a quiet abstract power and points the way to Lumet's future reliance on hands as a dramatic and expressive device, not to say as a potent zone of indeterminacy.

Lumet would continue to deploy hands in an abstract vein. In *The Pawnbroker* (1964), Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger), a Jewish survivor of the Hitler scourge, receives a young, pitiable customer in his Manhattan pawnshop. The woman, forlorn and heavily pregnant, angles to hock her glass engagement ring, sparking in Nazerman a fractured memory from his years interned in a Nazi concentration camp. Lumet depicts this subjective flashback in sharp disjunctive bursts, evoking jagged shards of stifled memory, intercut with the ongoing pawnshop action. Soon the recollection overwhelms Nazerman, consuming longer stretches of screen time, and the initially oblique imagery comes into focus for us (as for him). A lateral tracking shot surveys a sea of outstretched hands braced against a barbwire fence. As in *12 Angry Me*n, these limbs are sliced off by the bottom of the frame. The mobile camera follows another disembodied figure – a uniformed soldier whose helmet peeks into view from the bottom frame line – as he sidles from one pair of prone hands to the next, plucking jewellery from the quaking, acquiescent fingers. Startling in its austerity, this abstract image evokes the casual dehumanisation of war.

At the finale, Lumet will endow hand imagery with symbolic force. Plagued by irrepressible horrors, Nazerman – deadened by wartime trauma – wilfully impales his hand on a metal spike. A persecuted Jew, he enacts a form of crucifixion in a putative quest for rebirth: an extreme effort to restore feeling, vitality, life. All the same, this climax (informed by the period's European art cinema) embraces ambiguity and open-endedness. Nazerman shuffles out of his pawnshop – its cage-like enclosures providing a visual correlative for the camps – and, contemplating his stigmata, drifts into a bustling milieu indifferent to his suffering.

A former film actor and stage director, Lumet evidently realised that hand behaviour could fulfil a range of dramatic functions. Its versatility perhaps resides most strongly in implying subjective states – not only characters' thoughts and emotions, conscious or otherwise, but also internalised modes of being. Richard Gere's hyperactive campaign strategist in *Power* (1986), for instance, embraces a lifestyle of perpetual motion. His fast-paced existence is reflected in a devotion to jazz music – he fills the few spare hours he has by beating out a drum rhythm, using any means at his disposal. Even in repose, his body pulsates to an energetic inner cadence. Reclining on an airplane couch, apparently asleep, he spontaneously lets his fingers tap out the beat of a jazz tune. Here, fingerwork materialises Gere's internal tempo, evoking the propulsive, unrelenting rhythm that governs his way of life. Elsewhere, hands find a natural function in the articulation of desire, both sensual (e.g. the teenage boy's transgressive fondling of a nag's smooth coat in *Equus* [1977])

and sexual (Martin Balsam's errant hand planted invitingly on Sean Connery's thigh in *The Anderson Tapes* [1971]).

In Lumet's hands, the eroticised touch – as with other forms of tactility – is tethered to authorial principles of equivocation and ambivalence. *That Kind of Woman* (1959) provides an instance. On a furlough to Tennessee, a guileless paratrooper, Red (Tab Hunter), grows infatuated with Kay (Sophia Loren), the entrancing mistress of a wealthy businessman (played by George Sanders). Kay accepts Red's overtures but keeps him at arm's length. Under Lumet's aegis, Loren's ambivalent handplay – at once playfully affectionate and rebarbative, and sprinkled across the plot in motivic fashion – becomes a keynote of Kay's personality. Ostensibly tender hand actions spring forth as parrying gestures. Anxious to jettison Red, Kay presses a gloved palm into his face, all but shoving him away. Though her dialogue conveys warmth – 'Take care of yourself now' – the gesture functions contrapuntally, an oblique act of repudiation. Still, their nebulous romance limps along. Later, Kay anticipates the affair's conclusion: his furlough at an end, Red must depart for Vermont that night. As they canoodle under a tree, Red reveals that he has purchased a ticket for Kay aboard the train to Vermont. Abruptly Kay claps a hand over Red's mouth, silencing him. Presently she will make explicit her rejection ('I will not go'), but not before her hand, still fastened on his mouth, segues into a subtle caress – a tacit hint of the genuine affection she has developed for him. Red kisses her hand. Later, he reacts violently when Kay teasingly pinches his cheek, another passive-aggressive gesticulation. Their impasse prepares a suspenseful climax: will Kay join Red on the train?

Lumet organises the melodramatic denouement around hand activity. Rebuffing her rich lover, Kay stoops down and kisses his hand, a chaste parting gesture. Now Lumet crosscuts between Kay, darting across town in a taxi, and Red, disconsolate aboard the moving train. Parallel cutting reveals echoic gestures, both protagonists rubbing their faces, wiping away tears. This rhyming action hints at shared feeling: after a blizzard of quarrels, separations and hesitations, their respective emotions are at last aligned. Kay alights the taxi as the train pauses at a way station. In close-up, Red pensively rests his

hand against his mouth, convinced he has been jilted. Slowly, Kay's fingers float into the frame behind him. Here Lumet extends narrational omniscience – already established by the intercutting that places Red in the position of least knowledge – by turning the soldier away from the fingers advancing toward him. Upon Kay's touch, Red swivels around. The camera tracks his gaze, panning upward to a close-up of Kay, whose hand travels from Red's neck to her own mouth, echoing Red's posture at the outset of the shot. Rising from his seat, the soldier grasps his lover's hand, presses it to his lips and softly kisses it – another gestural echo, this time harking back to the clinch beneath the tree.

In all, Lumet has tethered hands to character revelation, as when Kay's conflicted gestures belie her utterances; and he has recruited hands for motivic purpose, creating long-range echoes that mark transitions in the protagonists' relationship. Not least, he has assimilated this hand motif to an aesthetic of expressive subtlety. None of the moments I have discussed isolate (and thereby italicise) hands in close-up framings. In a quieter register than *12 Angry Men, That Kind of Woman* integrates hand expressivity into the flow of the wider mise-en-scène, operating in concert with other bodily cues and scenographic details. Lumet's preferred shot scales – medium shots, plans américains, long shots – are keyed to the actors' dramatically expressive handwork.

Throughout his career, Lumet placed a premium on pre-production rehearsal. Over an extended period – typically spanning two to four weeks (Lumet 1996: 61-2) – he presided over 'a full-blown run-through of the movie', treating this preparatory phase of production 'like it was a play' (Bettinson 2015: 5). During rehearsal Lumet would choreograph or 'block' the action, but he disdained any prior conception of composition and camera placement, thus granting the actor latitude to explore a wide range of bodily expression (Lumet 2006: 63). Only as the performance crystallised did Lumet determine the position of the camera, calibrating shot scales and camera angles to the actor's gestural activity (Applebaum [1978] 2006: 76; Malcolm [1983] 2020). Out of this rehearsal method emerged Lumet's spacious compositions, oriented to the player's studied gaits and gestures. Any discussion of physical activity in Lumet's oeuvre must, of course, recognise the indispensable input of the actor. But not to be downplayed is the collaborative ethos baked into Lumet's production strategy – a practice that at once invited and facilitated the actor's inventive, dextrous handplay.

Like Lumet, many of his leading players had honed their talents in the New York theatre, fine-tuning a complete and eloquent body language. Nowhere is this eloquence better evinced than in the performances of Marlon Brando in *The Fugitive Kind* (1960) and Katharine Hepburn in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1962). Each actor composes a symphony of hand gestures that pulses with discordance, tacitly counterpointing the drama's surface action. Apropos Brando, lyrical hand movements – his long sensual fingers scratching his scalp, rubbing his chin, or clicking together as if to trigger a thought – permeate his entire performance. In one scene, a married storekeeper, Lady (Anna Magnani), invites Brando's young mythical vagabond, Val Xavier, to lodge with her. Lumet significantly embellishes Tennessee Williams' source play, orchestrating a suite of hand gestures that serves double duty: the actors' handplay both underscores Val's attendant

dialogue about existential solitude and hints at the sexual connotation of Lady's overtures to Val. As the drifter grips Lady's wrist, the pair interlock fingers and press their palms together.

Their utterances, along with Lumet's spacious medium over-the-shoulder framings, give emphasis to this suggestive hand interplay: '[You feel] the size of my knuckles', Val states, 'My palm …' Now Val lets go, his large open palms flanking Lady's idle hand at screen centre. 'That's how well we know each other', Val asserts. 'All we know is just the skin surface of each other'. Cut to a close-up of Lady, studying her fingers. This brief encounter teems with contradictory implications. Brando's hand manoeuvres chime with Val's discourse on human alienation. But, in concert with his facial and vocal cadences, Brando's hand actions – alternately tender and taut, sensual and severe – register an underlying menace, conveying simultaneous attraction and animus for a middle-aged, sexually frustrated woman and her flagrant ploy to seduce him.[4]

In *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, as per Eugene O'Neill's play, Mary Tyrone (Katharine Hepburn) calls attention to her apparently rheumatoid hands, declaring them 'ugly'. Her husband, James Tyrone (Ralph Richardson), demurs: 'They're the most beautiful hands in the world'. Pointedly, Lumet refuses a disambiguating close-up: are Mary's hands truly knotted and gnarled, as she contends? Or are they, as James later alleges, but a pretext for Mary's acquisition of morphine, a furtive yet transparent effort to sustain a drug habit? Throughout the film, Hepburn delivers a virtuoso display of hand gestures, some of which crystallise as motifs: a self-conscious tendency – reserved for judicious moments of insecurity – to dab her hair, anxious that stray strands will betray signs of dissipation; and a habit of clasping her hands to her face to conceal guilt or shame. Contemporary critics might disparage such gestures as mannerisms, but Hepburn's hand activity – even in moments of apparent familial harmony – continually bespeaks a woman in the throes of addiction, self-denial and despair.

By the mid-1970s Lumet had cultivated an understated, even sedate, visual style that thumbed its nose at the 'high concept' stylistics then in vogue. A character's sexual ambivalence could be implied in unobtrusive ways. In *Network*, Faye

Dunaway and William Holden contemplate an extramarital affair. Lumet frames the pair in medium two-shot as they traverse a Manhattan sidewalk, a shot scale that enables Dunaway to conduct some discreet hand business at the bottom frame edge: during the walk-and-talk, she absent-mindedly fondles a band on her ring finger. A seemingly incidental gesture harbours ambiguity: Does Dunaway's finger byplay expose guilt or arousal, or both?
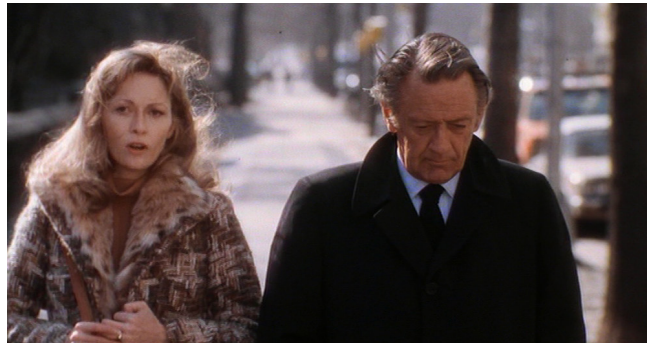
More elaborate is *Deathtrap* (1982). A passé dramatist, Sidney Bruhl (Michael Caine), plots to kill his protégé Clifford Anderson (Christopher Reeve), whose ingenious new manuscript bears all the hallmarks of a box-office blockbuster. Sidney intends to lay claim to Clifford's unpublished play. His skittish wife Myra (Dyan Cannon) professes to find his scheme repugnant, but her own moral propriety will be thrown into doubt later in the film. Sidney telephones Clifford, launching his plan to ensnare the young playwright. Anxiously observing him, Myra tweaks her wedding ring, an apparent symptom of spousal vacillation. She repeats the gesture when Clifford arrives at the Bruhl manse. Still later, after Sidney has fatally throttled Clifford, Myra distractedly slides the bridal ring clean off her finger. (Here again expressive understatement is the order of the day: Lumet thrusts this activity into the deep space of a long shot composition.) On the one hand, Myra's finger motif betrays marital disequilibrium. It presages a scene in which, dismayed by Sidney's crime, Myra demands a divorce. On the other hand, the motif vibrates with sexual titillation. After Clifford's demise, Myra confesses to having found Sidney's homicidal prowess seductive. Sidney ponders: 'Do you think it's possible that murder is an aphrodisiac?' In

toto, Myra's handplay embodies warring impulses, evoking a psychological reaction at once aroused and aghast.

Deathtrap – a comedy thriller – also extracts suspense and humour from its emphasis on hands. Sidney has concocted the 'perfect murder', but his wrongdoing may be exposed by the psychic prognostications of Helga Ten Dorp (Irene Worth), a local snoop. Even before Helga enters the drama, her association with hands is laid bare: Myra alludes to Helga's 'famous pointing finger' and her penchant for 'pointing at murderers'. Upon greeting the Bruhls, the soothsayer shares a handshake with Sidney, only to sharply withdraw from him in alarm. Her eyes fasten on Sidney's idle hand; cut to a medium shot of Sidney, quizzically inspecting his upturned palm. Though brief, this abortive gesture triggers suspense: has Sidney's physical touch ignited psychic vibes that will tip Helga to his crime? A reprisal of the handshake concludes the scene, but now the gesture's tenor is comic. As Helga bids

the couple farewell, she instinctively offers Sidney her hand, suddenly recollects the previous disquieting exchange, and clumsily, comically aborts the parting gesture. In *Deathtrap*, then, Lumet assimilates a favourite motif to the effects of comedy and suspense, yoking hand behaviour to fresh narrational functions. That hands are to be afforded saliency in *Deathtrap* is signalled in the opening credits sequence. The titles unfurl against a series of static close-ups, each one isolating the motley bladed weapons that festoon Sidney's study. Reserved for Lumet's title card is an image of an armoured glove, protruding from below the frame like the jurors' hands in *12 Angry Men*, as if clutching at a weapon.[5]

Lumet's most fertile use of hands is oriented around forms of violent aggression. Many of his films, from *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *A View from the Bridge* (1962) to *Prince of the City* (1981) and *Night Falls on Manhattan* (1996), depict hand behaviour that conflates, or oscillates between, aggression and affection. Nick Nolte's rogue cop in *Q&A* (1990) wields tactility as a cajoling strategy.[6] In comradely fashion, he plants his hands on the shoulders of the rookie official assigned to investigate him. The ingenue, played by Timothy Hutton, remains resolute: he will conduct an honest investigation. Nolte's ingratiating demeanour morphs into indignant anger. In an over-the-shoulder close-up of Hutton, Nolte softly strokes the young man's cheek, but the caress is anything but benevolent. Lumet's fondness for contrapuntal action again comes to the fore: Nolte's tender strokes belie the

bitterness in his face and the venom in his dialogue: 'I wish you were dead.'

Partway through Lumet's final film, *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (2007), brothers Andy (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and Hank (Ethan Hawke) rendezvous in a bar, urgently trying to strategise an escape from an imbroglio of their own making: they have presided over the armed robbery of their parents' jewellery store, the fluffed execution of which has left their mother mortally injured. Now the domineering Andy browbeats his timorous younger brother into explaining how the heist went awry. A medium shot presents Hank seated in a booth. Andy stands beside him at the right of frame, his upper body occluded by the top frame edge. Ostensibly, Lumet's staging prioritises the frontally positioned Hank. But throughout this shot – which Lumet intercuts with a low-angled two-shot privileging Andy – the viewer cannot

ignore Andy's fleshy, balled-up fist occupying the lower right zone of space. Wrought up with panic and rage, Andy pounds his fist against the table, but even in repose his hand simmers with latent ferocity. As if to offset Hoffman's coiled passion, Hawke adopts open-handed gestures – an adroit physical index of Hank's naiveté and passivity – as when he tearfully raises a trembling, outstretched hand to his face. Gradually, Andy determines that the brothers have fully covered their tracks. Now the same hand that had pulsated with fury comes to rest on Hank's left shoulder in a gesture of mutual reassurance and relief. Andy breathes a sigh: 'We're probably okay.'

By the finale, a concatenation of crises puts Andy in hospital. His father Charles (Albert Finney) – now cognizant of his sons' part in the murder of his wife – sneaks into Andy's hospital room. Andy is contrite: 'I never meant to hurt her.' Charles, in a putative act of clemency, reaches out his left hand toward Andy and strokes his thumb gently over his son's forehead. His dialogue echoes Andy's utterance in our previous scene: 'It's okay.' The penitent son raises his hand to touch his father's fingers and the stage is set for forgiveness. But what begins as a gesture of reconciliation degenerates into savagery: by the scene's end, Charles's hands have become instruments of filicide. The family's total annihilation is now complete. *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* conjures suspense and surprise out of hands that, at any instant, can execute startling volte-faces. This is, we might say, the Lumet touch.

No less intricate is *Family Business* (1989). Here Lumet binds a hand motif to a thematic of patriarchal tyranny. The

plot pivots around a caper orchestrated by a cross-generational cadre of family members: Jesse (Sean Connery), his son Vito (Dustin Hoffman) and Vito's son Adam (Matthew Broderick). The heist is bungled and Adam lands in jail. Holding Jesse accountable for his son's predicament, Vito furiously slaps an open palm against Jesse's forehead, yelling: 'Listen to me!'. Now a skirmish foments: Jesse springs up from his chair and, seizing Vito's wrist with his left hand, primes his clenched right hand for attack. Lumet furnishes the fracas in a taut two-shot. An emotional shift – played out in this single composition – registers an adjustment in Jesse's temperament, a wilful effort to arrest a violent impulse. Slowly the prospect of conflict dissipates. Jesse's raised fist hovers at screen centre, but soon it morphs into an open hand, gently patting and rubbing Vito's cheek, before winding around Vito's shoulder in a semi-embrace. The father has stayed a destructive reflex, repurposing his hands for paternal affection. This display of self-restraint marks significant psychological growth, for at the plot's outset, Jesse – a career criminal prone to brawling – languishes behind bars for assaulting an off-duty cop.[7]

Physical confrontation runs in the family. Early in the drama, Adam defies his father by pledging himself to Jesse's risky caper. A chip off the block, Vito exerts parental discipline by delivering Adam a stinging slap to the face. Sagely, Jesse shakes his head: 'Vito – that won't get you anywhere.' If Vito has inherited a tendency to resolve family disputes by physical force, Jesse has come to learn that draconian control only deepens the schism between father and son. It is this lesson that Vito must learn in his 'family business' with both Jesse and Adam. Yet subsequent events push Vito and Jesse further apart. In a reversal of the earlier faceoff, Vito raises his fist to his father, only now the punch is executed. Lumet links these two scenes further by reviving (and reversing) a distinctive hand gesture. Just as Vito slapped Jesse's forehead, so Jesse smacks his hand against Vito's forehead, a corporeal motif that signals a habitual – and generational – failure to communicate. Jesse dies before Vito fully grasps the folly of his ways. But at Jesse's funeral (which supplies the film's coda), Vito will tenderly clasp his son's hand, striking a poignant, optimistic note of fatherly intimacy.

Lumet's fixation with hands reaches its apogee, I think, in *The Offence*. Detective-Sergeant Johnson (Sean Connery) is a ferocious, clenched fist of a man. Two decades of investigative grind – an unyielding, corrupting exposure to human depravity writ large – have polluted his psyche and now, a hulking knot of repressed trauma, he moves through life primed for conflict. When a suspected child molester is brought into custody, Johnson commandeers the interrogation. The fingered suspect, Baxter (Ian Bannen), professes innocence. But

Johnson's zeal for justice has curdled into hardboiled sadism, and – convinced of his quarry's guilt and determined to coerce a confession – he pummels Baxter to death. An inquest is launched. Now Johnson becomes the subject of a police inquiry, led by the tenacious Detective Superintendent Cartwright (Trevor Howard). The film shuffles these story events out of order, toggling between the two inquisitions and interpolating the events that precipitate them (Johnson's discovery of a child victim; Baxter's arrest) and succeed them (Johnson, now facing a murder charge, returns home to his wife, Maureen [Vivien Merchant]).

Johnson treats his wife callously, but her touch provides a palliative (however fleeting) for psychological distress. When she places a consoling palm on the side of his head, he grasps her hand and gently rubs it against his forehead, as if to massage the miasma from his mind. 'If you could only put your hands into my mind, hold it, make it stop … If you could somehow cut out the thoughts, the pictures, the noise, the endless screaming panic'. This is a rare moment of physical intimacy between the couple, but as so often in Lumet, affectionate hand gestures turn on a dime. Their hands remain entwined as Johnson, exhorted by Maureen to share the burden of private trauma, recounts a volley of grisly episodes from his investigative past, each one a sordid vignette of human iniquity. Maureen lowers her head, appalled. In this single gesture, she fails him – incapable, despite her efforts, of withstanding the horrors in his head, she affirms what he has all along surmised: that he must bear his private suffering alone. Still, Johnson reacts with contempt to his wife's lack of fortitude. His left hand, still clasping hers, clenches firm; with his right hand he clutches her chin, pivoting her head to face him as his macabre anecdotes grow ever more lurid. Maureen – sobbing, too distraught to hold eye contact – wriggles loose of Johnson's grip, scampers to the bathroom and retches. What began as a gesture of emotional rapprochement has transmogrified, gradually but inexorably, into a scene of marital disintegration.

The protagonist's feral instincts are never far from the surface. Connery assigns Johnson a motivic finger-jabbing gesture, thrusting his forefinger down onto a desk or table for

emphasis. Recalled during both interrogations, this emphatic action hints at a proclivity for physical intimidation, not to say violence. At times, Johnson seems insensitive to his own brute force: attempting to re-enact a skirmish with Baxter, he seizes Cartwright's wrists, clinging vigorously as the Superintendent lets out a panic-stricken cry: 'Let go! What are you trying to do? Burnt my bloody hand'. (Later, Johnson apologises to Cartwright – 'Sorry I burnt your hand' – then instantly retracts the apology before falling contrite again. Ambivalence consumes the character: his bearish acts of brutality harbour a latent desire for penitence.) Throughout *The Offence*, Johnson's muscular hands bristle with lethal potential. Taunted by the supercilious Baxter, Johnson knocks him to the ground and, crouching over him, yanks the suspect upward; Baxter slips from his grasp, dropping to the floor. Here Connery adopts a revelatory posture, subtle in its brevity: his open hands evoke a strangling action, betraying an instinctive urge to throttle or kill. Just as abruptly, he quells this destructive reflex by pressing his hands together, a conscious effort to arrest a nonconscious impulse. Not for the last time in Lumet, a mercurial hand gesture provides a meaningful conduit to character interiority. [8]

Johnson's pugilism prepares the way for a startling revelation: he is as capable of assault – physical, sexual, even paedophilic – as the beleaguered man in his charge. The plot's nonlinear chronology ensures that this discovery coalesces gradually, in piecemeal fashion. Especially communicative are the variant flashbacks, scattered across the drama, that depict Johnson's recovery of a missing child, Janie (Maxine Gordon), the abduction and rape of whom are provisionally attributed to Baxter. Lumet presents the first iteration of this event objectively. In pitch darkness, a police search party scours a wooded area. Rummaging through the brush, Johnson discovers the bedraggled and petrified child, whose shrieks he subdues by means of forcible restraint. A low-angled medium shot of Johnson shows Janie's tiny hands reaching up from the lower frame edge, flailing at her rescuer as if he were her aggressor. As the pair wrestles in the dirt, he clutches her shoulders, arms and face until, the girl's hysteria subsiding, Johnson plants an assuaging, outstretched hand on her chest. Is this touch soothing or sexual? Ambiguity springs not only

from hands but also from faces: Lumet furnishes tight close-ups of the protagonist 'smil[ing] down at the girl a little too long' (Cunningham 1991: 214).

Subsequent iterations of this event, intercut with Cartwright's inquiry and funnelled through Johnson's addled subjectivity, ambiguate the protagonist's behaviour still further. These renditions posit alternative drafts of the objectively rendered action. Now the nocturnal setting has inexplicably switched to daytime. Across a string of four shots (each lasting 3 to 6 seconds), Lumet deforms the lighting expressionistically, so that a shadowy daybreak in the first shot has blended fluidly into broad sunlight by the fourth. Instead of recoiling and screaming in terror, Janie blithely returns the detective's smile. Her face dappled by sunlight, she sweeps a hand through her hair. In a close framing, Johnson wears a facial expression that can be grasped as amorous. The event will be replayed in jagged bursts throughout Cartwright's probe; by its final iteration, Johnson is caressing the child's cheek, sliding his forefinger over her chin, stroking her hair. Lumet recasts a scene of childhood trauma as one of erotic seduction. And as these replays unfold, a character revelation shimmers into focus: the detective hero and his adversary share deep, disturbing compulsions.

Handplay cues us to their affinities. Both characters are aligned by a recurring motif whereby an uninvited touch – typically, a hand on the shoulder – elicits from them a palpable flinch, a defensive, hostile repudiation of intimacy. Both figures derive power from touching (or more specifically, from illicit touching); to be touched, by contrast, is

to cede dominance to someone (an interrogator, a victim, a spouse) who might control or betray them. Even touch by mutual consent can be maladroit if initiated by another, as when Johnson accepts Cartwright's handshake only after a flicker of hesitation and, even then, executes the greeting cack-handedly. Other gestures hint at the protagonists' likenesses. During Cartwright's inquiry, Johnson describes Baxter as physically suspect. 'His hands …' Johnson asserts, raising his own hands as if to illustrate an aptitude for depravity. Lumet handles this action in visually bold fashion: first, we are shown a frontal medium shot of Johnson, his outstretched hands filling the foreground; cut to a reverse frontal shot of Cartwright, observed from Johnson's optical vantage point, as the detective's hands still loom in the foremost plane.[9] A brief subjective flashback follows, depicting the protagonist's manhandling of Baxter, whose blood-spattered face bears witness

to his inquisitor's savage interrogation methods. Cut back to the foregoing framing of Johnson, whose gaze now falls upon his own fanned-out fingers; he then guiltily looks at the camera, cuing a reprise of his POV which registers Cartwright's disconcerted reaction. Though Johnson invokes the dead suspect's hands as organs of violence, his own brawny hands are no less ready to inflict harm, as the interpolated flashback testifies. This silent procession of shots (Johnson's assertion – 'His hands …' – is left dangling) steers both Cartwright and the viewer, if not Johnson himself, to the realisation that the line between cop and child molester is vanishingly thin.[10]

Tactility as an instrument of power and as a font of sexual ambiguity – this dual trope coalesces during Johnson's solitary questioning of Baxter. Lumet's staging underscores the detective's physical dominance: low and high angle framings alternate in shot / reverse-shot pattern, consonant with

Baxter's seated position as Johnson, standing, towers over him. Clutching the suspect by the head, Johnson tries to dragoon him into confessing. But his brutish manhandling soon tapers into something more ambiguously predatory, his roving hands sliding down Baxter's cheeks, brushing over the suspect's chest and reaching beneath his coat, his fingers exploring the man's body like a lover's caress. Johnson couches this suggestive probing as a deliberate provocation – 'My hands, well, they're all over you, reaching into your secrets' – and as a flaunting of control: 'If I want to touch you, I'll touch you.' Defensively, Baxter clasps Johnson's roaming hand. Now Lumet's camera supplies a close-up of the entwined hands grappling and then slackening, so that for an instant the men's mutual touch seems subversively intimate. But here again, furtively erotic contact slips back into unalloyed barbarity. In the same close-up shot, Johnson squeezes Baxter's knotted fist until it splays open. He claps his other hand into Baxter's open palm and, with bone-crunching force, crushes the suspect's hand.

So far, an intricate choreography of hands has crystallised, modulated and amplified a power play between the two adversaries. As the interrogation (and the film) reaches a climax, so the hand motif culminates in emphatic fashion. Johnson, prodded by Baxter into a kind of anagnorisis about his own illicit drives, crumples into a chair, inconsolable. Here Lumet inverts the earlier staging: Baxter stands over Johnson, cupping a hand – sympathetic? goading? – around the stricken detective's shoulder. In a state of benumbed horror, Johnson recognises in the accused paedophile a kindred

spirit. Again he grasps Baxter's hand, but now in a gesture of communion. And again his grip, unconsciously tightening, exerts unintended force; Baxter, his hand already pulverised by Johnson's iron fist, sinks to his knees in agony. In a tight two-shot, the detective lifts Baxter's hand toward his face and wedges it between his teeth, as if to silence a scream. Johnson whimpers, 'Help me.' (Beset by psychic angst, he asks others for psychological aid throughout *The Offence*, but his pleas are unavailing.) Sobbing, he stands up and the two men stagger against a wall. Baxter, reeling in pain, spits out a retort: 'Help your bloody self, will you!' This act of rejection triggers Johnson's fury and climaxes the film's hand motif: from Baxter's POV, Johnson's bunched-up fist barrels toward the camera, a literal fist-in-your-face image. Lumet hammers home the sheer brute potency of the protagonist's hand by virtue of a shot that puts us on the receiving end of its destructive

force. Ultimately, Johnson will murder Baxter with his bare hands – a barbarous flagellation that constitutes nothing less than an act of self-annihilation.

As so often in his films, Lumet has treated us to a nuanced, dramatically charged repertoire of hand movements. In *The Offence*, as elsewhere in his work, hands wield expressive power, advancing story action and carrying thematic meaning. They add value to the drama by hinting at interpersonal dynamics not articulated in dialogue. And they foster structural unity, binding scenes through motivic patterning. Not least, Lumet's hands embody psychological indeterminacy,

deftly pointing to the morally conflicted, complex and murky motives of his ambivalent protagonists.

In all, Lumet's expressive use of hands is both systematic and distinctive. With remarkable consistency, the director harnesses handplay to the articulation of power, control, violence and eroticism, variously fusing these traits or juxtaposing them in unpredictable ways. Hand gestures thus emerge as startlingly enigmatic: characters' physical actions and, as corollary, the narration's affective tone, are apt to perform hairpin turns, the better to supercharge dramatic surprise and suspense. Then there is the sheer range of visual means by which Lumet explores hand behaviour. Hands might be thrust into the foreground (*The Offence*) or tucked into the frame edge (*Network*); isolated as lone elements within a composition (*12 Angry Men*); braided through the film as ever deepening motifs; or otherwise rendered salient as privileged moments in the drama. Few directors have so fruitfully and extensively probed the expressive power of hands. In a period governed by 'intensified continuity' (e.g. facial close-ups; rapid cutting), Lumet's films recall us to a neglected aspect of the actor's craft, one that harbours tried-and-proven potential for pictorial, dramatic and emotional enrichment.

GARY BETTINSON

Gary Bettinson is senior lecturer in Film Studies at Lancaster University. He is the author of *The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai* (Hong Kong UP, 2015), co-author (with Richard Rushton) of *What is Film Theory? An Introduction to Contemporary Debates* (McGraw-Hill, 2010), and editor of the bi-annual journal *Asian Cinema*.

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1 Key studies include Boyer (1993), Cunningham (1991), Malone (2020), Rapf (2006) and Spiegel (2019).

2 David Bordwell (2011) has also drawn attention to hand business in Lumet's *Fail Safe* (1964) and *The Verdict* (1982). Of course, Lumet is not the only director to make use of hand gestures as motifs. V. F. Perkins (1981) elucidates the ambiguity afforded a motivic hand gesture in Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950), with each repetition shifting meanings of intimacy and control. (I am grateful to my anonymous reader for guiding me to this example.) See also Lola Breaux (2017) and David Scott Diffrient (2019) on hand motifs in Otto Preminger's *Bunny Lake Is Missing* (1965) and Hong Kong's horror and kung-fu genres, respectively.

3 My survey is confined to cases of equivocal gestures. Lumet's oeuvre plays host to several performers whose handwork does not fit this category but is nonetheless dexterous. Of particular note is the eloquent handplay of Anouk Aimée in *The Appointment* (1969) and Irene Worth in *Deathtrap* (1982). Striking moments of hand activity are also furnished in *Child's Play* (1972), *Daniel* (1983), *Critical Care* (1997) and *Strip Search* (2004).

4 This physical interaction is specified neither in Williams' dialogue nor in his stage directions: the two protagonists refer only to 'touchin' each other' and 'close contact' (Williams [1940] 1987: 41). Lumet embroiders Williams' play in ways that enrich both the explicit action and its subtextual undertones. He does likewise in another of his 1960s stage adaptations, *The Sea Gull* (1968), treating a scripted line – 'You've got magical hands' – as an occasion for Konstantin (David Warner) to clasp his mother's (Simone Signoret) hands, a gesture pregnant with incestuous desire.

5 I analyze *Deathtrap* at greater length elsewhere (Bettinson 2021).

6 Likewise, Harry Andrews' dogmatic sergeant major in *The Hill* (1965) and Christopher Reeve's charismatic sociopath in *Deathtrap* marshal familiar tactility for cajoling and coercive purpose.

7 One character in *Family Business* describes Jesse as possessing 'a grip of steel', a description equally applicable to Connery's protagonist in *The Offence* (1973), as we shall see.

8 In a more comedic vein, Dyan Cannon fosters a similar gesture in *Deathtrap*. Anxious for Sidney to collaborate with Clifford on his auspicious play (and so avert any necessity for murder), Myra urges her husband to postpone his own nascent thriller about a soothsaying sleuth: 'People are always interested in psychics who can point at someone and say "That man"' – here she points a forefinger at Sidney – '"murdered that man"' – now she extends her other forefinger toward Clifford. A comic beat, as Myra realises the subconscious implication of her body language. She hastily brushes her palms together, as though to erase the tacit, undesirable undertones of her nonconscious gestures. As

in our instance from *The Offence*, an actor's apparently incidental byplay is tethered to the revelation of inner states.

9 Lumet recasts this device to subtler effect in *Q&A* (1990).

10 Though such instances as I describe here carry this thematic point visually, John Hopkins' screenplay does, on other occasions, make the protagonists' affinities explicit. As doppelgängers, Johnson and Baxter are afforded identical dialogue phrases (e.g. 'I know you'). When the detective castigates his suspect as 'a filthy, bloody little pervert', Baxter fires back: 'It takes one to know one'. Baxter, shrewdly perceptive about Johnson's sublimated instincts, informs his opponent: 'Nothing I have done can be one half as bad as the thoughts in your head'.

Loneliness in the films
of Aki Kaurismäki

Loneliness is a major theme in Aki Kaurismäki's cinema. As Andrew Nestingen has put it, 'the primary narrative of Kaurismäki's films is one in which the protagonist finds himself dislocated and alone, looking to put together a life' (2013: 62). Critics have been interested in how 'Kaurismäki's outcasts are pushed into the margins, which they then transform into heterotopic spaces to survive in the social order that represses and alienates them' (Pantet 2018: 56). For some of Kaurismäki's protagonists, however, the process of 'creating and affirming a new group identity' (Pantet 2018: 56) is very challenging. These lonely characters put their faith in ordinary decency, but for reasons that are never made entirely clear to the viewer, most people do not want to have anything to do with them. Kaurismäki is interested in his characters' actions and behaviour, their state of being that is, but not in psychological explanations or sociological explorations. According to Ginette Vincendeau, 'verisimilitude is not Kaurismäki's main preoccupation' and thus the loneliness of the characters should be understood as 'an existential condition rather than a sociological expose' (2007: 70). Similarly, Henry Bacon points out that the filmmaker creates a vivid sense of existential displacement of his characters without exploring specific societal situations (2003: 95). Up until now, the critical attention on loneliness in Kaurismäki's cinema has not been sufficiently close or attuned to style. To develop a richer understanding of Kaurismäki's handling of the theme, I build on these general observations focusing on his systematic and significant use of cinematic elements.

The theme of loneliness connects Kaurismäki's films to many masterpieces of world film history. The filmmaker is inspired by 'the cinematic representations of isolation prominent in some American and European inter-war and post-war cinema, and in particular the auteur cinema' (Nestingen 2013: 103). Indeed, the solitary figures of French poetic realist films and American film noirs have had a major influence on Kaurismäki's cinema, not to mention the lonely protagonists of Robert Bresson and Jean-Pierre Melville. Kaurismäki has mentioned these film movements and filmmakers in numerous interviews he has given. In addition, Kaurismäki has been influenced by paintings and novels. Critics have noticed the resemblance between Kaurismäki's shot compositions and the works of Edward Hopper (Vincendeau 2007: 70; Monk 2009: 273; Rascaroli 2013: 328), an artist who 'paints man in his alienation from and disenchantment with everyday life' (Solana and Cluzel 2012: 9). The theme of loneliness is also pivotal in the literary works – *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, Dostoevsky, 1866), *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, c. 1600) and *Juha* (Aho, 1911) – Kaurismäki has adapted. The theme is present in a more philosophical form in Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Dirty Hands* (*Les maines sales*, 1948), which discusses individuality and freedom of choice. Kaurismäki adapted the play for television in 1989 as *Likaiset kädet*.

Kaurismäki's interest in loneliness derives to a degree from his personal history. In an interview published after directing his first feature film *Crime and Punishment (Rikos ja rangaistus*, 1983), Kaurismäki explained that his family moved a lot during his childhood, and that he still remembers what it is like to be the new kid in school:

> Every time you manage to form some kind of a social network, it gets cut by an axe. Nothing feels like anything when you experience five times what it is like to go to a new school at the beginning of a school year. There you stand wearing a leather jacket, looking at others, a bit aloof from everyone else. And you do not know anyone. (Hämäläinen 1984)

Kaurismäki says that experiences of not belonging made him an existentialist, but he does not specify what he means by this. Kaurismäki's philosophical idol Sartre saw loneliness as a central and inescapable fact of the human condition: as the universe is a cold, meaningless and indifferent place, we alone have to create our values and make our choices (2020). One can suppose that Kaurismäki's childhood experiences have shaped his aesthetic sensibility. Even his camera habitually portrays the world and its characters from the point of view of 'a socially excluded, sympathetic stranger who observes people and their gestures with keen interest and would like to engage with them, but is unable to make his presence known' (Seppälä 2016: 19).

Kaurismäki probably sees the topic of existentialism through literary and cinematic representations, as he is not interested in academic debates. Film noir, for example, has been famously analysed in existentialist terms (Porfirio 1996). *The Liar* (*Valehtelija,* 1981), a film directed by Mika Kaurismäki and partly written by his brother, contains a humorous sequence in which characters talk about existentialism and literary giants, which leads them to ponder whether the promised land of modern existentialism is France or Finland. As a filmmaker, Kaurismäki follows Sartre who believed that in theatre 'situations must be found which are so general that they are common to all' (1976: 4). At the heart of each film he has directed lies the problem of modern alienation and the need for social connection. Kaurismäki's protagonists live by the values of solidarity and equality. However, whereas Sartre believed that 'love's inevitable failure hurls the lovers into a more desolating loneliness than the metaphysical and epistemic isolation they had hoped to escape' (McGraw 1995: 49), Kaurismäki portrays 'romantic, heterosexual love as redemptive for alienated lower-class characters' (Nestingen 2016: 293).

In this article, I analyse how Kaurismäki employs his signature style of ironic minimalism in representing loneliness. Using minimalist cinematic devices, the filmmaker guides viewers to react with sympathy and empathy to the thoughts and emotions of his deadpan characters as they are treated with injustice (Seppälä 2016). Kaurismäki's ironic devices, on the other hand, add strangeness and comedy to the films, not

to mention artificiality (Seppälä 2018). The filmmaker fuses the seemingly incompatible qualities of sympathy and irony, achieving aesthetic unity and balance. From this perspective I demonstrate that Kaurismäki's representations of loneliness are bleak yet not morbid, poignant yet not sentimental and absurd yet serious. My focus is on the loneliest and most melancholic protagonists in Kaurismäki's oeuvre. These figures are Iris Rukka (Kati Outinen), Henri Boulanger (Jean-Pierre Léaud) and Seppo Koistinen (Janne Hyytiäinen), the lead characters in *The Match Factory Girl (Tulitikkutehtaan tyttö,* 1989), *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990) and *Lights in the Dusk* (*Laitakaupungin valot*, 2006), respectively. Antti Rahikainen (Markku Toikka), the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment*, could be added to the list, but his isolation is of a different sort, as he prefers to be alone. The three characters selected for analysis are slightly caricatured and stylised, to use Henry Bacon's model of typification, appearing 'faintly naive and not well in touch with modern life' (2018: 159). In comparison to protagonists in most mainstream films, 'they have a fairly narrow range of emotional expression' (Bacon 2018: 159), but not so much that they become cartoonish or lacking in human warmth. *The Match Factory Girl*, *I Hired a Contract Killer* and *Lights in the Dusk* are often seen as the most despairing films in Kaurismäki's oeuvre, as the theme of severe loneliness and the need for togetherness is at the heart of each of them.

Lonely Persons in a Social World

As Andrew Nestingen argues, Kaurismäki's 'characters are invariably aliens in their social worlds' (Nestingen 2013: 12). *The Match Factory Girl* opens with a montage that follows assembly line match production in an anonymous factory. Loud rhythmic sounds of the heavy machines accompany the sequence that is composed of approximately thirty static shots. The camera shows only two humans working on the line, suggesting that the process has been automated to the maximum extent possible. Iris Rukka's monotonous job is to ensure that labels have been properly attached to the boxes that roll by her on the line. As shots of her working follow the montage, the sequence elicits a sense that her role in the system is comparable to that of a cog in a machine. As Yangos

Antiochos has put it, 'the viewer faces the utter emptiness that has come as a result of banishing the human factor from modern mass production' (2012: 78). The camera shows a close-up of Rukka's hands. They move in the rhythm of the assembly line, taping boxes every now and then. These are robotic and repetitious movements of a bored person who leads an empty life. Rukka's is a job where skill is not needed and thus on any given day the management could replace her with someone else. The following view is a close-up of Rukka's static, inexpressive face in which her eyes follow the movement of the boxes. She withholds emotions from her facial expression, much like the static protagonists of Robert Bresson and Jean-Pierre Melville, but looks sad nonetheless. The reason for this is her downward gaze. Gazes and their directions are salient aspects of Kaurismäki's minimalism. 'Gaze, I build upon that. It tells everything,' the filmmaker says (Lindqvist 1996). After associating Rukka with the assembly line, the camera shows her in a medium long shot. Now the alert viewer can spot her pink hair band, which becomes a vital leitmotif in the film. The detail is in an expressive relationship with other aspects of the mise-en-scène, especially with the pale colours of the loud machines that dominate the factory. The vibrant pink colour of the accessory implies that there is more to Rukka than meets the eye. As the colour pink is frequently associated with the romantic, the hair band can be interpreted as an expression of her rosy dreams. Supporting the interpretation, Kaurismäki later indicates that she is a fan of romance literature. As there is no way Rukka's dreams could be fulfilled in the factory, she appears displaced. What is so admirable in this opening sequence is that Kaurismäki manages to evoke a sense of Rukka's loneliness and unfulfilled dreams by using only simple shots in which nothing in particular seems to happen.

Rukka's relationship to her workmates is well illustrated in the sequence in which she is on a break. In a long take the camera shows her in a static medium long shot, as she sits next to her colleague in a locker room. The characters are physically close to one another, but mentally miles apart. Rukka stares quietly at the floor looking miserable and the workmate looks blankly ahead while smoking a cigarette. 'I'm pregnant,' Rukka says unexpectedly. This is her attempt to begin

a conversation about an important matter that is worrying her. Clearly, she has a very human desire for attachment with other people. 'Really?' the workmate says without looking at her. The laconic comment kills the conversation before it even began. To make clear where she stands, the workmate dumps her cigarette and leaves the room. The brutally honest gesture indicates that she would rather sacrifice her cigarette and break than have a conversation. This makes the scene not only poignant but also absurd, as it magnifies the contrast between Rukka's effort to seek value and meaning in human relationships and her inability to find anything of the sort. Rukka's company became too much for the workmate to bear as soon as she opened her mouth. It seems that Rukka's workmate sees her more as a machine than as a fellow human being. The comedy of the sequence flows from the absurdity of the work colleague's response, speaking amusingly of the way the factory has conditioned non-responsiveness and avoidance of human contact as part of its modus operandi.

A different kind of work place proves equally alienating in *I Hired a Contract Killer*. Henri Boulanger is a Frenchman who works as a clerk in the registry office at Her Majesty's Waterworks in London. He is introduced in a sequence that begins when the dirty blue-grey double doors leading to the office swing open as a pile of documents is carted in. The view is anything but spectacular, as the office is dominated by the same lifeless colours, echoing the restrained use of colour in Melville's *The Red Circle* (*Le cercle rouge*, 1970) and John Huston's *Fat City* (1972). Some ten clerks sit working at desks piled high with enormous amounts of documents. In this Kafkaesque office, work is a never-ending process, the piles suggest. Even though Kaurismäki is a minimalist, his style of filmmaking does not exclude deadpan exaggeration. He manages to achieve a balance between these two apparently contradictory states by underusing the documents: much like in the cinema of Jacques Tati, 'we discover humorous situations that are hinted at but not developed' (Thompson 1998: 257). Boulanger is introduced with a shot in which the camera tracks towards his face. When the protagonist is seen in a medium close-up, he lifts his head from the documents he is keenly working on and looks genuinely surprised. The camera movement indicates that he found something

thought-provoking in the documents. Ironically enough, to the audience the piles look as dull as dust. The sequence could certainly be funnier, had Kaurismäki wanted so, but he introduces just a hint of humour here, resisting the impulse to turn it into a gag. What the sequence tells us is that the protagonist differs from his workmates in that he finds the work stimulating. As the camera introduced the office, it showed a clerk sleeping on his desk, as if to emphasise just how life-draining the documents are to the other clerks. We might notice that Boulanger's workmates have small personal items on their desks, such as a souvenir Eiffel tower, a photograph and a cactus. The absence of any personal items on Boulanger's desk suggests that unlike the other clerks, he has no life outside work: no social life, no family life, nothing to go home to. As a bell signals the beginning of a break, the clerks get up and leave, all except Boulanger who works just a bit longer than others: being alienated from social life, he lives for his work. There is certain irony in this, as Kaurismäki makes the work look as daunting as possible. Here, as in the

opening sequence of *The Match Factory Girl*, Kaurismäki relies on restrained means that elicit a sense of the lonely life his protagonist leads. By showing Boulanger enjoying dull office work, Kaurismäki gently mocks the character, possibly because unlike his other protagonists he is a white-collar worker. In his films Kaurismäki often makes fun of middle-class characters and higher education, not to mention rich people. Boulanger is more strongly caricatured than Rukka in that whereas she dreams of a different kind of life, he cannot think of what more to ask for. Yet Kaurismäki is careful not to make Boulanger too comic, as that might cause the audience to lose sympathy with him.

Like Rukka, Boulanger is an outcast in his work community. Kaurismäki makes this apparent with a static shot of a lunch break, the composition of which is dominated by two tables: Boulanger eats alone at a small table on the left, right next to a six-person dining table where the other clerks eat and chat together. The two-dimensional shot looks quirky in its awkwardness, much more so than that of Rukka next

to her colleague, as the frontal staging comically emphasises the imbalance between the two tables. The artificiality makes it easy for the audience to find comedy in the sequence. The framing contrasts the solemn Boulanger with eight jolly workers sitting at the bigger table making him look lonely. Their smiles are expressions of pleasure and happiness but, like Rukka, Boulanger withholds any sign of emotion. In comparison to his lively fellow workers, the static protagonist is akin to the living dead. As Boulanger's table is missing a chair, we can suppose that one of the extra chairs at the bigger table has been borrowed from there. The strangeness of the sequence lies in that the tables are close to one another, which encourages the audience to compare them, but they have not been combined, which is a common custom at workplaces when a group of diners does not fit at the same table. Clearly, the other clerks do not want to have anything to do with Boulanger, just as Rukka's workmate does not want to have anything to do with her. Both protagonists are excluded from their work communities. The scene cuts to a medium close-up

of Boulanger as he turns his head towards the other clerks and attempts to smile at them. His is not a true smile, but a falsified facial expression with which he attempts to make a social contact – it is a jerky grimace that makes him look ridiculous. This shot gives a reason to suppose that Boulanger is not happy, even though he finds his job inspiring. So much time has passed since Boulanger last smiled that he is not able to fake the expression effectively. Like Rukka, he does his best to connect with his colleagues, but he too fails to get a response. Boulanger turns his gaze back towards the camera and lets it fall down in an unintended signal of disappointment caused by his failure to socialise. Despite his hard work and attempts to be friendly, no one recognises his existence. This prompts the audience to sympathise with the character, as he is clearly treated with injustice. Because the grimace and the overall artificiality of the sequence work against any deeper emotional involvement, the sequence never becomes melodramatic.

The opening sequence of *Lights in the Dusk* is yet another instance in which Kaurismäki does seemingly little and yet

elicits a vivid sense of the lonely life the protagonist leads. Seppo Koistinen, who works as a security guard for Western Alarm, is introduced descending the stairs of an underpass. The camera shows him in an extreme long shot as he walks confidently and in a carefree manner dangles a nightstick in his hand. As he reaches the street level, he routinely glances to his left to check that everything is in order. The combination of confidence, carefreeness and routine elicits a sense that Koistinen is experienced and knows what he is doing. When it comes to security guarding, he is a professional who enjoys his work, which guides the audience to respect him. Koistinen is just the kind of blue-collar worker Kaurismäki treats with admiration in his films. The camera shows Koistinen standing on an escalator in a medium shot. Unlike in the earlier shot, he is standing still and has a moment to think private thoughts, as the technology carries him upward. As Koistinen looks ahead, his deep melancholic eyes move, signalling a moment of confusion and a sense of being lost. He soon lowers his head and looks down, which suggests he is sad, but

he then lifts his chin up again. The sympathetic spectator can sense that Koistinen is missing something in his life, no matter how good he is in his work. In the following extreme long shot he is a tiny static figure who rides the long escalator all by himself in an enormous underground tunnel, holding the escalator rail. The shot correlates with earlier shots of high buildings made of steel and glass, giving a vivid sense of the cold and modern world the character lives in. Carlos Gardel's sorrowful tango '*Volver*' (1934) plays on the soundtrack. The old song evokes a sense of a past era and, to use the words of John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, 'the vitality of life on a smaller, more compact scale, where people live and work on the same block' (2008: 249). The use of the melancholic song also indicates Koistinen's inner resilience, as the lyrics are about keeping humble hope alive. In this world of steel and glass, Koistinen is unable to find a sense of community and meaning. Supporting the interpretation, when Koistinen is outside again, three Russian men walk past him talking about major literary authors, but he does not dare to approach them. After Koistinen has done his shift, he reports to the company office. 'And the name is?' his superior asks. 'Koistinen. Just like before.' After Koistinen has left the office, his colleague says to the superior: 'He's been here three years now. Lay off.' 'He'll learn', the laconic superior replies without a further thought. By pretending not to remember Koistinen's name, he signals that Koistinen is not on an equal footing with others who work for the company. Koistinen nonetheless does his best to keep his chin up. Even though the film treats Koistinen with respect, his situation is not any better than that of Rukka or Boulanger. The three opening sequences analysed depict solitary working but the point of view from which the events are represented is different in each film. To put it bluntly, the audience is directed to take pity on Rukka, smile at Boulanger and respect Koistinen.

In a later sequence in which Koistinen and other security guards are changing in a locker room after their shift, a worker who has not been introduced to the audience walks in. The film shows him and Koistinen in shot reverse-shots, indicating eye contact. For a moment, the minds of the characters are hard to read, as their faces are expressionless. In a medium shot Koistinen lifts his chin and with a kind, trustful

look on his face greets the other man. Here, as in *I Hired a Contract Killer*, the close view emphasises the importance of the friendly gesture. Unlike Boulanger's grimace, this is a true smile that should evoke a positive response. But in a reverse shot the man stares back at Koistinen and soon turns his gaze towards the other men. 'Let's grab a beer', he says to them. His gesture of turning his eyes away is a social signal that indicates that Koistinen is not welcome to join the company. Despite Koistinen's friendliness, his fellow workers reject him, just as those of Rukka and Boulanger reject them. Koistinen is left alone in the empty room and the static camera keeps rolling as he slowly puts on his coat and closes his locker. There is certain irony in the découpage: the sequence begins with an establishing shot, moves to shot/reverse shots and ends with a full shot. The structure is circular – nothing changes and connection is denied.

With means that are minimal yet very bold, Kaurismäki evokes a sense that Rukka, Boulanger and Koistinen are permanently out of place. At times, the combination of framing, deadpan performance and long shot duration verge on becoming a tableau. This enhances the sense of boldness: we are not allowed to miss the point the filmmaker is making. Indeed, in each sequence I have analysed, Kaurismäki manages to capture the whole in a nutshell, which is an achievement in itself.

Loneliness as the Failure to Notice

Time and again Kaurismäki shows how loneliness can affect attempts to socially connect with other people. For instance, Henri Boulanger and Seppo Koistinen are attractive to women whose need for social connection they fail to notice, even though they themselves are lonely. Kaurismäki treats such encounters with dramatic irony. In *I Hired a Contract Killer* and *Lights in the Dusk*, the audience can see that the women are romantically interested but the lonely and

alienated protagonists are not capable of correctly interpreting their social cues, as obvious as they seem to the audience. The lonely protagonists have been neglected for so long that they find the idea of someone loving them impossible.

After losing his job at Her Majesty's Waterworks, Boulanger decides to die. Before he puts his plan of hanging himself into action, he goes to meet his landlady with the intention of dutifully giving notice for his flat. The characters meet at the landlady's door and the camera shows them in close-ups, directing viewers to pay attention to their facial expressions. The landlady looks weary opening her door, but as she realises that it is Boulanger who has come to meet her, she straightens her back and a twinkle appears in her eye. The small gesture and the tiny detail express her delight at seeing him. But the feeling is not mutual, as one can interpret from Boulanger's face which appears stern throughout the conversation. 'I came to give notice of the flat', he states. 'Why are you… Just like that…' the landlady responds. She utters the first three words with a warm tone of voice while pushing her smiling face towards his. This indicates that she likes him and does not quite believe his words. But just then the meaning of Boulanger's statement hits her. Uttering the latter part of her sentence, she leans back looking surprised: her eyebrows are raised, the eyes are opened wide and the jaw drops open, parting the lips. The film cuts back to Boulanger as he claims he is moving away and says that in a week's time everything he has left behind can be thrown away – the hidden irony is that this includes his dead body. Now there is a touch of fury in his voice, which suggests he has failed to interpret social signs. The landlady leans back and looks confused, as Boulanger does

not realise how much she would like to socialise with him. There is another ironic element to the sequence: Billie Holiday's song '*Body and Soul*' plays on the soundtrack, explicitly expressing the landlady's emotions. Holiday sings: 'My days have grown so lonely. For you I cry, for you dear only. Why haven't you seen it? I'm all for you, body and soul.' As the song is diegetic – it plays in her apartment – it should help Boulanger to interpret what the landlady feels for him, but he fails to do so. He can only think about putting his plan of killing himself into action, finding life meaningless now that he has lost his job. Boulanger and the landlady could be romantically involved, but this is not something the film directly expresses. The connection is there, but we have to make the interpretation. That ethic is built into the style.

Lights in the Dusk contains analogous sequences in which Koistinen fails to realise that the woman who works in the traditional hot dog kiosk he regularly visits is romantically interested in him. The film contains three sequences in which he goes to the booth and meets her, all of which are more poignant than the meeting analysed above. The third visit differs from the other two in that Koistinen is seriously drunk. As it opens, he drinks vodka from a bottle at the back of the kiosk early in the morning. It is as if the hot dog booth has magically drawn him there: it is warmly lit, making it look cosy in the colourless city of glass, steel and brick. As Koistinen tosses the empty bottle into off-screen space, where we hear it breaks – a gesture that signals deep disappointment and indifference to his own fate – the woman steps outside to meet him. The orange coat she wears is in a sharp contrast with the black of the suit he is wearing. The warm colour marks her as

a rescuer, a person who can save Koistinen from his self-destructive tendencies. As the characters meet, they have their hands in their pockets in self-protective postures, expressing reticence and shyness. It is not easy for them to communicate their feelings. The woman kindly offers to take Koistinen home and in the next shot the camera dollies with them as they walk. The change from the static camera set-up connotes progress in the relationship: she is now holding his arm. In the opening sequence Koistinen only had the escalator rail to hold. Just before the end of the shot the woman lowers her gaze which makes her look melancholic. I take it that she feels good with him by her side, but sad because in his stupor he fails to realise her affection for him. When inside Koistinen's apartment, the camera follows her movements as she puts him to bed. From here the film cuts to a medium close-up of Koistinen's face as his eyes stare blankly at the ceiling and then close. He passes out with a wrinkled cigarette in his mouth, not realising that the woman finds him attractive. She takes the cigarette and pulls a puff from it in a medium close-up, which prompts the audience to interpret her unexpressed thoughts. Howard Hawks, whom Kaurismäki greatly admires, was famous for signalling social connection with cigarettes. Here the cigarette is used to symbolise the one-sided nature of their connection. The sequence ends with a sound of a distant foghorn. It connotes loneliness and makes the moment affectively engaging. Foghorns were frequently used in French poetic realist films that Kaurismäki appreciates, for example in and *Pépé le Moko* (Duvivier 1937) and *The Port of Shadows* (*Le Quai des brumes*, Carné 1938). In these films, as in *Lights in the Dusk*, the deep sound implies unfulfilled romance and

longing for something better. The foghorn returns at the film's end, just before Koistinen and the woman hold hands. This time it can be heard as an 'answer' to the earlier foghorn, as it stands for the possibility for them to sail away together, escaping their troubles.

The Match Factory Girl contains a night club sequence in which Iris Rukka meets a man who becomes interested in her company. Unfortunately for her, she totally misinterprets the nature of his interest. The sequence opens with a pan that moves from right to left showing happy people dancing under flashing lights, couples and groups at their tables and finally Rukka alone at her table next to a wall. The camera stops its movement and keeps rolling as she takes a sip from her soft drink. As she raises her eyes from the glass, they widen and lock on something in the off-screen space, as she spots something attractive. The following point of view shot shows a sleazy man at the bar whose tie hangs loosely as he does not stand up straight. The man has one hand in his pocket and in the other hand he has a cigarette and an empty drink. The small details are in stark contrast to Rukka's lemonade that connotes naivety and virtuousness. As he looks back at her, she bashfully turns her gaze away. While Rukka finds the man attractive, she is also scared of the attention she receives from him, as she does not know how to behave. The bashfulness of her gesture signals that she fails to recognise him as a creep. Soon the man sits at Rukka's table, leans towards her and takes her arm. While Rukka's coy smile suggests that she is pleased with the attention she is getting, his face is expressionless. As nothing in his gestures signals genuine romantic interest, the audience might find him scary. He takes Rukka to dance and the camera keeps shooting the empty table for a while, emphasising the lemonade that she left behind. Here it is a symbol of innocence, something from which Rukka is now drifting away. The camera shoots the dancing couple in a medium close-up in which his back is towards the spectator. The positioning of the characters increases the sense that he is a person whose true thoughts and feelings are a mystery. Rukka is the total opposite: she smiles and has her cheek pressed against his chest, which indicates trust and comfort. She is clearly lost in the moment. Slowly the couple turns 180

degrees, allowing the audience to see that the man is looking up, first to the left and then to the right. The movement of his eyes implies that the dance does not mean a thing to him. From here the film cuts to an extreme low angle shot of an upper corner of an apartment building seen from the outside in the middle of the night. It is an indirect way of indicating that the characters have sex, which is something Kaurismäki never shows directly. Early in the morning the man goes away, but leaves money for her to find. The detail clarifies that he was merely looking for sex without any commitment. Lacking the comedy Kaurismäki is known for, the sequence elicits a strong sense of sympathy towards Rukka: she was looking for romantic love, but is treated as a prostitute. The sequence is similar to the sequences analysed above in that the protagonist fails to notice what another character is thinking, even though viewers are guided to realise what is really going on. This creates a dramatic irony.

Showing what Loneliness Feels Like

In Kaurismäki's films, shots that represent bereft characters alone in a space are typically longer than is narratively necessary (Seppälä 2015: 23–26; Seppälä 2016: 10). As time passes, the camera rolls and shows action of a mundane sort, people who do not really do anything. In this way Kaurismäki depicts loneliness as a negative state of being without the means to meaningfully occupy time. As the bored characters do not have anything to do or anyone to talk to,

they become uncomfortably aware of the meaninglessness of their existence. By holding the shots longer than necessary, Kaurismäki evokes that emptiness and discomfort, using cinematic devices to show what loneliness feels like.

In *I Hired a Contract Killer* the camera finds Henri Boulanger in an underground train after a typical day at work. As Boulanger sits still, the camera keeps observing him. The train is full of men returning home from work, but he stands out in that everyone else is either involved in a conversation or reading a newspaper. It seems that only the camera is aware of his presence. As all seats in view have been taken, except the one next to Boulanger, he looks lonesome. No one was willing to sit with him in the cafeteria and no one is willing to sit with him in the train, but there is no apparent reason for this. For Boulanger, the public space of the train is a private space: he is lost in his own thoughts and does not pay attention to other people, just as they do not pay any attention to him. This is a theme Edward Hopper often explored in his paintings. As noted earlier, Kaurismäki's compositions tend to resemble those of Hopper. As he sits next to the window at the corner of his seat, aloof from everyone else, Boulanger further resembles a character from a Hopper painting in that he has a vacant, expressionless appearance. Boulanger appears to be the only person who is not connected to society. Indeed, the major difference to the works of the painter is that the other characters appear lively and interested in things around them. Here the other people who read do not appear isolated. On the contrary, they are actively involved with society as they read; one even gets a sense that their conversations have been inspired by the newspapers. The train shakes Koistinen as he sits still, looking a bit down. Once again Kaurismäki uses the minimal device of a downward gaze to signal sadness. Typically for the filmmaker, the long take enables a deeper engagement with the protagonist: the shot encourages viewers to simulate what it would be like to sit in solitude in that train, on that bench, at that hour, amongst all those people. To put it differently, the shot invites us to understand Boulanger's social pain through our own emotions.

Intimate moments of isolation can be more poignant than ones in which characters are surrounded by other people, but even such moments tend to be slightly ironic. An illuminating example is the sequence in *The Match Factory Girl* in which lonely Iris Rukka celebrates her birthday. It opens with an extreme long shot in which she walks from right to left on a wet road in front of a grey wall that totally blocks the view. The beige colour of Rukka's coat makes her look like she belongs to these outskirts, as she is as pallid as the surroundings. A bus and car pass by, but other than that, she is alone and looks alienated from the world around her. Rukka appears small and powerless, especially so because she is looking down in the long shot. Here, too, her pink hair band signifies her dreams for something better. From here the film cuts to a shot which paraphrases Hopper's painting *Automat* (1927) in which a

lonely woman in green drinks coffee in an empty cafeteria. In Kaurismäki's medium shot Rukka stares at a slice of cake she has on the table next to a glass of red lemonade. She looks miserable, which is understandable, as it is her birthday and she is alone. Like the woman in the painting, Rukka is in 'a place of social contact', but 'appears entirely turned inward upon herself, and her isolation is increased by a suggestion of hurry and unrest, conveyed by the coat […] she still has on' (Kranzfelder 2010: 146).

The sequence is anything but sentimental because of the upbeat Finnish version of a British pop song from the 1960s, *'You've Got What I Like'* ('*Se jokin sinulla on*'), which began to play on the soundtrack as Rukka was walking on the street. The placement of the song indicates that it is not part of the diegesis, at least not at first (it could be playing in the cafeteria), which accentuates the fact that Kaurismäki has deliberately chosen to play it here. The song adds ironic distance to the sympathetic emotions the sequence elicits, as a man sings about a woman he adores. The English subtitles translate the Finnish lyrics:

You've got that something, babe. Your smile makes it all worthwhile. So easily you can outshine the brightest stars. For me, your shining eyes turn each day into spring. You've got that something, babe.

The song goes against 'the emotional dominant of the sequence' (Stam 2005: 64), as the protagonist is nothing like the person the song is about. Rukka is cheerless and her eyes are dimmed by sadness and loneliness. By offering a stark contrast, the lyrics emphasise these characteristics of hers. The fast tempo of the song offers another ironic contrast: conventionally, 'slow movement in the visuals correlate with slow tempo, and fast movement with fast tempo' (Chattah 2015: 83), but here it is very noticeably the other way around. And yet, the song is not unfit in narrative terms, as Rukka probably wants to be something like the person the song is about in the eyes of the man she one-sidedly loves (Pekkilä 2005: 57). Thus, Kaurismäki manages to have it both ways: the song is poignant in what it tells about her dreams and yet it makes fun of her by offering an ironic contrast, which makes her look ridiculous and out of place. Here Kaurismäki playfully juxtaposes cinematic elements, creating strange and comic contrasts that express his ironic attitude (Seppälä 2018: 85 and passim).

In *Lights in the Dusk* Kaurismäki connects loneliness to heavy drinking. His drinkers are happy and their drinking stylish when drinking happens in a group as a form of social bonding. But when people are lonely and drink to make their pain go away, their drinking can be destructive. This is what happens to Seppo Koistinen when the woman with whom he has fallen in love with leaves him. In the sequence in question the camera follows Koistinen as he prepares a supper table while waiting for the woman to arrive. He is literally alone, but not lonely as he is meaningfully occupying time. The woman arrives and sits next to Koistinen on a couch. Having given her a drink, he puts his arm around her shoulders, thinking this is the right moment to do so. She loosens herself from his grip and says she must travel. The woman walks out of the two-shot and the camera keeps rolling as Koistinen sits gazing down. The inner corners of his eyebrows are raised and drawn together, further suggesting how miserable he feels. The film cuts to an extreme close-up of a liqueur bottle, which the protagonist grabs and opens. The close view of the hands opening

the bottle is appropriately abrupt. 'To hell with it all,' Koistinen is clearly thinking, as social isolation has deprived him of a sense of purpose. The camera guides the audience to spot the liqueur glass which Koistinen does not use, suggesting that he is drinking straight from the bottle. If Rukka turned away from innocence, Koistinen turns away from civilised drinking. One can sense that he is about to drink the bottle in one go. To reinforce this interpretation, Kaurismäki cuts to a close view of a spinning record, the metaphorical movement of which is not going to stop anytime soon. By using the shot of the record, Kaurismäki gives Koistinen privacy, refusing to exploit his self-destructive emotions.

Conclusions

The Match Factory Girl, *I Hired a Contract Killer* and *Lights in the Dusk* are existentialist films in the sense that they depict lonely characters who face the utter meaninglessness of life without social contacts. Their loneliness is the polar opposite of the working-class togetherness Kaurismäki celebrates in his other films. To put it differently, the films analysed here indicate what the role of the common man is in the modern world if the creation of heterotopias fails or is not carried out. The cinematic tropes Kaurismäki repeatedly uses in his depictions of loneliness include: the downward gaze of the main character; a shot composition in which the protagonist is close to other characters and yet separate from them; a shot composition in which the main character is surrounded by socially empty space; expressive objects and spaces; deadpan acting; silence and symbolic sounds; and music that can be expressive or ironic – or even both at the same time. In his treatment of loneliness, Kaurismäki uses these devices to both invite and block emotional involvement. Watching his films, the viewer can sense that the material could easily be funnier or sadder. Kaurismäki keeps the tone of his works on a knife-edge between irony and sympathy, laughter and sadness, absurdity and seriousness. This is where his cinematic achievement lies. The three films may be among the darkest Kaurismäki has made, but as I have demonstrated, they contain strange and comic elements, the function of which is to ensure that the representations never become too sentimental, morbid, frivolous or serious.

JAAKKO SEPPÄLÄ
Jaakko Seppälä is a docent (adjunct professor) in Film and Television Studies at University of Helsinki. He is currently exploring Nordic noir as affective mapping.

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Approaching the unapproachable: The cinema of mass shootings & the limits of classical form

I. Walking the line

What is the point of exhibiting these pictures? To awaken indignation? To make us feel 'bad,' that is, to appall and sadden? To help us mourn? […]. Do they actually teach us anything?

(Sontag 2004: 91-2)

I think it is necessary to begin with a personal admission. As an American millennial, I grew up in a milieu saturated by the presence of mass shootings. As such, my interest in cinematic depictions of mass shootings, the focus of this paper, is in no small part ethico-political. This does not, however, render my aesthetic interest secondary. Rather, these commitments are intrinsically bound up, as films *qua* films articulate themselves, ethically and politically, through their aesthetics[1]. Yet films that take mass shootings as their subjects must walk a delicate line. There is a certain *gravity* that the subject matter imposes, a gravity that threatens to pull films down into a moral abyss if they step carelessly. As such, the particular ways that films approach these subjects must be carefully considered.

Films about mass shootings have much to benefit from employing an elucidating narrative structure. At minimum,

it is hard to deny that when watching any such film, basic questions such as 'what is happening?' or 'what happened?' are irreducible and demand response. Importantly, the ability of the film to be definitive in its response has political consequence. Just as Susan Sontag worried that the narrative ambiguity of war photographs allowed propaganda machines to easily mobilise and re-contextualise these images for any purpose, we too should be wary of mass shooting films that remain open to re-inscription by virtue of an indefinite stance towards its subject (Sontag 2004). The last thing one would want is for a potential mass shooter to encounter or read the film in such a way that it inspires, motivates, or justifies precisely that act.

Yet these events evade simple narrative structuring, in particular the kind of narrative structuring practised in the classical mode. Whereas these classically formed narratives (as articulated by, e.g. Bordwell [1985], Branigan [1992]) rely on causal logic and a general principle of closure, the traumatic event (analysed along a Caruthian-Freudian line)[2], is defined precisely by the absence of the cause, by its *illogic*, by disassociation and openness. The traumatic event exists beyond the understanding that causal reasoning and logical comprehension let us penetrate.

Additionally, there are ethical concerns about ascribing a causal system on these events, as this risks rationalising the actions depicted. These concerns are articulated by Hayden White when he writes that by making these events the 'subject matter of a narrative, it becomes a story which, by its possible "humanization" of the perpetrators, might "enfable" the event – render it fit therefore for investment by fantasies of "intactness," "wholeness," and "health"' (2013: 31). Instead, he urges us to pursue 'anti-narrative non-stories' that transcend the 'narrative fetishism' of classical narratives (2013: 31-2)[3].

However, a non-narrative approach, perhaps approaches associated with avant-garde and spectacle-based genres – those contemporary heirs to Tom Gunning's early 'cinema of attractions' – also encounter challenges when broaching these events (2006: 382). For instance, an avant-garde approach, while articulating an experience which is, perhaps, phenomenal-affective, or contemplative, or subjective, may struggle to engage with the 'what happened' that is constitutive of our

response. Equally, a more carnivalesque approach premised on visual spectacle risks divorcing real death and trauma from the gravity the subject demands by reducing it to stimuli[4].

There exists, however, a corpus of films that formally and aesthetically respond to the difficulties noted above by attempting to circumvent or challenge these more traditional modes (in particular the causal, closed classical structure). I find it interesting to note that analogous strategies are often found in both documentary and fictional re-enactment films, as this signals that it is the *subjects* of these films, rather than the film's particular epistemological commitments, that largely motivate these responses; subjects which embed these films, in Vivian Sobchack's terminology, with the 'charge of the real', which 'calls forth not only response but also responsibility' (2004: 284). In short, gravity.

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on two films: Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) and Tim Sutton's *Dark Night* (2016). These films, both fictional re-enactments of major mass shootings in America, offer snapshots of a culture continuing to reckon with a form of violence, horrifying in its cruelty, yet increasingly endemic to its society. In their own ways, both films use a system of causal narrative logic as a point of departure for their interrogations, co-opting, subverting, or offering alternatives to central elements of this system in order to manoeuvre through the challenges presented by their charged subjects. In doing so, these films use their narrative form to respond to challenges in the ethical, ontological, political, and cultural domains.

II. *Elephant* and its initial system

A key interest in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* – the director's fictive reckoning with Columbine – is in exploring the limits of a traditional narrative logic when seeking to understand these events. Shot with a mostly non-professional cast, most of the film takes place over a single day at a school campus, the day of a shooting, and follows a number of characters as they weave through the maze of the American high school.

The film, at its outset, establishes a formal system that stands at odds with a more classical logic. Temporally, the film sticks to the bounds of the day of the shooting, but within

this limit articulates itself recursively rather than linearly. It skips around varying times as it follows different characters, weaving various temporal threads that exist for the most part in indeterminate relation to the others, but which unify at key moments. These unifying moments – often physical intersections between various characters / bodies – are then experienced from various perspectives and angles, as if revisiting them to signal or attribute a significance which nevertheless remains elusive. Beyond these moments, however, the dominant time of this formal system is 'dead time', a time that resists narrative impulse by refusing to become eventful or narratively productive (Little 2013: 117). The film often lingers on in-between moments, those banal actions, conversations, and commutes that amount to nothing meaningful, but which constitute the forgotten majority of these characters' lives.

Spatially, Van Sant eschews the kind of establishing shots that would clearly render the space and the relations between spaces. Instead, the space of the school is largely constructed through the lines of movement and intersections that occur through and within it, as the audience traverses the school 'leashed' to various characters (Rich 2012: 1318). Often, the viewer has the sense that they are in a labyrinth that they could not navigate were they not being led by these students. The camera meanders between teens, leashing itself to different subjects for seemingly no reason (or for a reason inaccessible to us), tracing their lines of movement and intersections with an ethereal, ghostly detachment.

Yet, these lines of movement and intersections reveal relatively little about the space we are in, or the characters we are following, and the film consistently denies us this knowledge. Instead, these characters are often rendered flatly, falling into generic high school movie archetypes. Moments in which deeper character psychology could spring forth fizzle out before they begin, while the disembodied camera's movements largely resist the psychologising techniques (e.g. shot / reverse shots, POVs) that would give us insight into the characters in a more classical formulation (Said 2004: 18). Meanwhile, the moments when characters look out of frame make us acutely aware of how spatially limited our view is.

These formal elements become visible early on, and we can already see them working in a much-discussed sequence

towards the beginning of the film. The sequence starts with a shot of an athletic field as Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* begins to play. In the foreground, we see figures run past, and behind them, a group playing a game of pick-up football. Yet the camera does not follow any of them, as if wholly uninterested, slight adjustments betraying that it *could move* (it is not, for example, fixed on a tripod) but is *choosing* not to. Then, a trio of girls run past, followed by another, Michelle (Kristen Hicks), who pauses in front of the camera. The camera adjusts

its focus slightly, acknowledging her, as she dreamily gazes at the sky, but the camera remains fixed and we are kept from seeing what she sees. She then continues her run, but the camera does not follow, her intersection with the camera rendered seemingly accidental, contingent, and yet also significant nonetheless in its sublime invocation of the sky to the music of Beethoven. The scene progresses for almost another minute before someone emerges from the pick-up game and walks into centre frame. The focus adjusts once again as he puts on a bright red lifeguard hoodie. As he walks away from the game, the camera pans, following him, and then begins to glide along behind him, following the cross on his back like a target. The camera has found its subject, and yet there is no clear reason given *why* it has chosen him. We follow him as he walks towards the school, perhaps waiting for a 'meaningful' event to occur that would render its interest justified, but it does not. The camera then stops on its approach to the building and watches from a distance.

The film cuts to the inside of the school, and the camera follows the same figure closely, rendering the space around him largely obscure, off-screen, out of focus. Meanwhile, the *Moonlight Sonata* becomes layered with Hildegard Westerkamp's track *Doors of Perception*, which acts almost as a diegetic soundtrack. Yet, as Randolph Jordan has noted, in this soundtrack the character's 'footsteps are not audible; his movement does not reflect within the environment' and

the soundtrack here becomes spatially disorienting rather than enlightening, as the sounds we should hear (e.g. break-dancers) become divorced from what we *do* hear (e.g. the screech of trains) (2012: 254). The shot continues until the figure passes by a trio of girls, who 'shoot' him a glance – a moment of intersection emphasised via slow motion – and the character, Nathan (Nathan Tyson), eventually meets up with his girlfriend.

In this sequence, we already see the core tenets of Van Sant's initial system emerging. Its temporal emphasis on non-eventful dead time, its focus on intersections (of bodies with the camera or people with each other) both seemingly accidental and intentional, on a logic of tracing and following rather than explanation, on a de-psychologising mode (e.g. we aren't shown the object of Michelle's gaze), and the use of misleading sonic and visual cues to challenge the viewer's sense of spatial orientation.

III. *Elephant*'s secondary system

A quarter of the way into the film, Van Sant establishes another formal system – one that is far more narratively driven and determinately rendered. Importantly, this occurs with the film's treatment of the two shooters. This departure begins immediately after John passes by the two shooters about to enter the school in full tactical gear. The film cuts to a title card that reads 'Eric & Alex' (Eric Duelen & Alex Frost, respectively) and then cuts back to a science classroom. As the teacher up front answers questions, the camera pans back to reveal Nathan (clearly in a different outfit) throwing something behind him. The camera continues its motion and reveals Alex as the recipient of these spitballs. It then becomes clear that we have been taken out of the day of the shooting. In doing so, Van Sant chooses to give us a biographical per-spective on these shooters that he has largely denied for the victims. Whereas we are only able to make conjectures about the life circumstances and experiences of the victims lead-ing up to that fateful day, Van Sant gives us this information directly with regard to the shooters.

As the film progresses, this system increasingly distances itself from the one initially established. Temporally, not only are we taken out of the day of the shooting for the shooters' scenes, but their narrative strand is rendered linearly around key events, rather than recursively around moments of inter-section: Alex takes notes on the school, Alex and Eric buy a gun, the gun is delivered, etc. This system also takes us out of the spatial bounds of the school, as we follow Alex into his home, and see him interact with his parents. Moreover, Van Sant renders this space more thoroughly than he does the

school, a move that comes out clearly in a sequence in which Alex plays the piano. Notably the piece, *Für Elise*, another Beethoven composition, associates the film's own soundtrack with Alex's. As he plays, we are given a 360 pan of the space around him, giving us a kind of grounding that is distinctly lacking within the school, a total rendering of his personal space.

This secondary system is one that is far more attached to its subject, and is far less de-psychologising than its counterpart. These elements emerge clearly when Alex is in the cafeteria, taking notes on the layout of the room. Throughout, the camera tracks and pans in a way that keeps him largely centre frame, focusing on him as the subject rather than employing the more inter-subjective logic of the first system. This difference becomes salient if we compare this sequence to the one in which the trio of girls go to the same cafeteria, in which the camera follows them as they get their food, but then moves beyond them, picking up and following a series of cafeteria employees before returning to the trio. As Alex walks and writes in his notebook, he suddenly pauses and as if in response, the camera moves back slightly. Then, the sound of the cafeteria begins to grow into a cavernous cacophony, and Alex looks around, somewhat panicked. The shot ends as he grabs his head with his hands to drown out the noise.

In concluding this scene in such a way, the film gives us a *direct phenomenal rendering* of Alex's experience as he is overwhelmed by sound. It expresses his subjective experience in a way that it largely does not for the other characters. As the film progresses, this second system's association with Alex and Eric's subjectivity grows, culminating at one point with a POV of one of them during the massacre. Unlike the initial system, this secondary system is presented as far more character oriented, temporally linear, clear and unambiguous in its rendering of spaces, 'event' based, and subjective.

IV. *Elephant*'s fatal intersection

Van Sant develops these formal systems in parallel until they come together in the final, fatal intersection – the shooting. The use of this secondary formal system, however, is dangerous. In associating itself so closely with the shooters in this system, the film risks what Hebard (writing about *Nuit et brouillard* [Alain Resnais, 1956]) calls 'moral contamination': of *becoming* the gaze of the killers, and consequently flattening and aestheticising the victims of the massacre (1997: 94).

That is, by spotlighting the shooters via the secondary system and positioning them as the narrative agents in the film, Van Sant risks painting the victims as characters that exist only to service the shooters' narrative, like so many bowling pins set up just to be knocked down. In doing so, he risks perpetuating and amplifying precisely the dehumanising views that contributed to these actual atrocities. The danger seems amplified for mass shootings given the intimate relationships these shootings have with media and film. After all, the Columbine shooters, in their home videos, spoke about the movie that would eventually be made of their massacre (Rich 2012: 1310-11).

Yet, *Elephant* appears conscious of the risks in this project. As William Little observes, in a scene in which the to-be-killers watch a documentary on Nazi film propaganda, Van Sant's own camera appears to self-consciously mirror the movement of a Nazi operated camera shown on screen (2013: 127). With this move, Van Sant seems to formally acknowledges the dangers of his project – how he might romanticise and reproduce evil in his own gaze. Why then take this risk?

To make sense of this move, it helps to bring in Hebard's analysis of *Nuit et brouillard*. This film, like *Elephant*, initially structures itself around two formal systems (one past, one present), but eventually merges the two together – or more specifically, turns the formal system of the present *into* the one of the past – in order to show that the past is not really past, and that the dangers of the Holocaust remain alive in the present (Hebard 1997).

I believe we can read *Elephant*'s structure similarly. Of course, the overarching concern is not the same here as it was for Resnais' film. As such, it will be helpful for us to contextualise *Elephant* in the discursive world of its present. Columbine represented a kind of signal event in the US. In its wake, commentators sought explanations for the event that were, in Van Sant's mind (and I am inclined to agree), reductive: these kids were Nazis, they were insane, they were homosexually repressed, they listened to Marilyn Manson, etc[5]. That is, in its wake, commentators applied a broadly causal-explanatory framework to the event.

It is precisely this mode of understanding that Van Sant is working against, and this much has been well documented in the filmic literature[6]. Yet, while most have attributed this causal-explanatory opacity solely to Van Sant's obscure

system – a view articulated by, for example, Damon Young when he writes that it is the film's 'refusal to give us the narrative information' that makes it opaque (2005: 500) – I think that to do so would simplify what is in reality, a more complex move. Van Sant achieves this explanatory opacity not simply by establishing an alternative formal system (the initial, obscure system), but by *simultaneously* establishing a secondary formal system that seems precisely causal-explanatory, and then collapsing these two systems such that they become indistinguishable. The film breaks down the narratively clear and transparent system into the obscure, opaque one.

V. Blurred lines

One instructive instance in which this deconstruction occurs requires us to return to the sequence in the athletic field discussed above. In it, Michelle is seemingly accidentally shot by the camera, in a moment rendered significant despite its contingency, before the camera chooses to follow Nathan – yet, it gives us no real *reason* why Nathan should be followed, the decision to follow him feels inexplicable, an arbitrary choice made on a whim (perhaps it is because he is good looking, perhaps it is because his sweater is so identifiable …). This mirrors the shooting itself, in which Michelle is the first victim because she happens to be in the wrong place (in the library) at the wrong time, and in which Alex later 'tracks' down Nathan into a meat locker.

The similarities here establish a parallel between the camera's 'shooting' and Alex's shooting – yet in doing so, it foregrounds the inexplicability of the latter when we otherwise might be tempted to understand it through a causal explanation[7]. Michelle is shot in an almost accident, a contingent moment rendered fatally significant. As for Nathan, we realise that we have as little reason to 'understand' why Alex hunted him down as we did the camera's initial decision to follow him. While we might initially think it is because he is a 'jock' or threw spitballs at Alex, the parallels here emphasise the ways in which any attempt to make sense of the 'why' becomes as muddied as attempts to rationalise Van Sant's camera. As Said writes, 'the motives of Columbine killers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris seem as enigmatic as those of Van Sant's protagonists: they too were picked on in school and

had a taste for violent videogames, but these aren't *conclusive motivators*' [my italics] (2004: 16). In this way, the camera, in associating itself with the shooters, begins to obscure rather than illuminate. The causal-explanatory seams of the secondary system begin to come apart.

Another instructive deconstruction is the way that the shooters' sense of spatial orientation is disrupted as the two systems meet. Before the shooting, we are given a scene in which Alex and Eric crouch over a map of the school to plan their routes. We get a view of the map from an over the
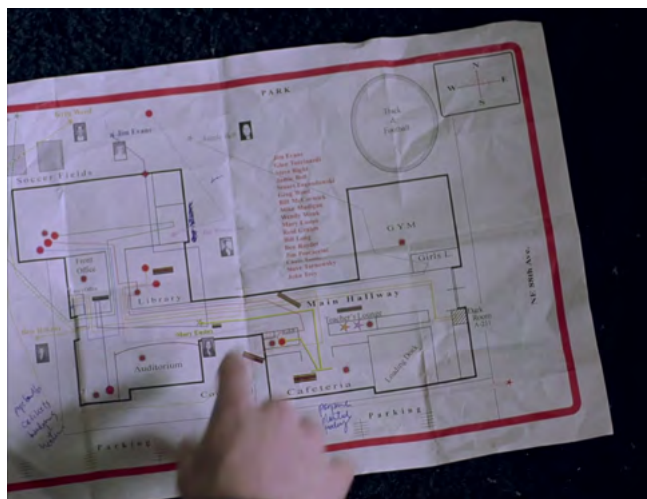
shoulder (almost POV) shot – as close to a spatially orienting 'establishing shot' of that space as we are given – and Van Sant emphasises that in their system, space is clearly rendered. Yet, when they enter the school, they quickly become disoriented by the maze of the school. Where they thought they would be like gods, looking down at the school, they instead become spatially dislocated. This comes to a head when Alex moves into the hallway where he plans to have a 'field day', but finds it empty. The camera revolves around Alex, unmooring him from the background, emphasising his disorientation,

as the spatial coherence of this secondary system becomes subsumed by the labyrinthine confusion of the initial system. As the second system dissolves into the initial one, it becomes clear that this pretension of spatial understanding, this 'god like view', was little more than an ego-maniacal delusion.

When these systems intersect, the elements of the secondary system that *seemed* explanatory, determinate are revealed to be as opaque as those of the initial system. Space once again becomes unnavigable, as do the motivations and psychologies of the characters. Moreover, this breakdown reveals the ways in which this secondary system was opaque *at heart* from the start, endowed with credibility simply by the coherence of the form. What felt like determinate 'clues' are revealed to be paper thin, a mirage of meaning. Van Sant cuts through the illusory meaningfulness of this secondary system and returns us to a state of unknowing. This is not to say that no critiques

of elements that could have contributed to this event are offered. However, by formally collapsing these two systems, Van Sant works against the closed, clear understanding of the event promised by news outlets, and more broadly, the causal-explanatory logic of the classical system. He acknowledges and reckons with the inability of causal, closed narratives to properly explain these traumatic events, to render them sane, sensible. Instead he leaves us with various factors that never get us to a full understanding, that fail to cohere and illuminate, forcing us to reckon with something much more unsettling: the sheer *inexplicability* of the act.

VI. Ethical notes on *Elephant*

Ultimately, I would contend that this film feels like a response particular to the early 2000s, when these shootings felt so new (so novel) that the gaze towards them bordered on curious. Van Sant's overwhelming preoccupation with the shooters, even if pushing back against a more reductive explanation of the shooting, does so at the risk of sympathising with these characters and flattening the victims. One may feel that the shooters are, in many ways, rendered more humanely than the victims since we are witness to their moments of familial life, intimacy, and play. Though this observational stance makes sense given the design of the film, a viewer could be wary of a perceived imbalance. Whether this is the case or not is certainly up for debate, but the decision to focus on these shooters is one that has been challenged.

VII. *Dark Night* & database logic

With *Dark Night*, we find a film preoccupied less with the individual shooter itself, and more with the milieu in which such violence spawns. On the surface, Sutton's film feels similar to Van Sant's. Like *Elephant*, it follows a number of characters on the day of a shooting and importantly, one of them is the shooter himself. However, while *Elephant* reveals its violent telos a quarter of the way into its runtime, and offers the semblance of structure (both narratively via its secondary system, and through its relational logic of tracing and intersections

between characters), *Dark Night* maintains a fog of uncertainty until its last moments, crafting a narrative that feels fractured, atomic, isolated. Even the relationships between its characters are rendered largely indeterminate, as Sutton refuses to show characters in the same frame even when it is clear they are occupying the same space.

This atomic, fractured system behind the film's narrative can helpfully be read as running on a 'database' logic. For Lev Manovich, who theorised the concept, a database narrative is one that is created when an 'algorithm' goes through a set of items (a database) and structures /orders the materials (1999). Importantly, the algorithm can operate along any ordering system it wants – it does not, for example, need to be causally, spatially, or temporally unified – and is only one of many that can be applied to the database. As such, the result of algorithm / database pair, i.e. the narrative, is always contingent, never necessary or final. Instead, it gestures towards the other ways it could have manifested, towards the wider field of possibilities. While elements of this logic can be meaningfully applied to *Elephant* (Van Sant certainly does not want his account to be definitive, and so gestures to other stories untold, perspectives it could have manifested), this database logic is particularly helpful in understanding *Dark Night* given the vast epistemic canyon it contains. We know even less in *Dark Night* than we do in *Elephant*, and the film's eschewal of an overt structure or narrative not only makes the arbitrariness of the structuring 'algorithm' salient, but simultaneously encourages the viewer to apply a similar database logic in order to interpret the film. It is this combination of narrative fracture and an unwillingness to reveal the event that connects these fractured strands that positions *Dark Night* apart from *Elephant*[8]. If *Elephant* tells us what will happen, and challenges our ability to find out why, *Dark Night* forces the viewer to attempt to make sense of the film at a more fundamental level. It is exactly this experience, of trying to figure out what is happening, what will go wrong, and who will be responsible for it, that critics have latched onto as central to the film[9]. This experience, however, is not simply a result of the radical opacity just mentioned, but stems from Sutton's ability to craft an underlying sense of violence that always feels just over the horizon.

This ambiance is a result of several factors, which include the employment of certain archetypes that signal potentially violent individuals (e.g., the silent veteran, the withdrawn teenager), the lack of psychologising formal / narrative techniques (similar to *Elephant*) rendering these characters opaque, and the ominous musical motif, in which a sole female voice, electronically modulated and reverberating as if in a cavernous room, sings against a minimal musical backdrop.

This sinister energy bubbles to the surface at certain moments, rupturing the narrative with sudden breaks. Consider, for example, the sequence in which a would-be social media influencer poses as her own agent on a call. The camera has slowly been moving towards the car in which the character is sitting, a steady, but claustrophobic motion – the lighting emphasising the dull beige hues of the surrounding parking lot, while in the distance we hear thunder. As we listen to her desperately try to get an audition, we suddenly hear a blood-curdling scream. The camera pans quickly to the right, and we see a trio of girls, in extreme close up, rush past. Before we can make sense of what's going on, we hear one of them say 'Sophia, you're such a bitch' and we realise that it was nothing serious. As if nothing happened, the camera returns to the car.

These moments litter the film – in another example, a person's speech on growing up while feeling isolated is interrupted by a sudden cut to a dart hitting a wall – and imbue the film with a certain violent energy. Yet, rather than manifest in anything concrete, each jolt dissolves into the background as soon as it is experienced, returning the viewer to a sense of general anxiety. This anxiety – and here I mean to recall the Heideggerian distinction between anxiety and fear, wherein the latter has a particular intentional object whereas the former does not (1929) – places the viewer in a certain state of anticipation, but by refusing to resolve, forces the viewer to keep on *searching* for something to make it concrete.

Put another way, the opacity of the film (i.e. that the viewer does not know *what's* going on) combined with the film's ambiance (i.e. that the viewer *senses* that something's wrong) leads the viewer to continually try to figure out the underlying logic of the film, to construct *their own*
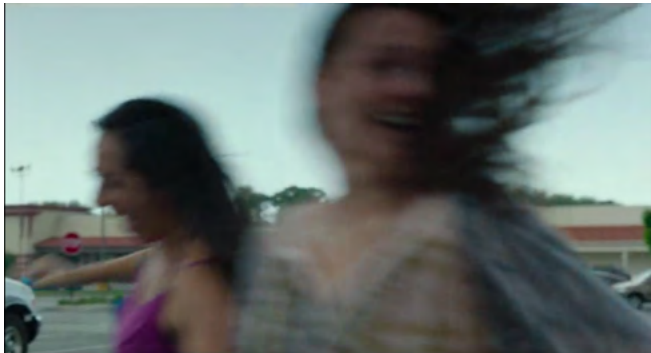
algorithm that would help them make sense of the film and its tonality. This process of trying to interpret the film through different frameworks for maximal clarity is something latent in most experiences of filmic comprehension – Branigan, for example, calls it the application of a 'top-down' schema, which he considers an essential part of any narrative viewing experience (1992: 37-9). But *Dark Night* draws it out to the extreme through its radical narrative fracturing and obfuscation, bringing that latent experience to the fore as we actively try to interpret the characters, and the violence we sense is hovering just beyond[10]. Yet importantly, this project is ultimately futile. Unlike most narratives, in which the viewer is guided towards a top-down schema that elucidates the film, *Dark Night* seems to consciously embed false leads and red herrings such that this process becomes confused. It is not until the end, until it is too late, that we confidently realise what will happen, and who will be responsible.

VIII. Implications of *Dark Night*'s structure

The film's ability to draw out what is normally latent in viewing experience – namely, this top-down schema or database logic – and its subsequent complication of the predictive viability of this process is notable for several reasons, but I want to expand here on its more political, social implications. Manovich, in his original discussion, re-iterates the fact that database narratives rely on a particular database logic that is dominant in a computerised society (1999). In challenging the applicability of this logic to the film, *Dark Night* can be read as challenging a general *approach* to understanding mass shootings and its milieu. This logical system, beginning with individuals considered atomically – opposed to the relational mode of *Elephant*, *Dark Night* renders each narrative strand in far more fragmented terms – seems unable to capture what is important, as the film thwarts the viewer's understanding of what is to come; that is, the affective *sense* that something is wrong fails to be explained by this mode of reasoning.

This move becomes broader reaching when we note that this logical mode is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the dominant logic applied to gun control in the United States, wherein an algorithm crawls through various databases in order to identify various at-risk owners. Much discussion around increased gun control has revolved around *what* the algorithm should capture, but this fundamental logic has often remained unchallenged (Elinson 2019). Yet, I think what Sutton does in this film is *precisely* challenge such a logic's ability to understand and prevent violence, and it does so by having the *viewer* act as this algorithmic program, but rendering the film in such opaque terms that it seems that there is *no* algorithm that can safely capture what is necessary until it is too late.

My claim here is not that Sutton consciously wedded the logic of his film to the logic of gun control in the US, which would be an empirical claim. Rather, it is that the film's approach to the origins of violence can be read as operating along a particular logical system that is dominant in a particular society; and that in exploring the limits of that logic, it is a *fortiori* exploring the limits of other systems that utilise that same logic. Now, this would characterise this film as a negative, or deconstructive project, and I think that would be half right (in this respect, I think it is similar to *Elephant* and the challenge it issued to classical causal-narrative reasoning); but this film has a positive aspect as well. For this, we need to re-orient ourselves and read this film through another lens: an ecological lens.

IX. *Dark Night*'s ecological stance

Sutton's broader, ecological interest arises early in the film. As the film cuts from the title card, we are given an aerial shot of a suburban landscape. Looking straight down at the ground, our view becomes divorced from a normal 'human' perspective; instead of houses and trees standing before us, we see plains of green intercut with estuaries of concrete and banks of symmetrical roofs, miniscule cars appearing here and there as if to emphasise the non-anthropocentric view. The treetops, houses, and roads roll together as if entwined – proportioned, symbiotic. Throughout, we hear an ambient calm, as birds chirp in the background.

This interest in the broader ecosystem, and in the relationship between it and humans, recurs throughout *Dark Night*. Most explicitly, it comes out within the narrative by the withdrawn teenager (Aaron Purvis), as he tells the interviewer:

The environment is not a person, it's not a human with a brain trying to resonate ideas throughout the universe. Nature is true, nature is real. Humans are not real.

This, of course, shouldn't be conflated with the *film's* articulation of this distinction, but I think we can read it as signalling a general interest in interrogating this divide. This interrogation occurs subtly, and proceeds in a way that begins to complicate this division. At multiple points, for example, we get shots of the sky accompanied by the hum of electricity, which then cuts to a different scene dominated by the buzz of cicadas – the sound of electricity and cicadas blurring in this transition, as if it were a sonic match cut, emphasising the similarities of these sounds. This motif culminates in the parking lot of the theatre shortly before the shooting, as the hum of insects and electricity blend together, becoming nearly indistinguishable. Visually, human figures are often shot in such a way that they seem to emerge from, and blend back into the natural world around them.

There is a sequence in which one of the characters goes swimming in a lake. The camera, in close-up, pans slowly across a tree, as if tracing its outgrowth of branches. As it does so, it encounters various bits of body – a waist here, a leg there – but the camera does not zoom out or linger on these body parts in a way that acknowledges their difference. Rather, it treats these body parts as if they too were part of the tree, passing over them, emphasising the textural and formal

similarities between them. Tree limbs and human limbs merge with each other, the camera treating both identically.

This human / natural thematic critically emerges again at the scene of violence. As the film cuts between the various characters getting ready for the evening, we get a shot of a turtle associated with the withdrawn teen lying in the grass
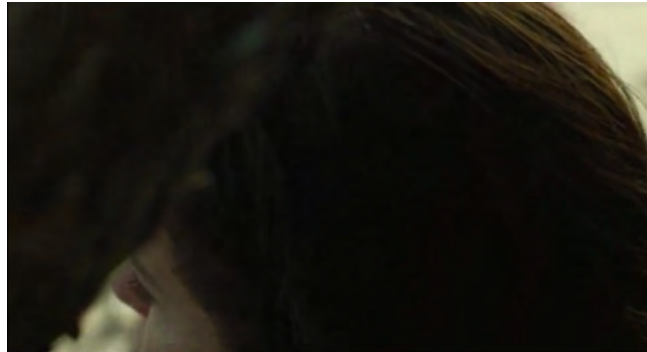
at dusk, cicadas roaring in the background. The camera pans up, but it does not adjust focus initially, so that when the teen walks into frame, he is blurred into the environment around him. As the camera begins to focus, he materialises from the world and we see that he is holding a hammer. The film then cuts, prohibiting a view of the violence implied, to a shot of a glowing lamppost, a false moon in the sky, as the voice of the would-be influencer asks us if we 'feel like we're dying'. It is only a short while later that the shooting occurs, as the shooter, likewise, walks towards the camera, and the film cuts, similarly ending on a red light hovering above the door through which he entered.
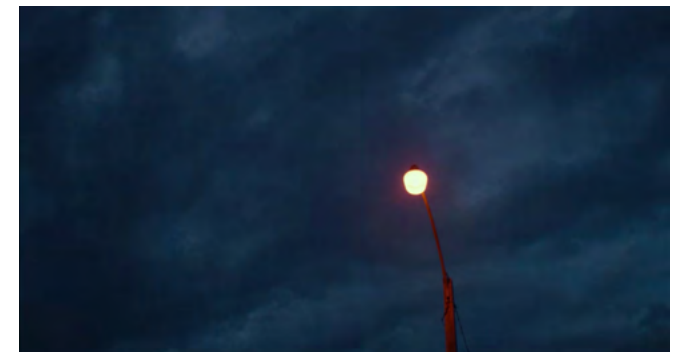
Sutton here seems interested in drawing out some connection between these two violent acts, between this violence set in nature and between the violence set in the manmade theatre. The question is: why? What is the point of complicating
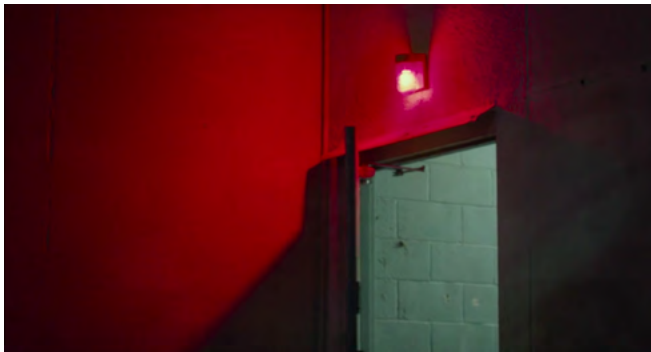
the distinction between the human and the natural, in making salient the ways in which the natural / human mirror and blend into each other, particularly in the final act(s) of violence?

X. A shift in orientation

The answer to this question becomes clearer if we compare this eco-logic to the database logic described above. Recall that the database approach was, among other things, a way the viewer attempted to understand what was happening, and make sense of the ambient violence that lingers throughout the film. It was a logic wherein one began with individuals and tried to find some relations / distinctions between them – find the right algorithm – that would identify the source of this affect. It is an anthropocentric approach, where one took in the information one could gather about the individuals and tried to arrive at a correct reading of the milieu. Yet, this approach proved nearly impossible. The film was structured,

and the characters rendered, in such a way that finding the correct schema that would elucidate the narrative before the ending was difficult.

We can conceive of the ecological stance as inverting its focus in an effort to offer a new way of approaching this same problem. Rather than begin with the individual, this reading begins with the environment, and has individuals emerge from this milieu in a quasi-Simondonian fashion (Simondon 1992). By re-orienting its focus, it gestures towards an understanding of violence that begins with the environment, with the illness that is latent in this Anywhere, USA. I do not think that it goes as far as diagnosing exactly *what* is wrong; this would be far too massive an undertaking. But I do think that it urges us to begin looking differently. Grounding this stance in the discursive world of the film's present, I think it is notable insofar as it aligns itself with increasing calls to address the gun violence epidemic as a public health issue; that is, as an issue not understood in localised, individual terms, but through a broader systemic / environmental approach (Kinscherff & Block 2018). It is through the tension between these two competing logical systems – one picking up where the other left off – that I believe we can read this film in a productive, dialectic light.

XI. Ethical notes on *Dark Night*

Now, one may say that this ecological approach takes away from the distinctly human gravity that its subject demands, and that we ought to mourn the human loss incurred here. Yet if we look closer, we can see how the film is not only preoccupied with the environment's relation to the origins of violence, but with the way that violence inscribes the environment. There is a moment in which the would-be shooter is marking the paces from his car to the theatre, although as viewers we do not quite know what he is doing. The sequence begins with the camera slowly moving in a circular motion around the car as the shooter gets out of the vehicle and fiddles around in the trunk. As he begins walking and counting, the camera tracks, appearing to initially follow him, but then comes to a stop a moment later as the base of a lamppost takes centre frame, shifting the attention away from the shooter onto the architectural elements of the parking lot. Slowly, at the base of this lamppost, a symbol materialises – the 'logo' of the

film, a crudely drawn three eyed face, or perhaps a face with a bullet hole in its forehead – and then, just as quickly, dissolves. The violence to come literally marks the environment, underscoring the ways in which violence and loss irrevocably alter the spaces in which they occur. Places – Sandy Hook, Parkland, Aurora, Columbine – become inseparable from the human loss that occurred there, and *Dark Night*'s ecological

stance allows the film to acknowledge the inextricable relation between the two. It mourns the human loss by recognising the missingness that fills up a space in its wake, that remains long after those lives have passed, after individual names have been forgotten.

In this way, *Dark Night* urges a reorienting shift in cinematic reckonings of mass shootings. Its gaze wanders beyond the humans towards the world behind them. While some may characterise this as cold or dehumanising, one may think that this environmental way of looking is exactly the radical, 'Copernican' shift needed to truly *see* a subject that is becoming increasingly endemic, etched into our landscapes and collective psyches.

XII. Conclusion

In approaching their subjects, both films interrogate the limits of a classical mode. Whether it is the limits of a causal-explanatory logic (*Elephant*) or an anthropomorphic stance (*Dark Night*) both films mark paths forward by turning *away* from the well-worn routes available to them. The films share family resemblances – a fracturing of narrative, opaque characters, a movement away from the classical paradigm. But it is in their differences that we can begin to trace the progression of this disease, as *Elephant*'s focus on the shooters and inexplicability of the 'why' gives way to *Dark Night*'s vision of an America in which these tragedies are not an anomaly, but something endemic to the air we breathe, beaches we visit, the movie theatres we frequent. After more than a decade of unrelenting mass shootings between *Elephant* and *Dark Night*, the curiosity about the shooters found in *Elephant* gives way to an urgent focus on the world in which these killings seem to grow and thrive, an ecosystem out of balance.

Now, perhaps one thinks such films shouldn't be made at all. One may fear that any film will inevitably play into the desire for notoriety that these shooters crave, and in that case, perhaps the best way to combat this phenomenon is to suffocate it of attention and deprive the fire of the oxygen it needs to spread. Others may feel that the act of fictionalising these events is inherently demeaning, that using real people and real death to give weight to a fictional story

is opportunistic. But insofar as these films *will* be made, understanding the ways in which they can articulate themselves will be critical, particularly as the climate around these events continue to change. As E. Ann Kaplan writes, 'telling stories about trauma, even though the story can never actually repeat or represent what happened, may […] permit a kind of empathic "sharing" that moves us forward, if only by inches' (2005: 37). In interrogating new forms, these films explore ways they can engage with ethically and politically charged subjects, contribute to discourse, and perhaps move us forward, 'if only by inches' – and they do so precisely through their aesthetics. Perhaps it is overly optimistic, but one can hope that one day the inches will begin to add up.

LEO KIM

Leo Kim holds a Bachelor's from Yale in Philosophy and a Master of Studies in Film Aesthetics from Oxford. He currently lives in New York City and occasionally writes for the film zine *From The Intercom*.

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[1] See, e.g. Robert Sinnerbrink (2016).

[2] See Cathy Caruth (1996) Chapter 1.

[3] While White was specifically referring to the Holocaust, I think we can draw on his statements productively for the subject at hand.

[4] This is not to say that these approaches have not been taken, and that they have been categorically unsuccessful. The immensely popular 'true crime' genre, for example, largely draws upon a classical narrative mode (Murley 2009: 4).

[5] See, e.g. Jennifer Rich (2012: 1326).

[6] See, e.g. William Little (2013: 116).

[7] This association between the camera and the gun is further manifest in Elias, the photographer who in many ways serves as a photo-negative of the shooters. For more, see Rich (2012: 1320-1322).

[8] Notably, it also positions it apart from a film like Michael Haneke's *71 Fragments* (1995), which uses its fractured form to gesture poetically towards the manifold stories that were senselessly cut short by its shooting, but at no point keeps us in the dark about the event connecting these fragments.

[9] See, e.g. Douglas Greenwood (2017).

[10] In this regard, *Dark Night* resembles the phenomenal-affective mode of the avant-garde. What is interesting about *Dark Night* is that it simultaneously retains just enough structure within each character's narrative in order to communicate the sense that these disparate stories are building to some final destination. In this way, *Dark Night* draws on these filmic modes to craft a layered experience that plays affect and structure off of one another.

AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

Dance, Camera, Dance:

Directorial choreography in the live anthology drama

Martin Scorsese famously described cinema as a matter of what is inside and outside the frame. For those who directed live television in the 1950s, what was outside mattered a lot.

Since the emergence of television studies as a distinct subfield, critics and scholars have made concerted efforts to dissect the medium's formal strategies. With the rise of 'Peak TV', American scholars have particularly centered contemporary programs (Butler 2010; Mittell 2015). Meanwhile, broadcast historians often highlight the live dramatic anthology programs that dominated American airwaves throughout the 1950s, but their focus shifts to its emergence as a writers' medium or even as an actor's showcase (Boddy 1993; Becker 2008; Kraszewski 2011; Schneider, 2015). However, critics and trade papers of the time equally heralded the directors – including Sidney Lumet, Delbert Mann, and Robert Mulligan – as innovators. Hollywood producers later recruited them throughout the 1960s to direct feature films.

What made live dramatic anthology programs a space for visual creativity and ingenuity? John Frankenheimer offered a possible explanation: 'Everything had to be pre-cut, pre-arranged, cut on paper, so that we knew every shot, and how cameras were going to be released. Timing, pacing, actual experience' (1993: 30). Live television directing required more than organising a shot; it required choreography.
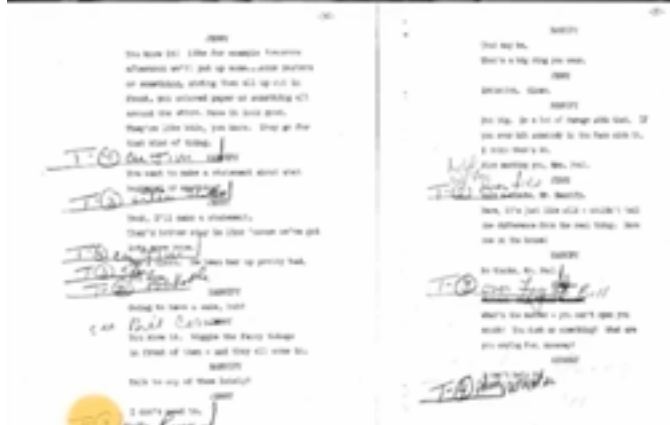
This video essay examines the production methods of 1950s live television and the director's role in shaping visual style. The work reveals the choreographic element of the medium by visualising the arrangement of physical space between sets, actors, and cameras during broadcasts. While critics often describe moving images as seeing through the director's eyes, live television directing required looking beyond the frame.

Many television directors opted to restrain camera movement, but CBS encouraged dramatic anthology programs to create a visually appealing style to lure audiences into appointment viewing (Horowitz 2013). Once Frankenheimer became a regular director on the network's biggest and most prestigious program, *Playhouse 90* (CBS, 1956-60), he developed a shorthand for visual innovation that worked within the limitations of the live broadcast.

Using Adobe Flash Professional and primary source documents located at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Television Research, I demonstrate how these directors balanced three different sights at once: the live broadcast image, an annotated screenplay with marked directorial cues, and a view of the physical stage. Certain stylistic camera movements became prevalent in the medium as a response to these technological limitations. The choices made on screen not only relied on the rules of classical continuity, but also organized for physical movement invisible to the audience. Live television directors

had to think not just about how to convey narrative through *mise-en-scène* but also about how actors *and* cameras all moved in relation to each other. While Hollywood directors had to think about continuity editing when planning their next shot, live television directors planned each edit through movement and proximity within the limitations of who and what was physically present at each moment. This video essay (literally) sketches this production culture and examines the adjustments to classical continuity live television necessitated alongside the new creative opportunities available in this medium.

Watch the audiovisual essay here:
https://vimeo.com/598583550

PETER LABUZA

Peter Labuza is a lecturer at San José State University. He earned his PhD in Cinema and Media Studies from the University of Southern California, and his dissertation, 'When A Handshake Meant Something: Lawyers, Deal Making, and the Emergence of New Hollywood', received the 2021 prize for best dissertation from the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. His research examines the legal and financial history of creative industries, and he has published in *Journal for Cinema and Media Studies*, *Film History*, *Enterprise & Society,* and *The Velvet Light Trap*.

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V.F. PERKINS

Introduction

In 2018 I jointly organised, with James MacDowell, a symposium on the work of film academic, teacher, and critic V.F. Perkins (1936-2016) at the University of Warwick. Details about the symposium which includes the initial proposal can be found here. And a memorial tribute to Perkins which includes a full bibliography can be found here. *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* has invited those who participated in the conference to publish their papers, or versions of them, or fresh work they have developed since. Submissions by those who did not participate in the conference are also very welcome. The contributions will directly analyse Perkins' work on film, explore new applications of it (for example to different media), and use it to discuss aspects relevant to the study of aesthetics, philosophy of art, and criticism. In the conference proposal we wrote, 'Perkins leaves us with a body of work which poses important questions and challenges for the study of film, television, media, and aesthetics today. The aim of this symposium is to grapple with these questions and rise to those challenges by engaging with the nature and implications of Perkins' proposals and approaches.' The aim of this dossier is to continue that engagement and share the products of it more widely. We also hope that the contributions–appropriately housed in the journal he helped found and with which he was subsequently associated–will act to honour him and his work. We start with three pieces and look forward to publishing more over the next two years on a rolling basis.

Andrew Klevan

V.F. PERKINS

The phantom thread of Victor Perkins

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Faced with all the currently accepted wisdoms, the theses that appear self-evident, the affirmations that had hitherto passed as scientific, intuition whispers in the philosopher's ear these words: *it's impossible, it just won't do*. Impossible, even as all the facts and reasons seem to invite us to believe that it's possible and real and certain. Impossible, because a particular experience, possibly confused but decisive, speaks to you in my voice, telling you that it is incompatible with the facts as presented and reasons as given, and that therefore the facts must have been poorly observed, and the reasonings false. […]
Isn't it clear that philosophy's first method, even while its thought is still poorly worked out and there's nothing yet

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

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

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

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

A later, completely unrelated viewing of *The Invisible Man* then reconnects her to the *Kagemusha* intuition. The Invisible Man himself explains that fog or rain – or, indeed, the action of digesting food – render him partly visible. Le Maître flashes
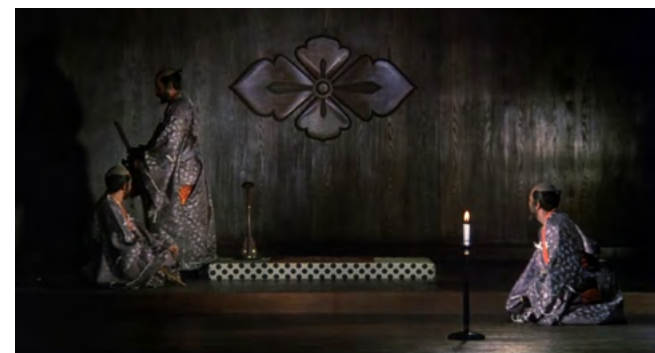
in her mind to the dark hands impressed on the walls of pre-historic caves. '[My] intuition surges once more', she writes, 'but now I can begin to formulate it: Kagemusha and the Invisible Man, whatever their differences, are so many man-ifestations of the same plastic problematic: the *imprint*' (49).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ophüls frames abstract and structural problems: the relation of desire to narrative drive, or death to narrative's termination, and these problems cannot be detached from the movement of the cinema itself, the destiny of the motion-picture machine, in which the narrative function of emotion is to enable the film to blossom into sequences of pure cinematic movement. (Mulvey 2009: 18)

Looking at Ophüls' films from the vantage point of our present makes us realise that they not only foreground the role of technology and exchange in the production of spectacle. They also engage with earlier moments of historic

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

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

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

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

Ambersons – and, let me add, I find Victor's analyses particularly fascinating when he is dealing with the directors who are resolutely high in his canon, but who simultaneously are more evidently formalistic, exhibitionistic or ostentatious in their cinematic styles; here the primary cases would be Welles and Lang. As Victor notes of *The Magnificent Ambersons*: 'We are invited to share in pleasure at the plasticity of image and sound, their openness to interruption, displacement and manipulation' (1999: 38). That statement marks, I suggest, an emphasis that is new in the aesthetic context established by Victor in *Film as Film* in 1972.[2]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

on board from Wilson is an overall understanding of what Lang's film is about and how it works: it questions our comprehension and evaluation of appearances, and of the various stories that are told about those appearances (very Langian concerns). From this point of departure, Victor embarks on an analysis in order to uncover what he calls the 'purpose in its meticulous design' (460).
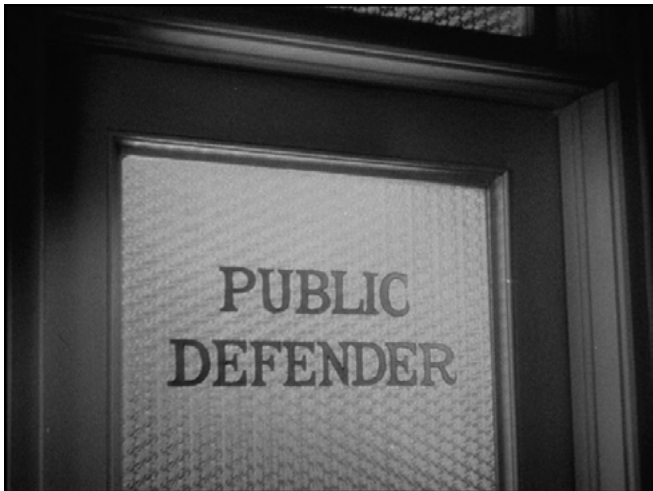
Victor walks us through the first three 'establishing' shots of the film's opening sequence. He notes two intriguing things about them. First, they offer a clear case of Lang the master narrator (the enunciator, as another critical tradition would say) overtly organising this introduction into a place and a scene – rather than hanging this introduction on a typically 'natural' device like a mailman entering the building and the camera following him in. Second – and here again is something *only* Victor could have noticed with his analytic intuition – all three shots '[display] a symmetrical structure [i.e., a public entrance, an inner office door, and a desktop] whose lines could easily be matched to the screen's rectangular format' (468). But this is exactly what Lang chooses *not* to do: instead, he angles and tilts the frames, forming an unusual pattern across the shots. Victor sums this up: 'The symmetry of the objects is marked in an image that displays them asymmetrically' (468). Why? He discerns in this progression of still-life images 'a visual metaphor of tilted scales' – alluding to the scales of justice – that is imbued with a certain irony that is already questioning the process of justice (a major preoccupation of Lang's film).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adrian Martin

Adrian Martin is a film critic and audiovisual essayist based in Spain, and Adjunct Professor of Film and Screen Studies, Monash University (Australia). He is the author of nine books including *Filmmakers Thinking* (EQZE, 2022), *Mysteries of Cinema* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018 & University of Western Australia Publishing, 2020) and *Mise en scène and Film Style* (Palgrave, 2014). An online archive covering over 40 years of his work is at http://www.filmcritic.com.au.

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

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

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

V.F. PERKINS

The World of Film and World Particles in the Criticism of Victor Perkins

In a 1962 piece on Howard Hawks' comedies, first published in *Movie*, Victor Perkins began by raising an objection to Howard Hawks' own reservation about the world of *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). Hawks had lamented, in an interview with Peter Bogdanovich: 'If only the gardener had been normal.' Perkins countered that the complete absence of normality in the film was one of the most important determining factors in its greatness. It would have been a 'cardinal error', Perkins insisted, to introduce a recognisably real figure who would stand apart from the pervasive irrationality of the narrative proceedings ([1962] 1996: 68). He goes on to claim that not only *Bringing Up Baby* but most of Hawks' best comedies, 'depend upon the reversal of all our preconceptions about character and behavior' (68). In the world of *Bringing Up Baby*, 'a postman's reaction to the announcement that you are about to be married is not "Congratulations!" but a somber "Don't let it throw you, buster!"' (68). Perkins' initial reference to Barry Fitzgerald's drunk, befuddled gardener, Mr. Gogarty, leads him by the end of his opening paragraph to one of his inspired, swift linkages: of the minor character, the gardener, with the far more minor figure of the postman, who peeks into the film for only a few moments. Perkins would have us share his intuition that it is the world of *Bringing Up Baby* itself

that calls these kindred antic creatures into being. They both belong in this world, by dint of balmy eccentricity, whereas the normative house servant Hawks envisions emphatically does not.

Throughout his distinguished career as a teacher and film scholar, Perkins emphasised the crucial significance for film narrative of the concept of the created world. In his extraordinary essay 'Where is the World? The horizon of events in movie fiction', Perkins takes issue with the suggestion that the fictional world was no more than a 'loose metaphor' (2005: 16). He acknowledged that this view might be widely and uncontroversially endorsed, for it has the dubious ring of common sense to recommend it. But he decisively rejects the lazy imputation of looseness to the concept of the fictional world. He characterises this position as 'nearly [how I cherish this qualifier] the opposite of the truth' (16). Then he sets out to demonstrate anew not only that the fictional world deserves worldhood status, but the ways in which this matters to our experience of film. After a brilliant reconsideration of the ending of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), which offers us, in terms which are intricate and difficult to parse, a double sense of *Citizen Kane*'s own reality and its relation to the world we inhabit outside it, separate from it but entangled in Welles' process of illumination, Perkins raises the question of why the fictional world issue has been neglected by so many engaged in film studies. He proposes a brief explanation of why fictionality rather than worldhood is the privileged frame of reference. He believes that the avoidance of 'world' may derive from film theorists' predictable 'recoil from all that smells of realism' (22). This assumption may have some bearing on one's assessment of *Citizen Kane* and Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937) (which Perkins also analyzes in his essay). The worlds of both of these films are in constant experiential communication with things we know and recognise in the larger world. But in the case of *Bringing Up Baby*, our first Perkins example, it is not the 'smell of realism' that makes one wary of giving *world* its due in the reading of Hawks' comedy. Perkins' most impressive case for the indispensability of the film world concept is to be found in his handling of moments or bits, which I choose to term world particles. What Perkins has shown me, again and again, in his work – and for me it has

been his most efficacious, endlessly renewed gift – is that the essence of the world can be extracted from judiciously chosen, intensely felt particles.

It was vital for Perkins that a film narrative not be reducible to a set of events, to cause and effect logic, or the image patterns we can mechanically trace through secure categories (e.g., those of genre convention). He saw the threat of mechanisation everywhere in the ways viewers respond to movie experience, and he regarded this grinding down of perception and imagination – in the reception of art as well as in human affairs – with abhorrence. Perkins writes in 'Where is the World?':

An event becomes a cause only in its relation to webs of circumstance, together with, say, desires and fears. Why a cause should be understood as a cause, and why an effect should count as an effect, are matters that can be assessed only within a world. It is, after all, a very particularly constituted world [Perkins is referring to *Citizen Kane*] in which one man's death can be the reason for squads of people to set off in an effort to identify the personal meaning of a familiar word. (22)

My primary objective in this essay is to examine and celebrate Perkins' thrilling intuitions about certain world 'particles' which he taught me how to see – easily overlooked, seemingly inconsequential peripheral details of sound and image in which Perkins discerns the *sense* of the film world. Readers of *Film as Film* will have little difficulty recalling instances: Marnie twice turning her face to walls during crisis; Emma's black-veiled funeral hat in *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954) carried off in the wind and trampled by the hooves of a vengeance-mad posse; Kay's loss of her belongings in the rapids in *River of No Return* (Otto Preminger, 1954). Perkins is not only concerned with the revelatory force of the particle in its narrative context, but also how the cosmology of the work as a whole is inscribed in it. Before taking up some memorable examples of Perkins' particle discoveries and his demonstration of their adhesive power (in binding emotionally and imaginatively related particles to them so as to form a governing world idea), I will spend some time considering Dorothy Van Ghent's pioneering study of the fictional world, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953). Van Ghent is as

concerned with the world's connection to form in literature (and implicitly with the search for form in the self) as Perkins is in film. Although her book builds on the criticism of Mark Schorer, R.P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, and I.A. Richards, her own way of articulating the meaning and value of the created world is as impassioned, moving, and persuasive as any that I have encountered. I am reasonably sure that Perkins was familiar with Van Ghent's study, and was indebted to both her elegant formulations and the trenchantly moral cast of her thought. In quoting her, for the purposes of this comparison, I will substitute the words film and viewer for novel and reader, where the exchange does not do violence to the capacities of either medium.

Film, like the novel,

is able to express the most profound ideas, but because of the nature of this medium, these will lie implicitly in the conjunction of the events that are bodied forth. The ideas in a [film] are largely for the [viewer's] inference, his inference of the principles by which the happenings in the [film] are related to each other.

A [film] itself is one complex pattern, or Gestalt, made up of component ones. In it inhere such a vast number of traits, all organized in subordinate systems that function under the governance of a single meaningful structure, that the nearest similitude for a [narrative film] is a 'world.' This is a useful similitude because it reflects the rich multiplicity of the [film's] elements and, at the same time, the unity of the [film] as a self-defining body [...].

A good [film], like a sound world, has to hang together. It has to have integral structure. Part of our evaluative judgment is based on its ability to hang together *for us*. And like a world, a [film] has individual character; it has, peculiar to itself, its own tensions, physiognomy, and atmosphere. Part of our judgment is based on the concreteness, distinctness, and richness of that character. (17)

In the next few sentences of this passage from her introduction, Van Ghent brings us closest to what chiefly matters for Perkins in his demand that the worldhood of a film be acknowledged, and assigned a value as experience.

Finally, we judge a [film] also by the cogency and illuminative quality of the view of life it affords, the idea embodied

in its cosmology. Our only adequate preparation for judging a [film] evaluatively is through the analytical testing of its unity, of its characterizing qualities, and of its meaningfulness – its ability to make us more aware of the meaning of our lives. All these tests test the value of the film [I would add the phrase 'as experience' here, since that is her implication] only *for us*, and value for us is all the value that matters. (17-18)

Van Ghent somewhat surprisingly combines the necessity for moral and aesthetic testing with a seemingly relaxed surrender of the need for objective criteria, or the 'amplitude' that comes from readerly consensus. Daniel R. Schwarz, in a 'reconsideration of Van Ghent's humanist poetics', points out that for her the process of reading emphasises the common ground shared by the author and skilled reader. 'Her book [employing a Gestalt model which perceives experience as a dynamic process] shows us how humans makes sense of their world and that novels are about testing, discarding, recreating perceptions – a process central to reading and writing novels, [to viewing and directing films], and also to living.' (96)

Two final quotes from Van Ghent's readings of particular texts will help us to see more clearly what she and Perkins mean by their insistent concern with the 'idea embodied in its cosmology'. Speaking about Thomas Hardy's weakness for abstractions and his habit of interrupting the narrative of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1892) in order to propound general, abstract truths, she offers an alternative mode of 'philosophical vision' that comes from adhering to 'the body of particularized life', the 'living form' (240). 'What philosophical vision honestly inheres in a novel', Van Ghent declares, and again I will substitute the word 'film' – 'inheres as the form of a certain concrete body of experience; it is what the experience "means" because it is what, structurally, the experience is.' (240) My second quote, from her great reading of Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), provides an exemplary illustration of the sort of ethical thinking I associate with Perkins, as she considers the dangers of failing to integrate aesthetic and moral modes of responsiveness:

Moral and aesthetic experience have then in common their foundation in feeling and their distinction from the useful. The identity that James explores is their identity in the most capacious and most integrated – the most 'civilized'

– consciousness, whose sense relationships (aesthetic relationships) with the external world of scenes and objects have the same quality and the same spiritual determinants as its relationships with people (moral relationships). But his exploration of that ideal identity involves cognizance of failed integration, cognizance of the many varieties of one-sidedness or one-eyedness or blindness that go by the name of the moral or the aesthetic, and of the destructive potentialities of the human consciousness when it is one-sided either way. His ironies revolve on the ideal concept of a spacious integrity of feeling: feeling, ideally, is *one* – and there is ironic situation when feeling is split into the 'moral' and the 'aesthetic,' each denying the other and each posing as *all*. (265)

The integration of aesthetic and moral perception in Henry James provides a fitting transition to Perkins' own characteristic approach to world particles in film. Perkins possessed what amounts to a genius level of intuition for the most telling, revelatory bits in a narrative – those that usher us with startling swiftness into a film world's most enticing paradoxes. The particles that Perkins identifies do not remain small or confined under his ardently inquisitive gaze. Something unstressed, out of the way, teasingly ephemeral, easily bypassed or forgotten because it lacks strong story focus becomes – when singled out by Perkins for extended treatment – an essential key to the movie's most beautiful aim, the idea embodied in the cosmology.

It is worth recalling that when *Film as Film* was written, the analysis of movies was far less dependent on stop-frame inspection, which current technology has made generally available. The close engagement with passing details was far more reliant on memory than on scrupulously accurate, comprehensive notation. The ready access of all the visual and sound particulars of a scene has many obvious interpretive advantages, but at least one infrequently mentioned limitation. Our careful reconstructive labor arguably tends to equalise the weight and force of moments in the narrative flow. Everything achieves hyperclarity and additional import in the process of being slowed down or frozen. We can lose sight of how the peripheral sights and sounds in an actual screening compete with story values and performer expressiveness for

an alert, but still catch-as-catch-can viewer. How do appearances rise up and make a claim on us when we are not yet sure where to direct our gaze, or to what end? The world particles that Perkins' delicately discriminating eye fastens on are the result of an unusually full immersion in the internal experiential dynamics of narrative.

The first particle from Perkins' trove that I'd like to reconsider is Barbara Bel Geddes' idle handling of the fly-swatter in the opening scene of Max Ophuls' *Caught* (1949). Perkins discusses this action on two occasions – in 'Must We Say What They Mean?' (1990) and 'Moments of Choice' (1981). I will quote from the shorter assessment in 'Moments of Choice' to supply a preliminary account of the terrain Perkins brackets for investigation.

In the opening scene of *Caught*, the car-hop heroine is apparently sharing a harmless dream with her flat-mate when she fantasizes a chance meeting with a handsome young millionaire. But what is calculating and predatory in this innocence is conveyed by her punctuating her words by making idle passes with a fly-swat while lying open-legged on the bed. What is blind in her calculation, too, emerges from her complete inattention to her own gestures and their evident meanings. (1981: 1144)

In Perkins' later, lengthier commentary, he draws attention to the fact that the bed on which Bel Geddes' Maud (not yet re-christened Leonora) is propped, leaning against the wall, has been the space used previously in the scene for Harper's Vogue daydreaming by both Maud and her cold

water flat roommate, Maxine. Maud's fly-swat speech occurs in an extended take – at close range – from which Maxine is excluded. Her nearby presence as listener is indicated by brief, harsh interjections and what Perkins deftly describes as the 'grubbily material sound of clattering plates and sloshing water from her dish-washing' (1990: 6). The sound of the fly-swat, for the length of its presence in the action, is more pronounced than the off-screen sound of the dish-washing, as Maud randomly taps and thwacks her trouser leg. Maxine currently works as a model in a fashion store. We learn that Maud wishes to ascend from her job as car-hop to Maxine's status, and possibly, after a planned stint in the Dorothy Dale School for Charm, to move beyond it by attaining a wealthy husband. Perkins also notes how Maud's working girl look is reinforced by her just concluded act of washing her aching feet in a large basin. Before distractedly picking up the fly-swatter, Maud has toweled off her feet and she sits now on the rumpled bed sheet, in close proximity to the fashion magazines which she and Maxine were vicariously leafing through as the film commenced.

I include this array of supplementary details to demonstrate how Perkins' decision to concentrate on the fly-swat was by no means an obvious, much less inevitable choice. It is entirely conceivable, even likely, that a viewer would register the key elements of this introductory episode without singling out or taking memory-hold of the fly-swatter. It is not given symbolic highlighting, nor is it mentioned by either character in the scene. Most viewers would probably give far greater emphasis to the fashion magazine that is prominently displayed in the credit sequence, its pages turned there by a visible hand. One might also be struck by the Dorothy Dale Charm School brochure that Maud inspects and comments on (it will have a bearing on her future in the narrative, and identifies her immediate goal). Or one might pay attention to Maud's somewhat protracted foot washing ritual, or the joint effort of the two roommates in a cramped, humid apartment to figure out a cost-cutting budget for Maud to attend Dorothy Dale's. What will she need to give up to make this plan possible? Finally, one might pick up on Maud's declared wish for an 'ordinary mink coat' as opposed to Maxine's desire for the more exotic chinchilla. Coats of various kinds become an important image pattern in Maud's (soon to be Leonora)

development. The fly-swatter is not an artfully hidden element in the dramatic proceedings, but neither is it conspicuous. The camera does move in to study Maud in sustained close range during the fly-swatter action, but her verbalised fantasy of meeting an eligible man of means at a perfume counter seems to take precedence over the lax, unthinking gestures accompanying it. We might grant the fly swatter some incidental gestural clarity, given its extended use, but not, in Perkins' judicious phrase, 'excessive clarity'.

Perkins does not show how the fly-swatter's extended moment in *Caught* creates a magnetic field for other world particles from *Caught*, or how Max Ophuls builds upon what it so nonchalantly and uninsistently conveys. I shall trace out some of the lines of implication that this image and its style of presentation generate. The fly-swatter action takes us backward in the scene to Maud and Maxine's first gestures in the film, as they hurriedly flip through the pages of their fashion magazine, and in friendly competition point at advertisements of luxury goods (jewelry, dresses, coats) that they aspire to own some day. They differentiate themselves as fantasy consumers by making separate choices. One can detect a resemblance between Maud's tapping fly-swatter and the young women's hovering hands and darting-in-to-claim finger pointing, which proceed without time for either contemplation or thought. The hands give the impression of having pre-formed inclinations. They instantly know and pounce upon the things that an efficient, pervasive marketing system has taught them to want. They playfully daydream of bypassing some of the constraints of their current hard-up circumstances, and making an ascent to a realm where happy belonging is marked by posed, self-indulgent display.

As Perkins attends to the bored and aimless behavior of working girls, he finds an inducement to use what he knows about fly-swatting to show him something complicated about romantic projection. What freshly occurs to him is divulged by his phrase about the potential of something both 'calculating and predatory' in Maud's innocent handling of the fly-swatter. Perkins does not endeavor here to make Maud's seeming innocence into a mask for a more sinister temperament or set of motives. Rather he posits the view that innocence can co-exist with calculation and predatory instincts and do so

easily and unremarkably, without placing innocence under strain. Innocence in this context is not synonymous with either naivete or purity. It has to do with what is unformed, pliable, generously (perhaps too generously) receptive in one's nature. Maud has not reached the stage in life where she has made up her mind about the world, with its many faces, openings, pressures, blockages, and more importantly, Maud hasn't made up her heart about the world. Maud can speak about her dreams leading to certain results without recognising these dreams as stale, recycled, cultural hand-me-downs. She still finds ways to play inside them without having quite figured out a direction for her sense of herself which will make her personally accountable. Whatever blunders she has made thus far in in her progression to self-definition do not seem to

be of great consequence, or irreversible. They are not the sort of missteps that come back to haunt her.

So, an innocent Maud picks up, without noticing that she is doing it, a domestic implement associated with pest removal (who could possibly question anyone's need or right to swat flies?) and filth. The fly-swatter is designed for efficacious, guilt-free acts of aggression, miniature killings. One swats to clean one's surroundings, but children need to be told not to touch the dirty surface of the swatter. It is filled with germs, left by the fly victims. Beginning with its title, *Caught* seems to have as its primary focus, and governing idea, female victimisation and passivity. If there is a metaphoric wielder of the 'swatter' writ large in the narrative, it is Smith Ohlrig (Robert Ryan), the millionaire whom Maud / Leonora 'lands' with

fairy tale rapidity. When we switch the control of the swatter to Leonora's mate, it cruelly exemplifies Ohlrig's, understanding of how relationships work exclusively in terms of power. He crushes the will and searching life of his partner with the 'single stroke' of their joining, and entombs her in the 'filth' of his lucre. Leonora's absorption into his vast, suffocating power sphere does indeed reduce her power to think or move independently, but it does not, in any obvious respect, reduce the viewer's preliminary impression of her as an innocent – now, a wronged innocent. Her identity is threatened with erasure by a paranoid psychotic who opposes all of her attempts at reciprocity, self-assertion, and inner development. Leonora's own, by contrast, modest 'calculating, predatory' proclivities are scarcely visible in her marriage, given the monstrous, untrammeled exhibition of these attributes in her husband. Nonetheless, Leonora's arrival at her marital destination has been achieved by the figure that Perkins anatomised in the swatter scene: an agent who advances her interests without watching or – more in keeping with Ophuls' title – 'catching' herself.

Her Dorothy Dale preparation for her modeling work – artful poses with the repeated refrain '$49.95 plus tax' demonstrates apparent passivity in action, but with calculated results. As Perkins points out, charm school as well as her modeling work have educated her about self-presentation and its advantages. Her persisting innocence depends on her not being driven to question the superficiality of the education she has settled for. Her insulating ignorance has not yet brought her an unmanageable increase of pain. As Leonora coyly tells Ohlrig as he tests her 'submissiveness' on their first meeting by driving the two of them recklessly in his expensive car: 'I know that you've never been married before.' This sort of knowledge still counts more in her estimation than an open-eyed, skeptical assessment of the disturbing behavior he proudly manifests. Ophuls returns here to the co-existence of innocence and predation in Leonora within *Caught*'s world. Smith Ohlrig's predation is overwhelmingly evident in his manner of taking. Leonora is by comparison a small stakes taker. She pardonably thinks in her distractedness that she is essentially a giver, one whose capacities for giving in the 'normal', wifely way are not sanctioned. In fact, they are ruthlessly rejected. She does not feel recognised or valued for what she assumes she is 'in herself'.

When Leonora eventually flees from Ohlrig's mansion prison in an agony of frustration, she takes her mink coat with her, one of the objects she spoke of to Maxine with the greatest tenderness in her opening scene daydream. At that stage of fanciful, innocent wishing aloud, she sketched an altruistic picture with two 'ordinary' mink coats – one for herself, the other a gift for her mother. Both would be shown to others in the small town she grew up in, as the outward proof that she had arrived, successfully, that she mattered. 'Showing' soon becomes modeling in a store as self-creation, a viable image of achieved selfhood, if only the coat were hers. When Leonora takes the coat from Ohlrig's 'preserve', the question the narrative raises is not whether she is entitled to it – call it meager compensation for enslavement under his roof – but whether the person she now aspires to become is not blindly, yet still innocently, attached to the coat's image.

The romantic and moral counterweight to Ohlrig is Dr. Quinada (James Mason), an overworked, underpaid, idealistic pediatrician for a working class clientele. In her relatively brief period of employment as a receptionist in the office he shares with Dr. Hoffman (Frank Ferguson), a gynecologist, Leonora demonstrates exceptional competence and work aptitude. But Quinada, who is powerfully attracted to her, expresses concern about her preoccupation, a quality of

disengagement resembling 'not thereness', which he notices in her way of pursuing both her work and her private life. He is not simply intuiting the secrets she is keeping from him about her failed marriage with Ohlrig. And though insecurity and jealous uncertainty may cloud his judgment, one feels that he is responding accurately to a lack of attunement in her: attunement to who she is and where she is. Once more we are redirected to that crucial world particle Perkins singled out for contemplation. Maud / Leonora absent-mindedly performs a set of mild and forceful taps with a fly-swat-ter while she improvises an innocent fantasy about setting the stage for a male admirer's discovery of her. She reveals qualities of calculation and predation as she proceeds with

her speech, which ends with her reward, a 'caught' man of wealth responding to her perfectly timed feat of self-display. He recognises the exchange value of what she has artfully pre-pared for his gaze, and thereby resolves – through the act of choosing her – the problem of being. In her persisting inno-cence (an exemption from self-awareness), Maud / Leonora can distance herself from the dirt of the swatter, and the parts of herself that mirror the aggressor's own taking and calculation.

Ironically, Dr. Quinada is attracted to the very aura of innocence in her that he seeks to eradicate. He tries to distin-guish between the innocence of her Cinderella yearning for transformation and the disabling quality of her 'unformed'

nature – unformed in a manner that prevents her whole-hearted commitment to the work world he occupies. She is too lightly present, like a dream visitor. He is entranced by Leonora's simplicity, yet simultaneously regards it as an illness that that she suffers from, and that he can cure. The cure would somehow preserve her softness, and her sleepwalker's freedom from taint. Late in the film, Leonora is persuaded by Ohlrig to come back to her, and she disappears without explaining to Quinada or his partner the 'hows' and 'whys' of her vanishing. In the scene where Quinada and Dr. Hoffman respond to the fact of her absence, Ophuls creates an extraor-dinary moving camera shot where we pass back and forth over Leonora's unoccupied receptionist's desk as the two doc-tors are standing in their office doorways on either side of it. As the scene proceeds, with shots that alternate between isolation and linkage, they obliquely reflect on the curious circumstances of her having gone 'missing' and Quinada is finally advised by his colleague to do what he can to forget about her. Leonora is not, of course, physically present, but the prominence of her desk in the scene, and the camera's ghostly, oscillating passage above it strongly evokes her. It is almost as though she is eavesdropping on their conversa-tion. The way the scene is dramatised reminds us of Leonora's noncommittal way of floating from place to place, person to person. Present or absent, she is sheathed in unawareness, a beguiling remoteness. The camera recapitulates, on a grander scale, Leonora's unthinking way of handling the fly-swatter in the first scene, with its shifting motion and power to 'expose' her, glancingly. The doctors (one of whom knows that she is pregnant) get nowhere in their attempt to pin Leonora's motives down, to assign her actions to the realm of accident, guilt or innocence. Perkins' world particle manages to 'catch' the idea that the whole film struggles to elucidate: Leonora's various attempts to find herself through hiding.

An even less highlighted sprinkling of world particles from Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950) is briefly iden-tified and illuminated in another quietly dazzling paragraph from Perkins' 'Moments of Choice'. When I first encountered this passage, I was under the impression that I had a firm, comprehensive grasp of the visual design of Ray's film. And yet I had somehow overlooked Ray's concise, reverberating introduction through gesture (in body language) of the cen-tral fixation in the film's world: 'the uncertainty of emotion'

(1981: 1144). Perkins elaborates on this phrase, with arresting precision – 'a story of passion dogged by mistrust in which only the strength of feeling (not its nature) remains constant' (1144). In order to accentuate, subtly, the ubiquitous ambiguity of gesture, Ray assigns in the opening minutes of the film 'the same gesture to three different characters' (1144) within a relatively compact scene. Perkins points out that this repeated gesture occurs within a scene that also

establishes the film's Hollywood setting: each of [three male characters involved in the movie industry] approaches another character from behind and grasps his shoulders with both hands. The first time, it is a perfunctory and patronizing greeting whose pretense of warmth is a bare cover for the assertion of superiority. Then, between the hero and an old friend, it conveys intimacy and genuine regard. Finally, when a large-mouthed producer uses the shoulders

of the hero himself as a rostrum from which to publicize his latest triumph, it is seen as oppressive and openly slighting. (1981: 1144)

Perkins encourages us in this segment to envision the world of Ray's film entirely through the lens of gesture, and the manifold potential for suspicion, affront, permissible excess, overt and latent threat, seductiveness, and romantic doubt that gesture contains.

I immediately recall Dixon Steele (Humphrey Bogart) straightening the grapefruit knife, with comic bewilderment, as a lead into an exchange with his beloved, Laurel Grey (Gloria Grahame) that balances on the knife edge between ardent trust (on his part) and mounting tension (on hers). Or Brub (Frank Lovejoy) hugging Sylvia Nicolai (Jeff Donnell) too tightly as he performs a possible murder scenario directed by Dixon; or the insinuating, pressure-filled revelations of the masseuse, Martha (Ruth Gillette) as she administers a massage to Laurel; or Laurel turning in her chair to size up Dixon, who sits behind her, as she learns that he is a murder suspect; or Mildred Atkinson (Martha Stewart) shifting between confidence and puzzled consternation as she tries to interpret Dixon's gestures after accepting his invitation to come to his apartment; or Dixon's 'accidental' striking of his best friend and agent, Mel (Art Smith) during a violent outburst at a restaurant celebration; or Dixon's 'making amends' actions

shortly afterward in the privacy of the restaurant men's room; or something coiled, needy, and imperious in Dix's gestural repertoire with Laurel, not only in their embraces but in their casual interactions. What is finally laid bare in both Dixon and Laurel during the final, terrifying shipwreck of their relationship, and what – beyond the reach of visibly incriminating gesture – remains hidden?

It is worth noting that in the opening triad of shoulder squeezing gestures that Perkins analyzes, Dixon, the screenwriter protagonist (not yet disqualified for hero status) is the figure who performs the gesture in a manner that is spontaneous, open, and affectionate, with no sly twist or element of reserve. Dixon's action is placed in the middle of the progression, and he serves as the balancing corrective to two false extremes. Dixon's eventual undoing comes about when his initially appealing directness and aversion to dissembling combine with his lack of restraint and paranoia (the latter due to psychic damage inflicted by war). His outbursts turn troubling and finally insupportable as openness becomes mired in compulsion, and his audacity spins out of control. Too much of Dixon Steele is released and exposed both in the ongoing police investigation and in his efforts to solidify his romantic relationship. After failing many tests, he sacrifices all claims to the balance that seemed not only a genuine but a hard-won personal attribute in our early acquaintance with him. It is

as though Dixon has the entire screen history of Humphrey Bogart to draw upon for the validation and replenishment of this balance. But it is not enough to save him. As we track the 'uncertainty of emotion' through its moment to moment, multitudinous gestural configurations in *In a Lonely Place*, we acquire an ever stronger, morally penetrating awareness of an 'impalpable organizing form' which presides over the appearance of every behavioral cue in gesture's broad regime. The power of gesture to yield truth and to frustratingly obscure it is the shaping force of Ray's film world.

The last of Perkins' film particles I will examine, and at greater length, is taken from *Film as Film* (1972). Although this book abounds in stirring, resplendent examples, the segment of his chapter 'The World and its Image' that exerted the most decisive influence on me is Perkins' descriptive commentary on the kitchen scene form Vincente Minnelli's *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1963). This analysis is paired in my mind with Stanley Cavell's paragraphs on the issue of 'Who is following whom?' in his essay on *Bringing Up Baby*, which first appeared in a 1976 issue of *The Georgia Review,* and later became a chapter in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981). *Bringing Up Baby* opened this discussion, and is proving difficult to leave behind. Cavell showed how the recurrent uncertainty about 'following' in Hawks' narrative could be simultaneously approached as a

children's game and a means of unfussily elucidating the comedy of equality. One needs to take the children's game as much to heart and mind, as an adventurous realm for thought in its own right, as one does the gender questions that shadow the play, if one is to arrive anywhere of interest with either. Cavell cites the hilarious moment during Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn's hunt for the leopard Baby in the 'night woods of Connecticut, he carrying a rope and croquet mallet, Hepburn with a butterfly net', when he turns around to 'discover her on all fours behind him' (1981: 135). Cavell persuaded me, in what seemed a thunderous burst of experiential edification, that one can and should hold on to all the absurd particulars of Grant's predicament and perplexity, to make a fitting approach to the seemingly larger issue of how men and women, beyond the scope of this farce, take each other's measure. We must continue to dwell on Hepburn 'on all fours' insisting that she is not playing (when she appears crouched down to avoid the branches swinging in her face that Grant, as so often, unthinkingly releases). And if we do behold her in this luminous light of nonsense, we are in the proper position to add Cavell's follow-up explication to the picture. Old and New Comedy are suddenly indistinguishable. *Bringing Up Baby* seriously and frivolously 'poses a structure in which we are permanently in doubt who the hero is, that is, whether it is the male or the female, which of them is in quest, who

is following whom' (135). If in our haste to get to the point of unsettled gender dynamics one loses sight of the trickily madcap experiential situation, with the children's game magically embedded in it, we lose touch with what makes Cavell's so-called higher claims worth pursuing.

Perkins' reading of the kitchen scene in *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* brought about an exhilarating shock of discovery for me comparable to that produced by the Cavell invocation of children's games. I recall encountering the two analyses at roughly the same time, in the summer of 1976. This fortuitous coupling somehow altered, overnight, my way of thinking and writing about film. I had a dim memory of seeing *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* in 1963, the year of its release. I did not associate the film with Vincente Minnelli. The film was linked in my mind with *The Andy Griffith Show*, because of Ronnie Howard's central contribution to both. I had an additional category available for 'placing' the film – early 60s sentimental fluff, overlaid with winking bachelor sex comedy. The film could confidently be described as formulaic MGM product, very much of its historical moment, in which the aims of family comedy and those of smirking prurience uneasily mingled. Possibly the extreme impact of Perkins' treatment of the scene owed something to the fact that he offered no preliminary, knowing disclaimer. The film was not approached as one different in kind and potential achievement from the movies grouped around it in the chapter, including work by Hitchcock, Preminger, and Ray. One was apparently not obliged to enter the scene experience being evaluated through a field of defensive concessions. Also pertinent to my response is the fact that Perkins' detailed reconstruction of the elements in the narrative segment caused me to remember my long ago single viewing of it, and to recollect at the same time that I had been moved by the scene, possibly to the point of tears. I was suddenly mortified by the realisation that the depth of my involvement with the father-son exchange had not prevented me from blithely dismissing the film as a whole once I had finished watching it. I had needed a ready-made, simple genre category to handle the problem of aesthetic judgment, and I found it effortlessly, automatically. How could the quality of Minnelli's observation and staging at particular points throw the whole question of what this film understood and contained into doubt?

Perkins' paragraphs on Minnelli revealed to me that what the director dramatised in the kitchen setting achieved its force by being part of a distinctive fictional world that genre conventions could not adequately account for. However many domestic scenes set in kitchens I may have watched in both television series and movies, they could not predict or restrictively determine what Minnelli's kitchen scene might express. Any more than the experiences I might have in actual kitchens would be dictated by my prior sense of what is emotionally likely there. In *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* Minnelli's sensitive deployment of familiar activities and objects within a kitchen on a singular occasion made his scene not only personal, but transcendently delicate and piercing. What came through to me with such vividness that it caused a wrenching psychic shift in my viewing practice is that this modest comedy drama (at least in such fragments as those Perkins commemorated) yielded values and quivering intimations equal in potential communicative power to the best work done in this medium. The limits of revelation could not be known and evaluated in advance, according to movie type or the aspirations that presumably go with type. It is not the case that Minnelli's scene arrests, perhaps invades us, only in the light of prior knowing. In addition to being awakened, unaccountably, by things we see in a comedy drama that nearly every spectator would describe as 'predictable', we might also be internally scrambled and to some small degree expanded, even remade, by what we allow in.

Let us begin our re-visiting of the Minnelli scene and the world that encompasses it by noting, with Perkins, that the kitchen once occupied by a recently deceased mother gives the environment a 'nuance' for the father-son exchange that distinguishes it from similar conversations set in school, street, or living room. Perkins insists, as he does so often in his writing, that we fully absorb, rather than take for granted, the associative resonance of décor. Eddie (Ronnie Howard) and his father, Tom (Glenn Ford) are preparing lunch together on Eddie's first day back at school after his mother's death. The scene has an outwardly calm, relaxed, and matter-of-fact tone for most of its length which conveys, misleadingly, the progress of parent and child in adjusting to the circumstances of bereavement. It might be argued that that the scene does not appear to gauge adequately the difficulties that both

of them are contending with as we drop in on them in the midst of performing routine tasks. One expects to see, on the part of Tom or Eddie, some pronounced hesitancy, discomfort, or withdrawal. Instead the two seem to be competently engaged in their respective activities. Tom is preparing soup from a can, perhaps without practiced ease and manifesting a barely discernible haziness. Eddie wipes and sets the table and then climbs up on a kitchen stool, where he continues to stand as he opens a cupboard to remove two bowls (for the soup), then a cup and saucer. Perkins identifies the unstressed counterpoint between the 'ordinary household routine' of lunch making and a quick shared meal, on the one hand, and on the other, 'the empty strangeness of their situation' (1972: 76).

Perkins aptly observes that Eddie is taking over activities that his mother would likely have performed in the recent past. No mention is made of this in the dialogue, nor is there any underscoring in the first beats of the scene of troubling memory interfering with Eddie's handling of his assigned duties. Part of Tom's apparent comfort in how the father-son chat is going derives from their mutual concentration on actions that don't necessitate eye contact or a clear assessment of Eddie's present emotional state. Tom believes that his

questions to Eddie about his school day, following a slightly awkward explanation of the soon to arrive new housekeeper, are a satisfactory acknowledgement of Eddie's possible fears, and an invitation to address his feelings openly. And here is where Glenn Ford's placid, collected manner is exposed as a tactical evasion of Eddie's grief, as well as his own. Tom imagines that by feigning self-mastery and relaxation (as though things are already 'back to normal' for him and he can resume the pleasures of old familiar patterns without a hitch) Eddie can watch his father 'being strong' and emulate his composure. His son should be able to recover his buoyancy and spark without having to spend much time in grown-up disorientation and darkness.

The stool that Eddie climbs and stands upon allows him to surpass his father's height. One of the film's central ideas – again, not directly referenced in the dialogue – is that the child has inadvertently become the 'father' to the man. Eddie is better at living through, staying in touch with and vocalising his pain and sense of loss than Tom is, who (like so many film fathers and real fathers of the period, puts all his chips on denial). Tom mistakenly believes that he is modeling stoic resolve for Eddie, and deflecting excessive exhibition of inner turmoil, because his son must be spared the sight of further suffering. In fact, Eddie is picking up on his father's unconscious need that the boy return to his former chipper resilience quickly so that Tom can rely on *his* poise, steadiness, and childhood knack for surmounting woe. A child has more resources for present tense, spontaneous being than loss-hardened adults do, and can outwit the past's ghastly desire to cling. The film encourages us to place our faith in this myth of the resilient child, but at the same time to pursue our doubts about it. When Minnelli shows us Eddie perched on the kitchen stool, he does not look strong, even though he

is displaying a matter-of-fact shrewdness in his calm talk of his teacher at school's ploys for comforting him. The stool is visibly sturdy. Minnelli does not angle the camera in such a way as to evoke danger or apprehension about the possibility of a fall. But the manner in which Eddie stands alone on his mother's stool does infuse the entire kitchen atmosphere with a feeling of precarious fragility. And fragility, Perkins rightly contends, is what the scene and the world of the film are most interestingly (and recurringly) about.

I am reminded of Scottie Ferguson's cheerful, confident climbing of the stool in Midge's apartment early in *Vertigo*, and the terror awaiting him as he reaches the top. There can be an abyss lurking right beside the most commonplace, familiar, and secure domestic object. The world particle from Minnelli's kitchen scene which possesses molten charge in its immediate context and diffusive amplitude (many paths into the film's world radiate from it) focuses on Eddie's handling of the cup and saucer from the cupboard. Leading up to the key action, Tom, speaking with simulated casualness from behind Eddie (his preferred position of avoidance) asks, while rubbing his hands pleasurably, 'What did the teacher say today?' Eddie replies 'About mommy?', instantly attuned to his father's drift. Tom nervously agrees with a 'Yes', while concentrating more intently on food preparation. Minnelli beautifully synchronises Eddie's reference to 'mommy' with his opening of the cupboard door from his elevated vantage point on the stool. Revealed to us behind the cupboard door is an assortment of inverted glasses, cups hanging from hooks, and neatly stacked plates and bowls. Everything the cupboard contains brings 'mommy' into quiet focus, as though giving Eddie's memory (reopened, like the

cupboard) vivid, palpable form. It is no accident, of course, that all of the objects exposed to view are breakable. They emanate a shared fragility. Eddie's offhand comments about his teacher's special attentiveness and emotion during his first morning back at school suggest an almost wry quality of detachment. He both appreciates her kind gestures and sees through the effort she is making, which is virtually an obligation, given what's happened to him. As he continues to deal with selecting bowls for soup, Eddie's back remains turned to his father. There is more than a hint that Eddie sees through Tom's display of hearty comradery and accepts it in the same knowing spirit as he did his teacher's gentle commiseration. Tom then asks him, steering into safer waters, asks what he did in school, and Eddie, modulating his mode of response to greater inwardness, responds 'Nothing much.' Tom, failing to catch Eddie's change of tone, jokingly presses Eddie for more details. 'I'm sure you did something.' At this climactic, supremely delicate moment Eddie confesses that there was something he wanted to do, but didn't. His father, continuing to be oblivious, in a reflexive self-protective fashion, inquires what it was. Holding a cup in one hand, Eddie reaches into the cupboard shelf with the other and removes a saucer. Cup and saucer starkly rattle as he brings them together in his hands. He pauses as he contemplates these all-at-once foreign objects, in a medium shot, before softly acknowledging: 'I wanted to cry.'

Perkins talks about the convergence of these items and Eddie's pained admission with his customary, compact elucidation of the most important point.

The harshness of the action – cup and saucer rattle unpleasantly as, on 'I wanted to cry', Eddie brings them together – makes the episode solid and convincing so that it is both very moving and completely void of sentimentality. Also,

the emphasis on Eddie's frailty prepares us for a subsequent scene in which he will break down [in his room] at the sight of a dead goldfish. (76)

As in the case of Ophuls' fly-swatter, Perkins is staunchly insistent about the director's necessary avoidance of over-emphasis, of coaxing emotion from the situation by false or garish means. Perkins wants us to recognise how much it matters for the edifice of feeling that the cup and saucer create an unpleasant, grating sound rather than a poignant one. Minnelli manages to keep the cupboard ordinary and neutral in its presentation, so the opening up to an assemblage of specific maternal objects and emotions remains half-hidden, *unannounced* by the manner of framing but still accessible to a viewer who intuits the fragility of the father-son interaction. If the mother's association with setting or character action received more overt emphasis, the scene's impact would be greatly diminished. The scene would dissolve into bits of coy calculation. In Minnelli's version, the scene ends with Tom somewhat taken aback by Eddie's direct expression of vulnerability. He is turned away from Eddie at the opposite counter as Eddie, also turned away, speaks of his thwarted wish to cry. There is a space between them that is wider than it first appears. Minnelli keeps Tom

and Eddie apart and isolated in separate one-shot framings. Tom is troubled and uncomfortable. He gazes outward, in the direction of the camera, as if uncertain how to proceed. Eddie continues to stand on the stool, grasping the pressed together cup and saucer. We are close to the point where the pair's need to free each other from their mutual standstill will achieve that outcome. Before the resolution can happen, however, the door buzzer sounds.

The new housekeeper, not yet revealed visually, has arrived at the apartment's front door, and Tom moves, with unmistakable relief, to answer the buzzer's timely interruption. The camera observes Tom shifting away from Eddie as he traverses the considerable distance between kitchen and hallway entrance. Although Tom has a definite reason to leave the conversation with Eddie in midair, he seems exposed in an act of repressive flight from what Eddie has set before him. Mrs. Livingston's (Roberta Sherwood) bustling arrival on the scene allows Minnelli to shift register decisively. With commanding self-assurance she invades the apartment and kitchen space providing an ebullient, blunt-edged cheerfulness – pushy but not insensitive – for Tom to hide behind. (Intriguingly, she brings with her a record player, which she informs Tom she intends to use to learn another language. The language she

alludes to is Spanish, but her entire attitude generates a different feeling language than the just concluded scene presented to us.)

The goldfish episode that Perkins alludes to is unexpectedly harrowing, a scene of unbridled, helpless emotional nakedness. As Tom assures his wife's best friend, Elizabeth (Shirley Jones) during a visit to his apartment that he and Eddie have settled back into a normal routine, we hear a piercing off-screen scream, coming from Eddie's bedroom. Minnelli cuts to Eddie, stripped to the waist, standing behind his large aquarium – extending the glass fragility of the kitchen – and continuing to scream uncontrollably as Tom, followed by Elizabeth, enter through the door behind him. On the bedroom wall, by the left side of the door, is a dartboard with a single red dart stuck not far from the center. A dead goldfish, whose orange form approximates Eddie's hair color, floats on the surface of the tank. We can make out other, active fish beneath it and a small, ornamental home at the aquarium's base. After Tom's first unsuccessful attempt to subdue Eddie's hysteria by embracing him, he spots the dead fish, and instantly breaking contact with his son, cups the fish's body in his hands and flees the room to dispose of it in the toilet. During his absence, Elizabeth stays with the wailing Eddie

and Mrs. Livingston enters as a third concerned witness, but one less capable than Elizabeth of addressing the boiling over feelings of Eddie directly and without fear. When Tom returns, Eddie's breakdown is still in progress. Tom's concern pivots without warning into unchecked, angry frustration. To get Eddie to stop – clearly as much for his sake as the boy's – he strikes him across the face, shakes him and thrusts him onto his bed without releasing him. Before joining Eddie in panicked loss of control, he calls out 'Please' several times. We may notice peripherally that the aquarium is suddenly shown to have a red base on which the whole structure rests. Adjacent to the aquarium is a small dark model airplane which is more directly linked to Tom's desire for 'flight' escape than Eddie's.

Elizabeth watches Tom's explosion from behind the bed, waiting for an opportunity to attend to Eddie in a different manner. As Tom, trembling, explains to Eddie haltingly that the fish are not 'him' but 'it', and that he flushed the dead one down the drain while many others remain alive, Eddie, also shaking, strives to calm his father's agitation. He repeats with pitiful determination the phrase 'It's okay, dad' by way of reassurance. Tom then disengages and returns to the doorway in pacing confusion. Elizabeth draws close to Eddie, covers the exposed

half of his body with a bathrobe and wipes his mouth. She speaks the self-evident truth about what brought on his attack: 'Eddie, you were thinking about your mother, weren't you?' The close-up two shot of Elizabeth and Eddie heightens our sense of restored safety and connection, as she looks after him. Yet no sooner does Elizabeth mention the link between Eddie's outburst and his mother than Minnelli cuts to a shocking extreme close-up of Tom swinging his head to glare at Elizabeth in a mounting rage. Having been seized by fury and making no effort to resist it, he swiftly leaves the bedroom, and slams the door.

A scene of such jagged, uncompromising extremity cannot easily be integrated into a narrative structure that is primarily concerned with Tom Corbett finding a suitable replacement for his deceased wife, Helen. The tone of this bachelor search is often comic, and Eddie supplies much guidance throughout, by turns diverting, stealthy, unreasonable, and wise. However, a closer examination of the film's methods and materials, following Perkins' interpretive lead, brings forth numerous surprising affinities with the fragility theme that the opening scenes so potently establish. As with many film stories involving parental loss – especially those with a 'light' tone

– *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* presents the absent, never seen (not even in a framed photograph) Helen Corbett as a paragon, a combination of the ideal, perfectly blended attributes of wife and mother. At no point is any acknowledgement made of trying episodes in the reign of this embodiment of nurturing love. In mythical terms, Helen inhabited an earthly paradise before the fall. Fragility is what inevitably, and with inconceivable abruptness, comes in her wake, since she took the familial virtues in their purest imaginable form with her. Until her hazy, unspecified final illness, one can almost believe that Eddie and Tom lived without strain, sorrow, or a sense of incompleteness. We accept this enigma of lost wholeness quite readily in fiction, as though Helen corresponds, in Robert Bly's enticing phrase, to 'Someone we know of, whom we have never seen.' (2018: 55)

When the film begins, radio host, Norman (Jerry Van Dyke) delivers in voice-over a crooning, salacious tribute to housewives, and we gradually discover that the unified discourse of vanished Helen, who had the power to reconcile all contradictions, has been supplanted by a perplexingly mixed language (in which the proportions of the domestic and erotic are skewed). Norman invites his largely female audience of radio listeners to 'wake up' to a Manhattan morning that feels at once dreamlike and degraded. He goes on to caution them – with incongruous seductiveness – about the dangers attending even the simplest, most ordinary break of day tasks. We are introduced to Tom impatiently listening to Jerry's silken patter while moving about (trying to take a mother's place) in his kitchen. Just before Tom is visually identified, we are shown a boiling glass pot of coffee on a stove, burning someone's fingers, an immediate confirmation of Jerry's radio warning. The damaged, recoiling hand belongs to Tom, who we then observe hastily preparing breakfast in his dress shirt and tie. Carlos Losilla's essay on *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, which bears a dedication to Victor Perkins, 'who looks and looks' (2009: 359), considers the film in the context of the numerous Minnelli narratives, starting as far back as *Yolanda and the Thief* (1945) which are preoccupied with angel surrogates, dream doubles and the resurrection of the dead. *The Pirate* (1948) and *Brigadoon* (1954) continue this progression. By the 1960s, Minnelli films with a ghostly lost

world component, which feature the return of a woman either from death or the doomed imprisonment of old age, trace a deepening obsession. Included in this group, along with *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, are *Goodbye Charlie* (1964), *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970), and *A Matter of Time* (1976). It is entirely appropriate to place *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* in the company of Minnelli's ghost stories, as Losilla does, and to interpret it in that light.

Elizabeth's first appearance in the film, at the doorway of Tom's apartment, bearing a gift of homemade fudge from her own apartment across the hall, is presented by Minnelli as an uncanny visitation. Tom reacts to Elizabeth as though he were seeing his wife returning, in the company of the woman who, since Eddie's birth, had been her best friend. He observes, after his momentary shock and resulting daze, that he had somehow beheld Helen right beside her. Eddie's own intro-duction in the film has a similarly haunted quality. After Tom fails to locate him in his own bedroom when he is attempt-ing to rouse him for breakfast, he searches through the other rooms with increasing alarm, finding him at last sleeping con-cealed beneath a blanket on his own bed. Eddie occupies the side that until recently belonged to his mother. When asked to account for his 'bed hopping' he mentions unconcernedly that he had felt 'cold' when awakened during the night. The child immediately seeks to ascertain whether his father is mad at him for this obviously mother-motivated transgression. Tom appears unwilling to confront the emotion underlying this surprising (to him) manoeuvre, just as he later refuses to see, as Elizabeth does, the mother's death reflected in the floating goldfish. Tom's first dialogue in the narrative is with a milk-man who enters the kitchen unceremoniously after Tom has neglected to leave a note indicating what the adjusted milk delivery requirements will be from now on. We see the milk-man place a quart bottle in the obviously cold refrigerator.

Elizabeth as reflection of Helen returned from the dead is a less disturbing version of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Ligeia' plot, which deals with a powerful first wife escaping death to return to her partner through the vessel of a 'weak' replacement, one

not only passive in her own right but erasable. A common reading of the courtship logic in Minnelli's plot is that Tom makes the easy final choice of the nurturing Elizabeth – a volunteer nurse with a deep attachment to Eddie – over the more challenging, multi-faceted fashion consultant, Rita – a career woman who values her independence, has a 'stricter' conception of parenting, and who serves as Elizabeth's chief rival. (The third candidate for Tom's affections is guileless Dollye (Stella Stevens), a deceptively bright child-woman who is, except in matters of artful maneuvering, a near-double of Eddie himself.) What most commentaries on the film neglect to attend to is the unusual quantity of exceptionally heated quarrels that Tom and Elizabeth enter into throughout the narrative. Nearly all of their interactions build to painful, unresolved discord. Tom endeavors to maintain an appearance of poised assurance in Eddie's presence. The negative force that he holds in check when around Eddie, in order to spare him further upheaval, he hurls at Elizabeth, losing control of himself in her presence repeatedly. Elizabeth's responses to his outbursts match his level of abrasive vigor. All of this tension, misunderstanding and acrimony seems generated by the interdiction against bringing Helen back, as though Tom is fighting the temptation to have the lost marriage over again, in a near identical form. The utopia of the 'flawless past' with Helen collides with the desecrating wish to supplant her with her best friend and confounding double. There is treachery and betrayal, as many ghost stories tell us, in the desire for sameness, repetition.

I am reminded here of Perkins' unforgettable discussion of Orson Welles' voice conjuring up (as disembodied narrator) the lost plenitude of the Amberson past at the beginning of *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942). Welles' opening tone-poem creates a subtle, gently ironic dissonance between the images of a refined, picturesque, achingly lovely, vanished idyll and the imminent tumble into wreckage and loss. 'We are told that the Ambersons had magnificence', Perkins writes, 'but what we hear [in Welles' voice] is that they have the speaker's heart. It is possible that his attachment is to their frailty more than to their pomp' (1999: 21). Joseph Cotten's Eugene Morgan has a modest courtship accident – a burlesque backward fall into a bass viol – which proves sufficient to change the initially evoked world of comfort, largesse, reliability, and slow moving time [Welles' narrator croons 'They had time

for everything'] with one stroke. His slapstick mishap, as it were, locks the gates of paradise against him. And the spectator is cast out of the garden as well in the very process of being gently, mellowly ushered into it. The 'crime' of Eugene Morgan is his belief that the past can be repeated, that a lost chance can be retrieved and lived again in the same old way. It is not only George Minafer (Tim Holt), the son of Morgan's beloved, who cries out in protest of this plan. The world of the film itself stands against Eugene's dream of making the past go into reverse and giving him Isabel Amberson Minafer (Dolores Costello) at last.

The coffee pot bubbling – in a comically dangerous fashion, as the narrator Norman sounds his note of warning at the beginning of *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* – coincides, as I previously noted, with hapless Tom entering the narrative for the first time. His reaching, then burned hand marks his uncertain attempt to merge father and mother roles as a newly widowed parent. The coffee pot turns up again at the commencement of Tom's second quarrel with Elizabeth after she spends the night nursing Eddie, when he is battling a high fever. More significantly, the cup and saucer that Eddie held onto as he spoke about 'not crying' is being used by Elizabeth as Tom offers her breakfast. We witness a reactivation of the

earlier scene's fragility – objects handled in a way that conveys barely contained feelings – when Tom makes a blundering attempt to pay Elizabeth for her caregiving service. Minnelli has Tom hold out the glass coffee pot toward Elizabeth, as if to refill her cup, at the precise instant that she withdraws from him in angry hurt. Less than a minute before their bitter confrontation starts, Elizabeth and Tom share a laugh over Eddie's explanation to her of how 'brave boys don't bleed when they're hurt. No matter how big the hurt, they hold the blood in.' Tom spends the majority of his time in the film contriving 'adult naïve' ways for him and Eddie to 'hold the blood in'. Although Elizabeth does not mean to be the instigator and facilitator of bleeding 'out in the open', that is her primary role in the film. If Tom is to enter – for the second time – the marriage that death has taken from him, he must be torn open. The spirit of Helen Corbett, using Elizabeth as her medium, seems to preside over that gradual stripping bare.

Minnelli's penchant for paradoxical exchanges of light and dark, so often conjoined with fragility, is present from the outset of his film career. In *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), a potentially comic scene of a young man and women furthering the cause of romance by touring the rooms of the girl's household with a long-armed lamplighter and extinguishing

the lights in various chandeliers becomes surprisingly delicate – indeed, fragile – as the creation of darkness speaks simultaneously of the quickening of love and the fleetingness of life. Judy Garland's Esther Smith, the girl in question, later sings a somberly beautiful Christmas song, balancing acceptance and regret, to her younger sister, Tootie (Margaret O'Brien), while holding her gently in an upstairs bedroom. Tootie is too worked up to go to sleep, she has told Esther, because she is waiting for Father Christmas. The song, instead of calming her, fills her with angry desperation. She runs outdoors to destroy a family of snow people that were visible from her window. The snow figures unmistakably represent the members of her own family and the waning possibility of any adequate protection coming to her from this group. Warmth and tender closeness, instead of keeping the child's crystal of faith intact, crack it open, and in through the fragility flows chaos.

When Eddie disappears from summer camp in the final section of *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, and Tom drives out to the camp in panic to search for him, Minnelli provides not only a demolition of Tom's carefully maintained defenses and evasions, but more startlingly, a sustained depiction of the father's core vulnerability. Minnelli shoots Tom's car drive with the identical effect of surrealistic hysteria that he devised for Lana Turner's drive through the rain in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952). When he enters Eddie's camp cabin after getting the news that search parties have not yet located him and that there are plans to drag the lake, Minnelli recapitulates, through visual rhyme, a pair of object-centered actions from early in the film, and in so doing places Tom belatedly inside his son's emotional perspective, so often – until now – blocked to his gaze. He finds a pair of Eddie's sneakers resting on his son's otherwise vacant, neatly made bunk bed. He hesitantly picks up the sneakers by their tied strings and presses them together in much the same fashion that Eddie joined his mother's cup and saucer together in the kitchen scene. Tom then walks over to the screened window sill on which rests a jar containing a swimming goldfish. A net adjacent to the jar succinctly tells us of the fish's recent capture. It eloquently attests to Eddie's arduous efforts at replacement. Tom then notices that Eddie's best friend, Mike (Leslie Barringer), is lying awake in his upper bunk and staring at him. In a

trembling, unguardedly tearful questioning of the boy, he displays the extent of his cumulative grief and stretched-to-the-limit weakness in a manner that Eddie himself has never been allowed to witness. He asks Mike whether Eddie has ever ventured into the woods alone, an imagined action that is as metaphorical as literal. He begs Mike to share any secret knowledge of Eddie's thoughts and feelings that he might possess, which Tom, for whatever reason, has not been let in on. Tom is unaccustomed to being so openly powerless, baffled, and dependent, but his desperate fear of having lost Eddie for good makes further masking and control impossible.

At this moment of exhausted privation, he receives a telephone call from Elizabeth, who informs him that Eddie has made it back to her apartment in New York safely, through a series of risk-filled actions. Minnelli includes no shots of Elizabeth in this call. We stay with Tom clutching the receiver helplessly, in a cabin back room. What transpires in the hallway of Tom's apartment building and in his apartment itself after his return journey (another anguished, hysterical car trip, presented in reverse angle from the first, so we see only the back of Tom's head) is the most extended, agonised quarrel episode in the film. The confrontation with Elizabeth culminates when Elizabeth slaps his face after he declares that he 'sees why her previous marriage failed'. Tom is enraged that Eddie seeks her out in an emergency ahead of himself, enraged that she nurtures him expertly, enraged at her accusation that he has hit his son, and enraged that she has found a tactic to make Eddie prefer her to any other woman he dates. (Rita, Tom's fiancée, mirrors that part of Eddie that self-protectively schemes, manipulates, and strives to exclude. Eddie fails to recognise the qualities that the two of them share in their ongoing skirmishes.)

If the ghost of Helen is somehow present in Elizabeth and guiding her actions, it is plainly not her intention to revive the abstract idyll that her marriage to Tom putatively resembled. She seems intent on creating an atmosphere for Eddie in which he need not be ever-accommodating and hide what is going on inside him. Elizabeth provides a sanctuary in her apartment across the hall, separate from all the places in his dealings with others where openness and direct contact with his pain and uncertainty are not allowed. And Tom, if he is to

have, in effect, the same marriage again with a woman who shares many of his former wife's qualities, must be broken down, challenged in his denial, emptied out by panic and confusion before the possibility of return and sameness are permissible.

The memorable, exquisitely fragile ending of the film depicts another phone call, this one from Tom inviting Elizabeth for a date after Eddie has cajoled him, from his now authoritative position at the kitchen table, to believe in her love for him. Minnelli preserves the separate apartment domains of Tom and Elizabeth. (Tom has hardly ever crossed the threshold of her living space in the film, and on

the one occasion where he steps inside it, is there only for a few moments.) The distance that is maintained is all the more remarkable given the fact that Elizabeth's door is hardly ten feet away from his own. During the concluding phone call, both Tom's and Elizabeth's entranceways are open, permitting Eddie, who occupies the space between them, to attempt by back and forth looks to bring the two closer together.

As the phone call progresses (completely inaudible to the film spectator) the two adults appear relaxed and comfortable, a state that may have something to do with the distance that they continue to depend on. Eddie becomes Minnelli's surrogate director, striving to achieve cohesive, satisfactory resolution to his dream of restoration. His shifting gaze wills the still separated pair into happy 'edited together' harmony. The film ends without Tom or Elizabeth being released by decisive action from their manageable stasis. Our final view is of Eddie in close-up, his head still moving in both directions, eager to persuade himself (and us) that his need for an end to limbo and loss can be attained by fervent, concentrated willing and wishing.

Thomas Elsaesser, in his influential 1970 reconsideration of Minnelli's work, argued that his films 'invariably focus on the discrepancy between an inner vision, often confused and uncertain of itself, and an outer world that appears as hostile because it is presented as a physical space littered with obstacles' ([1970] 2009: 87). The bass line of the Minnelli world *in toto* is a conspicuous alienation, but Elsaesser insists that Minnelli does not lament the alienation he persistently identifies and delineates with such Expressionist power. He chooses instead 'to concentrate on [and assign primary value to] the energies of the imagination released in the individual during this process of (social?) decomposition' (87). Richard

Dyer adds to this that the endings of Minnelli films 'are only apparently happy. The keenness of the longing for the ideal lingers in the mind, leaving a dark undertow to even the most glittering of his musicals' (1981: 1153–4). Eddie's impassioned creative undertaking at the film's end is to arrange for something apparently new that revives and perfectly duplicates the remembered form of what has been lost: the restored idyll of Helen, Tom, and Eddie, with Elizabeth and Helen becoming a fused entity, smoothing over all cracks with undivided tenderness. As Julian Barnes reminds us, in his novel, *The Noise of Time*: 'An idyll, by definition, only becomes an idyll once it has ended' (2017: 31). The final vision Eddie surrenders to in *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* is a vivid prospect, including literal doors that Eddie himself has forced open. As long as Tom and Elizabeth stand in their adjoining spheres and manifest no discomfort, fear, or indecision, Eddie can anticipate a fast-approaching end to distance, with all psychic damage repaired.

Eddie's concluding waking dream is strongly reminiscent of the young child Johnny's (Dickie Moore) in the closing shots of Josef von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus* (1932). Johnny's mother, also named Helen (Marlene Dietrich) seems to have been brought back to life – after a lengthy separation – as she

appears, unexpectedly, in his room at bedtime. After washing him and preparing him for sleep, she is joined, near his barred bedroom crib, by her estranged husband, Ned (Herbert Marshall), who is Johnny's father. For an indeterminate period, Johnny and his father have lived together on their own. Johnny persuades his parents to repeat an old ritual bedtime story, the fairy tale of their first meeting by a river in which his mother and her friends were swimming. Helen and Ned manage to play their respective parts in the story, though the shadows of subsequent pain and betrayal linger in the nursery air. Helen brings out a windup toy carousel and sings a familiar lullaby to its music box accompaniment. Johnny, half-asleep, either sees or dreams of his parents drawing nearer to one another, in forgiveness and rekindled love, as his eyes close. The final, heartbreaking close-up, whose weighty emotional task – as deep as the deepest fairy tale – is to heal all wounds with the touch of a finger, shows Johnny's hand stretched through the bars of his crib, touching the wings of the angels on the toy carousel, one by one, as they continue to go around. Eddie's position as entranced onlooker and presiding angel in his in between space, is one that similarly strives to bring about his mother's return, exorcising the fear that Elizabeth will not remain Helen 'for keeps' in his father's still unintegrated gaze.

Let us return, in closing, to Victor Perkins' still pertinent, still challenging question for film studies, 'Where is the world?' The argument I've presented is that in film worlds, every particle is a potential reflector of the whole's sense, but that a special gift of discernment is required to find the particles in any given world that connect us to the qualities of experience in it that matter most. The discovery of such particles, as my reading of Perkins' criticism amply confirms, is typically a perceptual shock, that both delights the viewer and disrupts the path of knowing. The achievement of world form is, for Perkins, always simultaneously an ethical and aesthetic achievement, but he scrupulously avoids judgments on these issues that feel facile or premature. One feels always that the most desirable pairings of ethics and aesthetics for him paradoxically combine ease (an absence of forcing) with a necessary internal pressure.

For a film world to 'hang together' it is not required to manifest that Aristotelian will-o'-the-wisp unity. No film

critic understood this more acutely than Perkins, and possibly explains why he expended so much interpretive labor on that most triumphant, recalcitrant instance of structural disarray, Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons*. I chose *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* as my most extended test case for thinking about world and world particles not because the film entirely breaks free of its affinities with breezy, leering, bachelor comedies, but precisely because it doesn't. Nevertheless, something substantial within it, belonging unmistakably to the sensibility of Minnelli, secures a more subtle, tantalising, complexly affecting shape. The fragility that Perkins unearths in his reading of the kitchen scene, where it suffuses every element of the father-son interaction, gives a direction to our experience, our meaning-making activity as partakers of the film's world. The pursuit of the idea embodied in the cosmology – of fragility continually surfacing in the midst of blithe busyness and of a ghostly undersong – enables a form to coalesce, forcefully, perhaps indelibly, despite resistance from opposing energies and impulses within the work.

Adrian Martin, in his absorbing defense of Minnelli's much maligned *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970), asserts the value of confusion in film world articulation (2009). Not everything that finds a place in a film's world belongs to it to the same degree, with the same intensity of adhesiveness or expressiveness. Martin talks about *Clear Day* 'stretching to the breaking point its central contradiction', and gaining interest from the resultant pressure (386). 'How hard is the problem that a narrative sets itself?' Martin inquires, and what does that resistance contribute to our understanding of the impressive, conditional 'holding together' of the fictional world? (385). The particles or unit passages of the individual film have additional possible connections, of course, to the director's overall cosmology, developed throughout a career. We can think of the evolving nature of that cosmology as the impalpable organising form that brings coherence to a director's creative vision. One might further note that Minnelli, like other film artists, has as much claim to transform the culture that he finds himself in, and where he does his work, as to be a symptom, determined by it.

'To advance our grasp of the worldhood of fictional worlds', Perkins characteristically observes in the conclusion of 'Where is the World?', 'should be a priority in thinking about cinema' (2005: 39). But that grasp can only be improved

if we also believe what Perkins notes, without elaboration, in 'Omission and Oversight in Close Reading': 'No criticism, detailed as it may reckon to be, will ever encompass all that might be observed about a passage of film, or even a moment' (2017: 384). We will, if fully responsive to our film experience, locate the vital, transfiguring world particle, as Perkins repeatedly does, and then, once we draw what we can from it, it will fortunately find a way to elude us.

George Toles

George Toles is Distinguished Professor of Film and Literature at the University of Manitoba. He has written or co-written the screenplays for numerous Guy Maddin films, including *Careful*, *The Saddest Music in the World*, and *My Winnipeg*. He is the author of *A House Made of Light: Essays on the Art of Film*; *Paul Thomas Anderson*; *Status Update, a selection of micro-narratives*, with art responses by Cliff Eyland; and *Curtains of Light: Theatrical Space in Film*.

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V.F. PERKINS

Integrating criticism into the philosophy of art: V.F. Perkins, *Dead Poets Society,* and 'value interaction'

Introduction

Although he was not a trained or practising philosopher, in the professional sense, the film critic and academic V.F. Perkins believed that his film criticism was addressing serious matters in aesthetics and the philosophy of art. He believed he was doing something more than offering critical appraisals of films even though he understood the latter, at its best, also to be a profound activity. However, this practice of philosophising about art through criticism is not the standard method in the dedicated discipline known as the Philosophy of Art.[1] To illuminate the benefits of Perkins' alternative method, and make a case for it, I am going to attend to his remarks on *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989). I will contrast this method to the more common method of philosophising about art through theory as undertaken by Noël Carroll and Berys Gaut in their contributions to what has become known in the philosophy of art as the value interaction debate. The debate concerns the interaction of moral value and aesthetic value. I believe that Perkins' method is superior in so far as it significantly helps improve our thinking about their interaction.[2] I will (1) explain Perkins' work on the film *Dead Poets*

Society; (2) show how his criticism exposes the flaws in the value interaction theories of Noël Carroll and Berys Gaut; and (3) draw out a range of limitations in their method while suggesting how a method underpinned by criticism might overcome these limitations and prove to be more advantageous. Although the problems I find with their method are not applicable to all the work that takes place within the philosophy of art, I do believe that many areas and aspects of the philosophy of art would benefit if our thinking about them grew out of detailed accounts of artworks and the associated evaluative experience.[3]

V.F. Perkins on *Dead Poets Society*

For many years V.F. Perkins taught a class, as part of a third-year undergraduate course in film aesthetics, on the topic of badness (in film). He also presented the topic in various conference papers. Unfortunately, he never published his teaching and presentations on the topic. After his death, however, *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* published Perkins' notes from the conference presentations (2019). In these, Perkins focuses on a scene from the film *Dead Poets Society* which he says, 'provides an emblematic instance of cinematic badness which is distinct both from ideological offensiveness and (since it is made with great proficiency) from ineptitude' (34). He concentrates on a scene around twenty minutes into the film where a teacher called Keating, played by Robin Williams, a new appointment at an exclusive boy's school, is teaching an English Literature class at the beginning of the school year. The core of the scene consists in Keating ridiculing a large book about evaluating poetry by one 'Dr. J. Evans Pritchard, P.H.D.'–which contains a reductive formula for measuring poetic greatness–and then inviting the students to rip out the pages of its introduction and deposit them in a wastepaper basket.

The scene is bad for Perkins because it is dramatically contradictory, disingenuously manipulative, overblown, simplistic, indulgent, and fraudulent. There is an important moral dimension to Perkins' critique and to his understanding of 'badness' because he wants to show that 'movies may have the attributes of bad communications, being for instance

bigoted, deceitful, vindicative, hypocritical or self-serving' and this will make them 'bad as works of art' (34). The following are examples of key critical statements: '[the film] employs an inflated rhetoric and some crude but effective devices of emotional manipulation that may disguise contradictions between its declared project (anti-authoritarian) and its dramatic structure (which validates the authority of the hero)'; '[t]he film gratifies […] by making it easy to be on the right side; it offers a dishonestly simplified viewpoint on conflict'; and '[the film shows] a failure to reconcile showmanship with thematic intelligence' (36).

Although Perkins considers the scene to be 'corrupt', it is also 'highly effective' and 'made with great proficiency'. In his analysis therefore he alerts us to the scene's 'crude but effective devices'. He draws attention to, for example, the way one of the students named Cameron (Dylan Kussman) is used by the film to 'define for the audience the appropriate response' (35).[4] Cameron has already been characterised as unattractive and now his behaviour, first exhibiting 'sheep-like submission' to note-taking and then 'timid neatness' by tearing his page along the edge of a ruler, predictably indicates the wrong reactions to Keating's teaching (35). Perkins notes how the film keeps returning to close-ups of Cameron which indicate the reliance on this structuring principle. In like manner, although Perkins does not mention it, there are also a few pointed close-ups of other students who represent the right response to Keating's teaching. Most striking are those of Dalton (Gale Hansen) whose expression turns from bemused to amused realisation, the intelligent and thoughtful face of somebody 'getting it' and is the first boy to rip out his pages.[5]

The film uses a similarly polarising device 'to secure approval for Keating's approach' when a teacher representing traditional modes of teaching intrudes on the class to angrily protest at the unruly proceedings (35). He interrupts the pleasurably liberating momentum that the scene is wishing to induce. This momentum is perhaps most effectively represented by the 'image of the wastepaper basket travelling from boy to boy' the movement of which, according to Perkins, 'has a pleasing rhythm, and our pleasure is enhanced by the completion of the circuit' (35). Although Perkins does not expand on how the pleasure is generated, doing so may further

substantiate his claims. Keating hands the basket to one of the boys whereupon the camera follows it round in a panning, unbroken close-up as it is passed amongst them, with camera and basket eventually joining up again with Keating. He appears with perfect timing at the other end of the line to reclaim the basket and the inevitability of its return to him is emphasised. The curving camera movement is matched by the basket rotating swiftly through the boys' hands, without it being stopped or grounded, as each boy deposits his pages. The fluency and buoyancy with which the basket is passed and its apparently determined direction–through the boys, back to Keating–make it appear as if the basket is carried by the force of, or on the wave of, Keating's inspirational rhetoric.

As the film shows the basket's passage, Keating is exclaiming on the soundtrack 'In my class you will learn to think for yourself again' and Perkins notes the contradiction: '[w]hat is proclaimed as individualism is pictured as militaristic uniformity' (35). He also notes that the figure of Cameron, previously emphasised, is now excluded from this very directed uprising. Perkins mentions that the film chooses the ripping apart of books rather than the burning of them for fear that 'that image would remind the audience in troubling ways of the recent history of Europe and America' (35). Nevertheless, I felt it was chillingly reminiscent, and just one flame away from the common image in films of various documents set alight and dropped into wastepaper baskets. Moreover, Perkins does not mention, although it is in keeping with his critique, Keating's incessant and aggressive commands to 'Rip' and 'Rip it out' leading to a cacophonous ripping sound which sonically expresses the giddy euphoria of following orders.

Perkins recognises the possibility that the contradiction may be a deliberate part of the film's scheme–'[c]ould this scene become part of a critique–or more rounded assessment of Keating?'–but finds no evidence to support this (36). He writes, 'Here as throughout the film Keating is never made to face an awkward question of judgment. He is always right […]. No boy refuses, in a principled way, to join in the use of violence against ideas that is pictured in the destruction of books–and the film never

suggests this as a possibility' (36). Indeed, the contradiction exhibited in this scene remains unaddressed throughout the film and it never becomes a productive tension. On a couple of occasions in the film, students take up Keating's advice to 'seize the day', a motto which became famously associated with the film, apparently representative of its inspirational potency. On one of these occasions, a student gets a beating for standing up to authority, and when Keating is unsympathetic to his moment of rebellion, the student understandably asks, 'What about *carpe diem* and sucking all the marrow out of life?' to which Keating replies 'Sucking all the marrow out of life doesn't mean choking on the bone. There's a time for daring and time for caution, and a wise man understands which is called for.' And matters are left at that. This is all conveniently unspecific and in keeping with most of Keating's gnomic advice. Quite where the 'wise man' will glean this understanding, or quite where the line between sucking and choking is drawn is never explored. Despite its vagueness, the dialogue is used to seal up the film's dilemmas prematurely and substitutes for dramatic enactment. The film also appears to rely too much on the Williams persona to do its work, and therefore finds it hard to get beyond the limitations of his performance. The film, not unlike his line delivery, is caught in a superficial amalgam of the whimsical and the earnest (Morkish and mawkish).

Later, one of the schoolboys, Neil Perry (Robert Sean Leonard), commits suicide after 'seizing the day' by contravening his father's wishes and appearing in the school play. Yet even this grave occurrence does not prompt the film to challenge, or deepen its understanding, of Keating's ethos and slogans. Its purpose rather seems to lend further support to Keating by according all the blame to the repressive regime (of school and father). For any viewer who feels the case is, or should be, less open and shut, Perry's death merely bewilderingly rubs up against the grain of the film. One might even consider the film exploitative in that it uses Perry's pain and suffering to sentimentalise Keating further (and his own sentimental exhortations). He is forced to resign from the school, and the final scene shows the boys one by

one standing on their desks in solidarity as he watches on with admiration.

Testing Noël Carroll and Berys Gaut's theories of value interaction

I present Perkins' critical appraisal of *Dead Poets Society* (from now on *DPS*), and my critical appendages, to highlight some specific problems in a couple of the contributions to what has become known in the philosophy of art as the value interaction debate. The debate concerns the nature of the interaction between aesthetic value and moral value in artworks. I particularly want to focus on what has become known as the 'moderate moralist' and 'ethicist' positions, notably the positions held by Noël Carroll and Berys Gaut respectively. I will attend to some of their key claims, but I am not going to work through analysing every aspect of the content and argumentation. This is firstly because I want to orientate toward the bigger methodological picture and secondly because a step-by-step critique has already been done effectively, for example, by Nils Hennes Stear (2020) and by Rafe McGregor (2014). The latter has devastatingly damned, not only Carroll and Gaut's contributions, but the whole value interaction debate, accusing it of using 'vague terminology', resting on 'naïve assumptions', and making 'uninteresting claims' (2014: 451, 455, 459). I concur with McGregor, but I want to explain, by focusing on Carroll and Gaut's contributions, why I think these deficiencies might come about and how they might be avoided.[6]

The moderate moralist position, held by Carroll, claims that moral and aesthetic value interact in a work and that a moral merit will in some cases be aesthetic merit, and a moral defect will sometimes be an aesthetic defect (1996; 1998). The point of the moderate moralist claim is to challenge 'autonomist' positions which argue, among other things, that aesthetic merits and defects are not necessarily, or even significantly, bound up with moral ones. *DPS* therefore looks to be a reasonably fair test case, rather than a tricky counter example, because Perkins' moral critique goes together with

a broader aesthetic one: for example, he finds the film's moral defects simultaneously to be formal defects (for example, the close-ups on Cameron which contribute to the 'dishonestly simplified viewpoint on conflict').[7] Carroll's further argument is that a moral defect will prevent the 'uptake' of the artwork, that is it 'deters the response to which the works aspires' and can therefore be regarded as an 'aesthetic defect' (1996: 234-235). It seems therefore that the case of *DPS* continues to be helpful for Carroll: Perkins does indeed argue that its moral defects prevent the 'uptake' of the film, deterring the response to which it aspires.

However, this is not the full story. To be precise, *DPS* is morally defective *for Perkins* preventing the uptake of the film *for him*. He does not say this because it is not *only* for him, as others may see the film, or come to see it, in a similar way. Indeed, he hopes others *will* come to see it this way and even that they *should* because there is a moral dimension to the critique. His criticism is implicitly prescriptive as well as descriptive of his experience (of the film). Nevertheless, this is not the same as saying *DPS is* morally defective, or in all cases deters uptake. Indeed, Perkins' response while not unique does not seem to be typical of other publicly-aired views.[8] One only needs to read the film reviews of the time to see that *DPS* was, with a few exceptions, rapturously received by film reviewers. Here is a selection of the praise summarised on *IMDb*: 'poetry and passion, comedy and tragedy are fused into one absolutely marvelous affirmation of the independent spirit'; 'one of Australian director Peter Weir's most sensitive films'; 'it grips, because it has been made with plentiful feeling and vigor'; and 'commands respect and affection'.[9] Pauline Kael no less, doyenne of American film reviewers, claimed that it 'turns itself into a classic'.[10] And here is a sample of comments by viewers on *IMDb*: 'One of the best movies ever made'; 'Extremely good movie that explores our deepest desires and the situations that get in our way'; 'It was probably the most influential movie in my life. I was truly inspired to change. Everyone should see it. CARPE DIEM'; 'Influential, beautiful, and powerful. This film will stay in my heart forever. The acting and plot are unmatched by films of its kind, and the message will hold you tight'; 'A thought-provoking

and emotionally engaging drama about one simple fact: nobody can teach you how to live your life'; 'An incredibly emotional and inspirational film'.[11] These reactions do not seem surprising to me because I recall experiencing the film's favourable reception by intelligent acquaintances on its release. More importantly, *DPS* is bending over backwards to achieve these responses. According to Perkins it uses a series of 'effective' devices to achieve them and these 'disguise' its corruption. I suspect that Perkins was compelled to offer his critique partly because of the film's favourable critical reception which he regarded as undeserved. He intends to invite a revaluation while also unseating assumptions about what constitutes achievement in film (both formally and morally). One mistaken assumption is that 'effective' straightforwardly corresponds to good.

For Perkins the film's 'effective' devices would be a reason why these critics and viewers do not see the film as contradictory or manipulative or indulgent in the way he does. Alternatively, perhaps they see or understand the same presentation differently, for example, manipulation as a well-directed handling or indulgence as a passionate immersion. Or what Perkins sees as demerits are insignificant and possibly not even registered because they are outweighed or submerged by good aspects. For them, the film is morally meritorious ('inspirational', 'sensitive', an 'absolutely marvelous affirmation of the independent spirit'). It is also aesthetically successful in Carroll's terms because he considers the aesthetic success of a work to be its ability to 'absorb' its audience (1996: 226-227). For Carroll, this shows that the work's uptake is not impeded by any morally defective aspect. It does appear, for these critics and viewers, to have succeeded in absorbing them because 'it grips', 'it commands respect', 'hold[s] you tight, and is 'powerful'. And indeed, Perkins refers to the 'pleasing' quality of the wastebasket passing: the satisfying fluency of the unbroken and palindromic shot. However, such satisfying fluency can be an indication of something too easy, of not enough complicating challenge, friction, or cross-current in the composition. It may therefore be 'pleasing' in both senses: it generates a pleasant sensation for the recipient while also being overly willing to satisfy them

or make them feel comfortable or, as Perkins says, gratified. A related criterion of aesthetic success for Carroll is that the work needs to 'mobilise' a viewer's emotions. Yet, this is what Perkins disapproves of in the film: 'effective devices of emotional manipulation' which are 'crude' and may 'disguise'. A further related criterion of aesthetic success for Carroll is that the work should 'succeed on its own terms', and so he writes, 'If an [artwork] is to succeed on its own terms then the audience must fill it in in the right way, where the "right way" with regard to the emotions is in terms of the emotions the work aims to elicit' (1998: 420). Once again, *DPS* does appear to 'succeed on its own terms', and many audiences do appear to have emotionally responded in the 'right way […] in terms of the emotions [the film] aims to elicit'. Yet, it is precisely *DPS*' 'own terms' and 'the emotions [the film] aims to elicit' that Perkins is critiquing.[12]

To which 'audience' therefore is Carroll referring? He talks about the 'average viewer', then slips into a majoritarian position when he talks about 'large parts of the audience', and then decides he requires a 'morally sensitive' viewer or reader (1996: 233). This puts us in the difficult position of trying to decide who is more 'morally sensitive': Perkins who finds the film 'corrupt' or the critic who finds it 'a marvelous affirmation of the human spirit'.[13] Carroll could argue that the *DPS* case does not change the fact that a moral merit / defect is sometimes an aesthetic merit / defect, it is simply that we will not be able to specify whether this will turn in a positive or negative direction. It will be different for different people even regarding the same film. I suppose this would be some sort of minimal claim, but it is a very limited one and not particularly helpful if we want to philosophise productively about the moral dimensions of the aesthetic. In actuality, Carroll proposes more than this minimal claim. He makes claims about the logic of the relationship between the moral and aesthetic, and about the consequences for critical appraisal in particular instances. He also implicitly and explicitly makes claims about what a moral defect might look like and the 'morally sensitive' viewer who can spot it. He writes, 'Failure to elicit the right moral response, then, is a failure in the design of the work, and, therefore, is an aesthetic failure' (1996: 233).

What *is* the 'right moral response' though in the *DPS* case or in many, or even most, cases?[14]

Berys Gaut, in a version of 'moderate moralism' he calls 'ethicism', finds that much of Carroll's argument is on the right lines (2007). His version is similar except he replaces Carroll's 'securing uptake' with 'merited response' in his chapter entitled 'The Merited Response Argument' (2007: 227-252). His claim is that if the artwork 'prescribes' an 'unmerited' response then it will be both morally and aesthetically defective (229). Once again Perkins' understanding of *DPS* initially appears to be helpful to Gaut's theory in that he draws attention to the contradiction between the film's 'declared project' and its actual content and structure. Perkins' 'declared', in this context, is not unlike Gaut's 'prescribed', and Perkins' overarching argument seems to provide a case of an artwork where an appreciative response would be 'unmerited' because it 'has failed in an aim internal to it' (Gaut 2007: 231). However, Gaut's scheme works just as well the other way around: it can equally be argued, as it has been, that a film which 'prescribes' an attitude that young boys 'seize the day' by rejecting a dull, rote type of learning is far from morally defective; and that dramatically articulating this with a pleasing vigour and fluency (for example, in the wastebasket sequence) is far from aesthetically defective. The film has succeeded 'in an aim internal to it' and there is nothing 'unmerited' in an audience being inspired by any it. Indeed, I suspect, given all I have read of Gaut on this topic, and the assumptions he makes about morality in artworks, that *DPS* would provide an ideal example of a film that is morally and aesthetically meritorious. There is a problem in Gaut's use of 'an aim internal to it' which matches Carroll's use of 'on its own terms'. Perkins believes that if an aim is misguided then it is not morally good if it succeeds in achieving it, and many of our evaluations of artworks are based on assessing the worth of 'aims' (not simply whether they succeed in rendering them). Moreover, even if a film's aims are worthwhile, one aim may undermine or be at odds with another: for example, Perkins criticises *DPS* for not being able reconcile its desire to be 'a gripping melodrama' with its desire to be 'a thoughtful dramatisation of important issues' (36).[15]

The methodological contrast

Because Perkins works with, and through, the film, he is able to more accurately specify variants of value interaction, for example, the type of relational unease just mentioned between 'a gripping melodrama' and 'a thoughtful dramatisation of important issues'. Therefore, the first and foremost methodological point to highlight is that Perkins' claims, specific and general, emerge from, or alongside, his analysis of the film. This is not true of the general claims by Carroll and Gaut which are presented abstractly. In the writings where they develop the theories, outlined above, there are no extended or involved treatments of artworks. Although Perkins' treatment of *DPS* is restricted by being presented in the form of a short conference paper which disallows the extended and involved analyses of films which he often provides in his published critical work, even here his criticism is precise about the location, manifestation, and impression of moral and formal defects, their interaction, and evaluation. He unpacks the film's workings in such a way as to provide us with something to direct our thinking toward. It is therefore instructive in thinking through this case and, in a comparative fashion, other cases which might show similarities and differences. Someone may wish to argue with Perkins, disputing perhaps his criteria or their application, or they may draw attention to countervailing aspects or qualities, but the precision of his observations and attributions would, in principle, ground and discipline any further investigation.

Perkins' micro approach contrasts with Carroll and Gaut's macro approach, although the latter do briefly refer to examples from artworks as they propose their theories of value interaction. At one point, Carroll briefly offers up the novel *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis (1991) as an example (1996: 232-233). He asserts that 'the serial killings depicted in the novel are so graphically brutal that readers are not able morally to get past the gore in order to savour the parody […]. Certainly, Ellis made an aesthetic error' (232). Leaving aside for a moment the speaking on behalf of 'the readers' who are 'not able morally to get past', Carroll does not show why the brutality in the novel is necessarily a moral flaw when

softening the presentation of serial killings could equally be regarded as such. The major accusation is not substantiated, nor are we given access to the details of the case. The depictions of the killings are not analysed, and it is not shown how, for example, their linguistic formulation, their place in the design scheme, their tonal disparity, or their generic failure (as 'parody') lead to the accusation. Therefore, despite being offered up as gleefully decisive by Carroll, the example is cursory and does not do any of the work it needs to do.

However, more detail about the novel by itself would not necessarily solve the problem. This is because the engagement with it would not be sufficiently integrated into the philosophy such that it was genuinely generative. Much earlier in the book in which the 'merited response' chapter appears, Gaut analyses two paintings of Bathsheba, one by Willem Drost and one by Rembrandt (both 1654) and he shows why he thinks the painting by Rembrandt is both morally and formally better than the Drost (2007: 14-25). These analyses are relatively detailed about the presentation of the paintings, but they are not involved in the construction of the later theory (they are not even mentioned in the theory chapter). At the outset of his analyses, Gaut writes, 'In developing philosophical theories about art, it is important not just to formulate them with care and to consider their general merits, but also to test them against one's responses to particular artworks' (14). And he continues, 'It is customary to perform this testing by marshalling a parade of examples, quickly sketched and peremptorily dismissed' (14). This would be an accurate description of Carroll's use of *American Psycho* and support my impression of how examples are often used in the philosophy of art. Yet, despite Gaut's candid acknowledgement, when it comes to the 'merited response' theory he does not test it against his Bathsheba example or, even better, develop the theory alongside it. The precise terms and claims of the theory are not derived out of the example. These two different sections of the book are oddly dislocated (especially considering the professed intention). Gaut also writes that 'any adequate theory in aesthetics should be able to account for complex cases, and account for them in detail' (14-15). Gaut's account of the Bathsheba case is indeed 'in detail' and his evaluation

makes sense, but it is not apparent, nor does he explain, why the case is 'complex' or provides a robust test (unlike the *DPS* case). His account makes the evaluation appear relatively straightforward.

I wonder if we might try to conceive of 'the example' differently, along with the associated activity of 'finding' and 'providing' supportive examples. Or, if it helps, perhaps we could try, for a little while at least, not to think in terms of examples. I am not merely hoping for better examples when we philosophise about art, or even examples which are better mined, but for a fundamental reorientation. Rather than turning to an artwork on the occasions when it suited, we could stay turned toward it while we philosophise. It might be argued that *DPS* still operates as an example for Perkins, an example, indeed, of badness in film. No doubt it will be rare, perhaps impossible, for the direction of travel to be *all* bottom-up, and I acknowledge there is a chicken-and-egg aspect to this. Nevertheless, even if it is not a pure demonstration of what I am proposing, Perkins' paper on *DPS* offers a material rebalancing. He keeps the film in play as he makes his larger claims and this also enables, as we have seen, more specific ones. Although it might be true that Perkins has some idea of this species of badness in advance, it is also true, that his analysis emerges from a particular aesthetic experience of the film which has compelled him to make the case and stimulated him to explore and articulate relevant detail (partly in opposition to a standard view). Although the sequence from the film may be illustrating a prior idea of badness, it also appears to be contributing to the formulation of the idea, such that the larger claims about badness appear inextricable from the manifesting instance. The actual film is an important part of the process and hard to disentangle from what is a stake. It is not simply serving a big idea.

For Carroll and Gaut, the artworks appear to serve their theories, or perhaps, at best, are introduced to test them, in which case they are still serving a theoretical endeavour. It is also worth mentioning that they serve those theories within the larger encompassing framework of a debate. It may be bewildering to those outside the philosophy of art that two of its leading philosophers have found themselves needing

to insist that moral and aesthetic values may interact significantly.[16] Arguably one of the reasons that Carroll and Gaut's theories settle at this place of seemingly banal generality is because they are restricted by the format of a disciplinary debate.[17] It is not easy for them to move out of the relatively narrow space where the debate takes place to the wider space which remains untouched and where there is much philosophising left to do. Because their contributions to the debate are concerned to present a favoured position, in a quasi-polemical way, representing and advocating it while rebutting other positions, there is a tendency to overstate *and* water down to maintain viability. They are not well placed or well equipped to investigate artworks nimbly or let their philosophy evolve from matters arising.

I concur with Kendall Walton's characterisation of the methodology of contemporary philosophy of art as mainly theory construction (whilst not sharing his satisfaction with it) (2007: 150-152). Carroll and Gaut offer theories of value interaction, whereas Perkins does not, and this is another key methodological difference. Perkins is not attempting to develop or propose a theory of 'badness' for all cases. He is illuminating what he understands to be a species of it.[18] Walton claims, 'Theories are supposed to illuminate particulars, to explain and help us understand the data on which they are based […]. If we want to investigate particulars, we had better be constructing theories about them' (156). Aside from Walton's disconcertingly coercive 'we had better be', he appears to be mistaken in many ways: Carroll and Gaut's theories of value interaction are not shown by them to 'illuminate particulars'. Nor do they appear to put us in a good position to handle 'particulars'–for example the 'particulars' of *DPS* –should we wish to apply their theories. Interesting, Gaut 'investigates' the 'particulars' of the Bathsheba paintings long before he offers his theory; the illumination of them precedes, and does not depend on, his theory (in fact it seems extraneous). Even if one regards the theories as illuminating in some respect, their theoretical type does not seem designed to illuminate 'particulars'. Moreover, we can 'investigate particulars' in all sorts of ways, and philosophise about them, without 'constructing theories about them' (as Ludwig Wittgenstein

argued, as Perkins shows, and as we repeatedly do in many of our engagements with artworks).[19]

The case for a philosophy of art rooted in criticism

The theoretical method that Carroll and Gaut engage in, and which Walton characterises, appears to be too overarching and absolute to 'illuminate particulars'. This is because it is not *situated* to be responsive to the intricacy and variety of artworks and the varying aesthetic experiences that accompany them. *If* we want a philosophy of art to be responsive in this way–and some may not–then we will need a more agile approach. The sort of criticism that Perkins engages in is more likely to 'illuminate particulars'–although not necessarily if poorly executed–because it emerges from, and is directed towards, artworks. It is intentionally fine-grained, homing in on a scene to 'illuminate particulars' regarding editing, camera movement, dramatic coordination, and sound / image relation. Dominic Lopes labels this approach to the philosophy of art 'critical demonstration' where 'rich descriptions of actual examples of art criticism' are given (2016: 658). He gives the example of Alexander Nehamas' book on beauty *Only a Promise of Happiness* (2007):

Nehamas arrives at an alternative conception of beauty through a thoughtful engagement with specific art works, which supply a vocabulary giving voice to an apt description of beauty […]. What [Nehamas] […] means is only fully expressed in the context of what he has to say about his chosen art works, and especially about his enduring fascination with Manet's *Olympia*. Nehamas offers a critical demonstration whose proof lies in the experience it gives us of these works. For […] Nehamas, one way philosophy is done is by doing a kind of art criticism. (2016: 661)

Lopes admits to the 'relative rarity of this kind of writing in analytic aesthetics and the philosophy of art' and my sense too is that Nehamas' book, which I admire, is an unusual contribution (662). Lopes' explanation for the rarity is that this approach requires specialist skills which humanist art scholars might have, but which most philosophers do not: 'few philosophers happen to have the training or temperament for

writing successful art criticism' (665). He says that they are 'outclassed by scholars in departments of literature, music, fine arts, film, and theatre' and consequently they would be better pursuing the commonly pursued non-critical route (665). While I agree with his characterisation, I do not draw the same conclusion as Lopes for the following reasons: 1) if philosophers wish to pursue the philosophy of art there is no reason why they could not learn some of the skills involved in the close criticism of art (in the way that humanities scholars often have to learn some philosophy); 2) even if they did not reach the same proficiency–in the way a humanities scholar seeking to develop their philosophical skills, such as myself, might not–it still would be helpful and even essential for them because the sort of claims they wish to make, and the concepts they wish to use, while travelling on their 'non-critical route' are not independent of the data that criticism provides; and 3) short of critically analysing art themselves they could use pre-existing criticism as their data, by writers such as Perkins for example, as I have done. They might use several pieces of criticism about the same work.[20]

In his description of Nehamas' method, Lopes astutely picks up on the way 'the art works […] supply a vocabulary', and indeed this alternative method provides linguistic benefits. Concepts can more naturally emerge from the bottom up rather than being created out of generalised reflection, detached from the object, and imposed from the top down. Even if a concept's meaning was relatively elastic it would be delimited by the occasions which prompted its use. There would be less referential disorientation. Consider how Carroll's use of 'success' and 'succeed' is exposed as faulty in the way he deploys it once we consider the criticism on *DPS*. For example, he claims: 'Thus, in large measure, the aesthetic success of an artwork is response dependent, i.e. the work depends on eliciting certain mandated responses, if it is to succeed on its own terms' (1998: 420). Perkins shows that although *DPS*' devices can be deemed a success in achieving sought-after effects (and perhaps achieving ticket sales and popularity), this does not mean that the film succeeds in other respects either morally or aesthetically. It would be fascinating to know whether Carroll would have used 'success' in this

way had he been working from an actual artwork and had he been responsive to its various accomplishments. Even if he had still wished to use it, the notion of 'success' could be tested against the aesthetic experience of the work, and either discarded or modified, or at the very least adequately assessed to bring out the complications involved in its application. Such conceptual clarification and finessing would be part of the philosophical work. Moreover, any investigation based on criticism would have a larger pool of concepts. Perkins short treatment of *DPS* makes us alert to, and offers up to contemplation and conversation, a range of concepts used morally – for example inflation, manipulation, gratification, and simplification–showing when we might apply them and what they may look like in relation to artistic expression (and each other). Carroll and Gaut's theories tend to be built around a few words which dominate–for example, 'prescribe', 'merit', 'uptake'–and are applied come what may. Even if they challenge or finesse concepts–for example substituting 'merited' for 'warranted' – they are done so within the circumscribed terms of the debate rather than the plentiful terms generated by the aesthetic experience of an artwork. They are influenced by internal compatibility rather than external correspondence and reward.[21]

Artworks and the experiences of them are active and a philosophy of art integrated with criticism could reflect the flexibility and dynamism. Because the moment-by-moment qualitive reality of our aesthetic experience would move the philosophy, it would help it to be less static. One would engage in a *process* of moral delibe*ration* and aesthetic eval-u*ation* with different value-pertinent aspects coming to light as one investigates over time. This deliberation and evaluation would also be dependent on the philosopher-viewer's imagination. Carroll and Gaut often talk about moral judgement as if it were simply a matter of straightforwardly recognising and applying an accepted moral rule to an artwork: 'this is a moral defect which therefore affects uptake'. Taking the *American Psycho* example once again: '[Ellis] failed to anticipate that the readers would not be able to secure uptake of his themes in the face of the unprecedented violence. He invited the audience to view the murders as political satire and that

was an invitation they could not morally abide' (Carroll 1996: 232). It is assumed here that using 'unprecedented violence' as 'political satire' is something 'the reader' 'could not morally abide'. My experience from film study is that things are rarely this unambiguous and indisputable. Consideration is often required for moral evaluation, with assessment taking place within a range of contexts, for example, dramatic, narrative, symbolic, metaphorical, compositional, tonal, authorial, and cultural. To be done fairly and well this takes a creative imaginative capacity. Different outcomes are possible and might lead to outright disagreement. Mark Johnson has elegantly made the case for understanding much of moral judgement in this way:

[T]he process is imaginative insofar as it involves ordering or structuring representations in a new manner […]. To sum up, moral judgment involves imagination in several related ways: (1) Just to recognize that some rule might be relevant to our present case requires that we organize various details and select out some as more significant than others. (2) We must also imaginatively weigh similarities and differences between the situation at hand and others where a certain rule proved to be applicable. This skill of weighing requires an educated imagination and cannot be usefully formalized. (3) Even if we have discovered a relevant rule, it will typically involve underlying metaphors, the understanding of which is not a rule-governed process. (4) Finally, the situation as I grasp it here and now is not the same as similar cases, so I must tailor the metaphorically understood moral precept to this particular state of affairs, and, in so doing, I make the situation determinate in a novel way. The complex imaginative process I have just described is, in many ways, more similar to what Kant called 'reflective' judgment. (1985: 276-277)

In line with their approach to moral judgement, Carroll and Gaut's theories are similarly inflexible about how they see artworks operating. Criticism however is responsive to the different ways different works address their viewers. For example, according to Carroll artworks 'depend […] on eliciting certain mandated responses' (1998: 420) and for Gaut they depend on 'prescribing certain responses towards the

events' (2007: 233). Yet, many fiction films seek to dramatise situations which will be open to a variety of responses and some films are actively trying not to 'mandate' or 'prescribe responses towards […] events.' It is possible Carroll and Gaut might argue, albeit risking further dilution of their theories' relevance and import, that such films are simply mandating or prescribing a 'variety of responses', but there would be a difference between a film which I felt was mandating a 'variety of responses' and one that, say, might invite it, or achieve it without directly seeking it. Although he does not use the word, Perkins thought *DPS was* prescriptive, but the implication for Perkins is that this is a severe limitation of the work. Indeed, I often criticise works for being prescriptive, for example films that are point-making or those that insist on a particular emotional reaction such as jerking tears. Even if we leave the evaluative implications to one side, 'prescriptive' is only one word amongst many I might use to describe an artwork's address if my aim was to accurately characterise it. Gaut's theory, however, implies that it is non-contingent and that it is a necessary feature of artworks (that they prescribe something).[22]

To make the sort of arguments they want to make, inevitably perhaps, Carroll and Gaut treat films as affecting us automatically, in a direct, immediate way, and in doing so they assume or apply one type of artistic expression and one type of response to it. Perkins' analysis of *DPS* appears to suggest that its subject matter and meaning are dramatically *enacted*: they are diffused through the images and sounds. Subject matter and meaning are embedded–physically, materially, metaphorically, symbolically, and thematically–such that their expression is indirect and reception, for example interpretation or emotional reaction, will be complicated and varied.[23] Instead of assuming or applying, our understandings of expression, and ontology more generally, can be derived from the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of actual artworks (by actual viewers through criticism).

Assuming a particular type of response to art returns us to a basic problem with Carroll and Gaut's theories: their dependence on a speculative notion of 'the viewer' ('the audience', 'the reader' or similar). Either all viewers are homogenised ('the viewer') or standardised ('the average viewer'), or privileged, singled out to become the chosen few ('the morally sensitive viewer'). Much of the theory is built upon whether 'the viewer' is absorbed, able to take something up, feels something is merited, and so on. Notice how in his *American Psycho* example Carroll speaks on behalf of what readers 'would' or 'could' do such that '[Ellis] failed to anticipate that *the readers would not be able to secure uptake* of his themes in the face of the unprecedented violence. He invited the audience to view the murders as political satire and that was an invitation *they could not morally abide*' (1996: 232; my emphasis). 'The reader' is quite possibly a front for the philosopher's own reading. Louise Hanson correctly critiques the value interaction debate for its reliance on 'indirect' (which include 'qua') strategies (2020). For example, she states that, 'All that Carroll's argument shows […] is that moral features *qua something else* are relevant: a moral feature is relevant only insofar as it also qualifies as an inhibitor of uptake' (217). It is not, however, only the indirection that is the problem, but the detour taken: what Hanson does not highlight is that the indirection is via an abstracted reader.

Hanson does argue, again correctly in my view, that 'we should start taking direct strategies seriously' (218), but things become less clear as she continues to make the case:

[Parallel debates in the Philosophy of Art] tend to appeal to critical and appreciative practice–to the art-critical judgements we, in fact, make. (Do we tend to rate a work more highly as art on the basis of its originality? Do we tend to take cognitive value to bear positively on our overall assessment of a work?) So why not do this in the case of ethical value? Why not ask: do we tend to take ethical value as relevant when assessing a work's overall artistic merit? […]. As a methodological principle, we should try to adopt a theory that is in accordance with what we, pretheoretically, think on an issue. (220)

These sentences show that Hanson's apparent challenge to the method only goes so far. What sort of 'critical and appreciative practice' is being referred to in the first sentence of the quotation? Although I am not immersed in the 'parallel debates', I have enough knowledge of them to know that they do not 'tend' to engage in the sort of critical practice I am advocating, and Lopes also confirms this. Hanson's 'practice' could refer to a wide variety of behaviours–for example, everyday practices or professional practices which themselves vary –and indeed the dash runs 'critical and appreciative practice' into 'art-critical judgements' misleadingly suggesting their equivalence. 'We' can make 'art-critical judgements'–'The wastebasket scene in *DPS* is inspiring' – and not engage in the sort of critical process adopted by Perkins that might usefully reveal an artwork (for philosophical investigation). Moreover, given that critical practice rarely becomes a core part of the philosophising, it is not clear what 'appeal to' amounts to.

'Tend' is used again within the parenthetic questions and this is revealing because most 'critical and appreciative practice' of the sort I am advocating would not establish tendencies about evaluative criteria such as originality or cognitive value. Claims would depend on the work, and the experience of the work, being considered: sometimes originality will be a salient or a positive criterion, and sometimes it will be neither. Hanson goes on to write about 'adopt[ing] a theory', and although the philosophy of art can do this, I am suggesting that it does not have to, and this will at least free it from the considerable burden of making 'pretheoretical' thoughts about artworks accord with theories about artworks.[24] Note also Hanson's phrase 'in accordance with what we […] think'. The use of 'we' here–and 'we' is mentioned six times in this quotation–assumes that there are *a priori*, agreed upon, 'pretheoretical' positions in relation to the experience of artworks that can be implicitly trusted and on which we can then base theories. Yet whose 'pretheoretical' thoughts should be prioritised in trying to understand *DPS*? (Furthermore, by appealing to her 'we', Hanson is *also* relying on an indirect strategy to make her case.)

Walton in his essay on philosophical methodology writes that 'theories […] [are] designed to explain and help us understand a body of data' and 'philosophers […] specialize in devising theories, or choosing among alternative theories, after the data are in' (2007: 151). Leaving aside the move to theorise the data, as distinct from other ways we might philosophise in relation to it, it is not clear what this 'body of data' amounts to, nor is it clear when we might conclude we have reached the satisfactory point at which the 'data are in'. Is the 'body of data' a particular segment of an artwork, a whole

artwork, a corpus, an artform, or a generalised idea of artworks, and by whom is it collated? Even within a segment, as in the wastepaper basket scene of *DPS*, there is a range of data, much of it salient though not obviously or immediately so, which needs to be observed and interpreted (and interpreted to be observed). Walton goes on to write, 'there is a body of very ordinary knowledge, gleaned from everyone's everyday experience of the world, which seems pretty secure, and that constitutes a large part of the data that philosophers' theories are designed to illuminate (152). The *DPS* example alone suggest this is rather fanciful. What is the 'body of very ordinary knowledge', that 'constitutes' the data of artworks, or the data of films, or even one film like *DPS*? What 'constitutes' 'everyone's […] experience' when individual experiences of *DPS* differ?[25]

A philosophy of art rooted in criticism would not assume that we could know an artwork or a viewing experience in advance (nor know in advance about the features of art and the experience of them). It would recognise that different aspects of works will be brought out by different viewers / critics. A work's identity would not be certified prior to the philosopher's individual experience, investigation, and critical articulation.[26] 'The viewer' in this method would be a real person–for example, V.F. Perkins or whichever philosopher-critic was offering their appraisal–rather than a fantasised or ventriloquised one. The perspective of this real person would be based on carefully analysing the work and their evaluation, commonly intertwined, would be offered for my assessment, and yours. You or I could then develop our own philosophical investigations accordingly in response. A philosophy of art rooted in criticism would understand that criticism is a form of 'perspicuous presentation', in Wittgenstein's terms, 'whereby something that had always been in plain view, and yet overlooked by us, when properly arranged (perspicuously presented) is brought to our attention and strikes us significantly and as never before' (Moyal-Sharrock 2016: 244). I have witnessed students and conference delegates changing their minds about *DPS* after hearing Perkins' 'perspicuous presentation', and I have seen versions of this dawning as tutor and students analyse film sequences together over the course of the seminar. The artwork appears to change, or what we understand the artwork to be changes; we see and experience it differently. As Aaron Ridley says, this is 'a process of discovery that may well have no determinate end' (2003: 214). A philosophy of art which recognised this would have to embrace the indeterminacy of the work and the experience of it, knowing that the substance of any such philosophy would benefit from the various and perspicuously derived data.

One of the consequences of this approach would be to push the philosophy of art back in the direction of aesthetics where criticism is the report of the aesthetic experience of the artwork. The separation of the philosophy of art and aesthetics may be, or has been, convenient, but I think, and hope to have shown, that there is a need for them to come together.[27] This is certainly true for areas such as value interaction where matters of value, and in particular aesthetic value, are involved. Yet, it might also be helpful for investigations into, for example, ontology, fiction, emotion, depiction, intention, and interpretation, where *working out* from concentrated aesthetic experiences may open these areas up to unexpected insight. In all these topics dear to the philosophy of art, artworks are often assumed to be objects that invite an aesthetic experience, and it matters to the topics, to their sense, and to their purpose, that they do. Yet the aesthetic experience is not an integral part of the way the topic is addressed. In particular, the removal of the evaluative part of the aesthetic experience is an absence that at best limits an investigation and at worst irreparably distorts our understanding of a work. Imagine how artificial, misleading, and barren it would be if Perkins investigated, say, fiction, emotion, or intention in *DPS* without the evaluative component – summarised by him as 'badness'–that is intrinsic to the experience and the identity of the film (as he sees and hears it).[28]

In conclusion, a philosophical approach rooted in criticism, and for which I have been arguing could, in principle, be profitable in the following ways. Firstly, it could responsively evaluate how a range of different aspects of an artwork interact, and this would aid thinking about individual works. Secondly, and in turn, this thinking about individual works could enable more general investigations into features which cross artworks and would take the form of revealing similarities and differences through instructive comparison (rather than proposing conclusive, catch-all theories). Perkins reveals not only the way that *DPS* is (morally) bad, but the ways in which a film may be (morally) bad from the ways in which *DPS* is bad: the way in which, for example, hypocrisy in a film may arise from image / sound contradiction. Thirdly, and finally, this approach could also be attuned to a range of meta-concerns about our critical engagements and articulations, for example: the different ways artworks are addressed; the processes of perception, description, and recommendation; the form and logic of argumentation; the nature of evidence; the scrutiny of assumptions, emotions, and prejudices; and the weighting of features and criteria. Because the investigation into these concerns would be based in, and inform, the close analysis of artworks, this would be an analytical philosophy of art also worthy of the name.

Andrew Klevan

Andrew Klevan is Professor of Film Aesthetics at the University of Oxford. He is the author of *Disclosure of the Everyday: Undramatic Achievement in Narrative Film* (2000), *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation* (2005), *Barbara Stanwyck* (2013), *Aesthetic Evaluation and Film* (2018), and the co-editor of *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (2011).

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Notes

1. By 'Philosophy of Art' (from now on without capitalisation) I am referring to an academic branch of philosophy, the research of which takes place typically in the *British Journal of Aesthetics, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and some other journals primarily situated in the analytic, anglophone tradition and which commonly, if not exclusively, operate by a particular methodology. I am not referring to the widespread and diverse philosophising about art and artworks that takes place in disciplines dedicated to the arts (such as english literature, art history, or film studies). I would like to thank Britt Harrison for her penetrating scrutiny of this essay, and her invaluable advice and suggestions.

2. Arguably, the word 'method' is not apposite in relation to Perkins' work if one understands the word to be describing something systematic and regulated. This reasons for this will become clear over the course of this essay. I use 'method' in a looser sense as meaning something more like a way of proceeding. And the investigations into the way he proceeds in his academic work are I think fairly described as methodological.

3. As I am a film specialist, and as this is a film journal, I will emphasise the art of film in this essay. However, the claims about method are more widely applicable. For an extended, dedicated account of what criticism is and what it involves see Klevan (2018, especially 'Part II: What is Aesthetic Criticism?': 59-166) or Klevan (2019).

4. The original publication may be consulted for all relevant images.

5. In the next few paragraphs, I will couple Perkins' criticism on the film with my own. My contributions grow out of his and are intended to accentuate his points.

6. It should not be assumed that by focusing on the positions of Carroll and Gaut that I prefer, or wish to ally myself with, other positions in the debate because I do not (even though they may include insights I find worthwhile). See McGregor (2014) for a bibliography of the value interaction debate.

7. When I use the terms 'formal' or 'formally' in this essay, I am referring to the form of the artwork: its shape, structure, configuration, and presentation (the form it takes). I am not referring to the observation of conventional forms of, say, ceremony, behaviour, dress, or writing (and which would contrast to the casual).

8. For full disclosure, I also thought the film was bad on a first viewing. In fact, I discussed the film with V.F. Perkins as a film student before I knew his views. Nevertheless, Perkins' analysis sharpened and expanded my understanding of its problems. See Richard Combs (1989) for another instructively dissenting critical viewpoint which dovetails with Perkins'.

9. Available at https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097165/criticreviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt (Accessed: 08/11/2021)

10. Available at https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097165/criticreviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt (Accessed: 08/11/2021)

11. Available at https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097165/reviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt (Accessed: 08/11/2021)

12. I am not sure where Carroll has derived his criteria for aesthetic success because they are not standard in the literature on aesthetic evaluation. See Klevan (2018) for a discussion of the literature.

13. It is worth noting that Perkins found the film, rather than the audience, 'corrupt', and presumably he was not beyond susceptibility, if not to this film, then to others.

14. The matter of 'the viewer' or 'the audience' is a fundamental problem for Carroll and Gaut's theories and I will return to it later in this essay.

15. These two aims are not necessarily at odds because the reconciliation is achievable. It has been achieved in many good film melodramas and is an accomplishment that Perkins frequently celebrates in his film criticism. Investigating the failure in *DPS* is a way of distinguishing and understanding the accomplishment elsewhere.

16. It seems clear that they do. Much less clear is how the interaction does, or should, affect the evaluation of a work, or what

aspects, moral or otherwise, will be emphasised or prioritised. This will depend upon the nature of the artwork, the context of production and reception, the disposition of the viewer, and the sort of claims about the work, and the different parts or aspects of the work, they are wishing to make. It is worth noting that in discussions about art, it is all too common and frustrating to see an emphasis, or even an exclusive concentration, on moral aspects where presentational matters are side-lined. Moral considerations, as Daniel Jacobsen writes, 'take over the entirety of the evaluative space' (1997: 156). I suspect that this frustration has contributed to the advocacy of autonomist-style positions, and as someone who specialises in studying the form and style of films, I am sympathetic. This is, however, something Perkins does not do in his account of *DPS* where he keeps the moral and formal considerations in balance. In Perkins' work on aesthetics, moral and aesthetic values inevitably do affect each other because he understands 'the aesthetic' to be referring to the way things present themselves and as such these things will have a moral dimension. Indeed, attention to the work's quality of presentation, its character, and its attitude to its material and its audience–including how it appears to imagine or conceive of its audience–are underestimated areas of contemporary moral evaluation, and insufficiently acknowledged, as far as I can tell, in the value interaction literature. Yet such attention is familiar in the British tradition of criticism–it was an important aspect to F.R. Leavis' literary criticism–and this would be an example of where the interests and insights of criticism could inform discussion in the philosophy of art (even if it does not wish to practice criticism itself). In Perkins' critique of *DPS* it is not necessarily the basic ingredients of the work that are morally at fault, for example, the inspirational teacher, but rather the way the teacher is presented in the scene through performance, camerawork, sound, and editing. The work has morally bad qualities akin to ones that we might attribute to the behaviour of human beings or in Perkins' terms has 'the attributes of bad communications': it is inflated, manipulative, and hypocritical. See also Leavis ([1952] 1968) on sincerity in artistic expression which has some fascinating similarities in its critical approach to Perkins' treatment of *DPS*. For relevant contemporary commentaries on the Leavis essay, see Blackburn (2010) and Scruton (2009).

17. Overall, I have not found the contributions to the value interaction debate helpful in understanding, and managing,

the evaluative dilemmas that arise with multi-faceted artworks. Hence my desire for the philosophy to work through artworks, responsive to their configurations. (I apologise if I have missed a contribution to the debate that did do this.) Let me offer the hypothetical example of my experience of a rap song (which bears some relation to some real experiences I have had). I am listening to a rap song which I consider to consist of extraordinary formal and stylistic achievements in terms of melody, rhyme, production, and performance. However, I find some of the lyrics abusive and demeaning to women and some homophobic, and these are deplorable attitudes (to me). Asserting that moral defects are aesthetic defects, or sometimes are, does not seem to address the problem I face. The songs have plenty of formal merits, both in parts of the songs that do and do not contain the ethical attitudes I deplore. Although the song's moral defectiveness will affect my evaluation, it will not necessarily prevent the 'uptake' of the whole song–a crudely all-or-nothing response–and perhaps should not (even though it could and should for some listeners). This will be especially true in artworks where I consider the moral flaw less deplorable or more undecided (as is often the case). There will also be those occasions when a moral flaw once thought to be easily forgivable, whether rightly or not, is now considered more significant. Indeed, one can never be certain about what would count as morally relevant to an evaluation. Critical theory and cultural studies, for example, have alerted us to moral defects in artworks which through normalisation have gone unseen or been mistakenly deemed insignificant. There may also be disagreement over whether certain content is morally meritorious or not. Some listeners considered the hip hop band N.W.A' s attack on the Los Angeles police to be a moral defect, where others felt it to be a moral imperative. Moreover, my hypothetical rap song may be morally good in one way, or even in many ways (sensitive to matters of race and economic inequality) and not in another (insensitive to matters of gender and sexual orientation). In addition to its formal musical qualities and other aesthetic achievements such as, say, the imaginative development of its genre, it offers (1) a social critique of oppressive institutions (2) incorporates, and represents, ways of life marginalised and misunderstood in mainstream discourse (3) envisages how Afro-American protest might proceed and (4) lets penetrating voices, previously unheard or silenced, sing. And it has some lyrical content which I think demeans women. These are

challenging and troubling matters in the evaluation of artworks, and they are not easy to negotiate. Therefore, it could be beneficial to have a philosophical debate which would proceed by having several philosophers addressing a selection of the same songs, each working through how the material might be interpreted, assessed and weighted, alert to the handling of criteria and other 'meta' aspects, and responding to each other's responses.

18. I should note that Perkins has himself offered theories in his work most notably in his book *Film as Film* (1972).

19. See Klevan (2020) for an extended advocacy of a philosophical approach to film study which is non-theoretical.

20. No single piece of criticism will offer an objectively true report of the artwork which should rest without amplification, supplement, or challenge. Perkins' criticism offers a particular aesthetic experience that leads to a way of grappling with matters and concepts arising, and then to dialogue and further investigations, critical and philosophical.

21. For more on finding language appropriate to the artwork and the experience of it see Klevan (2020).

22. See Stear (2020) for an extended discussion of the problems regarding Gaut's attachment to the idea of 'prescription'.

23. For example, as pointed out earlier, I find the cacophonous ripping of the books and the insistent order to do so in *DPS* reminiscent of other atrocious behaviours in history. I assume that this is an unintended evocation and therefore revealing about how the film has not thought through the ramifications of its rhetoric. However, this evocation would not be necessarily obvious to everybody, or accepted even if pointed out.

24. Although I understand the context in which this word is offered, I am uneasy with classifying thoughts as 'pretheoretical' as if they were simply waiting to be theorised or could only be conceptualised in terms of forthcoming theorisation.

25. Regarding the improvement of data, I would not wish to make the move that is often proposed at this point, which is to be more objectively empirical, making use of social surveys, questionnaires, interviews, experiments, psychological tests, observations, and similar. This method would be inadequate in providing the form of disclosure required for the type of philosophising proposed.

26. Aaron Ridley (2003), in what I consider to be an important essay about the methodology of the philosophy of art, takes a similar position to my own regarding the matter of musical

ontology. He argues that characterising the identity of musical works will only be relevantly meaningful if pursued through evaluative criticism.

27. Such a realignment has been explicitly and implicitly argued for in the work of Roger Scruton and Peter Lamarque. For example, see Scruton (2007) and Lamarque (2014; 2020)

28. Ridley makes a similar point about evaluative engagement regarding musical ontology when he writes:

The question whether this or that performance, or style of performance, is actually any good […] is scarcely raised. If one is serious about the philosophy of music, the last fact should strike one as scandalous […]. [The] indifference to genuinely evaluative issues […] presupposes a sharp distinction between what it is to take a philosophical interest in music and what it is to take a critical interest in it. It is true that such a distinction can be drawn. It is true, that is, that the philosophy of music is not identical to music criticism. But the distinction is not, and cannot be made to be, a sharp one, for unless one's philosophical engagement with music is driven by, and is of a sort that might pay dividends for, one's musical experience–including one's evaluative experience–there is no obvious sense in which one is engaged in philosophical aesthetics at all (2003: 214).

V.F. PERKINS

V.F. Perkins and television

In this article, I am interested in the ways in which the work of V.F. Perkins can usefully inform our understanding and appreciation of television drama. My contention is that there is value in applying Perkins' ideas to the study of television, and in making that connection an explicit critical and conceptual ambition. The following discussion lays out some of the groundwork in arriving at that position, and examines its congruity with Television Studies more broadly. Ultimately, the article seeks to explore the extent to which our appreciation of television's special characteristics can be enriched by evaluating some of its qualities in the context of Perkins' scholarship.[1]

In setting out these tentative proposals, it is not my intention to claim that television criticism has been entirely or egregiously ignorant to Perkins' writing or, indeed, that similarities in approaches do not already exist.[2] On the surface at least, there is a correlation, beginning roughly at the start of the twenty-first century, between the sustained resurgence of interest in Perkins' critical legacy and a turn in Television Studies towards some of the methods and approaches also found within his work. Whilst it is somewhat impractical to pin any specific dates on a renewed investment in Perkins' film criticism, it is nevertheless pertinent to note that a

conference organised by John Gibbs and Douglas Pye at the University of Reading, UK, in March 2000 entitled 'Style and Meaning: Textual Analysis – Interpretation – Mise-en-Scene' can be regarded as a pivotal moment in terms of actively and strategically bringing together a group of scholars who shared a dedication to the close scrutiny of film style, which had been a hallmark of Perkins' critical writing.[3] Perkins gave a keynote address at the conference, was 'a tireless contributor' to proceedings (Verhoeven, 2000), and his landmark essay 'Where is the World?: The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction' features centrally in Gibbs and Pye's edited collection, *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film* (2005), that arose from it. The timing of the conference falls towards the beginning of a period in which a range of work emerged that was connected and, indeed, committed to Perkins and his critical approach.[4] Gibbs and Pye were dedicated and energetic proponents: in addition to their edited volume, for example, they launched the *Close-Up* series for Wallflower (2006-09), which collected together monographs that offered sustained close analyses of particular films, and made style-centred criticism their focus.[5] Gibbs' own monograph within the first publication of the series, *Filmmakers' Choices*, makes an explicit connection to Perkins' work, drawing upon his essay 'Moments of Choice' ([1981] 2020) as a key catalyst for the ensuing discussion (Gibbs [2006] 2015: 5). Similarly, Gibbs' 2002 book *Mise-en-scene: Film Style and Interpretation* cites Perkins as an influential source, as does Jacob Leigh's monograph *The Cinema of Ken Loach: Art in the Service of the People* of the same year, and, published shortly before these titles, Andrew Klevan's *Disclosure of the Everyday: Undramatic Achievement in Narrative Film* (2000) emphasises the strong importance of Perkins' critical approach to the book's analytical stance.[6]

Within the first *Close-Up* collection, Gibbs' *Filmmakers' Choices* sits alongside Deborah Thomas' extended analysis of a single television title, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997-2000; UPN, 2001-2003) in a monograph entitled *Reading Buffy*. It is a simple endeavour to note the coming together of film and television within the work of two scholars committed to the sustained scrutiny of style.[7] Thomas goes slightly further, however, in her description of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as

'cinematic television' and (more controversially, perhaps, for reasons that will be referred to later) 'television aspiring to the condition of film' (Thomas [2006] 2014: 7). Whilst Thomas' analysis does attend to *Buffy*'s status as television, and the concomitant distinctions from film, it is nevertheless striking that her critical approach is aligned confidently with Gibbs' work on film in *Close-Up*. By implication, television is deemed equally suitable for close analysis, to the extent that its suitability does not necessarily need to be explained or, indeed, justified at length. (Instead, the suitability of this particular show can find justification through Thomas' fluent analysis of it.) That notion chimes with work undertaken elsewhere at a similar time. Returning to Gibbs and Pye's 2005 edited collection, *Style and Meaning*, for example, Sarah Cardwell contributes a chapter on television, entitled '"Television aesthetics" and close analysis: style mood and engagement in *Perfect Strangers* (Stephen Poliakoff, 2001)' (Cardwell having presented at the University of Reading 'Style and Meaning' conference in 2000). It is worth observing, firstly, a further instance of television being treated equally and unquestionably alongside film as a subject for close analysis and, secondly, that Cardwell frames her debate around a single television title, *Perfect Strangers*, (as Thomas does with *Buffy*) creating a specific area of focus through the selection of an individual case, just as a majority of equivalent chapters in Gibbs and Pye's collection do in relation to films. Indeed, Cardwell states this unequivocally from the outset: 'Through an exploration of a sequence from *Perfect Strangers*, I hope to be able to offer an engaged critical reflection upon central questions that arise *in this case* [my italics]; these concern mood and engagement, and their intimate connections with style and form' (2005: 180). Cardwell and Thomas' contributions are indicative of a shift towards thinking about television shows in more precise aesthetic detail, and consequently acknowledging that evaluative claims are dependent upon our experience of specific texts, rather than deriving from any pre-existing criteria one might want to impose, or generalised notions of television's overarching qualities. Indeed, Cardwell and Thomas each allow their chosen shows to guide their conclusions, rather than using them only as illustrative tools for broader assertions (consistent with their respective bodies of work in

Television Studies and Film Studies). We would not struggle to recognise these characteristics in aspects of Perkins' writing on film (although, as this article will aim to illustrate, his work certainly invests in overarching conceptual debates too). It is at least of interest to note that the rise of an approach in Television Studies that prioritises the detailed scrutiny of particular shows should coincide with a number of Film Studies scholars utilising Perkins to invigorate their own close analytical work.[8] As a consequence, sets of critical investments are shared across both fields within a period of time, and it is possible to relate these directly or indirectly to Perkins' critical legacy. This pattern continues from that point in the early twenty-first century onwards and, in Television Studies, I would suggest that we can trace Perkins' influence, to greater and lesser extents, in the more recent work of writers like Alex Clayton, Lucy Fife Donaldson, Elliott Logan, Steven Peacock, and James Zborowski; a group that also represents a trend for scholars to move between film and television and, in these cases, to carry over the practice of close analysis comfortably between the two.

Finally, a direct and sustained relationship between Perkins' writing and Television Studies can be found in the work of Jason Jacobs. Like Cardwell, Jacobs is a key figure in the drive towards the closer scrutiny of television and the positioning of aesthetic evaluation as a central concern within debates. Among television scholars committed to these approaches, Jacobs has been especially careful to acknowledge Perkins as an inspiration and his writing often shares important guiding interests. We can, I think, see how Jacobs has drawn upon this relationship to enrich his thinking about television, resulting in passages that align quite closely with the kinds of claims Perkins makes across his work. In a seminal article, 'Issues of judgement and value in television studies', Jacobs writes:

> We need to recognise that our criteria for judgement are in part derived by defining the nature of our involvement with specific texts. As with the analysis of all art, understanding that involvement requires above all concentrated study: minimally, the close observation of texts in order to

support the claims and judgements we may wish to make about them. (2001: 430-31)[9]

These words are reminiscent of the position that Perkins articulates in *Film as Film*. We might recall, for example, chapters like 'The World and Its Image,' in which claims for the impact of aesthetic choices upon the ontological reality of films are supported and illustrated through a series of precise accounts of moments from a range of examples, culminating in a landmark analysis of the shower scene from *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and its relationship to that film's wider artistic composition (1972: 71-115). If Jacobs' assertions sound uncontroversial today, with a significant number of scholars choosing to follow the course that he outlines, it is important to bear in mind that, in 2001, this wasn't an especially widespread approach in Television Studies[10] (just as Perkins' dedication to aesthetic evaluation was not replicated in abundance among critics and scholars at the time of *Film as Film*'s publication[11]).

Credibility, shape and significance

I am mindful that moving towards a suggestion that Perkins' work could have a useful relationship to the study of television might be construed as an attempt to resolve or even 'solve' television by making it fit a model designed for film. In this configuration, television becomes the lesser medium and, possibly, Television Studies becomes the secondary discipline to Film Studies. Equally, I am conscious that references to Perkins might be read as a regression to older critical approaches, and that the endeavour could be seen to curtail the advancement of academic debate. It is worth taking these concerns seriously, and to reflect sincerely upon what happens to television, and to Television Studies, when we incorporate the work of figures like Perkins into our thinking. Is it possible that considering television in relation to other art forms (such as film) and using writing about those forms (such as Perkins' work) may enrich our understanding of television,

rather than automatically diminishing its status? Might a consideration of those other forms, those other writings, actually help to strengthen an awareness and appreciation, of television's distinctiveness? And does the act of reaching back to existing critical practices, or sideways to practices from other fields of study (such as Film Studies) necessarily amount to a regression: something that impedes the forward motion of critical inquiry?

Even if we regard the integration of Perkins' ideas within Television Studies as positive, we should be equally mindful of respecting television's inherent qualities within such an undertaking. Care is required if we are to avoid drawing television shows out of shape, or misrepresenting their characteristics, by evaluating them alongside different contexts or from different perspectives. Bearing these concerns in mind, I want to explore how the specificities of a television text might be given clarity and focus when evaluated against ideas contained within *Film as Film*. In this respect, I am attempting a yet more direct association with Perkins' conceptual work and, indeed, my purpose involves the notion that there is value in making this kind of connection explicit (rather than, for example, citing Perkins as an inspiration for a broader critical direction).

I am turning to a well-known example of American television: the multi-season serial drama *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-18), and beginning with the very first moments of the opening episode (a pre-credit sequence). The screen is dark as we hear the squeal of brakes, the smash of glass, and a dog's whimper. In the darkness, the front doors of a property swing open and Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) emerges into the night. He walks forward purposefully, down the few steps leading up to his building, as he searches the area for the source of the disturbance. Frank's journey from background to foreground effectively moves him from a medium-long shot to close-up, his features becoming more distinct as he looms larger within the frame. The camera tracks with him as he looks right, beyond our view, and advances in that direction and down the street, where he is joined by another

man from his neighbourhood. A reverse-shot captures the hurried progress of the two men as they make a discovery: Frank looks beyond the camera, saying 'that's the Wharton's dog', and accompanying sounds of canine distress are audible on the soundtrack. Frank and his companion are framed by a camera positioned almost at street level and, as they look at the dog beyond the frame, they also look at us. We might recognise the straightforward device of attributing status and power to characters by filming them from below (whilst acknowledging that the device does not produce that effect exclusively across all works, as it will always be dependent upon specific context). Here, however, the power relationship between character and viewer is intensified somewhat as we are aligned temporarily with the position of a badly injured animal, while Frank effectively looks down on us. This type of power balance will endure as the scene develops. Assessing the dog, Frank judges that 'he's not going to make it' and sends the neighbour away to summon the owners. A new shot frames Frank's progress as he walks towards the patch of ground where the dog lies and slowly bends down into a crouching pose. The dying dog remains hidden from our view, just below the bottom of the frame, but the animal's yelps and cries are still a prominent feature of the soundtrack. Without being visible to us, the animal's suffering is also filtered through Frank's responses and, again, we might note that he is further established as a controlling presence within the scene, shaping our understanding of events to a significant degree.

From his crouching position, Frank administers comfort to the dog, laying his hands softly upon it and shushing gently before murmuring 'It's OK.' He sighs heavily and then begins to speak: 'There are two kinds of pain. The sort of pain that makes you strong. Or useless pain. The sort of pain that's only suffering.' As he delivers these words, Frank's gaze shifts around in different directions: to right of the frame, then to the left, and finally back down to the dog. There is a contrast between the fixed certainty of his vocal expression, as he calmly voices his assured knowledge of types of pain, and a physical evasiveness as his focus resists settling upon one location. And, suddenly, Frank is looking directly at us. Not because our position happens to be aligned with other elements within the scene, as we were with the dog earlier, but because he is actually talking to *us*. Fixing us in his sights, he

says: 'I have no patience for useless things.' A sharp twisting of his posture conveys that he has forcefully tightened his grip on the animal: he is suffocating the dog. He continues in a composed, efficient tone: 'Moments like this require someone who will act, and do the unpleasant thing. The necessary thing.' As he speaks, his gaze darts around again, beyond the frame, and we now understand this to be surveillance of other potential visitors to the scene, rather than only an act of avoiding the visual ordeal of the dying dog. Is Frank seeking to spare them the ordeal of this moment by checking for their presence? Or is he attempting to keep the violence of his act hidden from the world around him: searching for possible witnesses?

House of Cards allows this ambiguity to linger unresolved and, indeed, Frank's actions can be read as inherently ambiguous throughout the short sequence. There is humanity in his ending of the dog's suffering, taking grim responsibility for a resolution and perhaps sparing others a tribulation. Equally, however, there is a disquietingly sinister quality to the way in which Frank moves seamlessly from a compassionate demeanour to the corporeal brutality of killing an animal by hand, which he performs passionlessly. At a broader level, the show also spares us some vicarious trauma as the dog is withheld from our view. Yet, at the same time, we are brought especially close to Frank's actions, almost to the point of enforced complicity, when he addresses us directly and the camera remains with him for the duration of his mercy killing. In discussions of screen horror, it is often remarked (possibly to the point of cliché) that unseen action, taking place beyond the frame, can be greatly affective because audience members imaginatively fill gaps in visual information. Perhaps something similar occurs in this opening from *House of Cards*, whereby the choice to keep the dog hidden creates a yet more unsettling experience for us, which is intensified as we can still hear the animal's suffering, even if we cannot see it. Certainly, our inherent passivity as viewers is emphasised, as we are directed by Frank's profound influence within a set of compositional features and drawn into a relationship with him that is both intimate and uneasy. The sequence brings us close to him, but this closeness does not necessarily result in a full understanding of his character (underlining a simple fact that increased proximity to a person does not automatically unlock interiority). When we return to an extreme close-up of Frank, and he looks directly at us saying 'There. No more pain', we are perhaps encouraged to regard him even in these early moments, with so many contexts regarding this man and his narrative world yet to be revealed, as a multi-faceted character that resists straightforward definition (as uncomplicatedly villainous, for instance). We might, for example, want to say that his direct address represents moments when his truthful, candid thoughts are expressed and that, in contrast, Frank's interactions with other characters constitute a guarded, self-aware performance. And yet, he delivers the words straight to audience with a mannered poise that suggests Frank is crafting a further layer of composed performance even as he apparently confides in us. In this sense, the injured animal becomes a prop and that final line, 'There. No more pain', marks the flourished completion of an act. As a result, binary distinctions between authentic disclosure and calculated presentation become precarious.

In these opening moments, the show exhibits a set of especially pronounced stylistic choices. The use of direct address, inherited from the original British version of the show (and from the long-established stage convention of the soliloquy in plays like Shakespeare's *Richard III*, which inspired *House of Cards*), has a particular impact. Although television routinely features individuals talking directly to camera, especially in factual shows, the occurrence within a drama can still possess force. The employment of direct address within a fictional world introduces a diegetic space between that world and the audience, which in turn can offer potent opportunities for creative expression. We might say that *House of Cards*, for example, uses direct address not only to communicate Frank's thoughts to an audience but also to explore, at an early stage, some contrasts and tensions within his behaviour. Self-evidently, the ability to direct interior thoughts to an unseen audience is not a feature of our everyday lives and, indeed, Frank's actions occur within a distinct fictional context. At the same time, we would not reject the world of *House of Cards* because its world does not replicate precisely a reality that we

know and experience. A television show is entitled to employ any available expressive device, including stylised forms of address, in the pursuit of a compelling portrayal. As a result, we are invited to accept or perhaps embrace the world on screen as a specific and specialised fictional reality that has the capability to incorporate sometimes extraordinary events. This may lead us to questions of credibility and, here, we can readily turn to *Film as Film* as a practical source for further understanding our acceptance of the fictional world, and our relationship to it. As Perkins explains:

> On one level cinematic credibility is no different from that which we demand of other story-telling forms. It depends on the inner consistency of the created world. So long as that is maintained, the premises are beyond question: people can express their feelings in impromptu song, with or without instrumental backing; inanimate objects can be self-willed and malevolent; Death can be a devotee of chess. But the created world must obey its own logic. (1972: 121)

Reading this account of cinema, we can ask whether it could equally be applied to a description of credibility in television. Indeed, Perkins takes care to emphasise that his points regarding cinema are applicable to storytelling forms more widely, and there is no reason to suggest that television could not be included within that grouping. In the case of *House of Cards*, the characterisation of credibility would certainly appear to correspond with our experience of the sequence briefly described. While the moment at which Frank addresses the audience is striking, the event quickly becomes a facet of the fictional world's inner consistency, which we appreciate as logical. An impossible act becomes a possible occurrence within the parameters that this particular fictional world constructs through the actions disclosed to us.[12]

Perkins, however, does not propose credibility to be a single criterion against which we can adequately evaluate films. Rather, he describes a balance, which I would like to suggest can be usefully applied to our considerations here:

> The movie is committed to finding a balance between two equally insistent pulls, one towards credibility, the other towards shape and significance. And it is threatened by collapse on both sides. It may shatter illusion in straining after expression. It may subside into meaningless

reproduction presenting a world which is credible but without significance. (1972: 120)

In its opening sequence, *House of Cards* demonstrates ambition in its attempts to craft shape and significance within the fictional world: establishing, for example, complicated discrepancies between outward appearance and interior reflection, or presenting dispassionate action as having the potential to encompass both pragmatic care and ruthless efficiency ('the unpleasant thing. The necessary thing'). The decision to convey these qualities through especially direct means – the delivery of lines straight to camera by a character who acknowledges the presence of a watching audience – places demands on the scene. It involves communicating aspects of the world to us without breaking our belief in that world *as* a world. Breaking the fourth wall through direct address might be regarded as precisely the kind of thing that would risk disrupting the credibility of a fictional world, given that it has the potential to draw our attention to the constructedness or artificiality of a work of art. To use a term of Perkins', the expressive device could be designed and employed to 'shatter illusion' deliberately. We might consider, however, whether *House of Cards* instead uses direct address to enhance and enrich the fictional world depicted on screen, Frank's place within it, our understanding of each and the relationships between them. In this respect, it is important that the 'inner consistency of the created world' should be maintained for this particular television drama (whereas, it is quite conceivable that another show might legitimately choose an alternative strategy that seeks to disrupt or destabilise that inner consistency).

In factual television, the convention of direct address is necessarily associated with precise information-giving and, in examples of news, current affairs or lifestyle shows, the unambiguous clarity of message-delivery is often a paramount concern. While the conditions for a television drama like *House of Cards* are markedly different, there may still be a risk of Frank's speech coming to represent something that the show itself wants to assert, so that he becomes a mouthpiece for messages, potentially diminishing his status as an individual within a complex fictional reality. However, the discussion thus far might move us towards the suggestion that *House of*

Cards exhibits a more nuanced approach as we are invited to evaluate Frank's words within the context of his wider behaviour, rather than accept them as a form of linear messaging. Indeed, a number of available meanings are effectively kept in play as Frank's relationship to his own words is made complex. He may regard his speech as an unequivocal endorsement of his actions whereas, with the show displaying the reality of his disinterested brutality, they could alternatively become an unsettling element. Equally, as touched upon already, we may sympathise with Frank's justifying speech, be repelled by his ruthlessness, or find ourselves caught between judgements. The show offers choices as we are invited to observe and gauge human behaviour within its fictional world. In the first few minutes of screen time, despite its employment of a particularly direct convention, *House of Cards* exhibits a delicate touch in its depiction of Frank, allowing certain questions regarding his behaviour to remain suspended in anticipation of an unfolding drama. Here, the rapport between actor, camera and script becomes a crucial element within the fine balance Perkins describes, where heavy or clumsy emphasis resulting from the desire to assert significance, for example, could result in the credibility of the fictional world falling away. At the same time, as Perkins explains, the effort to preserve that credibility might subdue or weaken the significance of words and actions, thus compromising the scene's status as a compelling dramatic event.

Television, time and pressure

If these are hazards that *House of Cards* must negotiate in its first few minutes of screen time, we might consider the ways in which such risks persist or, indeed, are intensified as the show moves through the accumulation of hours in new episodes from new seasons. Taking this into account is important, I would suggest, if we are to retain an appreciation of television's particular qualities. Straightforwardly, while it is the case that some television dramas will resemble films purely in terms of their duration – a single work lasting roughly two hours, for example – serial dramas like *House of Cards* will extend well beyond this length as fresh seasons

the post-dawn half-light. Contrasting with the initial close-up of the character when he stepped out of his car, we can read these audio-visual choices as a gesture to humble Frank, or at least diminish his authoritative status as he continues his journey across the graveyard. This softening of his image is complemented on the soundtrack, as the underscore transitions into a lighter, hesitant, major-key melody when Frank approaches his selected gravestone (modifying and moving away from the forceful, minor-key motif that coincided with him exiting the motorcade earlier).

In the final wide shot, Frank crouches down at the graveside, transfers the flowers to one hand, and raises the other hand to rest on the top corner of the headstone he faces. We hear his voice: 'Hey Pop,' spoken softly, tenderly, and a cut to tighter over-the-shoulder reverse-shot reveals the name engraved into the stone: 'Calvin T. Underwood. 1935-1978. Husband, Father, Servant of God.' Frank uses his finger to trace out an invisible line under 'Calvin' as he says 'been a while, hasn't it?' The practical redundancy of this gesture suggests that it is motivated by an effort to achieve closeness, even intimacy, with his father's grave, a notion complemented

are commissioned and created. In suggesting that the work of film scholars like Perkins can usefully augment an understanding of television, we should be careful to keep in view the contexts that underpin the mediums and that, fundamentally, film and television possess important differences. The question therefore becomes 'in what ways and to what extent can Perkins' film criticism enhance our appreciation of television's particular qualities?' Attending to the long form seriality of certain shows can be a factor in such discussions, and I want to pursue that line by considering a sequence that occurs at a later point in *House of Cards*' duration.

In the opening of the third season of *House of Cards*, a post-dawn motorcade of US government vehicles draws up slowly, framed in a low-angle shot, on a tree-lined track.[13] The authority of this procession is marked by the presence of government insignias and US flags on the cars, and underscored by a strident, minor-key, orchestral theme. The camera tracks forward to isolate a car door within the frame, which is opened by an anonymous staffer, and then tilts up as Frank Underwood (now President of the United States) steps out

from the vehicle, in close-up, carrying a bunch of flowers. He walks forward, looks around, and sighs gently. Seven shots follow: an overhead view of Frank walking across a graveyard plot; two shots capturing the gathering of White House officials and press agencies around the stationary motorcade; a view of Frank as a distant figure making his way further and further into the graveyard and away from the camera and over the brow of a small hill; a wide reverse-shot that frames Frank's progress over the mound and into a further section of the cemetery; a side-angle medium-long shot that tracks his progress from the left to right of the screen; and finally a return to the wide reverse-shot as Frank nears a particular gravestone, looks down, and stops in front of it. In one respect, this succession of shots performs a basic role in emphasising the increasing distance being placed between Frank and the waiting groups of staff and reporters. At the same time, however, the accumulation of images creates a sense of Frank's solitude and smallness within the scene as his features and stature are reduced in the framing, often mingling with or becoming dwarfed by the assorted headstones and the trees that loom in

by the move to a closer reverse shot to frame the action. Placing the flowers on the top of the headstone, he continues: 'Did you see that motorcade roll up?' and, in a reverse medium close-up shot, 'It's the first time that the President of the United States has visited Gaffney. Can you believe it?' In this reverse-shot, Frank rises from his crouching position to stand over the headstone, eyes remaining on his father's grave, and he delivers his words in a low, soft, elongated rhythm that is suggestive of emotional warmth and, perhaps, pride. And then the mood changes: Frank looks directly at us, saying rapidly 'Oh, I wouldn't be here if I had a choice, but I have to do these sorts of things now. Makes me seem more human, and you have to be a little human when you're the President.' Spacey tilts his head slightly from side to side and wrinkles his nose a little, complementing Frank's description of a necessary but irksome duty that must be performed. A small shake of the head instigates a further flow of thoughts: 'He couldn't even afford to pay for his own gravestone – I paid for it, out of my own scholarship money from the Sentinel. Nobody showed up for his funeral except me. Not even my mother.' Frank's gaze moves between the headstone and us as he speaks, and his tone is now much more forceful, with Spacey placing heavier, deeper emphasis on key words like 'I', 'Me' and 'Mother'. The weighting placed on these terms contributes to a sense of Frank's underlying bitterness as he describes the funeral, superseding the affection that was evident in his voice just moments earlier. On the soundtrack, the musical underscore has developed from the tentative, major-key melody to incorporate a slightly faster-paced and more fervent rhythmical structure. This change corresponds with a new line of action: Frank pivots and looks out to the left of the frame and behind him, before stepping forward, saying: 'But I'll tell you this, pop. When they bury me, it won't be in my backyard. And when they come to pay their respects, they'll have to wait in line.' This final sentence is delivered directly to the audience, with Spacey dropping the pitch of his voice considerably on the word 'line' to a resonant, low rumble. While speaking, Frank has been shifting his posture and adjusting something below the frame. A reverse-shot reveals the nature of these activities: a jet of urine sprays onto the headstone as Frank desecrates his father's grave. We cut to the waiting entourage beyond the borders of the

cemetery, and a conversation between a press photographer and Frank's Press Secretary: 'You should let us take a photo at the grave.' 'He wants privacy. The man's honouring his father for Gods' sakes.' And then we return to the graveside: Frank walks away and the camera rotates around to linger on the urine-splashed headstone.

It is apparent that this opening from season three replicates features found in the first moments of season one. The equivalent pre-credit sequences involve levels of candid direct address, the theme of death and dying, the concealment of information below the frame to set up a surprise revelation, and Frank committing an extreme act, for example. As a long-running serial, repetition is one of the dramatic options available to shows like *House of Cards*, and it can be used to build points of significance within the fictional world. It can also, however, invite comparisons between the use of similar techniques and conventions and, as a result, provide insights into how certain themes and techniques are handled across the wide span of episodes and seasons. In this respect, I am led to propose that the graveside scene exhibits shortcomings

which, in turn, have wider implications for matters of credibility and significance. As a consequence, I would propose that there is value in returning to some of Perkins' conceptual arguments to better understand the degree of disappointment I experienced when first watching the sequence. Personal responses to television shows can provide a meaningful foundation for further evaluative work and this work, in turn, can usefully focus and develop those initial reactions.

The sequence hinges upon a trick of misdirection when our understanding of Frank's visit as a sentimental gesture is reversed emphatically: not only is he bitter about his father's life, he soils the lasting tribute to him. In order to achieve this bait-and-switch, the show has to depict him rapidly changing his attitude, tone and demeanour, so that his original compassion is shown to be playacting. (And the portrayal of his character as he makes his away across the cemetery, framing him as an increasingly humble and diminished figure, works as a form of compositional playacting, setting up the reveal that he is neither.) The tactic serves the delivery of the trick perfectly well – Frank's transformation has the capacity to

surprise – but it carries with it repercussions for the position of his character within the fictional world. We are entitled to ask what motivates Frank to behave initially with such open affection towards his father's grave at the outset, for example. It is made explicitly clear, through the succession of shots of him walking through the cemetery, that he is far-removed from witnesses, and so the continued pretence possesses a questionable motivation. We might possibly read it as Frank putting on an act for his own perverse amusement, but this seems an elaborate justification for behaviour that is out of step with a hitherto subtle and complex characterisation. We may even stretch to suggest that Frank's awareness of the audience motivates the pretence – that he is playacting for us – but that equally seems inconsistent with the nature of the direct address employed in the show, which rests upon the character striving for complicity through disclosure, rather than attempting obfuscation or misdirection within the convention (although these qualities can certainly feature in his relationships with other characters in the show).

As an alternative, I would contend that Frank's actions have been contrived, or even imposed, externally on the part of the show-makers to facilitate the effect of the twist, rather than emanating internally within the context of this scene. This has implications for credibility, of course, as it affects the extent to which we are able to plausibly accept the fictional world according to its own internal logic but, equally, there are ramifications for the way in which significance is being sought within the scene. The trick of misdirection is laid out too directly and articulated only in terms of sharp binary oppositions (Frank pretends to be sentimental and respectful but is actually bitter and vindictive), which undermines the effort but also limits any lasting significance: once the trick is revealed, there is little more to say about it. This contrasts with the equivalent sequence from season one in which Frank's actions were imbued with an intellectual and moral ambiguity, inviting further contemplation of his character through the extraordinary actions he performs. In this later sequence, however, these aspects of Frank's character are sidelined in the pursuit of an effect which may have impact but which is somewhat one-dimensional, arguably rendering him as a limited element within the scene. We might even go so

far as to suggest that his credibility as a human being within the show's fictional world is undermined as a consequence. Furthermore, the delivery of the revelation involves Frank dispatching information about his father's death that leaves little room for interpretation on the part of the viewer. We are simply told 'straight' and, so heavily marked is Spacey's delivery of the lines, we are barely asked to evaluate his bitterness in the retelling: his emotions are communicated unambiguously and bluntly. These features continue in the delivery of the final word, 'line,' with Spacey's drop in pitch becoming a somewhat caricatured display of villainy (not unlike the archetypal twirling of a moustache) because no other aspects are kept in play. The brief interaction between Press Secretary and photographer merely reasserts the already clearly-defined deception at work and, similarly, the final shot of the headstone simply re-states a fact made abundantly clear to us already. Not much can matter beyond the accomplishment of the trick.

I would propose that this sequence from season three of *House of Cards* fails, in certain respects, to achieve the kind of subtlety, complexity and nuance that I find within the equivalent scene from season one. This claim does not necessarily amount to an unequivocal dismissal of its worth: we may well find virtue in work that deliberately employs aesthetic strategies that are neither subtle, complex nor nuanced. Likewise, a television show is entitled to change style and tone (a more erratic and looser employment of direct address, for instance, might mark a new direction, connecting perhaps with Frank becoming less controlled and more reckless). However, Perkins' articulation of credibility, shape and significance provides an available means with which to explore a set of contentions, and to think through the wider ramifications of the shortcomings that I felt existed. In striving for a particular dramatic effect, the season three sequence falls short of developing significant relationships between its elements and, at the same time, undermines those elements' credibility within the fictional world. The 'two equally insistent pulls, one towards credibility, the other towards shape and significance' that Perkins describes require careful effort, not only because they work against each other but also because *both* are evidently at risk in any mishandling. Making unequivocal connections with Perkins' work is, I maintain, helpful in

working through responses to the two sequences – why one might seem more accomplished than the other, for example – but also to place an awareness of their qualities within a wider conceptual framework. Perkins' criticism provides tools that can be taken up and used in Television Studies as we develop our responses to shows and, in the case of *House of Cards*, his concepts of credibility, shape and significance are especially useful for considering how these features can be made to withstand pressure within a *particular* television context: the long-running serial drama. Perhaps *House of Cards* does not collapse because the opening to season three can be viewed as inferior to the opening to season one in certain ways. But the disparity between them, I would argue, illustrates the potential strain that can emerge as the hours of screen time stack up across seasons, at least focussing our attention upon how individual shows manage that burden. (And, very specifically, how this particular show handles the consistent use of a bold aesthetic device – direct address – over time.) This, in turn, has implications for our wider evaluation of television texts: a claim for overall excellence (or, indeed, fallibility) may require qualification if there are distinct variations in achievement across episodes and seasons. A robust, extended, evaluative account of *House of Cards* could consider these two sequences in the context of the show as a whole, weighing up whether they are indicative of its overall quality (and, in terms of my tentative suggestions in this article, the extent to which they might even be symptomatic of a decline).

Perkins and television

It is my hope that the benefits of incorporating Perkins' ideas might help to counteract certain anxieties that can emerge, and which I've referenced briefly, regarding the status of Television Studies in relation to Film Studies. Indeed, I would claim that Perkins' writing can illuminate our thinking about television, for the reasons laid out in my discussion, and that acknowledging this can help to advance critical understanding. At the same time, I am mindful that we should retain choice in the critical methods we seek to apply, and I hope it is clear that I am not advocating a wholesale integration of Perkins' work in

the field of Television Studies at the expense of anything else. Likewise, it must be the case that we can decide whether the tools available best fit the job we are attempting and, indeed, the work we are engaging with. To my mind, his concepts of credibility, significance and shape help to clarify a series of qualities found in sequences from *House of Cards*. It is important, however, to reflect upon the congruence of these ideas within the study of television and to consider, in detail, any implications in applying work across disciplines. Certainly, further opportunities within Perkins' critical output exist. I have chosen only a few, albeit well-known, passages from *Film as Film* to help focus a set of ideas and, as a result, it is not difficult to recommend that there would be value in returning to that book (and, indeed, Perkins' other published work) to consider further incorporations of his writing within our critical and conceptual appreciation of television. [14]

James Walters

James Walters is Reader in Film and Television Studies at the University of Birmingham

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Notes

[1] A version of this article was presented at the 'Film as Film Today: On the Criticism and Theory of V.F. Perkins' Symposium, Warwick University, UK, 4-5 September 2018. I am grateful to the many attendees who responded to the paper on the day and subsequently helped to shape its development. I would also to like to thank Sarah Cardwell, who generously read an earlier draft of this article, and Andrew Klevan, for his meticulous and insightful editorial feedback.

[2] Equally, I would not want to suggest that Perkins was oblivious to television. From conversations with him, I know this was certainly not the case and, in the pages of *Movie*, he contributed to the television-focussed interview articles on *Upstairs, Downstairs* (LWT, 1971-75) (Barr, Hillier and Perkins, 1975) and the writer E.A. Whitehead (Perkins and Pye, 1977).

[3] This description of Perkins' writing is barely adequate. I am therefore very grateful that Douglas Pye's superb collection *V.F. Perkins on Movies: Collected Shorter Film Criticism* exists, which brings together all of Perkins' shorter critical pieces for the first time and thus familiarises the reader comprehensively with the positions Perkins adopted and the methods he employed. (Pye 2020).

[4] Perkins' approach, certainly, but it is worth noting that it was shared by others, such as his fellow *Movie* editors. Ian Cameron, for example, provides a strong defence of close scrutiny in the second issue of the magazine as he lays out *Movie*'s editorial position: 'For talking about one small section of a film in small detail, whether in an interview or in an

article, we have been accused of fascination with technical trouvailles at the expense of meaning. The alternative which we find elsewhere is a gestalt approach which tries to present an overall picture of the film without going into "unnecessary" detail, and usually results in giving almost no impression of what the film was like for the spectator.' (1962: 4).

[5] Although not following the same format as *Close-Up*, Gibbs and Pye have since edited a further series of books, *Palgrave Close Readings in Film and Television* (2013-), that make detailed analysis a central critical focus.

[6] *Disclosure of the Everyday* is dedicated to the close reading of films but it is also a work of film philosophy, with the writing of Stanley Cavell a guiding influence alongside Perkins.

[7] Before the publication of *Reading Buffy*, Thomas' critical writing had been – to the best of my knowledge – located exclusively in Film Studies. Her excellent books *Beyond Genre: Melodrama, Comedy and Romance in Hollywood Films* (2000) and *Reading Hollywood: Spaces and Meanings in American Film* (2001) consistently demonstrate a dedication to the close scrutiny of film style.

[8] It should be emphasised, however, that Cardwell's work in television aesthetics does not derive from a Film Studies background at all. Indeed, in an email conversation I conducted with Cardwell, she identifies two broad groups in television aesthetics that became more clearly defined from the turn of the century onwards and, subsequently, aligned with each other over time: 'film-based, very much concerned with the practice of close analysis' and 'a smaller grouping who were more of a conceptual (analytic) philosophical bent' (Cardwell 2022). Cardwell places herself in the second camp.

[9] Jacobs' article is wide-ranging and, as a consequence, has been influential in several areas of Television Studies. However, its explicit and detailed engagement with, indeed, issues of judgement and value makes it a crucial influence (arguably, *the* crucial influence) within the move towards television aesthetics that occurred from the turn of the century onwards.

[10] Sarah Cardwell makes reference to the scarcity of aesthetics-centred work she experienced when she was planning a television aesthetics course in 2000, as part of a key article that sets out in detail the features and foci of television aesthetics (2006: 72).

[11] The publication of *Film as Film* coincided with the growing influence of *Screen* theory, which Robert B. Ray identifies as an antithesis to the underlying principles found in *Movie* (2020: 35-51). Ray weaves a consideration of *Film as Film* into his discussion of the *Screen / Movie* divide and it is not difficult to appreciate, given the strong influence of *Screen* theory which he describes, that Perkins' work did not fit the dominant fashions of the time.

[12] Although my contention here is that *Film as Film* can provide crucial guidance for thinking about this sequence from *House of Cards*, it would be a little odd to neglect mentioning that Perkins considers direct address specifically in his essay, 'Where is the World?' He discusses the ending of *The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955) and uses the moment of Rachel (Lillian Gish) speaking directly to camera to pursue its relationship to the film as a whole, and its implications for our understanding of fictional worlds in cinema. One passage that, I think, marks a particular continuity with Perkins' concept of credibility in *Film as Film*, and which has pertinence to the concerns of this article, is as follows: 'If we insist too much on reason here we shall divorce criticism from experience. It is normal for a movie to stress and sustain the separation between the fictional world and the world of the viewer. Imagination allows the movie to work within that register. But imagination makes other registers available as well. In one such, a world may be suggested whose beings can respond to our watching. In another, the film may have its actors step aside from their character roles and move apart from the fictional world so as to appear or address or confront us in their own right.' ([2005] 2020: 293). I would maintain that Perkins' assertions here can be applied profitably within a consideration of television drama.

[13] For reasons of economy, I have omitted two exposition shots of the motorcade approaching the cemetery from my account of this sequence.

[14] I have, for instance, relied upon the terms 'credibility,' 'shape' and 'significance' from *Film as Film* to suit some specific points I wanted to explore and clarify regarding *House of Cards*. I should concede, however, that this selection is also a narrowing (although I hope not a misrepresentation of the arguments), as these concepts do not stand alone in Perkins' book, and fuller consideration would profitably incorporate others like 'balance,' 'unity' and 'coherence,' which are central to his critical contentions, and closely related to 'credibility,' 'shape' and 'significance.'

V.F. PERKINS

Why did Film Studies ignore Perkins?

1.

I will start with a question, one that I hope will shed a useful light on both Victor Perkins and the academic discipline of cinema studies: Why for over three decades did American Film Studies ignore both *Film as Film* and Perkins' subsequent work? Some of you may object that things were not that bad, but I can assure you that they were. This semester marks my 44th year of teaching. Until the last ten years, I had almost never heard *Film as Film* mentioned or noticed Perkins' work being used. His writing appeared on no undergraduate syllabi and no doctoral reading lists. What caused such an astonishing neglect? Answering that question will involve looking at both the institution of academic Film Studies and the particular method of Perkins' work.

2.

Isaiah Berlin once observed that what characterises philosophical questions 'is that there seem to be no obvious and generally accepted procedures for answering them' (1984: 11). If, for example, I want to know whether Jim knows you, I can ask him. If, on the other hand, I want to know whether I can ever be certain about what goes on in Jim's mind, I'm not sure

where to begin. To a certain extent, problems about the cinema share this characteristic. If I want to find out how many films Hitchcock made or how many shots in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) exceed 24 seconds, I know what to do. If, however, I want to define 'film's ontology' or understand the experience of a spectator who, having been involved in a movie's character, suddenly recognises the actress playing her, I'm less certain.

Most of Perkins' career took place as academic Film Studies was experiencing a continental shift that produced a stark contrast between two different ways of answering the cinema's 'philosophical' questions. In fact, these two approaches did not even agree on what the proper questions should be. The shorthand names for these two approaches are *Movie* and *Screen*.

Film as Film appeared in 1972, just as *Screen* was taking off, after its 1971 publication and adoption of *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s 1969 manifesto 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', whose opening sentence, as translator Susan Bennett put it, dictated the new terms: 'Scientific criticism has an obligation to define its field and methods' (Nichols 1976: 23). Armed with the new tools of semiotics, structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Althusserian Marxism, the *Screen* approach rapidly displaced *Movie*'s commitment to aesthetic evaluation, now denounced as quaintly reactionary. Overnight, the *Movie* writers had become mouldy figs.

In many ways, the *Screen / Movie* divide resembled the quarrel between analytic and Continental philosophy. *Screen*, however, was a mash-up: while its intellectual origins were obviously Continental, its stated goal aligned it with the analytic tradition, which, as Richard Rorty diagnosed, 'hope[s] to *get something right*' by putting the inquiry 'on the secure path of science' (2007: 123). Rorty, however, pointed out that this commitment requires 'expert cultures' where agreement about questions and methods can be assumed. Rorty's conclusion about philosophy also applies to Film Studies: it 'as a whole is not, and has never been, an expert culture characterized by such long-term, near-universal consensus' (125). In retrospect, the stridency of *Cahiers* and *Screen* appears less malevolent than strategic: intuiting what their 'scientific' approach required, they quickly closed ranks in an attempt to establish an 'expert culture' of Film Studies. Dictating a

consensus where none existed, theorists banished other ways of doing Film Studies – aesthetic evaluation, mise-en-scène analysis, *auteurist* celebrations were now off-limits for serious film scholarship. The effects could immediately be felt in the academic job market. If you weren't engaged in 'Theory', you weren't seen as part of the newly emerging discipline of Film Studies. You couldn't get published, and you couldn't get a job. Couldn't a graduate student use both *Screen* and *Movie*? As Rorty saw about the philosophy split, 'The main reason ambidexterity is rare is that graduate students trying to shape themselves into possible job candidates for teaching positions in philosophy only have time to read so much. They can please only so many potential employers' (2007: 120). He also pointed out the real problem: 'such disputes [between competing approaches] only become dangerous when one side or the other wants to say that the material taught by the other side shouldn't be taught *at all*' (1982: 225). In the U.S., *Screen* theorists didn't seem to think *Film as Film* should be part of the curriculum. *Screen* Theory had become the new scholasticism.

The odd couple of *Screen* and *Movie* resembled the Dostoevsky / Tolstoy dichotomy: like Dostoevsky, *Screen* was melodramatic, broad, and memorable; like Tolstoy, *Movie* was matter-of-fact, subtle, and harder to recall. Why did *Screen* displace *Movie*? In retrospect, the headlong consolidation around *Screen* Theory appears as a classic example of what Rorty called those 'temporary, historically conditioned little frenzies' that affect intellectuals (he cited seventeenth-century skepticism and twentieth-century ordinary language philosophy!!) (1982: 186). Eventually, the fever breaks. In the short run, however, *Screen* swept away its competitors. In a buyer's market enabling even regional American colleges and universities to demand publication, *Screen* Theory's appeal lay in its *portability*. Its 'scientific' model stressed *explanation*, the standard conception of which involves the notion of *generality*. Like Barthes' *S/Z*, Mulvey's 1975 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', almost certainly the most widely cited of any film studies article from the last half-century, offered to explain a whole *class* of works, not just a few novels or movies. Rorty identified both the attraction and danger of this approach: 'The recent popularity of "literary theory" in departments of literature', he observed in 2003, 'is a result of

the fact that you have to produce a book to get tenure. The fastest way to do so is to learn a theory and then apply it to a literary text. Most such books are unprofitable hack work' ([2003] 2010: 199-200).

A good way to think about the *Movie / Screen* contrast lies in a remark Wittgenstein once made to a friend: 'Hegel seems to me to be always saying that things which look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different' (Malcolm 1994: 44). *Screen* was Hegelian, often explicitly so (Alexandre Kojève's 1930s lectures on Hegel, translated into English in 1969, regularly turned up in *Screen* bibliographies). Its writers, eager to show that things which look different are really the same, were willing to ignore particulars. In one of *Screen*'s most influential articles, 1974's 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', Colin MacCabe was candid about neglecting individual cases. Having announced that he would 'attempt to define the structure which typifies the nineteenth-century realist novel and […] show how that structure can be used to describe a great number of films', he laid his cards on the table:

> What to a large extent will be lacking in this article is the specific nature of the film form, but this does not seem to me to invalidate the setting up of certain essential categories from which further discussion must progress (1985: 34).

Movie, on the other hand, had always attended precisely to the kinds of cinematic details that MacCabe considered unimportant. In fact, the journal could have adopted Wittgenstein's ideal motto for his own *Philosophical Investigations*: 'I'll teach you differences' (Malcolm 1994: 44). Think for example of Perkins' description of *The Wizard of Oz*'s (Victor Fleming, 1939) conclusion, designed to dissolve David Bordwell's overly credulous acceptance of the comforting line, 'There's no place like home', and to show that dialogue cannot always be taken at face value (Perkins 1990). If Bordwell had bothered to object to Perkins' fine-grained argument, Perkins might have replied with Wittgenstein's response when accused of a preoccupation with 'superficial differences' – 'I don't know any

other kind'. The *Movie* writers were effectively adopting Helen Vendler's dictum for film study: 'I do not regard as literary criticism', Vendler argued, 'any set of remarks about a poem which would be equally true of its paraphrasable propositional content' (1997: xiii).

Jeff Dolven's distinction between 'transcendent' and 'immanent' explanations perfectly catches the *Screen / Movie* dichotomy:

> Explanations can be immanent, or transcendent; they can occupy the same world as what they explain (as storytelling tends to do), or they can point or stand elsewhere (like astrology, or physics) […] . an explanation can share a style with what it explains, or not. It can sound like, or sound different. The desire to explain is often a desire for difference, in the fear that to sound *like* is to be entangled, compromised, complicit. You might ask for an explanation simply in order to stop the action, as explaining a joke will still the laughter. The rhythm is interrupted […]. *In its refusal of local rhythm*, *explanation is the enemy of style* [emphasis added]. (2017: 165)

Mulvey on narrative cinema and *Cahiers* on *Young Mr. Lincoln* (John Ford, 1939) offered 'transcendent' explanations. *Movie* seemed more interested in 'local rhythm'.

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*' (1958: §51). Wittgenstein denied that most of our concepts have a generalisable essence: there is no one thing, for example, that *all* games have in common. Thus, it is perfectly OK to use examples to 'explain to someone what a game is', and

'Here giving examples is not an *indirect* means of explaining – in default of a better' (§71). In other words, *Movie*'s examples – a particular film by Ray or Sirk – were utterly appropriate means of understanding the cinema, which, like games, has no single essence.

Having repudiated the scientific approach to philosophical problems, Wittgenstein famously proposed that 'We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place' (§109). In his hands, the descriptive method involved *showing*, or better, *exhibiting* examples, which as one writer has suggested, were not intended as a philosophical doctrine, but rather a defense *against* doctrine. These examples – think of *Movie*'s case studies – amounted less to an argument than a means of persuasion. Wittgenstein described the process:

> I wanted to put this picture before your eyes, and your *acceptance* of this picture consists in your being inclined to regard a given case differently; that is, to compare it with *this* series of pictures. I have changed your *way of seeing*. (I once read somewhere that a geometrical figure, with the words 'Look at this', serves as a proof for certain Indian mathematicians.) (1970: 82).

Look at this – the phrase exactly describes *Movie*'s method, and by extension, Perkins' own.

3.

In the U.S., *Screen*'s ascendancy coincided with the emergence of academic Film Studies programs, which found their initial homes in Midwestern and Californian state universities. (Harvard and Yale have only recently developed formal programs; Princeton has still not done so.) Of *Movie*'s principals, Robin Wood was by far the best known in America, probably because he moved away from the journal's aesthetic focus towards questions of ideology and gender. Perkins, more loyal to *Movie*'s original project, publishing less than Wood, and writing for a journal that appeared unpredictably, became less visible. But while Perkins' work was obviously typical

of *Movie*, it was also distinct, and as such, it presented its own difficulties.

For someone like me, whose career in many ways owes itself to *Screen* Theory – my first book derived from its American inflection in Charles Eckert's famous article about *Marked Woman* – Perkins' approach took some getting used to. When I read *Film as Film* for the first time about a dozen years ago, I immediately thought of how Wittgenstein once began a course: 'What we say will be easy', he remarked, 'but to know why we say it will be very difficult' (1979: 77). Perkins, of course, was an elegant writer, and never an obscure one. But after the first two chapters on film theory, I felt lost. The problem involved the challenge identified by two of Wittgenstein's students:

The considerable difficulty in following the lectures arose from the fact that it was hard to see where all this often rather repetitive concrete detailed talk was leading – how the examples were interconnected and how all this bore on the problems which one was accustomed to put to oneself in abstract terms. (Fann 1967: 51)

Screen had trained its followers to work from abstractions. The detailed, nose-to-the-ground, case-by-case method of Wittgenstein and Perkins seemed to come from another country.

In fact, *Film as Film* resembles Wittgenstein's later work, with its critique of essences and its reliance on examples. Here is Wittgenstein:

The idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation, for it has not only led to no result, but also made the philosopher dismiss as irrelevant the concrete cases, which alone could have helped him to understand the usage of the general term. When Socrates asks the question, 'what is knowledge?' he does not even regard it as a *preliminary* answer to enumerate cases of knowledge […]. As the problem is put, it seems there is something wrong with the ordinary use of the word 'knowledge' […] We should reply: 'There is no one such exact usage of the word 'knowledge'; but we can make up several such usages, which will more or less agree with the ways the word is actually used (1965: 19-20, 27).

And here is Perkins:

I do not believe that the film (or any other medium) has an essence which we can usefully invoke to justify our criteria (1972: 59).

Wittgenstein attacked what Aristotle called Socrates' most important idea, his insistence on definitions – of knowledge, courage, friendship, virtue. Perkins' target was the orthodox film theorists (Arnheim, Rotha, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Balazs), whose celebration of German Expressionism and Soviet montage rested on an attempt 'to produce a definition of the medium which would coincide with the definition of Art' (1972: 11-12). Perkins also saw that even those theorists' antagonist, André Bazin, had himself assumed a definition of the cinema, photographic representation, that simply amounted to the orthodoxy's complementary antonym.

Perkins remarked that film theorists had ignored the movies' variety, a spectrum from documentary to cartoon. 'We can evolve useful criteria only for specific types of film, not for the cinema', he cautioned. 'The problem arises from the embarrassing richness of the cinema's aptitudes' (1972: 59-60). In the early 1930s, Wittgenstein realised that he had made the same mistake that Perkins had diagnosed in the orthodox film theorists. Repudiating his earlier picture-theory of language, he pointed out the '*countless* kinds' of sentences we actually use:

Giving orders, and obeying them—
Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—
Reporting an event—
Speculating about an event—
Forming and testing an hypothesis—
Making up a story, and reading it—
Acting in a play—
Singing rounds—
Guessing riddles—
Making a joke; telling one—
Translating from one language into another—
Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying (1958: §23).

The *Tractatus* argument had assumed that all words were either like nouns (which 'pictured' the world) or the leftovers ('but', 'which', 'soon', etc.), which could take care of themselves.

Similarly, Perkins saw that a film theory 'becomes coherent only if we identify the cinema's 'essence' with a single aspect of the film' (1972: 39). Eisenstein had found that exposition in juxtaposition, Bazin in photographic automatism. Perkins made clear that his ideas applied only to the photographic fiction film, neither documentary nor cartoon – nor the kind of Brechtian 'subversive' movie celebrated by *Screen*. 'The degree to which *Les Carabiniers* is to be valued', Perkins acknowledged, 'will have to be argued in terms other than those proposed here' (1972: 190).

After *Film as Film*'s opening chapters, Perkins devoted himself to close observations of scenes whose synthesis of 'clarity' and 'credibility' make them 'at the same time significant and convincing' (1972: 69). Arguing against importing something from outside to impose significance (as with *Potemkin*'s 'rising' stone lions), he celebrated deploying the expressive potential of material already before the camera. He liked *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*'s (Vincente Minelli, 1956) kitchen scene, where Minnelli used Eddie's 'precarious physical position on the stool' as he reaches for a cup and saucer (a job previously left to his mother) and the harsh rattle of the china to convey the boy's fragile emotional state (78). 'The spectator can understand the action of the scene', Perkins noted approvingly, 'without becoming aware of the device as relevant comment. It does not *demand* interpretation' (77). 'What is pretension', Perkins asked, 'other than an unwarranted claim to significance, meaning insecurely attached to matter?' (132) The real achievement involves the contrary, a style that serves the subject matter rather than the filmmaker's own ambition.

Described in this way, *Film as Film* would seem straightforward. In fact, however, as with Wittgenstein's later work, the book's commitment to description and examples made its basic argument elusive. Perkins' analyses of film moments were acute. But as Wittgenstein's students had said, it could be 'hard to see where all this concrete talk was leading', especially for someone used to High Theory. After beginning *Philosophical Investigations* with Augustine's account of learning his native language, before proceeding to his own example of the builders, Wittgenstein withheld the clearest formulations of his project until §§ 89-92 and 109-124, not

coincidentally the book's most often quoted passages. Perkins was similarly discreet. Only on p. 120, in the midst of *Film as Film*'s longest chapter, did he offer a clear summary of his examples' underlying point:

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. It may shatter illusion in straining after expression. It may subside into meaningless reproduction presenting a world which is credible but without significance.

As a diagnosis of one of moviemaking's most important problems, Perkins' four sentences could hardly be better: they explain, for example, why so many noir films appear pretentious and sentimental (too much 'straining after expression' and significance) and some neorealist ones merely dull ('credible but without significance'). In fact, Perkins' proposition amounts to an ideal heuristic. But blink and you could miss it.[1]

Sam Rohdie's *Screen* review of *Film as Film* and *The Movie Reader* was predictably negative, but it did articulate the difference between the two journals:

The 'organic' work, in *Movie*, took precedence over any generality about artistic forms and techniques. It was always the forms and techniques within this or that given text that *Movie* writers regarded as primary. All hope of a theoretical, scientific view of the cinema […] was ruled out by this sort of approach. (138)

The need to attend closely to the film text became a kind of *Movie* fetish – 'the best antidote to the prevalent woolliness about the cinema seemed to us to lie in detailed, descriptive criticism'. *Movie* published few general articles, no theoretical ones […]. (140).

Rohdie's value-words (what Rorty would have called *Screen*'s 'final vocabulary') were precisely the ones criticised by Wittgenstein for their capacity to mislead: *generality, theoretical, scientific*. What Rohdie dismissed – *detailed, descriptive criticism* – was exactly what Wittgenstein had called for as the remedy.

Screen's writers seemed more interested in Glauber Rocha and Straub-Huillet than in Preminger and Minnelli. In the early 1930s, Wittgenstein had rejected the idea of an ideal language, purified by scientific logic: 'ordinary language is all right', he had insisted (1965: 28). While Godard and the other avant-gardists sought a more rigorous *cinematic* language, cleansed of ideological contamination, Perkins announced that he would draw his own examples neither 'from the accepted classics of Film Art nor from the fashionable "triumphs" of the past few years, but generally from films which seem to represent what the Movies meant to their public in the cinema's commercial heyday' (1972: 7). This disposition often meant 'Hollywood', but *Movie* never restricted its interest to any one filmmaking tradition. It did, however, assert the priority of studying what most people mean when they say, 'We're going to a movie'. In the face of *Screen*, Perkins and the *Movie* group suggested something almost shocking: *Ordinary cinema is all right*.

Robert B. Ray

Robert B. Ray is the author of *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy*, *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies*, *The ABCs of Classic Hollywood*, *The Structure of Complex Images*, and (with Christian Keathley) the forthcoming BFI Classic Films Guide to *All the President's Men*. He was also a member of the band *The Vulgar Boatmen*. He is Professor of English at the University of Florida.

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Notes

[1.] The question whether *Film as Film* offers a theory of the cinema remains contested. In *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (1988), Noël Carroll argued that in showing the weaknesses of the Eisenstein and Bazin positions, Perkins had inadvertently mounted a theory of his own. I would say, however, that what Perkins provided was not a theory, but rather a description of a certain kind of movie that enabled a perspective from which to make evaluations. He

explicitly excluded types of films, including comedies and things like *Les Carabiniers* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963). If you want to argue for Perkins operating as a theorist in *Film as Film*, you would have to say that he tried to stipulate a narrow definition of 'film', effectively turning it into a technical term like 'isosceles triangle'. Wittgenstein says you can always make this move as long as you recognise that your sense of the word in question 'will never entirely coincide with the actual usage, as this usage has no sharp boundary' (1965: 19).

But the issue gets messy. If Perkins converted 'film' into a technical term, capable of precise definition, where does evaluation enter? It would make no sense to call something a 'bad' isosceles triangle. Was Perkins offering less a definition of 'film' than the rules for a certain kind of game we call filmmaking? In this sense, his argument would again depend on stipulating a narrow use of 'film', as if we wanted to talk only about games with two sides, a ball, and goals with nets. Such games can be well or badly played, but the rules for them would not apply elsewhere: a tennis player cannot hit a ball into the net and declare a goal.

Two final points: (1) Ultimately this issue seems moot: whatever Perkins thought he was doing, academic Film Studies, thoroughly dominated by *Screen* theory, did not recognise Perkins as a theorist. (Did Perkins' claim to that title suggest how dominant that position had become?) (2) In arguing that Perkins was not offering a theory, I do not mean to criticise him. On the contrary, I am suggesting that his way of working had far more in common with Wittgenstein's than we have previously noticed – the Wittgenstein who insisted that philosophy should not consist of theories, and that explanation should yield to description.

V.F. PERKINS

Upstairs, downstairs: Victor Perkins and Nicholas Ray's domesticity

'The world is full of wonderful actors!'
V. F. Perkins

Prelude

Very frequently I find a story standing in wait in the wings of consciousness, so to speak: a glowing ghost, if you will, asking, preparing, positioning itself to be introduced, yet never fully stepping into the light. I wish I had told this to Victor Perkins, who wrote, sensibly enough, in compelling our attention to the filmmaker's 'organisation of the world', that 'stories do not exist except as they are told' (1972: 70). As a writer of stories I think they *do exist,* and before they are told.

I would certainly agree that the form of the story is *owed to* the teller's quirky way of telling it, owed, let us say, to the behavior of the storytelling enunciator one learns to become on occasion, whom I have learned to become. Owed to the enunciation . . . but not exactly formed in it. Victor Perkins is perhaps reading the situation from the point of view of the audience, not the storyteller (and he was sensitive to storytellers). For me the form's ghost is there before the expression, and so I can't believe, as he seems to, that the thing actually doesn't exist outside of its telling. The storyteller is not only

an enunciator but must also be, and first, a listener, always on his perch with ears perked at the darkness well before the throat is cleared or the hand set to letter. What the storyteller-listener gathers up is the story's imaginary existence, its very gatherability, and only once the challenge of gathering is met the thing can be told. A very lovely passage at the beginning of Julio Cortázar's 'Blow-Up' says this with a charming playfulness:

It'll never be known how this has to be told, in the first person or in the second, using the third person plural or continually inventing modes that will serve for nothing. If one might say: I will see the moon rose, or: we hurt me at the back of my eyes, and especially: you the blond woman was the clouds that race before my you're his our yours their faces. What the hell. (1967: 114)

For a writer, the blueprint or anatomy of the story, the imagined and 'heard' entity, even the spirit, that precedes the writing can differ in both trivial and salient ways from the 'told' work. The child that promised to be the man is hiding (but only hiding) in the man's shadows. Between what the listener-dreamer found and the enunciator-artist worked upon is a kind of slippage, something more than a discontinuity and less than a contradiction, and because of which, revision is conceivable. Also possible is a certain terminal dissatisfaction: that no matter what one manages to put into form, it is not enough to bring out – all out – the perfume that can no longer be remembered.

The storyteller / imaginer dreams beyond what he or she is ready to accomplish. So the present moment, every present moment, has its impossibilities.

Perkins suggests – astutely – that told stories have order and credibility. Recognising the need for these does not alter a painful and compelling fact: that there are two orders: one the audience fervently wishes to recognise, a relation between a text and an everyday they already know, and another that the storyteller fervently needs in his trap between the medium and his desire. Should things go well, the audience will be happy enough, but no story ever makes its teller so happy that it can peaceably be filed away. Beyond, behind, perhaps even lost is the germ. Is not the originary story, call it the deep story, the story before the storytelling, something like the book to

George F. Morrell, 'The House That Jack Built' (detail)

Jim Backus (l.) with stairbound James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955)

which Poe refers at the beginning of his story 'The Man of the Crowd', a thing that 'does not permit itself to be read', '*er lässt sich nicht lesen*' (1998: 91). *To be read,* as in pointed out and inscribed. It does not permit itself to be told.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

These two tellers of stories, the impressionable who is touched by experience and the impression-making who works to form, these two lobes of the spirit . . . There are no serious artists, in filmmaking or any other medium, who are not intimately familiar with this pair.

Could they not, one very sensitive to presence and harmony, to deep structural form; and the other laboring to make a credible telling-out, say a musically credible telling – could they not, like any pair of roommates, occupy discreet living spaces, arranged in such a way that some pathway linked them?[1] Moreover, might one such habitation not be above and the other below? That is the arrangement impressionable youngsters saw pictured at the very beginning of the twentieth century, in 'The House That Jack Built', an inspiring series of photogravure illustrations from the magical hand of George F. Morrell. These pictures were cached, and discovered with the greatest delight, in volume after volume of Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopedia (1908; and many subsequent editions). Morrell (who died in 1962, and whose métier was astoundingly detailed architectonic drawings of, say, ship construction or the solar system) fashioned the human body as a multi-storey house with the control center nestled at the top. In 'Jack At Home in His Wonderful House' (Mee 1910: 5620), for example, we have a dense cluster of nerves running from an atrium just inside the 'hall door' and also from the 'nose window', 'ear window', and 'eye window' upward into the domed 'telephone exchange', where a young clerk in a high collar sits upon what resembles a piano bench to connect wires in a vast switchboard. (The first telephone switchboard was installed in 1877 in Boston.) Dropping down out of frame at the bottom of Morrell's picture, a respectful nod to Victorian prurience, are 'Action, Touch, and general controlling wires

of the Lower Storeys'. A caption charmingly reads, 'This is a picture of Jack in his study at the top of the wonderful house which builds itself'.[2]

In the vertical structure imagined and visualised here, certain popular social arrangements are presumed: between modern comfort and home ownership; between various higher functions (the switchboard as moral arbiter) and the 'upstairs' zone; between the body as structure and the principles of architecture; and between upstairs and downstairs. In 1971, when *Film as Film* was in the process of being published, this verticality and its implications gained particular attention in America. Here, in an early case of British cultural arrangements being sold as commodity to ravenous American audiences (on the Public Broadcasting System, by way of WGBH-Boston's *Masterpiece Theatre* hosted by the transatlantic personality Alistair Cooke), viewers of London Weekend Television's *Upstairs, Downstairs* (ITV, 1971) by Jean Marsh and Eileen Atkins came to know the tricky insides of the domestic vertical arrangement that was already long-lived in the United Kingdom. But the seminal American filmmaker Nicholas Ray (1911-1979), who had studied architecture with Frank Lloyd Wright, knew about building forms on top of forms (the gaze down off the cliff after the 'chickie run') quite as well as he recognised the challenges of another aesthetic principle, the horizontal, which took on centrality in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955) once Warner Bros. made arrangements to use CinemaScope. 'The wide screen, in particular, extended the film-maker's resources for the organisation of action within a single shot', writes Perkins (1972: 56). Here, we can see the stairs leading up and the spanning bannister holding safe the landing, all in unity, so it is true that the wide screen helped; but what it was helping with was the explicit invocation of two worlds, one atop the other, and the passageway between them.

Imagine mounting a staircase upward from a hall or atrium that links the world outside to a private zone above. This vertical division of domestic space centers the Victorian 'two up / two down', with bedrooms floating on high and reception space beneath. Persons finding their way through the front

door would not, as a matter of course, be walking up into the most personal of family spaces. 'Upstairs' was a local privilege, related to ownership and propriety, to being a stair climber, to moving into the sublime territory invoked in *Bigger Than Life* (Nicolas Ray, 1956) where waits, for Perkins, a haven of 'privacy, rest, fantasy and male dominance' (1972: 91) and, in Ray's own words, 'possible refuge, serenity and joy' (qtd. in Perkins 1972: 91). As far back as 1842, Robert Browning had published 'Up at a Villa – Down in the City', a poem extolling (some say satirising) the delights of city life, the excitements of a place where 'all day long, one's life is a perfect feast' (1896: 120); and frowning at the much more private residential possibility of the country seat, where ''T is May perhaps ere the snow shall have withered well off the heights' (1896: 121): 'down' for Browning and his fellow countrymen of the time is exciting, bustling, spontaneously intoxicating, and 'up' is private, sedate, natural, but also without the friction of stimulus.

Upstairs spaces in film are refracted in the structural 'above' to be seen in dramas of the upper class (a magnetic class subject to copying, the behavior of 'uppers' being imitated, less elaborately but with fervor, by managers and workers below). Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top* (1959) give a well-known example. 'Upstairs' privacy implies body management and therefore exclusion: preparing for and gaining rest; cleansing and other rituals of toilet; and clandestine, confidential conversation about things in circulation downstairs that can be discussed only when they are at a remove. What lingers and festers outside the house is attached to – part of – a 'lower' world: the visitor imports it from the doorstep. The homeowner's body and thoughts, uninfluenced by social intercourse, belong above, in Morrell's 'telephone exchange', a zone if not clear surely organically ordered. 'Downstairs' life outside the house requires masks, training, discipline. Ascending the stairs, one shifts from role-playing and the strict morality of situations into a condition of feeling, self-concern, and intimacy, a coalition of secrets. There is a moment in *Rebel Without a Cause* when harassed Plato, a sensitive and confused boy, rushes into his home and races up the carpeted stairs to the carpeted sanctuary of his parents' bedroom and

their sacrosanct coral pink bed – sacrosanct even though they are no longer a couple.

A different moment in *Rebel* caught Perkins' always extraordinarily sensitive eye. Jim Stark has heard a sudden clatter above his head. Going upstairs he finds his father Frank (Jim Backus) stooping to clean up the mess from a breakfast tray he has accidentally dropped to the floor. Frank is wearing a housewife's apron over his suit pants and white shirt because, as we may assume, he has just been nursing his migraine-beset wife – this film having come out just over a year after *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)*,* one might speculate on a possible reference to the caregiver Lars Thorwald – and has dressed himself 'properly', at least as she would, for domestic chores: chores, that is work undertaken in her domain by the proper controller of domesticity in 1955, Mom. Doing this spate of housework Frank Stark is, briefly at least, the 'domesticated American male', a figure anointed by *Life* magazine in 1954 (May [1988] 2008: 139). Yet the distinct irony of his garb also manages to underline the brutal patriarchal division of labor and compensation prevalent in the culture, a cause of both his privilege and his torment. Ray was not inventing the man in the apron as a screen image. The character type had, in fact, graced the corridors of popular culture since at least 1945, when Danny Kaye unselfconsciously wore a pale blue apron in Virginia Mayo's kitchen in *Wonder Man* (H Bruce Humberstone); and he showed up once again January 20, 1954 when on *The Web* (CBS, 1950-54) Jim Backus wore a domestic apron as Judge Bradley Stevens conversing with his mother (Norma Varden) in the episode 'I Married Joan'. The spillage confronting aproned Frank is distinctive, a real *macula,* and he panics to clean it as quickly and undetectably as he can. 'Let her see it', Jim says. A challenge to both parents at once.

In 'The Cinema of Nicholas Ray', Perkins is specifically interested in Ray's use of the 'upstairs' setting for this fragile scene, as well as in the filmmaker's other uses of the 'upstairs' in *Bigger Than Life*, *Johnny Guitar* (1954), and *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957). His discussion notes a particular post-Victorian organisation of bourgeois life that settles the family in a private or semi-private two-level home, an arrangement shown in most of the house interiors in *Rebel* but already well-known among working- and lower-middle-class members of the British audience for whom, after the privations and destructions of war and the postwar move toward urban renewal (focused quite famously on the rebuilding of Coventry), a feverishly desired value was ownership of a domicile with its own self-contained living space: interior water closets, an equipped kitchen, a tiny garden plot. David Kynaston quotes a fifty-year-old woman living in an upper tenement flat (with a husband, two working children, and two children at school):

> I'd like a sitting-room-kitchen, so that you could have meals in it, and a nice garden at the back for vegetables and chickens, and a flower garden in front. A nice bathroom all done with lino [. . .]. Coal fire in the living room and none in the bedrooms, I don't think fires in a bedroom are healthy. I'd like a sort of sunshine paper, if you know what I mean, with just a little heading round the top, flowers or fruit. That for the sitting room, and blue for the bedrooms. (2008: 50)

As Perkins points out knowingly about the two up / two down, having grown up in one himself, 'upstairs suggests both the possibility of a normal family life and the temporary retreat from responsibilities' (1976: 254). Having experienced his childhood during the war, Perkins may be intending to convey a great deal with the phrase 'a normal family life'. It was perhaps a condition of which he had only dreamed. The specter of a delectable breakfast spilled clumsily on the floor would have reverberated for Perkins, who from the age of four had eaten rationed food, falling into more and more deprivation as the years progressed: hungry, chilled with coal on the ration, and in fact seeing no end to rationing until he was eighteen (and *Rebel* came out). He told me he sometimes had baths while visiting a chum's house. Since in Britain the bedrooms and closet space were typically in the upstairs zone, with toilet outside, while public accommodation, access for visitors, a lounging and dining area, and the work zone of the kitchen – a fountainhead of responsibilities – were on the street level below, Ray's projection of the Starks' domestic space could have seemed familiar and logical enough to Perkins the British viewer: familiar if on the sumptuous side. The English house was very often cramped, narrow, minimally decorated, and cold, and a bath (preparation for circulation outside) was typically had downstairs in a tub in the parlour next to the fireplace. In the England of Perkins' childhood, the downstairs domestic sphere was the one that abutted – that led directly to – the grim wartime world outside, and to head upstairs was to retreat from that dark chaos; to become, not a figure anxiously dancing public ritual and subject to moral review but, a private, largely undisclosed person, a body requiring management using space for playing out the intimate impetus of the deep self.

Victor Perkins was three years old when World War II began. Nicholas Ray was three years old at the beginning of World War I. Two personalities separated in time but still mirror images of each other, because to be three years old when one's world changes is the same wherever and whenever you are. I was three years old when the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb.

Perkins finds it aesthetically and ideologically appropriate – correctly so, I think – that the father-son confrontation about the spilled food should take place on, of all places, the landing outside the bedrooms, up at the top of the stairs (while of course Ray could just as well have set it in the kitchen below). There is enough liminality in the space to accommodate the presence of food. And as we see it, there is a dramaturgically helpful, but strange, capaciousness. Many of the Stark home scenes of the film were shot in Ray's own Bungalow No. 2 at the Chateau Marmont, a very tiny little home (as I observed), which only a wide-angle lens (not used to a great degree in the filming) could have made seem spacious. The landing scene was made on a Warner Bros. soundstage designed to mock up the bungalow: but on a stage designers could take some liberties. In this key moment both the idea of eating and the deeply personal – maybe too clean – relationship between the husband and his wife are being openly alluded to, in front of the son. It is not only that Mrs. Stark has been what Jim would think too obsessive about tidiness at home; she has tucked the organicism, the unshaped truth of human life, away. Perkins' evaluation of this space has wish in it, too, because his own upstairs was far too confined a place for action like this. As Jim argues with his father he shows his own growing manhood and invokes a way, quite unspoken at the time, for Frank to co-exist with his wife: 'Let her see it!' Jim is offering a new dispensation of power, his command riddled with a sexual innuendo that Ray and Dean would both have understood. The scene must have burned in Perkins' imagination. Marriage

in its core, Ray is saying to his young watcher Perkins, the arrangement that settles what men are to women and women are to men, is here, right here, in this mess, on the floor. This 'it' is the 'it' of all of us. Upstairs the spill and soil of emotional truth are usually hidden away; the family secret – definitely also a matter of organicism and mess – is kept safe from the eyes of outsiders. 'I sometimes think I see', wrote Norman O. Brown, 'that civilizations originate in the disclosure of some mystery, some secret; and expand with the progressive publication of their secret; and end in exhaustion when there is no longer any secret, when the mystery has been divulged, that is to say, profaned' (1991: 4).

If Jim is subtly confessing the sort of man he would like to be, one who would 'let her see it', a British boy in late adolescence may have sensed him pointing to the man he wished he could be, too, the man Jim does not think he is yet though he is on the path. Think of this scene as a radical textbook on 1955 masculinity, a sharper pointer than even the film as a whole or Ray's other very explicitly critical work. The film 'uses upstairs to point the failure of a man through his weakness as both husband and father', Perkins suggests, but in this use of setting, 'the spectator does not have to strain to make the required connections' because the upstairs / downstairs relationship is, for them as for the characters, 'common property' (1972: 91). Later in the story, at the empty mansion, we see Jim's radical 'husband' character rehearsed as he engages with his 'wife' and 'son' (Judy [Natalie Wood] and Plato [Sal Mineo]) in open-hearted play, behavior staged in an equivocal space with only figurative depths and heights: Jim and Judy never quite get all the way up the stairs, and jumping down into the empty swimming pool offers Jim the too-dry reality of concrete, not the mythic oceanic dream.

In a particular sense Frank Stark is visible in stark nakedness at the top of the stairs; certainly he is without his habitual appurtenances. We have entered a fragmentary bubble in which his authority is fully stripped away and his paternal identity fully confused, not only because of that apron – many men wear aprons when they work – but by way of the frilly, feminised design of the thing. In truth this is one of his wife's aprons, and in donning it he has become her for the moment: ill-disposed now, she would normally – by social

dictate – demand of herself the debasement he is self-inflicting in rushing toward tidiness at the cost of dignity. Instead of relaxing into the mess of life, Frank – as Backus performs him – is nervous, ashamed in his klutziness, a weak man who has let the side down. Stooping, he loses his manhood doubly, becoming an epitome of the hen-pecked husband (a figuration mocked at the time in comic strip caricatures and Hollywood films) and, as his wise son is trying to point out, a denier of nature, repressing the shapelessness he really has inside and that the world has everywhere, and rejecting himself. All of this happens in the part of the house where sacred objects routinely fall from their perches, clothing drops away from the skin, lipstick is wiped off, the food that went politely into the mouth falls, as Hitchcock's Vandamm has it, 'from a great height' (James Mason in *North by Northwest* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1959]).

Given that Perkins noticed Nicholas Ray's penchant for setting scenes upstairs, making exquisite sense of the setting of a scene as underpainting for its action, we might ask how our moving forward to watch and think about film is illuminated and assisted, but perhaps also a little obstructed, by Victor's sensitivity to the *above*.

Looking up, especially looking up for moral clarity or domestic harmony, can be a signal feature of a childhood, an observation Claes Oldenburg made about his own massive sculptures as related to a world he saw long before (1969: 33). Looking up the social ladder to more luxuriant climes moves many young people as they grow, especially young people caught in the brittle, constraining English class structure we find described so artfully in Orwell's 'Such, Such Were the Joys', or working-class boys trapped in northern factory towns like Albert Finney's desperate Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960). In the delusion of social panic, *out* seems to be *up*, 'up' as in status-enriched. But for the two up / two down resident status is gained only by heading 'out', which is to say, 'down in the city'. The social climb is fraught with dangers. Victor Perkins told me that the comfortingly respectable life of the intellectual that he lived as an adult was one for which he had to change himself, learning, as he surely did, and quite painstakingly, that for gaining passage to the airy echelons of the academy he

had to systematically extirpate and replace certain elements of his early class identity, for example his pronunciation of English, this to the degree that the accents of his childhood speech became inaccessible to him. Thus the real, lost Victor Perkins remained beneath what he became, but 'beneath' metaphorically, in the safe upstairs bedroom where his original relation to the world was always assured. This self-denial, this domestic confinement away from the action, is what Ray shows us in Frank's trouble with the food spill: a forced and immediate self-invention, making oneself up for the world beyond the middle-class home, cleaning up the family smear for showing off 'properly' in public life. This 'housekeeping' is 'Elevation' but in a *downstairs mode,* a prelude to the pumping up of social status, propriety, ownership. Frank performs it by 'going down the stairs', as it were repressing the bedroom talk that will not pass muster in the board room, but Jim is hinting to him that the repression is dishonesty.

When one goes upstairs, as Jim Stark does to make contact, let us argue to make primal contact, with his father, one is in retreat from the public gaze, Jim, for example, tucked away from his gang with their relentless demands upon his honor: retreat from a civic hierarchy, an intemperate moralism, where one carries enforced responsibilities and a masqueraded self, to a cache where ethics and personal conviction rule. There is a liminal zone that is only part-way up or part-way down the stairs, Jim meets Judy there in the mansion and they have a candle; but this zone is like a waiting room, it exists only to be passed through. If they mounted to the bedroom, they could play at growing up (being what Jim thinks his father has failed to be), but upstairs they would in truth be children again, protected, stowed away. The child in each of us is 'upstairs' of the adult, who, having learned the world, is always just as prepared to open the door and invite the stranger in as to wander outside and make a living.

Perkins grew up on Church Road in the Alphington area of Exeter in the late 1930s and early 1940s, one of those children terrified and forever marked by the so-called Baedeker blitz of late April and early May 1942, when the Luftwaffe targeted Britain's landmarks of historic charm such as St. Paul's in London and noteworthy sites in the west. Too young was he to appreciate the acerbity of Mollie Panter-Downes, the *New*

Yorker's observer, who made a wry note May 9, 1942 about the Germans' 'new cultural policy of visiting Britain with an open Baedeker propped above their bomb sights': 'The general feeling seemed to be that much as one might lament the disintegration of a gem of eighteenth-century English architecture, it was more sensible to reflect that Nash's elegant inspirations had served a good purpose as bait to draw more German bombers away from the Russian front' ([1942] 2014: 275). With bombers not so far away in the sky, young Victor may well have developed a disenchantment, if enchanted he had ever really been, with the terraced two-up / two-down experience so many in England shared in those years and for decades thereafter, chiseling out life with a certain restrictive diligence, a constant putting of things aside against a more destitute tomorrow and a suspending of desire in order to keep on the alert. The war was forcing consciousness to leave the house even if the body crouched behind blackout curtains.

It is possible – say, from across the sea – to bear for Perkins genuine and intensive admiration without at the same time fully occupying his point of view. For some critical intelligences there never was a stairway such as we find in Jim Stark's house. I am one of those who, through childhood, youth, and adulthood, until I was about forty years old, lived in a single-storey apartment, what in England are called, with an aptness Ray might have chuckled at, flats. While I may have climbed the stairs of a building to get to the door of my home – and not so many stairs at that – once I was inside everything was dispersed laterally, not vertically. Above and below one's apartment were people from another world. One neither snuck *down* to the kitchen to grab a midnight snack nor experienced the vertical privacy (and piety) of a bedroom upstairs. The kitchen was east of my bedroom, and between the two *endroits* was the piano at which I practiced with my back to the public, and very clean, seats in the living room. The piano's guts were as though part of my private space. I thought of my best friends as living, not outside but, beside, one further east, one further west. Downstairs, as I knew it, was a strange and gothic zone of elderly residents who kept African violets lining their street-level windowsill and a dusty, creepy chamber containing wood-slatted lockers. Perhaps the

clear distinction between an 'upstairs self' and a 'downstairs self' is one I never learned to make.

But my point is not to insinuate my own biography as a critique of Victor's. It is to note a fact easily apparent to me because of that biography yet perhaps more exotically unfamiliar to those who grew up living vertically, say, to the English whose childhood was early in World War II: that cinema itself, the sacred screen, *has no upstairs*. It is always on a single level, directly before the viewer's eyes, and the gravitational experience we can have with architectural elevations can be only an onscreen allusion (and illusion), not a given. When I mount a staircase in the actual world I feel the blood shifting in my thighs and calves. In the movie theater we sit in the dark and look forward and only forward at movement: up / down, left / right, toward the camera or away, around and around in circles . . . but in looking we neither climb nor fall. In his use of CinemaScope Ray was sensitive to this fact of planar experience. When Perkins claims for places 'a structural as well as a symbolic or evocative value' (1976: 255) has he forgotten, perhaps, along with the accent of his childhood, the way beyond structure places onscreen can have an evocative value as well? Because migrating into the private zone 'above' is greater than narrative.

What remains mysteriously exciting for me about Frank Stark spilling his food tray 'up there', mysterious as in the perfume of a story imagined by an author but not committed to expression, is that even if we conceive 'upstairs' action as a domestic retreat and challenge, we also experience it as flowing directly from – and by way of a tactile movement directly affiliated with – all the other visions in the film, which form a single culminating, horizontal train, not really unlike life in a universe with only one storey. It is the action of *Rebel,* up and down, that leads our experience of the story as told, the story that for Perkins *exists,* but this telling, this *existing,* flows from a perfumed hint of something deeper and not told, an arrangement of space so very elemental, deriving so fully from long ago, that it seems to be nature itself. Whilst we can *imagine* ourselves moving up with Jim to meet his father, the scene as we watch it carries us only forward: forward, forward, and further forward, across the border.

Murray Pomerance

Murray Pomerance is an independent scholar living in Toronto and Adjunct Professor in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is the author of *Color It True: Impressions of Cinema* (2022), *A Voyage with Hitchcock* (2021), *The Film Cheat: Screen Artifice and Viewing Pleasure* (2021), and many other books. *Uncanny Cinema: Agonies of the Viewing Experience* is forthcoming from Bloomsbury in November and *A Silence from Hitchcock* from SUNY in February 2023.

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Notes

[1] For discussion of an elegant and fascinating approach to this dualism see my 'Hide, Jonathan, Seek'. (2019)

[2] The nearest social arrangements came to Morrell's farsighted design was in March 1947, when the first of Levittown's mass-produced homes was sold. Not quite building the self, these homes were assembled with extraordinary swiftness, flowing from an assembly line.

THE POLITICS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

Introduction

The idea for this dossier, 'The politics of Close Analysis, and its Object', came about in 2020. The late 2010s has a special significance for being a moment when public reflection on the relationship of cultural representation to historical and current power structures that oppress particular peoples and communities gathered pace and prominence. In 2018 the film industry started to acknowledge systemic abuse and misogyny brought to prominence by the 'Times Up!' campaign, in 2019 many declared climate change an emergency, and in 2020 we reckoned with the onset of a global pandemic, alongside protests over the continued brutal killings of black people by police, and historical attachments to slavery and colonialism. Public demand for cinema, television and news media to openly address these issues of social and climate justice have grown over the same period. Interest has grown, too, in the politics of film curation and programming, and in film festivals' responsibility to better curate and present existing and emerging filmmaking that can speak to or reflect these questions, as examined in the recent *JCMS* In Focus 'Curators Speak: Film Programming as Social Justice Work in the Wake of COVID-19' (Francis 2022).

While it has a much wider reach, this activist moment re-poses pressing questions for film criticism and its ability to reflect on the power dynamics of how we choose our object of attention. The questions are urgent: who gets to make films and television, who gets to write and platform criticism, and which films, television shows and their makers should be examined and celebrated as the object of analysis? What *should* be the object of writing on film and television aesthetics at this contemporary moment?

Noting that questions of style 'cannot be separated from questions of politics', Racquel Gates reminds us of the political analysis that close attention to film and television form facilitates (2017: 44); a form of rigorous analysis often present in the pages of *Movie* in its original and online forms, in the journal's attentiveness to style not as natural or neutral, but meaningful and engaging with questions of representation, for example of class, gender and race.

For this dossier, we wanted to encourage contributions which give voice to and reasoned evaluation of figures, communities, and films or television that have traditionally been marginalised in critical analysis and screen culture, and in wider cultural discourse. We sought to reject what So Mayer and Ania Ostrowska (2015) have called 'the perception of scarcity' that has so often framed and perpetuated marginalisation, and embrace the prompt to 'celebrate and participate in [the] plenitude' of marginalised films and filmmakers instead. Yet this is not to seek to reduce film criticism to a narrow account of 'representational progress on-screen' (Mayer & Ostrowska 2015), nor to lay the burden of examining marginalised perspectives onto particular critics. As Bilal Qureshi argues, 'It is a disservice to "diverse" critics of whatever race, class, or sexual identity to expect only a problematization or championship of work to be rendered through the narrow confines of a single or singular identity' (2022), just as it is a disservice to the films being examined.

So, this dossier is a starting point and intervention into what we acknowledge is an ongoing conversation – taking place across sites of public, press and academic debate – about the politics of film criticism and its object, and about screen representations and how they are framed, understood and celebrated. It is a dossier that invites ongoing contributions, and a starting point that takes up Girish Shambu's challenge, that 'Each cinephilic act of speaking, writing, citing, and curating must also be an act that intervenes in an unequal world' (2019: 33).

Lucy Fife Donaldson & Lisa Purse

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THE POLITICS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

Eileen Rositzka (1988-2021)

This dossier was to have included a contribution from Eileen Rositzka, the exciting author of *Cinematic Corpographies: Remapping the Body Through Film* (2018), whose work brought skilful close textual analysis together with ground-breaking work on bodies and war at the intersection of Film Studies, War Studies and Geography. Her work was opening up new ways to think about the representation of war onscreen, but she also brought her incisive and illuminating analysis to bear on a striking range of film and television texts that, in different ways, raised questions about the politics of representation, and the depiction of bodies and borders, from popular science fiction cinema to cinemas of migration, from feminist television to horror to realist cinema.

Eileen was writing an essay for the dossier which reflected on the extent to which festival sidebars – like Cannes' *Un Certain Regard* – that are intended to platform potentially discounted films actually represent a further act of marginalisation due to their 'curatorial separation from the main festival strand', as she puts it. She was exploring this theme through a close reading of the Ali Abbasi film *Gräns / Border* (2018), which won the *Un Certain Regard* award at the 2018 Cannes film festival, bringing it into striking dialogue with

another film equally (but differently) interested in corporeal transgressions and their screen depiction, Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013). This summary alone indicates the originality of Rositzka's approach.

Tragically, Eileen died before the essay could be completed in final form. The dossier is the poorer for its absence, but the more deeply, keenly felt loss for the dossier editors and the wider film community is Eileen herself. As the moving tributes from Cinepoetics and the SCMS War & Media Studies Special Interest Group among others attest, Eileen was a much-loved scholar, colleague and friend, with a wide network of peers who benefitted from her intellect, her warm friendship, her good humour, and her instinctively activist collegiality. We miss her greatly.

Lisa Purse and Lucy Fife Donaldson

Editors, Dossier: The Politics of Close Analysis, and its Object

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THE POLITICS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

The spirits of African cinema: redemptive aesthetics in Mati Diop's *Atlantics*

In Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019), the ghosts of young Senegalese men who have drowned trying to sail to Europe return to haunt their girlfriends in Dakar. The film's mise-en-scène is suffused with images and sounds of the ocean. The Atlantic forms the horizon of narrative possibility for the film's desperate young men, but it also forms the cinematic material of a stranger and more joyful accounting of precarity, loss, and redemption. *Atlantics* centres on young Africans for whom postcolonial economics are personal – Ada (Mame Bineta Sané) loves Souleiman (Ibrahima Traoré), but he has not been paid in months and goes to sea to reach Europe. His boat sinks, and the drowned men it carried return as spirits. Diop's film understands these spirits as a form of anticolonial realism, capable of rendering visible the affective depths of the Atlantic Ocean: they bespeak the ocean's unimaginable archive of Black death, as well as envisioning beauty and grace in contemporary Black life. At the Cannes Film Festival, where she was the first Black woman selected to compete, Diop said 'I wanted to dedicate this film to a certain youth, firstly those who disappeared in the Atlantic Ocean in trying to reach Spain, but I also wanted to pay homage to the youth of today who are living, full of life.' (Sène 2019) The film is structured aesthetically around this relationship between death and life,

and its scenes of ghostly haunting encode seemingly opposed commitments to the antirealist codes of horror and the realist representation of quotidian – and joyful – life. In this apparent contradiction, Diop's film enables reflections on what anticolonial aesthetics could look like today, for the generation of Black diasporic filmmakers who have inherited both the histories of Third Cinema in Africa and of assimilationism and its refusal in Europe.

Diop is an active voice in understanding her film's style as political, and we will return frequently to her own analyses. 'You could say there's a reparative dynamic in my cinema', she reflects, 'almost as if by creating a new landscape I'm healing myself from having been exposed to colonial stereotypes for too long' (Diop, Al Qadiri, Azimi and Radboy 2019: 12). Diop calls for a reparation of the image of Africa, and in *Atlantics* the ghost is a formal mechanism for this work. The film's central question is how to represent – or do justice for – those who have disappeared into the vastness of the ocean. Supernatural possession is at once a refusal of colonial realism (in which ghosts don't exist) and a demand to bring the humanity contained in the ocean into cinematic visibility and memorialisation. We cannot see beneath the ocean, but the spirits that dwell there bring a political and affective force to the frame. *Atlantics*' ghosts participate in a history of haunting across the Black Atlantic, from the Senegalese faru rab to the Arab jinn to the Haitian zombie. Indigenous spirits travel from precolonial belief systems to postcolonial cinema, bringing with them complex layers of cultural meaning and a potential for resistance. These spirits are borne on the ocean: Diop speaks of Breton tales of drowned Africans haunting the French villages they never reached (Black 2019). This is also a cinematic history, traced in 1970s African films of postcolonial liberation and in more recent European stories of migration and diaspora. In reimagining the inheritance of these journeys, Diop focuses on the ocean and the ghost as powerful sources of renewal. In Atlantics, spirits embody an oceanic history of colonial violence, and create a cinematic optic capable of both memory and transformation. I argue that style in *Atlantics* is legible as an articulation of Black histories, anticolonial aesthetics, diasporic identities, and queer feminism. Its antirealist aesthetic of ghostly haunting encodes both an atmosphere of loss and a reparative politics of Black life.

Mirror reflections

A crucial scene late in the film brings together the spirits of the dead men with the bodies of their girlfriends in a nightclub. Ada realises that the men have returned as spirits and runs to the beach-side club to tell her friend Dior (Nicole Sougou) that 'The boys are back.' As she speaks, we see what the friends already know: the women sit white-eyed, chilling on bar stools and chairs with a masculine ease. The camera follows Ada's look with a series of point-of-view shots of Fanta (Aminata Kane) sitting on a stair, another woman on a bar stool, a group of women posed in various masculine stances, legs open or slouched on plastic chairs. The boys are indeed back and have taken possession of the bodies of the girls. Thérèse (Coumba Dieng) speaks to Ada with the words of one of the dead men. He relates how Souleiman poured out his heart in his final moments, telling him that Ada was the love of his life. We cut to a long take of the sea, in which Thérèse continues as a voice off-screen, describing the doomed voyage. When we cut back to the group, this time we see the bodies of the men they were, not the women they now possess, reflected in the mirrored wall of the bar. Cinematic form allows the spectator to see through the ghostly embodiment of the possessed women to the male-bodied truth of the spirits, but only in the tacky mirror of the nightclub. The shot of the men in the mirror is overlaid with the crisscross pattern of the tiles, reminding us that what we see is not a direct representation of reality. In terms of camera position, it indicates that we're looking at a mirror reflection, but within the film's supernatural realism, that surplus on the image evokes the inflected visibility of

spirits. Revealed in their ghostly form, two of the men look out to sea while the others gaze at nothing. One looks directly at the camera. One lies with his head back, a scarf partially covering his face. They are slumped, exhausted, in a shot that lasts more than twenty seconds. Here, in this lengthy witnessing of embodied loss, we see both the film's antirealism – its investment in spirits – and the deep commitment to the real that such antirealism encompasses.

These spirits who possess women's bodies can be identified within transnational Muslim cultures as jinns and specified further within a Senegalese syncretic worldview as faru rab. The faru rab is an ancestral spirit that is understood as circulating in the sea and air, similarly to an Islamic jinn, looking for people to possess. It remains a reference point in contemporary pop culture, discussed on Tumblr as a 'bad spirit boyfriend' (Nataka-Kusafiri 2013). This combination of Senegalese / animist and transnational / Islamic belief enables the faru rab to perform complex and often ambivalent cultural work, particularly in a postcolonial context. The faru rab explains situations in which women are controlled by the spirits of troublesome boyfriends. In conventional lore, such possession is a consequence of dressing immodestly, and so animist belief is entangled with Islamic codes of conduct to reinforce conservative gender codes. As Fanta says in *Atlantics*, 'The marabout said that a spirit got in through my belly button because I don't dress correctly.' (Her friend's reply is 'The marabout is talking crap.') As with many supernatural beliefs, spirits can work to limit and define women's actions with the threat of supernatural punishment. But Diop's faru rab are not anonymous bad boyfriends, but the spirits of the women's actual partners. They possess them not because the women broke religious codes but because their boyfriends broke with the untenable conditions of postcolonial capitalism. The resulting possessions are thus not hostile but melancholic, the living bodies of the women doubled by the dead souls of their men. In the night club, Diop presents possession as love.

The figure of the faru rab can offer a form in which to counter patriarchal, religious, and colonial systems of control (Fatou 2016; Sow 2006). The cult of the rab expands social space for women, and Janice Boddy argues that faru rab 'possession is an embodied critique of colonial, national, or global hegemonies whose abrasions are deeply, but not exclusively,

held by women.' (1994: 419) In *Atlantics*, spirit possession doubles gender, offering women power in their new mode of embodiment. We see it in their stances, the immediacy with which maleness gives them permission to take up space, and in the queer voice with which Thérèse, with her long blonde hair and her blue lingerie, speaks of dying at sea with his brothers. Cinema's suturing of sound and image to construct the effect of realism is destabilised when a female-bodied character speaks as a man. The voice remains that of the female actor, however, so the effect is not that of two bodies being spliced (as in voice dubbing) but rather a person containing more than one gender. Spirit possession explains narratively this doubling of gendered embodiment, but it does not exhaust its cinematic effects.

This scene of mirrored genders calls back to the film's first scene of possession, in which the women rise from their beds and converge on the home of N'Diaye (Diankou Sembene), the

boss who exploited their boyfriends and would not pay them for their labour. The film shifts out of realism in this sequence, moving from an uncanny shot of the women waiting silently in the boss' living room into a reveal of their whited-out eyes, as N'Diaye's wife (Seyni Diop) turns to see them. The women advance on N'Diaye, demanding their wages, in a sequence that similarly foregrounds the disjuncture between the image of feminine lingerie and naked legs and their voiced claim to be the male employees. The wife asks who they are and Fanta replies, 'He knows.' The women force N'Diaye to the cemetery, where they demand that he hand over the men's back wages and dig their graves. Only as spirits can this combination of male and female, life and death, become visible. Spirit possession enables this scene of revenge, and it does not have the effect that a ghostly image of the men returning would have: it's the embodied assemblage of temporal and gender dissidence that creates cinematic force. The feminist potential of

the faru rab is closely conjoined to the narrative's critique of corrupt postcolonial capitalism in Senegal (embodied here by N'Diaye), and these strands of political discourse evoke longer histories of both precolonial belief and anticolonial thought.

Diop says of her practice, 'You can see that aspect of past and present informing each other in this way that divests of Western conceptions of time or reality' (Black 2019). This claim that the antirealism of the ghost works against Western epistemologies speaks in a tradition of what Harry Garuba terms 'animist materialism' (2003: 261-285), a cultural practice that includes both literary magical realism and the postcolonial horror film. In addition to the Senegalese beliefs that she cites, we can understand these spirits within the transnational circulation of resistance to colonialism through the imaginaries of indigenous animisms. We might think of the zombie, the figure of slavery's dead labour who comes after those who have stolen his body. Bertrand Bonello's *Zombi Child* (2019), for example, locates its voudoun revenants in the context of a French high school, in which the pedagogic inculcation of national ideologies is confronted with the textually indigestible presence of a Haitian teenager. Other colonial-era revenants haunt recent European cinema. The French horror film *Kandisha* (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury, 2020) and the British film *His House* (Remi Weekes, 2020) both address postcolonial histories with their spirits, and the former explicitly links its Moroccan jinn with a history of European colonial violence. These vengeful figures of the horror film – the zombie, vampire, jinn and so forth – are themselves examples of colonial extraction, constructed from the spirit worlds of the colonised. To take one pertinent example, Mark Allen Peterson's tracing of the Arab jinn's transformation into the Hollywood genie illustrates the coloniality that sustains the horror genre (2007: 93-112). There are surely risks for postcolonial filmmakers in turning to horror, and yet as Adam Lowenstein has argued (2005; 2022), horror cinema has also been a powerful tool for navigating traumatic histories and for creating what he calls 'transformative otherness' (2022: 6). Whereas European films like *Kandisha* maintain the colonialist perspective of those who fear the spirit's revenge, in *Atlantics* the possessed women are not victims, and revenge is a more ambivalent goal. What really

matters for the spirits in the mirror is a different kind of restitution; an acknowledgement of what has been lost and what remains. To deploy supernatural horror in a postcolonial cinematic context is, at its most radical, to rescue animism from colonial vision.

Film and media scholarship has addressed the relationship of colonialism to horror in various ways (e.g., Gelder 2000; Aizenberg 1999). Fred Botting argues that whereas the gothic was a mirror to modernity, Glennis Byron's concept of the 'globalgothic' forms a mirror to the era of neocolonial globalisation (2015: 189). The globalgothic, with its words smushed together to suggest the indivisibility of globalisation and its dark mirror, resonates with Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar's account of the 'global-popular' (2022: 1), in which the audible hyphen asks us to think about how and where pop culture interfaces with the worldly, how they are conjoined, and to what ideological ends. Both terms use the space between words to stage the distance or proximity between geopolitics and cultural forms. Together, they speak to Diop's meditation on distances and proximities. In *Atlantics*, Europe is an unreachable distance despite the connectedness of globalisation, and the possessed women experience both a supernatural closeness and a painful ontological chasm between their bodies and the spirits of their dead lovers. As the sequence in the nightclub continues, we cut in to a closer shot, in which the mirror's uneven surface disturbs the image of the men. One man, in the foreground, is blurry to the point that his body is close to dissipating. Behind him, another man's image is doubled. They exist, insofar as they can be seen in the mirrored tiles, but imperfectly, precariously. The final shot of the sequence brings both worlds into the same frame, showing one woman sitting close to the wall, her male spirit double in the mirror. The film makes the distances between life and death, Africa and Europe proximate across the mirror shot of the women and the spirits. It understands horror as a wholly cinematic means of making systems of power visible and of countering them. Bliss Cua Lim considers that 'the spectral alerts us to the contiguity – rather than the subsuming – of diverse ways of inhabiting the world' (2009: 137), and this contiguity perfectly describes the two modes of representation brought together by the mirror. On the one side, a

naturalistic attention to lives lived in the shadow of migration. On the other, a supernatural response to the ocean's archive of Black death. These histories of migration and death, and of Europe's violent significance in Senegal's past, require the intervention of jinns to become imaginable.

Coloured lights

As Thérèse describes the events of the men's deaths from offscreen, we begin to see green points of lights play across the men's faces in lines and parabolas, refracting around the space of the night club. The swell of lights evokes waves, playing over the image and remediating the fatal crashes of water in the intangible, beautiful language of disco lights. We cut to Dior's face in close-up, crying. Green lights play over her but so does sea spray, visually mixing dots that are material – made of water – and those that are composed of immaterial light. As the green lights create swooping and circling patterns, the sea spray moves more randomly. Both forms surround Dior as she listens to this tale: the ocean water that seeps in from the Atlantic, from the space of horror and death, and the lights that decorate the club, a space of tawdry glamour and of life. The journal collective Bidoun describe the film as 'a sensualist's delight' (Diop, Al Qadiri, Azimi and Radboy 2019: 2), arguing that the textural qualities of colour and flashing neon light channel the ghostly realm of jinns. Diop says, 'I'd wanted the *Atlantics* score to sound as if written by a jinn', and sound forms a crucial component of this immaterial haunting. The disco light effect is introduced earlier in the film when Ada

tries unsuccessfully to call Souleiman. She sits in a dark part of the bar, lit only with neon green points of light that swirl around her as we hear the waves crashing on the beach. The electronic score evokes an otherworldly atmosphere, as the lights sweep back and forth, crashing over her like waves in electric form. These coloured lights render cinematically what is written on the body in the forms of haunting. In the mirror we see ghosts, but even in the 'real' space of the nightclub, cinematic form demands that we see the body as more than its manifest self. The lights are aesthetically beautiful, and they compel as a formalisation of the effects of what cannot be visualised – time, pain, love – on the body.

If these lights attune the spectator to invisible pasts, *Atlantics* stirs many such hauntings. Of course, the drowning of Black people in the Atlantic Ocean cannot but evoke the

transatlantic slave trade, in a haunting that is as unavoidable as it is painful. Kobena Mercer writes that the

descendants of enslavers and enslaved alike share in a predicament arising from the unrepresentability of the past. While the former may be unreconciled with a history that has been wiped out of collective memory, the latter, it may be said, are haunted by too much memory; ghosted by the floating bodies of lost and unnamed ancestors buried beneath the sea. (1997: 67-68)

Atlantics reckons with such ghosting, both of the female protagonists who are haunted by loss and of a broader audience for whom Black cinema can form a mode of collective memory. Christina Sharpe describes 'Black being in the wake as a form of consciousness' (2016: 14), and we can see *Atlantics* as what she describes as 'wake work', balancing the

experience of that consciousness with something other than the dead weight of trauma. In evoking the Middle Passage through the men's deaths at sea, the film recalls what Hortense Spillers terms the 'oceanic […] as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet "American" either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all' (1987: 72). For Spillers, the oceanic bespeaks precisely slavery's stripping of name, place, and identity, and it is this 'nowhere at all' that Diop both recalls and rewrites. Narrated from their point of embarkation, where loved ones remember them, *Atlantics* can imagine its men as retaining their identities despite and through the oceanic. This recall, in bright lights that rain across the women's faces, is part of the work of reparation to which Diop aspires.

This doubling of the oceanic is a consequence of the more recent history of migration and death at sea to which *Atlantics* responds. As Alan Rice and Johanna C. Kardux put it,

if there is an excess of Middle Passage memory, in the last two decades there has also been the return of actual African bodies crammed onto ships, trafficked and then washed up on Mediterranean shores – the ghostly memories become emblems of a new and horrific by-product of globalisation. Nineteenth-century slave narratives now have their twenty-first century equivalents in refugee narratives that summon Middle Passage ghosts. (2012: 256-257)

Young Senegalese people leaving the country via perilous boat journeys to Europe account for a high proportion both of migrants arriving in Southern Europe and of those who die en route (Pflaum 2020: 135-136; Mbaye 2014: 4). Many films address the migrant crisis in naturalistic ways – such as Gianfranco Rosi's 2016 *Fuocoammare* and Jonas Carpignano's *Mediterranea* (2015) – and indeed Diop's own short film *Atlantiques* (2009) is a documentary about young men who go to sea. The first half of *Atlantics* works beautifully as a portrait of life in Dakar, but the film becomes something rich and strange when the spirits return. Diop describes her own encounter with young men who were leaving for Europe, and one in particular who told her, 'When you leave, you're already dead'. This proleptic phrasing prompted her to

'envision Dakar as a ghost city, a city of the living dead' (Diop, Al Qadiri, Azimi and Radboy 2019: 10), and the temporalities at play in the already dead / living dead draw together past and present horrors. The aesthetic work of *Atlantics* is to find a form for the layered depths of this historical haunting.

The lights that play across the faces of Ada and Dior also speak to a more personal haunting: that of Diop's own diasporic identity and cinematic inheritance. As is well known, she is the niece of the filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambéty, and grew up with the influence of that generation of Senegalese filmmakers who defined the cinema of anticolonial liberation. Maguèye Kassé finds converging in *Atlantics* 'the engagement that Sembène nourished a half century ago with *Le Mandat* or *Guelwaar* and the desperate irony of her other teacher, Djibril Diop Mambéty, brother of Wasis, uncle of Mati, auteur of *Touki Bouki* and *Hyènes*.' (Sotinel 2019a: 12) *Atlantics* is a very different film from these radical texts, much more legible as art cinema. But what should engaged cinema look like today, and how can the descendants of Third Cinema navigate aesthetics and politics in the age of Netflix? Diop pays specific homage to her uncle's most famous work in an early scene in *Atlantics* in which a herd of cows cross the screen, and these cows are also seen in the opening of her short film *Mille Soleils* (2013). These repetitions are not mere echoes, as *Mille Soleils* forms an extended reflection on the historical distance between the production of *Touki Bouki* (1973) and the present. The film focuses on the lead actor in *Touki Bouki*, Magaye Niang, who forty years on is still driving cattle in Dakar. In one striking scene, we see a cleaner working in a nightclub not unlike the one in *Atlantics*, with mirrored tiles and coloured lights. In voice-over, we hear Niang describe a life story that echoes that of *Touki Bouki*, in which he wanted to go to France with his girlfriend but had no money. We cut to Niang, in the club, only for the punch line: 'She left. I stayed.' The nightclub is a space out of time, in which the many stories of lovers who left can be told. In another emotionally freighted intertwining of temporalities, Niang attends an anniversary screening of *Touki Bouki*, and in that film's climactic scene, he is sutured into the play of looks between the lovers. He looks through the audience, their heads partially blocking the screen, at the image of a woman standing on a ship, choosing to leave. In

the film, she looks back at Niang's character, ashore in Dakar, and we cut to him still, half a lifetime later, in more or less the same place. The film asks insistently what has changed in these postcolonial decades and what, despite political disappointments, could be a redemptive inheritance from Third Cinema?

Atlantics extends Diop's attention to these questions and insists that the inheritance is not only familial but is formed from the whole culture of Senegal's liberation cinema. Diop shares with Sembène an interest in the spaces in which the anti-modern or supernatural emerges with political force within realist texts. The use of an indigenous mask in *Black Girl* (1966) and the curse of impotence in *Xala* (1975) point to the recurrence of anti-realism in his political aesthetic and offer a lineage for Diop's spirits. Sembène, along with other West African filmmakers of liberation like Med Hondo, used anti-historicist forms to animate the forces of European

colonialism, religion, and African resistance. *Atlantics* does not reject realism in the same way – its use of the supernatural means that its anti-realism is diegetically contained. Nonetheless, there are significant continuities. In *Ceddo* (1977), for instance, an English-language gospel song disjunctively flashes forward to link enslaved Africans to their future in America. *Ceddo* evokes transatlantic Black histories through times and places that are not directly represented, and that are reinscribed in relation to specifically African postcolonial accounts of politics and belonging. *Atlantics* similarly evokes histories of colonialism and slavery through what is unseen, and similarly insists that these formal mechanisms are most vivid not as memorial but as present-day politics. Another echo of Sembène can be discerned in the choice of the Thiaroye neighbourhood as the film's setting: his 1988 film *Camp de Thiaroye* narrates the history of the infamous massacre in 1944 of West African infantry in the French

army by white French troops. Diop references the massacre in a press conference in Dakar, at which she says that she chose Thiaroye as a location for reasons both aesthetic and historical. 'It was almost an ethical choice, and it could only have happened here, a history of revenants who reclaim their due, that could only be in Thiaroye.' (*All Africa* 2019) The ghosts of Senegal's colonial history are also the ethical inheritances of Diop's cinematic forebears.

This legacy also falls differently on the diasporic artist. The wave of migration in the 2000s echoes the departure of so many in the post-independence years, the generation of Diop's parents, as a result of whose choices Diop was raised in France. She has reflected on her formation, noting that as a young adult, she lived in a very white world, quite distanced from her African origins (Sotinel 2019b: 3). It was not until she took time out of school to visit Dakar that she began to connect with her Senegalese family and culture – and there she witnessed the desire of so many young men to leave for Europe. A profile of Diop in *Le Monde* identifies 'shockwaves between the director's desire to return and the exodus of the young people' (Sotinel 2019b: 3). This tension between her diasporic impulse to remake an African identity and the urgency of the young men to find a European one fuels the film's complex accounting of desire and mourning. Upon Diop's return to Dakar for the premiere of Atlantics, she was greeted by Lebou women wearing traditional boubous and performing a Ndawrabine dance. They fêted her, singing 'thank you Mati for this blessing, little girl of Dial Diop … thank you for this blessing, niece of Djibril Diop Mambéty!' (Leye 2019). These Lebou women perform a benediction on the diasporic daughter's return in a language that is at once feminine, traditional, cinematic, and generational.

In his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre conjures the generation of anticolonial resistance and liberation as men gathered around a fire, who ignore the French: 'a fire warms them and sheds light around them,' he warns, 'and you have not lit it.' (1963:13) These are the sons of the colonised – they refused to be 'dead souls' like their fathers, whose possession by colonial power rendered them 'zombies'. This classic text of French anticolonialism finds strong echoes in Diop's short film *Atlantiques*, which focuses

on just such a group of young men, gathered around, and lit by a fire, and which she shot on that first adult return trip to Dakar. As with Sartre's metaphor, these young men are the descendants of colonialism, but they are not the generation who rose up in the moment of anticolonial struggle, but their children, who long to leave for Europe and to escape the precarious conditions of postcolonial capitalism. In *Atlantics*, these are the men who return – if not quite as zombies, then certainly as another vision of dead labour. Thus, in Diop's intellectual inheritance, there is something of an elegy for the heroic era of anticolonial thought. (*Mille Soleils* is also very much an elegy for the lost artistic and political potential of that moment.) There is so much loss in the film, and yet there remains an echo of that fireplace as a legacy of anticolonial energy.

Atlantics also features fires set with purpose and replete with political energy: the spirit of Souleiman burns the marital bed of Ada's wealthy suitor Omar (Babacar Sylla) and the possessed women set ablaze the house of the corrupt boss N'Diaye. Fire is deployed as a form of refusal and resistance, in the sense that we use 'burn it down!' as a political demand to wholly remake systems of oppression. This violently vengeful energy of fire is largely replaced in *Atlantics*, however, by the radiance of disco lights, which awaken another affective register. As a visual mode of illumination and as a cultural form, disco lights offer a radically different set of connotations from fire. They are pretty, decorative, and colourful, in ways that are understood as feminine and can be dismissed as trivial, but which nourish intersecting forms of aesthetic resistance. Disco itself has long been theorised as a queer form (see Dyer 1979; Lawrence 2011) and it is equally a Black form, closely linked, as Jafari S. Allen (2022) has argued, to experiences of Black queer healing. This is also a cinematic history: *Atlantics*' nightclub evokes the final sequence of *Beau Travail* (Claire Denis, 1999) in which Denis Lavant dances alone in front of an almost identical mirror tiled wall, surrounded by sparkling disco lights. More recently, *Rafiki* (Wanuri Kahiu, 2018) deploys the neon lights of a nightclub to envision a space of refuge and joy for queer African women. When *Atlantics* shines disco lights on its characters, it conjures rich histories of queer and Black cultural resistance.

Ocean

Although it is set in a nightclub, the scene of the men's return reiterates images and sounds of the ocean. The club's architecture is open to the beach, constructing a space that is at once exterior and interior. We begin with Thérèse talking to Ada, the ocean visible in the background and the soundtrack layering waves crashing with eerie music. A reverse shot of Ada has a narrow focal length so that as the story of Souleiman's journey grips her, the ocean becomes blurry and abstract, yet still recognisable. As Thérèse moves toward the disastrous climax of her tale, we cut to a direct and frontal shot of the ocean, an empty and unchanging vastness, which discloses no detail of what has happened within it. We hold this unmediated view of the ocean for a long time as Thérèse speaks off-screen, the visual field at once empty and full. The tension created in this sequence between the complex resonance of the Atlantic in the film's textual system and the blankness of the shots of the ocean itself reiterates across the film. In an early sequence, Ada meets Souleiman for a rare moment of semi-privacy by the beach. Over another cutaway to the sea, Ada's voice off can be heard complaining that 'You're just watching the ocean, you're not even looking at me.' When we look out at the ocean, we are turned away from the people on land: point of view is always a restriction of attention and *Atlantics* makes the spectator feel the weight of that sensory distribution. The ocean is over-visible in the way that these images recur, punctuating the narrative and coding the sheer ubiquity of this view to life in Thiaroye. The view to the horizon is impassive, flat, and shimmering. We actually can't see anything when we see the sea. We can't see Souleiman's desperation or the way that the presence of the ocean tempts departure. There are no shots 'at sea' of the voyage, or of high waves, exciting peril, or of terror and catastrophe. No, we simply see the flat line of the horizon, viewed from the shore, just as we might see the sea from Marseille or Brighton or anywhere else.

The ocean is always there in *Atlantics*, offering an ontological aesthetic in the profilmic realism of city, shore, and sea. But the stories that it holds are legible almost everywhere else but in those flat, static views of the horizon. Lindsay Turner argues compellingly that the ocean imbues the entire atmosphere of the film, not only in the sense of mood or feeling

but materially, in the hazy polluted air of Dakar, 'The Atlantic, resting place for enslaved people taken from Senegal centuries ago and for migrant people leaving right now, repository of collective grief, literally becomes the air we breathe. The moisture in the air is the moisture from the sea; it is the evaporated substance of history' (2020: 190). What we do not see in the indexical thereness of the ocean image, *Atlantics* reveals in other ways: in the air, in spirit possession, and also in special effects. Diop's film does not use many visual effects, and the most computer-generated object in the film is not its ghostly revenants but the perfectly realist skyscraper that dominates its view of Dakar. The ocean's mute horizontality speaks in relation to its opposite – the vertical line of this shiny and fictional new development. This spectral building is a key part of the film's visual economy: built with real labour but fraudulent finance, it is the cause of Souleiman and the others going to sea. As a visual object, it condenses many kinds of postcolonial capitalist exploitation including corrupt development, the macho construction of giant statement towers, global speculative fantasy, the reproduction of local elites, and the contrasts in Senegal of extremes of wealth and poverty. These are all real things, but they're things that are hard to see. The not-real tower that we can see through cinematic effects enables us to see that which does not always register visually.

The climactic nightclub scene has a second part, and between the two, the possessed women take N'Diaye to the graveyard and insist that he dig the graves that their bodies cannot fill. As the men's former boss finally does some work,

struggling to dig the hard earth, Thérèse tells him, 'Every time you look at the top of the tower, you'll think of our unburied bodies at the bottom of the sea.' Her statement makes explicit the relationship between height on land (monuments to exploited labour) and the depth of the ocean (the nonhuman memorial to that labour). Cinema provides a visualisation of the human-built environment but it cannot easily see the bottom of the ocean. With its CGI tower, *Atlantics* does not only provide a synecdoche for neocolonialist capitalism in Africa, but for the challenge of engaged cinema in a neocolonial world. Cinema, the film proposes, is an apparatus primed to see with the eye of the boss, to see the glamour of capitalist environments and not the human and nonhuman spaces that represent their cost. By imagining the tower as a special effect, but the men's spirits as materially embodied – played by real actors, and simply composited in the mirror shots – *Atlantics* uses cinema's capitalist optics against itself. The camera cannot reach the deep of the ocean's dead, cannot ever see Souleiman again or fully register the depth of generational loss. But in dispersing the meanings of the ocean across the film's formal systems, *Atlantics* sees what (neo)colonial capitalisms do not want to imagine.

Bodies

When *Atlantics* returns to the nightclub, after N'Diaye has been dealt with, Ada walks in alone, without her girlfriends. The first shot of this iteration of the club is empty, only the

end of the bar orienting us to space, as blobs and lines of green light swoop across the frame and waves crash on the soundtrack. We cut to Ada, sitting alone and staring intently out of shot. Instead of a camera sweeping inclusively across a group of friends, the sequence introduces a much more spatially constrained and expressive relationship of camera and editing to bodies. As Ada gets up and walks nervously toward the unseen object of her gaze, spatial relations are rendered disjunctive. The next shot is not, as the spectator might expect, a point-of-view shot; instead, it cuts across the 180-degree line to show Ada walking back into shot in the opposite direction. She turns almost directly to camera, smiling, and we cut again, this time right on the line, but also unexpectedly jumping behind her. This series of cuts renders Ada's return to the club as uncanny and locates her – not one of her possessed friends – as prised out of quotidian experience. The reason for her dislocation becomes clear when Issa (Amadou Mbow) walks into shot: he is the policeman who has been possessed with the spirit of her dead lover.

As Issa walks toward Ada, we cut to a mirror shot, in which he is visible as Souleiman. They embrace as green lights swirl over Souleiman's white T-shirt. This embrace extends, expanding their amorous reunion across the entire remaining time of the scene. In medium shot, lights play across Ada's bare back as music gradually enters the sequence – first a melody, then chirruping cicadas, in an otherworldly soundscape. As they kiss, lights arc back and forth, and camera and editing likewise switch back and forth from Souleiman to Issa. After cutting between them, the camera tracks from Issa in the real world to Souleiman in the mirror, grounding both men in the same visual field. The camera moves down their bodies as Souleiman caresses Ada's butt and she smiles in pleasure and holds him closer. Time is elided and now we see the lovers naked, lying in front of that same mirrored wall. In a reverse shot of the empty club, white-capped waves roll in rapidly. In response to this breath-taking sequence, Diop speaks about cinema's dearth of images of Black love (Diop, Al Qadiri, Azimi and Radboy 2019: 14). In part, this scene is powerful because it is rare, but *Atlantics* moves beyond the simple fact of representation in the formal complexity with which this layering of mirrors, lights, ocean, spirits, and

desiring bodies moves us from postcolonial critique to reparative relationality.

Ada believes that Souleiman exists within the body of Issa, and in this corporeal doubling we find multiple openings to alterity. Contrary to most possession narratives, the humans possessed with these spirits are not viewed as violently dispossessed of their selves. The girls do not seem frightened by the presence of their former boyfriends within them, and Ada knows that she is embracing both Issa and Souleiman at once and accepts this multiplicity. But why does Souleiman return in the body of Issa, when all the other men possess women's bodies? Diop initially thought that Souleiman 'would return to haunt the body of a woman who would make love to Ada' (Cahen 2020). She explains that 'we abandoned the idea because I thought the Senegalese public was not ready for that' (Cahen 2020). Diop avoided a direct visioning of homosexual sex, but the film nonetheless registers queerness in its multiplicities of desire. Even without a same-sex couple, the multiplicity of Ada-Souleiman-Issa makes for a

queer relationality, a kind of polyamorous 'V' in two bodies. Moreover, a queerness remains within the film's regime of spirits. Most of the dead men return as women, and as we move back and forth from mirror to nightclub, each of the characters changes visible gender. This effect of mixing, crossing, and fusing evokes what Eliza Steinbock calls the 'shimmering' of trans cinematic forms (2019: 3), in which gender's mutability registers across the visual field. These are not queer or trans characters, but the mutability of gender, sexuality, and desire reimagines bodily hierarchies at the formal level. Diop's reimagining of the faru rab works against patriarchy, at once transforming women's agency and their relationships to their own and others' bodies. These hinted refusals of cis- and heteronormativity contribute both to the feminist force of Ada's refusal of marriage, and to the aesthetico-political force of staging Black love.

This corporeal politics resonates with the film's narrative of migration. In 2012, a wave of popular protests led by the 'Y'en a marre' movement, often called the Dakar Spring, helped

topple the corrupt president Abdoulaye Wade. For Diop, 'Y'en a marre turned the page on the attitude of "Barcelona or death". I told myself that the young people who went out into the streets to say "no" carried in them the youth who were lost at sea' (Sotinel 2019b: 3). Here, Diop describes the protest movement in the same terms as faru rab possession, with bodies containing within them the spirits of others. Just like Ada and her girlfriends gathering in N'Diaye's house, protests work by way of bodies simply being in public, creating political pressure from the solidarity of those who bear witness. As Diop describes her experience, 'the Dakar Spring "contaminated me", this vital insurrectional force inspired me to get to work and set my cinema at the same frequency as the uprising' (Goodfellow 2019). This idea of a cinema set 'at the same frequency' as the uprising emphasises the processes of attunement, both aesthetic and political. Frequency asks us to think about sound, pacing, temporality, and rhythm, which is one way to describe the film's gradual and then irrevocable disclosure of spirits' return. It also suggests frequencies that cannot be heard or immediately processed, but which must be sensed in other ways. Haunting imagines a supernatural frequency beyond normal human perception, but one not disconnected from the political. To be attuned to this frequency in *Atlantics* is to open oneself to a decolonised sensory register.

In Ada's love for Souleiman, *Atlantics* stages this frequency through emotion. From the beginning of the film, we are attuned to some inchoate sense of wrongness, and this sense is routed primarily through Ada's bad mood. She is not allowed to be with Souleiman, and she feels awkward in their secret embraces. She puts him off as he tries to tell her how he feels. Moreover, her mother and grandmother are angry with her for not being happy to marry Omar. She's not quite in synch either with her pious friend Mariama (Mariama Gassama) or with her more secular friends Fanta and Dior. Ada's mood is off, and she does not align with the prevailing social organisation of affect. Robert Sinnerbrink writes of cinematic mood that it 'is not simply a subjective experience or private state of mind; it describes, rather, how a (fictional) world is expressed or disclosed via a shared affective attunement orienting the spectator within that world' (2012: 148). Ada's bad mood orients us to a network of dissatisfactions – around gender,

economics, and social power – that will resonate across the film. As Sinnerbrink suggests, this production of mood does not merely build character but rather works to orient us to and within worlds. Kathleen Stewart writes of the 'charged atmospheres of everyday life' (2010: 2) and proposes atmospheric attunements as 'forms of attending to what's happening, sensing out, accreting attachments and detachments, differences and indifferences, losses and proliferating possibilities.' (2010: 4) In the movement from Ada and Souleiman's violent separation to their joyful supernatural reunion, *Atlantics* more than anything plays with the political potential of a change in atmosphere.

For the first half of the film, the atmosphere is one of impossibility and conflict. The men shout angrily at their bosses, who have not paid them in months. Ada is sullen when forced to spend time with Omar and quiet when she must undergo a humiliating virginity test. At her wedding party, Ada's secular friends wear shiny dresses and pose for selfies in her ugly new bedroom, while her more religious friends gossip about how Ada should not hang out with those sluts. Ada herself skulks at the edge of the bedroom, refusing to step into the photos, and eventually leaves the room altogether. Everyone is at odds. But when Souleiman dies, the atmosphere changes. Ada becomes attuned to the ocean and when the spirits of the men return, the film's opening onto supernatural horror precipitates a shift into a mood of agency and resistance. Ada and her girlfriends become attuned to the men who possess their bodies. There's a solidarity in the emotional expression of all the girls (including former enemies Mariama and Fanta) and all the boys. They speak together, bodies and spirits combined. Political action – the revenge of the spirits against N'Diaye – emerges from this solidarity of attunement. And for Ada, her bad mood becomes not a way to disassociate from her inevitable marriage but a way of actively refusing it. She shrugs off Omar, refusing to align herself with his body or his values. Possession realigns attunement as Ada senses out the proliferating possibilities of her life.

The film's final scene depicts Ada waking up alone, as her friend Dior cleans the bar. The women continue life, at the very edge of the Atlantic, in a dual space of neon waves and real ones that is always listening to the histories of the ocean. Its terrifying archive of death is right there, intimately understood, but life is produced alongside and separate from its weight. The

return of Souleiman's spirit as a faru rab draws on animism to provide an alternative epistemology to that of neocolonialism but it cannot, on its own, offer freedom to Ada. In the aftermath of the night-time acts of just revenge and reparative love, *Atlantics* leaves us with Ada's own sense of self. As she dresses, Ada looks toward the mirrored wall and for the first time, we hear her thoughts in voice-over. She says, 'Last night will stay with me to remind me of who I am and show me who I will become.' She looks directly to camera and announces herself as 'Ada, to whom the future belongs.' This final powerful shot is from the point of view of the mirror, which the film has consistently associated with the spirits of the dead. From this location, the camera position implies, the spirits also see Ada and witnesses her moving beyond them in time. Future is what Souleiman does not have, and the film thus points toward a beyond, after this space of ghosts and possession toward what Ada (the only woman not possessed) might do.

Rosalind Galt

Rosalind Galt is Professor of Film Studies at King's College London. She researches in the aesthetics and politics of world cinema and her most recent book is *Alluring Monsters: the Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization (*Columbia University Press, 2021).

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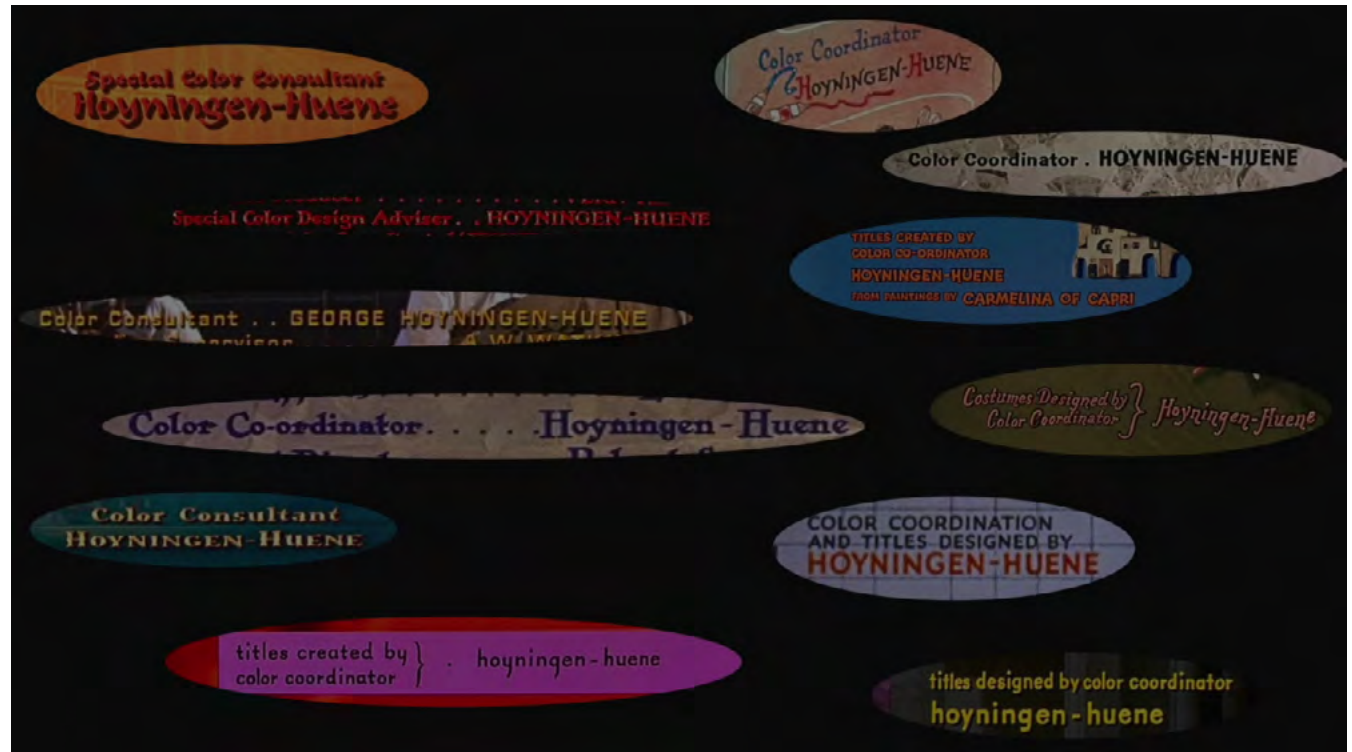
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THE POLITICS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

Tracing the threads of influence: George Hoyningen-Huene and *Les Girls* (1957)

The audiovisual essay has become a dynamic format for illuminating people and labour in film, especially those who might have gone unnoticed or unappreciated. To give just a few examples of work in this area, we can look to audiovisual essays by Ian Garwood (2014), John Gibbs & Suzana Reck Miranda (2018), who have brought attention to the background performances of musicians and their critical contributions to particular Hollywood films, while others highlight the contribution of women editors (Pearlman), or steadicam operators (Bird 2020), or sound designers, as in Liz Greene's focus on Alan Splet's work on *The Elephant Man* (2020). Like these examples, this video essay seeks to uncover a background contribution, one that is mixture of visible and invisible, and to argue for their place in an appreciation of visual style.

This audiovisual essay is the first step towards building a portrait of George Hoyningen-Huene and his work in cinema. Although he worked on a small number of films over the course of a decade, Huene's work as color-consultant/color-coordinator/costume designer and more, represents the kind of essential creative contribution to filmmaking that has generally been sidelined or forgotten in appreciations of film style. The potential depth of his influence on the films, and perhaps more significantly, on the people with whom he worked, registers most forcefully in the quality of his production work detailed in archival materials – the letters, memoranda and notes addressed to his collaborators. The principal aim of this audiovisual essay is to bring to light Huene's meticulous design of colour, alongside his composition of action, props, lighting and costuming, that can be found in these materials, using *Les Girls (*Cukor, 1957) as a case study.

Les Girls was chosen because it offers the richest resources in the holdings relating to Huene in the George Cukor collection held by the Margaret Herrick library in Los Angeles. Triangulating his influence on this film is undertaken through the combination and layering of materials available – archival documents and the reference points evoked therein, interviews with Cukor and the detail of the film itself. This approach is not without its difficulties or dangers; avoiding collapsing the connection between an idea or reference and the film itself is a chief point of concern. As John Gibbs points out in his critical account of filmmaking processes, any effort to link production history and style-based criticism faces a number of challenges, not least the risk of presenting evidence of decision-making as a foregone conclusion of the achievements of the finished film: 'Emphatically, the idea is not to validate the critical reading by knowledge of what the filmmakers felt themselves to be doing, but rather one of becoming more densely informed about the decision-making processes, as critics, historians and, perhaps, practitioners' (2011: 81). While Gibbs avoids this by starting with stylistic interpretation, on this occasion, the principal aim of foregrounding Huene's work and influence meant that I started with his notes and looked for the traces of his ideas, and how they might have shaped the work of others, in the finished film. Any interpretation of the relationship between archival material

and film has to be understood as just that, an interpretation. The archival material also offers a lop-sided view of his input, given that the documents are principally Cukor's and so don't contain his replies to Huene. Interviews are extremely useful in this regard, as Cukor himself gives a great deal of credit to his collaborator, consistently stating the degree to which Huene's approach underpinned his colour films (even with the suggestion that this was not limited to the films on which Huene worked) in multiple interviews. The close nature of their working relationship is also confirmed in Ronald Haver's book on the making and restoration of *A Star is Born* (1954), in which the art director Gene Allen recalls the integration of his and Huene's work with their director: 'George Huene and I began working with him on every shot, every angle; we were always right there. And we were all learning' ([1988] 2002: 134). *Les Girls* was the third collaboration between the three men (and Huene and Allen's fourth).

The understanding of film style as a collaborative endeavour is central to arguing for recognition of Huene's work. The gesture of uncovering a person previously sidelined or forgotten is emphatically not one that carries with it an attempt to replace one idea of authorship with another. Rather, the argument that his contribution should be considered crucial to the film's achievements and therefore pertinent to our aesthetic evaluation, is an effort to further develop an understanding of aesthetic achievement as produced through collaboration, and that any recognition of the artistry of filmmaking should be shared among a larger group than has been traditionally acknowledged.

Watch the audiovisual essay here:
https://vimeo.com/740289237

Lucy Fife Donaldson

Lucy Fife Donaldson is Senior Lecturer in film studies at the University of St Andrews. She is a member of the editorial boards of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* and *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture,* the author of *Texture in Film* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), and co-editor of *Television Performance* (Red Globe Press, 2018), and the 'Moments in Television' collection (Manchester University Press).

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THE POLITICS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

No compromise: Jan Němec's rough diamond

1.

A bell tolls and then silence. White titles fade in over black. Another bell. Clang resonating over dense black space. Another pause, longer this time, and then the bell. Five times this ponderous rhythm builds as white text looms forward out of darkness. Then a crash and we are running, bright light, black and white, sound of gasping breath, train chugging, bullets ringing, shouts. 'Halt!' Two boys run across the grassy flat. Trees behind shoot straight up, vertical pull against the boys' horizontal thrust. A train glides across the top of frame. The camera runs apace, wide at first, then closing in. One runs ahead. Swish pan back to the other, camera shaking. Now they run up the slope, bent low. The frame tilts and the trees teeter at forty-five, slicing across the screen. The camera closer now, careening along behind them, beside them, sometimes ahead. Footfall, panting breath. No skyline, just struggling backs, striding legs, grass, branches, pine needles. Heads bobbing out of frame.

The frame is a box, but it might as well be a cage. The boy is running inside the box as the camera jerks along beside him. Stumbling as the box teeters with him, jagged edges all askew. Gasping for breath as a chug-a-chug ricochets around him, echoing the rhythm of his rasping breath. The box starts to close in around him, shaking and tumbling as he runs, bent double, clawing at the earth. The box tightens, catching at him as he crouches, grasping the grass to pull himself along. He collides with the box now at every step. It trails behind him, now races ahead of him, jumping and jolting with every move he makes. His legs start to give way and all he can see is the grass beneath his feet, dense mat of blades, as bullets slice the air. They have not caught him yet, but the camera has him shackled, trapped in its sights as it lurches along at his heels.

2.

When Jan Němec was a student at Prague film school, he was taught that tracking was a bourgeois technique. Filmmakers in communist Czechoslovakia were expected to use editing to emphasise the difference between good and bad. Tracking was verboten.[1]

The opening shot of Němec's 1964 debut feature, *Démanty noci / Diamonds of the Night,* was the longest, most complicated tracking shot ever before produced in Czechoslovakian

cinema (První 2009). For two minutes and twelve seconds the tracking camera crashes against the bodies, the grass, the slope. A slope so steep that the crew had to build two tracks up the hill: one for the camera to go up and another for a carriage to come down as a counterweight.[2] One take per day was all they could do, so exhausting was the shot for both cast and crew. At twenty minutes the camera is still tracking, at fifty-seven, at the last moment tracking still. There are breaks, cutaways after the first shot, but always we come back to the relentless moving camera.

3.

Running he stumbles. The slope is steep and he is weak from hunger. He gave his boots for bread but now his feet are bleeding and the ground is sharp. Staggering he falls. A breath. Heart pounding. Legs screaming. But this is no resting place. The men are close. He can hear their shouts and the whistle of their bullets. Even an old musket can fire straight and true if the range is close, the sights steady.

Running, the camera tracks him. Close behind it veers from side to side, never wavering in its pursuit. Grasping him in its eye. Shuddering. Jolting. Narrowing in. The camera sways violently but every moment it closes in, pinning him down, fencing him in as shots ring out.

They had no choice, crammed together on the floor of the carriage and the guards at the door. The sound of the train missed a beat on the rise. One chance only. The flick of an eye and the pact was sealed, but the leap was high and the landing hard. Limbs jarred, head thumping. We know none of this yet. Just their scrawny bodies, clothes dishevelled, heavy breath gasping, feet scraping desperately across the ground. They can see the forest on the ridge but the hill is long and the

going rough. All around a wall of sound. Heavy breathing, feet beating on the rugged field, angry voices calling, train engine pumping, bullets whirring. Menace ratcheted up to a cacophony of fear.

4.

Němec eschewed psychological cinema.[3] Narrative realism was anathema to him. Storytelling is fragmented, elliptical. He took as his base a story of escape from a Nazi transport, but he chiselled this narrative down to its existential core: escape from persecution, the fight for survival, for freedom.[4] There are hints at a context, flashbacks to a past life, hallucinations, fantasies, but these are mere snippets, terse, cryptic. No explanation given.[5]

Němec says, 'All my life I have felt that film is much closer to music than to anything else. It means that I work with fantasy, imagination, tones, rhythm, harmony and feelings' (Němec & Fryš 2001). He wanted to build a 'pure cinema' (Košuličová 2001: 2). His camera is a vehicle for pure sensation: kinetic rhythm, texture, pulse. He wanted his film to have the structure of a musical composition.

5.

The camera is an eye but whose eye is this? There are labels we could give this camera – at times subjective, unmotivated – but what purchase do these names have on this wild unshackled eye that carves the space into colliding perspectives? At one moment it is our eye, as if we are in pursuit. Then in a jolt the camera swings from the eye of the pursuer to the eye of the pursued, as the world narrows to just the patch of

ground in the boy's sight, close-up, single point of focus as he scrabbles to reach the forest. Again the camera jolts to become an emotional field all of its own, fractured rhythms, shards of chaos, random fleeting moments: the unhinged eye of panic. This is a camera that breaks all the rules, forges its own existential dynamic, invents cinematography anew.

Němec knew what Eisenstein before him knew: that the camera '[hews] out a piece of actuality with the ax [*sic]* of the lens' (Eisenstein [1929, in Leyda 1949). Not for him the inertia of a 'dry quadrilateral' frame with a picture composed inside it. His frame is a scythe to cleave a space; an energetic force, propelled into motion with as much feverish energy as the runners. And we as viewers are wrenched from the stable ground of point-of-view and catapulted full-pelt into the kin-aesthetic maelstrom.

Rather than space and figure excised into fragments, collision *and* continuity of motion build the kinetic rhythm that engulfs us here. Montage would not cut it in this opening

scene. The inexorable driving, plunging momentum of the tracking shot welds the conflicting forces of the frame with the desperate flight of the boys, and the landscape stuttering by, into one roiling, racing energetic trajectory.

6.

To refuse the primacy of linear narrative: this is an easy gambit. But how to undercut entrenched habits of viewing inculcated in narrative modes? By withholding the certainty

of narrative and the stability of vision, Němec throws us onto our other faculties. Through the opening shot, we are transported into the film through our bodies, mirror neurons fired up to roll with the ramshackle movement of the camera, to sprint and stagger with the struggling bodies of the boys. The primacy of kinaesthesia knocks vision off its pedestal. We are thrown onto our vestibular system: we 'watch' the film with our inner ear.

7.

Diamonds of the Night stakes a dazzling claim for a space to think cinematically, stylistically, outside the normative strictures imposed by Němec's teachers, in an echo of the pushback against restrictive regulations happening across Czechoslovakian society in the 1960s. The historical context of the film is so vaguely hinted at, the existential scramble for freedom so central, that the film could easily be interpreted

as a nod to the struggle for liberation in the country – the calls to develop a new 'socialism with a human face', that culminated in the Prague Spring in 1968 – as Němec and his compatriots battled to open up the civic and political space of Czechoslovakia against the repressive controls of the Soviet Union.[6]

8.

Of all his peers, Němec was the 'enfant terrible', the one who refused to compromise (Hames 2001). Only four years after the release of *Diamonds,* the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia and the brilliant flurry of experimentation of the Czechoslovakian New Wave was stilled. Němec was forced into exile.[7] In the US, unable to make films because of his refusal to budge on his cinematic principles, he turned his talent to making wedding videos. He claims to have invented the genre (Košuličová 2001: 1).[8]

Postscript

To write this moment in Czechoslovakian cinema, to capture something of its dazzling inventiveness, demands more than a sober analytical commentary. It demands immersion in the energetic propulsion of the film. This article attempts to develop a performative writing that can circumvent the linear constraints of academic writing. It aims to evoke, in the writing itself, the body of the film and the embodied viewing it provokes: it asks to be read not as a commentary on the film but as a parallel text ignited by the sparks of its innovation.

Acknowledgement
This article is dedicated to Dana, with thanks.

Anne Rutherford

Anne Rutherford is an Adjunct Associate Professor in cinema studies at Western Sydney University. She is the author of *What Makes a Film Tick: Cinematic Affect, Materiality and Mimetic Innervation* (Peter Lang, 2011) and has published widely in both academic and mainstream contexts. https://westernsydney.academia.edu/AnneRutherford

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Notes

[1.] Němec cites his textbook at FAMU (Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts in Prague): 'dollying is a bourgeois means of expression. Because when you track a scene you can't make a selection. And we, as Marxist-Leninists, we must draw attention to positive and negative things. When you are dollying you are making it all the same. That kind of movement makes it all equal and there's no class consciousness.' Video interview with Němec (2021).

[2.] Peter Hames describes this remarkable tracking shot as a handheld shot, and it definitely feels handheld, but in a 2009 video interview Němec explained that, as there was no such thing as Steadicam at that time, the shot was filmed by three cameramen 'sitting on carts to balance each other. Two were sitting in a cart and a second cart was a counterbalance and a camera was on a tripod fastened with rubber bands to keep it steady. [They used] this invention to make the film as unique as possible […] something not seen previously' (První 2009).

[3.] Němec was inspired by Bresson's non-psychological cinema. He admired the 'discipline and concentration' of Bresson's films and 'the lack of pathos' (2009). He says, 'I was always interested in the Bressonian distance between actor and his role' (Košuličová 2001: 3).

[4.] The film is adapted from a 1958 story written by Arnošt Lustig, 'Darkness Casts No Shadow', first published in the anthology, *Démanty noci / Diamonds of the Night*. Prague: Mladá Fronta, Inc.

[5.] For a detailed account of the narrative threads of the film, see Peter Hames (2005: 166-183). According to Hames, Němec's aim was to emphasise 'the interaction between physical sensation and mental states' (Hames 2001). Němec says he tried 'to convey abstract thoughts and feelings in a visual way' (Němec and Fryš 2001). He 'sought to […capture] emotional and mental states in a way that strived to be intrinsically filmic rather than just theatre on film' (Košuličová 2001: 1).

[6.] During the 1960s there was widespread social and political agitation for reform in Czechoslovakia, that culminated in the Prague Spring in 1968. The movement called for a new 'socialism with a human face', an end to censorship and to the power of the secret police, and an acceptance of pluralism in political life.

[7.] Němec was given the choice in 1974 to leave the country or be prosecuted and go to gaol (Košuličová 2001: 1). His 1968 blacklisting by Barrandov Studios had already made his cinema career impossible to pursue in Czechoslovakia (Brooke 2010).

[8.] In the US, Nēmec also made documentaries and music videos.

THE POLITICS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

Roundtable

Across two meetings in 2021, Issue 10 editors Lucy Fife Donaldson and Lisa Purse were joined by *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*'s editors John Gibbs and Doug Pye, and prolific film critic Girish Shambu. In the context of Issue 10's themed dossier, 'The politics of close analysis, and its object', and in an historical moment at which questions of marginalisation, visibility and inclusion are highly pertinent, this roundtable discussion explored the intersection of politics and the practices of film criticism. Our ambition was to consider the past, present and future of film criticism through this lens, in relation to our journal, and its print predecessor *Movie*, directly, but also to other forms and practices of film criticism. Alongside reflection on earlier issues of *Movie*, prior to our discussion we selected two recent examples of writing to read that explicitly pose challenges to how film criticism has engaged or could engage with politics, to act as a springboard for the conversation: Racquel Gates' 'The Last Shall Be First: Aesthetics and Politics in Black Film and Media' (2017) and Shambu's 'Manifesto: For a New Cinephilia' (2019).

Past / The history of *Movie*

Douglas Pye: If we're going to begin by using the history of *Movie* as some sort of focus, there are perhaps a couple of things to start with. First is that Movie's early interventions could be considered, in some respects, to be political. The current wider concept of politics wasn't available in the same way [as it is now] but there are at least two ways. One was their intervention on behalf of detailed criticism. The other, which is less visible in *Movie*, but was very evidently a motivation, certainly for Victor Perkins, was to do with class. This is in Britain, of course, where class is very much a political, as well as a social and economic issue. John did a very good interview with Victor and a number of other figures whose work went back to that period, during which Victor talked about his own life and motivation.[1] He came from working class family in Devon and found himself eventually at Oxford. If I could just refer to a little bit of that interview where Victor's talking about his motivation in terms of class. He speaks of, 'a desire (certainly on my part, I don't know how widely this understanding would be shared) to escape from class-based notions of taste, where understanding is related to the person rather than to the process. Understanding as something which happened, rather than something which was achieved' (Gibbs 2019: 45-46). I think much of that position would have been more broadly shared [among *Movie* contributors] without necessarily having the same class animus about it. The attempt to resist and to challenge inherited notions and paradigms of value – what could be seen as significant and what couldn't – connects to *Movie*'s pioneering work on Hollywood cinema: to begin to find value and significance in a cinema, which had been – in the English-speaking world – hardly taken seriously at all. What they were doing was saying, in effect, our culture is blinded by inherited prejudice, rooted in class, rooted in educational norms, rooted in traditions of cultural commentary. But blindness isn't a product of the visual field, as it were; when you look, what you find is often what you're looking for. And on the whole, film criticism in Britain had not looked to find artistic value, to find significance in Hollywood movies. Those three things, I think, detailed criticism, Hollywood, and class, they're what we could think of as political dimensions of *Movie*'s early work. But it was never overt in the journal, in those terms. I don't think John, was it?

John Gibbs: No, I don't think so. Another contextual factor was what was called 'committed criticism': others writing about film in the early sixties with a more explicit political motivation, often connected to the New Left, and much less likely to be enthusiastic about Hollywood cinema. Doug was mentioning that, very sadly, Alan Lovell has just died – he had an interesting parallel life to Victor's, and they were friends and critical sparring partners over a long period of time. Alan was a leading voice in committed criticism, which *Movie* found itself opposed to, although there were rapprochements later on. This was another kind of a tradition, which saw value in European cinema, mostly, and which was very sceptical of claims being made for popular Hollywood movies of the day. But returning to those early *Movie* articles, there is an argument about the importance of looking at style in detail in order to make political judgments. In 'Films, Directors and Critics' Ian Cameron criticises the celebration of certain war movies because he feels that reviewers are taking a superficial understanding of what those films might be doing, rather than really engaging with how they're working ([1962] 2010). And when Victor is writing about 'The British Cinema' in the first issue, he's quite sceptical of Dearden's films, for example, and argues explicitly that unless you look at the stylistic choices and the material dimensions of these films you can't understand their position in relation to race or other political issues. The Movie critics' commitment to engaging with form, with style, with the materiality of the medium is often about challenging misjudgements, some of which are explicitly about politics, some of which are just snobbish, some of which are 'fuzzy thinking' (Cameron [1962] 2010: 4). This is a major part of their early commitments, to turn the phrase around slightly.

DP: I think Ian Cameron actually talks, doesn't he, at some point, about detailed criticism as the best way of challenging the prevalent wooliness in the writing on film.

JG: Another thing that's interesting to look back on is that *Movie* is actually quite a broad church and includes a lot of different voices over its history. So two years after 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema' appears in *Screen* (1975: 6-18), Laura Mulvey publishes 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama' in *Movie* 25 (1977/78: 53-56). Richard Dyer's 'Four films of Lana
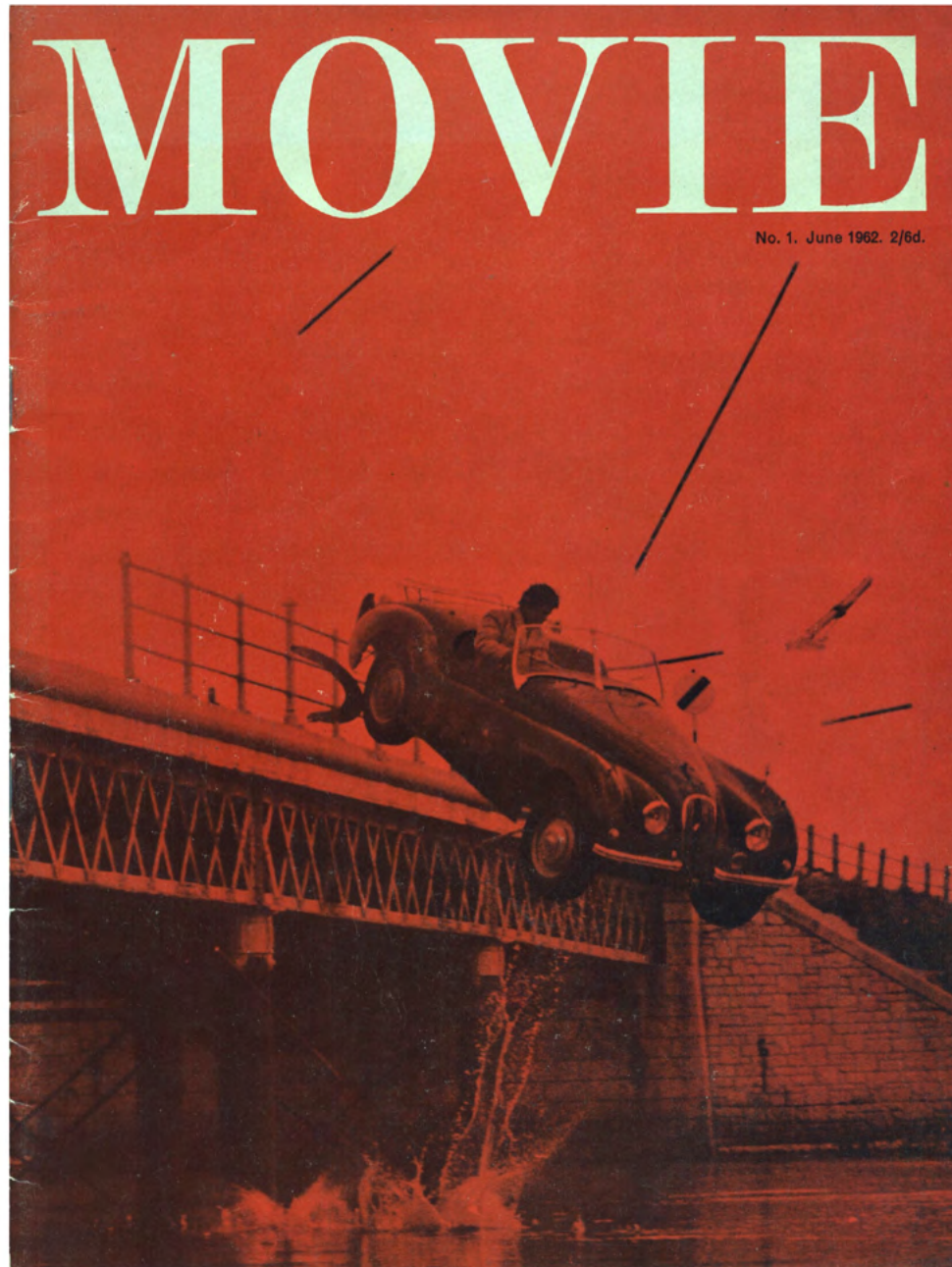
Turner' appears in the same issue (30-52), there are articles on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Williams: 12-16) and *The Exorcist* (Britton: 16-20), and Doug writes about genre, *Fort Apache* and *Liberty Valance* (1-11). I feel it's worth bringing out the flavour of some of those debates, that there are some 70s voices coming through who aren't necessarily names you associate with the *Movie* tradition, but who found a home for some of their work there. Janey Place and Julianne Burton's article in *Movie* 22, 'Feminist Film Criticism', includes a passage which argues, 'Feminist critics who confine themselves to chronicling changes in narrative content throughout history, cinema, ignoring the fact that the mediation of form is the final arbiter of a particular film's effect on the viewer, can never achieve more than an incomplete understanding of specific films and of the medium itself' (1976: 59). That's a *Movie* argument but infused with a new impulse and direction by Place and Burton as they embrace second wave feminism. There are things about the *Movie* approach which make it amenable to other people coming along and saying, no, this account isn't doing justice to my experience or the film's political importance, and we need to articulate what's really at stake here.

DP: Yes. Which is also to say that between *Movie* 19 (1971/2), the Elia Kazan issue, which was the last of the original format, and *Movie* 20 in 1975, there is a gap of about four years, and the world had changed. There was the initial impact of the new theory being published in *Screen*; *Film as Film* and *The Movie Reader* appeared in 1972 and were attacked by Sam Rohdie, also in *Screen* (1972: 135-145). What then happens is you do begin to get, as John says, these new kinds of input, so that in the 70s and beyond there is, within *Movie*, a much more recognisably political concern with representation, with feminism, with a whole range of things that begin to feed in with people like Andrew Britton.

JG: Yes. *Mandingo* (Richard Fleischer, 1975) is a great example here, isn't it? Andrew Britton's article is in the same issue as Place and Burton's (1976: 1-22); the film itself was very popular, very popular with African American audiences, and completely dismissed by reviewers and the critical

establishment. Doug and Ian Cameron interview Richard Fleischer, and Andrew writes this brilliant article about the film and its political and artistic achievement. This is a popular movie, viewed as pulp – and *Movie* comes along and argues very strongly that this is what we need to be engaging with, that this is an important work of political art.

Lucy Fife Donaldson: Looking back through past issues, as you say, John, it's so striking to see the eclectic nature of what is covered in *Movie* right from the beginning. You have the kind of issues that are about Preminger or Hitchcock, but then in issue three, for example, there is a recreation of *Cuba Sí!* (Chris Marker, 1961), along with its censorship letter, and the articles that Victor wrote about the British film industry. So

this idea we might now have of what *Movie* was, and who were the people who are writing in it is to some extent challenged when you go back and look at those earlier issues. Going back to what Doug was talking about, of challenge being the animus to the whole project, in issue one their very first statement is about disagreeing and wanting to disagree with one another. For me, that has always been such an exciting thing about looking back through *Movie*. Of course, there's the detailed criticism, but this sense of challenging the status quo all the way through and also challenging one another, which is brought out through the exciting roundtable discussions that happen at various points across the journal's original run. In those you get not only this sense of the opposition that they're posing outwards, but also that this is an eclectic group coming

together who really want to get to grips with certain kinds of questions about film. I think that's an important thing to remember, and to see that coming from the cultural background Doug was describing, is crucial.

Lisa Purse: What's striking me is how much connection there is between Racquel Gates' call in her piece (2017), as one of the inspirations for the dossier, and what's happening at this moment in the 1970s, that Doug started to describe to us. The sense in which the *Movie* critics at the time are saying, hang on, we've got to look at the detail of the film here, we've got to evidence our arguments from that, and see how that then connects out to various questions around ideology, representation, industry, those kinds of structures. And in the same way, Racquel Gates is moved to say, hang on, we must start talking again, about the formal dimensions of cinema, as well as their relationship to questions of taste, and questions of politics, and so on. So I think that's quite interesting. I just wanted to make that point, we're not talking about the present, we're not talking about the future just yet. But to see these as critical interventions, at particular kinds of historical moment; to recognise that there is desire for a form of activist intervention at both of those points in time. And I think that's important, because in the intervening period, the *Movie* tradition is often talked about in quite narrow terms. It's often characterised quite narrowly, and identified by people who aren't perhaps very close to that tradition, as being very connected to the auteurist tradition, which we may talk about in a little while. But looking back at this period that we've been describing, of *Movie* past, as it were, I think it's important to remember that process of historicisation that we're involved in, but also to recognise that that tradition has been mischaracterised by people who don't remember the nuances. And that's interesting, because when we come to the present and the future, you know, we might want to reflect on that characterisation. That kind of narrowing of what we understand *Movie* was trying to do at the time.

And finally, I just wanted to pick up on that question of the broad church versus the rather fraught conversation. So it's not a versus but a broad church full of people who sometimes disagree with each other. And I suppose for me the most

exciting moments were the places where that disagreement comes to the surface. For example, in *Movie* 20 (1975: 1-25), with Victor on the one hand, Jim on the other, debating where one's consideration of Hollywood should start and end, and what value one might place on different parts of American cinema. And Jim's piece on Jon Jost's *Last Chants for a Slow Dance* in *Movie* 27/28 (1980/1: 108-16), where he talks not just about challenging different ideas of what American cinema is, what we mean by American cinema, but he also takes *Movie* to task a little bit in relation to the kinds of things that it was celebrating at the time, and the kinds of things it wasn't really looking at, at the time that he's writing in the early 1980s. He argues, and I'll quote a little bit here, that '*Movie* ought to be interested in independent work in the USA (and elsewhere) in similarly avant-garde or counter-cinema areas, since much of it […] also involves a critique of mainstream illusionist narrative cinema' (109). This is part of a vital discussion that's happening between those different contributors through their writing.

Past / auteurism, criticism and cinephilia

DP: This complicating of the history is really vital, because one of the things that happens all the time, and Lisa's characterised it precisely just now, is that the history is caricatured. Particularly at moments which are culturally fraught, where there are new interventions coming in, new voices trying to make themselves heard, you get these extraordinarily reductive accounts. And one of the things that seems to me crucial about being a film critic and for those of us who are teachers, is to keep aware of the cross currents, the complexities, the different voices within the history. The auteurist thing is part of that, that *Movie* is an auteurist journal. Well actually *Movie* never embraced auteurism in the sense that it's largely come down to us. What *Movie* did embrace was what Victor called director-centred criticism, and of course Victor makes a very significant differentiation between those things in 'Authorship: The Premature Burial' (1990: 57-64) where he takes Peter Wollen particularly, to task and also refers to Andrew Sarris. For him there was a really vital distinction between auteurism, with what he saw as its exaggerated concern with continuities and coherence across a director's work, and other views of cinema which celebrate the creative role of the director.

JG: There's a nice line from Ian Cameron from when I interviewed him, which I could just read if that would be useful, about precisely this point about Sarris and auteurism. He says,

Sarris, who unlike the rest of us had a regular critical niche (in *The Village Voice*), had – the word 'soundbite' comes to mind – had identified something which was lurking in *Movie* 1 in that histogram of directors. But he had identified this, more strongly than the rest of us, as something that was in effect marketable, and he then took it to absurd lengths – the 'is he / is he not an auteur' view. I would say that all directors are 'auteurs' but the likes of Fred Zinnemann are lousy ones. Whereas Andrew definitely saw auteurship as various levels of state of grace. That was, I think, actually going off in not merely a wrong direction but rather a dangerous one because it allowed everyone else to take a very simplistic attitude to what we were trying to do (Ian Cameron qtd in Gibbs 2019: 42).

DP: Exactly. Those interviews that you did were really valuable. The other thing I just wanted to say, really connects to the perpetuation of reductive notions of history. You mentioned, Lisa, the Racquel Gates piece, which I was very interested in. That gives the kind of emphasis that we would want – you've got to look at how movies articulate their material, you can't just read off representation. But it's very interesting that, what you seem to have to do, particularly after or as part of the great rhetorical moments, is to reinvent the wheel. Because the history's been falsified, it's almost as though you're starting again, we've got to now look at detail. If you actually take account of the history in a fuller sense, then you can see there are continuities, as well as disjunctions, that are available, not just to the white straight population, but to all of us, to everyone. There are continuities that are valuable, and can be taken into a whole range of different contexts, polemical, political, aesthetic.

LP: I think there's something that I'd want to pick up here, which is the interplay in the wider culture between auteur theory and what I guess commercial film critics are doing, what studios are doing to market their work, and who's getting to make films. I'm putting it in very simplistic terms, but I'm suggesting that rather than people looking back and, in a rather cynical way, falsifying the narrative around *Movie* and how inclusive it is, we've got actually quite a complicated interplay between the press, the industry, and more thoughtful ways of engaging with film criticism. We know that there's a body of film critics, for example, who just take the press kit, and replay it and, they're still gatekeepers for their audiences, but they're not saying to themselves, Okay, I'm going to write about this in relation to history of cinema, those kinds of things. So what I'm suggesting is that some of that narrowing of the understanding of what *Movie* has done, perhaps, or what the concept of the auteur is all about is partly a problem of a wider culture, where particular directors are celebrated, because it's good for marketable copy and it's good for marketing film. So that's one of the complicating factors here. And that connects to this question of who gets to make films. So Racquel Gates is looking at this history, and she's not seeing herself particularly well represented in who's being written about it, or indeed who is writing film criticism. So I think it's complicated how that those questions are encountered by people who don't see themselves in those films, and therefore, in the criticism that they're encountering.

JG: I think that's a fair point. I was going to make a couple of observations here. One, we probably ought to distinguish between critics and reviewers. If Victor was here, he'd certainly want to make that distinction, between people who are responding often on very short timescales to what's being released – perhaps they've relied on the press packs, and the narratives that are coming out of production companies themselves, etc. – and a critic in in a more academic sense, or in a sense that Victor would use the word. Robin Wood often makes that distinction in his writing too.

LP: And that's a distinction I was reaching towards. I think that's an important distinction to make.

JG: The other thing, just briefly, before we go into some of the other questions that you raise is the word 'auteur' itself,

which goes through this bizarre inversion. When Andrew Sarris is using it, he's using it to pick out unrecognised directors in the American cinema who are dismissed because they're regarded as part of the machine, not as individuals. But before very long, the word auteur is used to talk about Francis Ford Coppola, or whoever it might be, a new generation who are very much regarded as artists. Somehow it's got twisted around: it's no longer being used to draw attention to the person nobody's noticed, despite them working away producing these extraordinary movies with their collaborators; instead, it's used to refer to somebody who's got an indomitable vision, and they're going to make that film no matter what. It's even used to talk about the director of European Art cinema. There's a weird inversion of the word which perhaps fits into that kind of discussion.

LP: I think that's absolutely right, the myth of the great man of cinema, and that's still very persistent now. And is predominantly white and straight: it's a very clear kind of idea of what artistry is. One of my personal bugbears is things like *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010), and the cultural narrative of the creative woman who can't cope with being brilliant; anyway, that's an aside really, it takes us away from some of the things we've been talking about. But certainly, you're right, that the kinds of narrowing that we're talking about here, when we look back it includes a narrowing of the idea of who can make films and who can be brilliant at making films and who deserves that attention to the texture of the film as a result.

LFD: Do you think it's also a kind of academic narrative about what detailed criticism is or is not, and what it should and should not be and where it sits? That is part of what I think, Doug, you're talking about: people feeling like they might need to reinvent the wheel. I wonder if that's coming out of that way in which detailed criticism and close analysis were deemed to be not 'academic', not what was or should be happening in the academy? The idea that if it's not theory, you're doing it wrong. Of course, it's flourished in the last 20 years and has been reinvigorated in certain ways but there's still a level of gatekeeping.

DP: Yes, that's right. I remember a conversation I had, well, maybe 20 years ago, over a research assessment exercise with a social scientist. And this person said, 'Oh, x, y, and z, they just write about individual films'. How do you begin? It's almost as though you're speaking different languages. Only writing about individual films! Well actually, what is the study of cinema rooted in if it's not rooted in individual films? There's a complete paradigm clash going on.

JG: We're talking about two kinds of Academy here, though aren't we? We're talking about the academic Academy — I'm sure we'll come back to the ways in which some of the insights and interventions of 70s theory have fed into critical approaches, including *Movie*'s own approaches, and helped us to identify new targets to explore in what might be political criticism. And then there's the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, where interesting questions would concern its membership, what kinds of films get nominated for Oscars or win Oscars, all those kinds of debates. Of course, you're right Lisa: the critical discourse – or the 'reviewer' discourse – can create a feedback loop. The Golden Globes are currently under discussion, aren't they, in terms of their lack of diversity. Let's just remember there are two different academies at stake, which are often at odds in interesting ways as well.

Girish Shambu: I think we need one or more articles that look back at *Movie* and its history in a fine-grained way to dispel some of these received notions of what *Movie* was about. Of course, this problem of thin and flattened histories is common and endemic to every field. For example, the narrative that we see crop up sometimes in social media discussions of feminism: that 1970s feminism was mostly white, that women of colour were absent. But when you look at the historical record (books, films, archival photographs, oral histories, etc), it's clear the movement was much more diverse than we often realise. I'd be eager to read accounts of *Movie* history written through the lens of matters that are acquiring great importance and urgency today, such as gender and race – both in terms of the makers of films discussed in the magazine and also the critics doing the writing. Doug and John, you've both spent so many years both being part of (and helping make the

history of) the magazine, and also studying it – you'd be ideally positioned to take on such a project, if you felt so inclined!

LFD: So it's not only the films that require that kind of fine-grained engagement, but the criticism itself. For me, as a writer and as a reader, the moments where you get to have that very detailed engagement with what you're attending to is part of the pleasure of detailed critical engagement. We've talked about some of those conversations happening in *Movie* itself, and I think that's why those roundtables, particularly the *Movie* 20 discussion, are so exciting because you get to see the granularity of people's thinking about what it is that criticism should do and what they want it to do, and how they view each other. In that roundtable, leading from a discussion about ideology and politics where they are using those words to mean slightly different things, Robin Wood and Victor Perkins get into a conversation about subjectivity and the idea of what you should be doing as a critic. It's so invigorating to see that kind of discussion happen in that kind of detailed exchange. It's always been the thing that I value most about detailed criticism, the capacity to reflect on what it is that it's doing. The challenge that we were talking about before, becomes that invitation to disagree, to be a jumping off point, to share enthusiasm. So enthusiasm is a word that they use in the *Movie* 1 statement, and looking at your book, Girish, *The New Cinephilia* (2020), enthusiasm is a word that you use and value. So I was really struck by the parallels between that and thinking about enthusiasm as not just a starting point for criticism, but as a political act.

DP: There's quite a lot there. But enthusiasm. It's very difficult to write good criticism about movies, you're not, in some sense, enthusiastic about. That's one reason why in *Movie*, on the whole, people would write about the films that they were enthusiastic about. It wasn't a case of 'we need to write about this, Robin, you do this, Jim, you do that'. The *Movie* books were the same, you pitched something that you're really enthusiastic about. That's not to say, of course, that you don't also engage with things that you're not enthusiastic about – there can also be enthusiasm to expose what's bad or overvalued. But the energy of wishing to persuade others that

This is a pilot issue of MOVIE. The next number will be published in three months' time, and from then on it will appear monthly.

MOVIE aims to help remedy the unhealthy lack of reasoned disagreement about films in Britain. It will embody an approach to the cinema which is not represented by any existing magazine, and although the opinions expressed in it are those of the individual authors, in general they will be shared by the rest of the contributors.

We are likely to be labelled as "uncommitted", which we are only in not sharing the superficially "committed" approach. But we are not politically opposed to other critics; it is mainly on grounds of critical method that we differ from them.

We do not want to force our ideas on other people, or to persuade everyone to like Otto Preminger and Leo McCarey rather than Visconti and Kurosawa. There is no point in replacing one cult with another. Instead we would like films to be the subject of enthusiastic argument in which our approach would only be one of many.

MOVIE will not attempt to be exhaustive in its coverage. For us, enthusiasm is the first essential of good criticism. Therefore MOVIE will only review the films which interest its critics. Detailed disagreement with anything in MOVIE will be welcomed. Mere invective, which we expect, will not interest us.

Opening statement of purpose from the first issue of *Movie*

what you found in the movie is there and valuable, that seems to be a characteristic of what I take to be good criticism. And it always has a context.

Cinephilia's been touched on and cinephilia and enthusiasm seem very much to go together, don't they – though I'm not sure they're necessarily bedfellows. So I doubt you can have cinephilia without enthusiasm, but you can certainly have enthusiasm without cinephilia.

LFD: So then, what is crucial to recognise is how much that enthusiasm immediately starts you thinking of what you value, what kind of judgments are being made, and to recognise that those are all coming out of something. One thing that Victor says to Robin in that discussion, after Robin has said that he doesn't see a distinction between him and the audience. Victor replies, 'part of what you're saying makes me want to be very awkward' and he points out that there are assumptions behind what Robin is pointing out about a film, that you're never an isolated individual, coming out of nowhere. So in that conversation we can see him being very careful about remembering we are people coming from a particular culture and that we need to recognise what our reference points are, and more than that, that criticism is coming out of a set of assumptions informed by that background. I thought that was a revealing moment in that discussion, and a useful one for us more broadly. It might be an obvious point, but I think an important one that is always present, even when not explicitly stated.

JG: Cinephilia was described as a cult recently, wasn't it, by B. Ruby Rich, lead editor of *Film Quarterly*, in a good keynote address, where she was articulating her own position on the value of criticism? I always felt that *Movie*'s criticism gets enthusiastic about things because they're important in certain kinds of ways – and in certain periods of history that's been an explicitly political commitment. At other times, it might not have been thought about in quite those terms, but it doesn't mean that it's not engaged in why these things are valuable because of what they tell us about the world and our ways of understanding it and what we can do with it. Maybe it's a tribute to the educational context that I came through. When I arrived in the Department [of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading], having been studying zoology and psychology, I found a space where everyone was completely

committed to engaging in the politics of the world, trying to create a more inclusive and a better world. And as a result I've already always seen the work through that lens, always felt that was part of our endeavour. I can't do better than the concluding lines of your Manifesto, Girish, but I've never thought of the project of detailed criticism being divorced from trying to engage with politics.

Past / money and institutional support

DP: One thing to add here is the question of the economics of publishing. It's still very much an issue, of course, even though many journals are now online. *Movie* was entirely independent, it had no institutional backing. The BFI had some grants available to support small journals, if I remember rightly, and Ian Cameron would meet Penelope Houston for lunch to talk about *Movie*. So there were I think occasional grants, but funding was always a struggle and it's hardly surprising that publication became very irregular. The difference between *Movie* and *Screen* was that *Screen* was institutionally supported. It originated, as the journal of The Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT), very much as a journal for teachers and evolved by the early 70s into a journal of theory. The economics of publishing and distribution are really vital dimensions of the history of film criticism and theory but they're not much discussed. Now, of course, *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* is online and open access, with all the wonderful advantages that that gives, but it still takes a good deal of labour to produce. We're fortunate in our institutional affiliations – it appears via Warwick University's website, and while we used to do our own design work, more recently we've worked with design students studying graphic communication at Reading to do the design as part of their coursework, and we also make a contribution to our student fund to engage their services, which is great. But there is still an issue around how you sustain a serious journal that is not institutionally funded. You do need sometimes to pay people, and a lot of work is done for free, such as Lucy's excellent copy editing, and the Board's editorial work more generally. What you ultimately depend on is the goodwill of people to sustain

it because they actually believe in the project, which is great. But it's constantly an issue. That lack of a consistent funding stream that enables you to do the spadework.

JG: This also presses on the issue of access. *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* is Platinum or Diamond open access in the sense that you neither have to pay to contribute nor to read, which is, of course, a good thing to be in the modern world. Doug and I were quite taken aback when Chris Keathley calculated that the issues of the original *Movie* are only available in two US university libraries or something extraordinarily small like that. He'd been talking to other people who've been trying to track it down and having great difficulty. So that's another one of the contextual issues, or one of the other issues of being a small scale journal. How do you ensure that that work reaches the full range of people who might be interested in reading it, especially if the journal comes out intermittently, as was the case with *Movie*?

DP: Yes, *Movie* had a distributor in the States based in New York. You could subscribe of course but beyond subscription level, we were never sure how far beyond New York and its environs it actually got. But certainly, it is very difficult to access. To have a conversation about the history, the basic primary materials need to be available, and across the English-speaking world, they're not. It's not digitised, though there have been many discussions about getting it digitised. There were some old digitised versions in circulation, done without authorisation by enthusiasts – but there's no official digital version that an institution can buy, for instance, and make accessible to students.

Present / enthusiasm and curiosity

LP: I was wondering if we could just return to that question of the use of the term enthusiasm, and perhaps tailor our attention to what the present in terms of film criticism looks like and might look like. Because enthusiasm, of course, is political in the sense that it's a set of selections, which depend on

your level of access, and there's questions of privilege, and there's questions of other people's access to distribution channels, and so on. So if I can say there is an 'ethics of enthusiasm' when one is putting enthusiasm into print in some way. Now, I mean, print in the broadest sense, so on a blog, on Twitter, or championing it in a publication, a journal, that kind of thing. So I'm just staying with that idea of a thoughtful form of film criticism: when we think about the ethics of enthusiasm, what does that mean to us? And what are we seeing in the landscape around us? In terms of other forms of film criticism? Before I let you all answer, I should say that this is a very changed landscape in terms of the platforms by which we access that film criticism. There's been an explosion over the last 20 years of online criticism of various kinds, and that online criticism has hung its hat on a number of different hooks, so there are some people who are writing very much in the narrow, I would suggest, iteration of auteurist criticism. You've got the bloggers talking about Michael Bay as auteur, or whatever, I don't mean to dismiss that work, it's just that it suffers from some of the narrowness we were talking about earlier. We've got lots of other things going on. People have talked about the democratisation of film criticism during this period, and so on. So can we maybe just focus on the idea of the ethics of enthusiasm and think about the current landscape of film criticism and how we're encountering it, and how we might be intervening into it?

GS: Your phrase, Lisa – ethics of enthusiasm – is lovely and evocative. I'm thinking that an ethics of enthusiasm would need to address two things: both our narrower object of love, cinema, and also something larger: the world. I think of the experience of 'new cinephilia' as being one that is always deeply engaged with both – and shuttling back and forth between them. In other words: how can individual films both give us pleasure and also deepen our engagement with the world – and (in reverse) how can our knowledge and experience of and in the world enrich (more with each passing year) our experience of viewing and thinking about cinema. The ethics of enthusiasm, in my view, would lead us not to all films equally but more to those films that speak of, or are in contact

with, marginalisation. Specifically, films and filmmakers and themes and critical paradigms that traditional cinephilia has neglected. Speaking personally, I have lived in the West most of my adult life, and most of the films that I've seen have been made by a minority population – straight white men – because they dominate film culture in every way: volume of output, visibility, amount of critical writing, etc. But over the last decade, the bulk of my viewing has been the films made by women, people of colour, queer people and other marginalised makers, because even though these works are far fewer in number, less visible, less written about, they collectively represent the work of the majority! So, I seek out this cinema both because it brings me great pleasure and because it immerses me in experiences and subjectivities often different from my own and frequently marginalised in our culture – which also feeds into the gratification and pleasure I receive from these works.

DP: It's very interesting, isn't it, the question of what's initially available to you. You grow up accepting the world pretty much as it's given to you, so what cinema was, for my generation, was what was at the local cinemas. I wouldn't have seen European film, a non-English language film until university. Curiosity seems to be an interesting and potentially linking term here. It is enthusiasm which gets you engaged in movies, wanting to explore them more. Enthusiasm won't necessarily take you into these other areas that you're talking about Girish. Curiosity will. And curiosity in the first instance may not engender enthusiasm, because very often, when you begin to explore a cinema that is culturally extremely different to yours it can be very disorientating. In my first encounters with Japanese cinema, for instance, there were things I responded to very powerfully, but there were extraordinary levels of puzzlement and cultural uncertainty. In our close analysis seminars (John's very familiar with this), when we're often looking at movies that most of us have just seen for the first time, one of the questions I tend to ask is, 'what kind of thing is this?' 'What kind of thing is it we're dealing with?' Back to the university moment – the first time I saw *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) I had no idea what kind

of thing it was, though I suspect that's not how I expressed my response at the time. I certainly wasn't enthusiastic about it. But later curiosity kicked in when I picked up that there was a connection to the new novel, and bits and pieces of what was going on in French culture became clearer, some of the intellectual and cultural threads that fed Resnais and Robbe-Grillet, and I guess enthusiasm began to grow. It might not have done of course. But several years later when I started teaching film, Resnais was one of the first directors I taught. So the process is a very interesting one, but it's potentially very tangled and one doesn't want to simplify it. Curiosity can take you into new areas. Those new areas might repel you, but somewhere along the line, if you're curious enough, something might happen and enthusiasm grows. You can also be totally put off. Is anybody's first experience of Renoir's *La Regle du Jeu* (1939) an experience of unbridled enthusiasm? Often the response is more 'what the hell is going on here?' What are these performances? It's only when you begin – if you're curious – to penetrate beyond that. But you begin gently, slowly, slowly and enthusiasm builds: oh, my God, that's what he's doing.

The other thing I wanted to add in was subjectivity has been mentioned and obviously, enthusiasm is a dimension of subjectivity. We can never rest with that but we can't escape it either. And that was one of the great disasters of grand film theory of the 70s. The aim to produce a scientific criticism, which was in some sense free of subjectivity. It was nonsense, but it was obfuscatory nonsense, so that it was very difficult for people who simply couldn't understand it to challenge it. When Andrew Britton did mount a brilliant challenge, 'The Ideology of *Screen*' (1978/9: 2-28), they just ignored him.

JG: I was going to ask Girish a follow up question – how have you made the journey to these cinemas that hadn't been part of the terrain for you previously? And are there barriers to doing so for other people? I partly ask that in the question from the perspective of students today. When Lisa and I were at university, there were four channels on British television but there were a lot more films, and films from different contexts, free to view. There were double-bill matinees of studio Hollywood cinema every Saturday and Sunday afternoon, and

when you turned on the television late evening in the week there might be an Indian film on or there might be a French new wave film. And you didn't spend the next hour and a half flicking through the channels on your remote, you settled in and watched one of these things, and you learnt about these films. What you couldn't do then, of course, is order an DVD of a film from another part of the world, or earlier moment in film history, or access through the internet some of the range of voices that we can do today. But to take advantage of what's available you've also got to have your curiosity sparked, haven't you? And if we're dependent on the algorithm on the streaming service integrated with our television or laptop, how do we find out about the range of cinema or television history? So, I'd love to hear your thoughts on that, and how young people who don't have a lifetime of cinephilia and going to the Toronto International Film Festival are able to access the range of material available? Is there an issue there?

GS: That's a good question, John. I find that any cinephile who spends time on social media today encounters little bits of information all day long. You're in a sea of little bits of information floating all around you. I find that I'm constantly writing down or bookmarking titles of films or websites or essays or books. I'm also slow and poor at making my way through these lists, mainly because of the super-abundance of availability today – vastly more than my cinephile self of 20 years ago would have had access to. I'm sure this also speaks to my economic and location privilege (a middle-class person living in the urban USA). So, I think the problem of access in many (not all) ways is less than it used to be. This problem of super-abundance is exacerbated by the fact that cinephiles in general simply have less time in their lives today to devote to watching, thinking about and enjoying cinema. Economic pressures felt more acutely by younger generations of cinephiles and the overall toll of the world simply falling apart (the rise of fascism, the climate apocalypse, the outright war against women and people of colour) – all of this has had a role to play in preventing the possibility of (as one of the traditional definitions of cinephilia has it) 'organising one's life around films'. Still, over the pandemic, something interesting happened: a lot of relatively smaller websites started streaming

films that are very difficult to access: experimental work, films by directors of color, by women. For example, the wonderful programs curated and mounted by Daniella Shreir, the editor of the feminist film journal *Another Gaze* for her streaming platform Another Screen.[2] Because the films only play for a few weeks, you only have a limited window in which to catch them, which personally has been a good discipline for me. So, I think the pandemic has also increased access to films that were previously very difficult to access. This enthusiasm and curiosity discussion also has me wondering about something else. There's a tension between the fact that film criticism is most often about a certain delimited object, an individual film: everything begins with the individual film text. And the tension here is that our curiosity is not limited only to the individual film, especially in a medium like film, which is fundamentally based (both in fiction and nonfiction cinema) on the capture of images of the world. What are the places where that initial spark of curiosity leads us? It might begin with the individual film, but then this curiosity often also gets projected outward from the object into the world. And so the cinephile also feels an obligation to learn about the outside world, to acquire knowledge about it, because that's important to us both as citizens of the world and as film lovers. And this allows us to appreciate film in a deeper, richer way, the more we are aware of the contexts that surround it, the contexts in which a film is embedded. I feel like when I watch films now, I'm leaving the film for periods of time, more than I ever did. More than before, it's igniting my curiosity about the wider world in a pronounced way. As a cinephile, I'm coming to grips with the fact that a lot of my time is now spent not on the film proper, but on things that surround it. But I want to find ways to bring those things back to the film, find pathways to re-enter the film through these contexts.

JG: And do you think that's because you've changed your approach? Or because the films that you're watching are provoking you to enter that exploration in a new way?

GS: That's a very good question. I think both are happening. I think the impulse to move beyond the text, to link it up to the world in deep and serious and meaningful ways just

feels more urgent at this hard, painful, incendiary historical moment (compared to say, 20 years ago).

JG: We had just survived the Millennium bug, of course, and the end of history. But Bush and Blair hadn't invaded Iraq at that point, so it was a halcyon moment, perhaps.

GS: And climate change is just something that we didn't really and truly acknowledge and recognise at the time. How could this not transform our thinking? And our existence?

JG: You'll notice that Robin Wood is writing about climate change 30 years ago, certainly 20 years ago, in some of his books, and posing the question of what does the film critic do in the context of a world which is heading towards ecological catastrophe.

GS: I find Robin, maybe of all the *Movie* writers, is the one I return to the most. I feel a powerful personal resonance with his voice, the way he always self-reflexively situates himself in relation to the film he's writing about. I love how self-critical he is, how personal honesty is an important value for him. I speak of him in the present tense because, although he is gone, his writings feel ever alive to me.

JG: Someone once asked me what book had most impacted on me, intellectually. I said *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (1989) and they burst out laughing. But they obviously hadn't read it.

DP: Girish, I love that account of your recent intellectual adventures, as it were, and the way they've developed. But there are other dimensions to this super abundance, this remarkable availability, the multiplicity of platforms and so on. You do have to deal with it but it can engender, for instance, intellectual and cultural guilt. There is so much out there. That's not a recent thing, but it has just expanded exponentially. Social media is both a blessing and a terrible curse. You're bombarded with tempting offers to take you off into all sorts of directions, so you subscribe to more streaming channels. You've got a life to lead as well. So, the only way of negotiating this is you have to make hard choices, and try to stop yourself feeling guilty that there are millions of things

that you're not getting any grip on at all. And a kind of intellectual paralysis can very easily set in. I don't think lock down and the whole COVID year has helped, with that intellectual paralysis. So we have to find – if we're engaged critically, if we want to write or produce audio visual essays – we have to find our way through this in a way which enables us to focus, to produce the kinds of work that we want to produce. And the things we focus on are inevitably going to take the most time. And we've got to find some way, not of shutting out the rest of the world and everything that's out there, but saying, maybe at some point I'll get there. But balancing the immediate and the detailed engagement with this wider sense of a universe out there can be paralysing. Anyway, that's not to be at all sceptical about what you said, which sounds wonderful, but there is another side to this multiplicity of stuff. At one point, you could still track, you could make your way through availability, not with ease, but with relative confidence. It is much more difficult now. The world is too much with us.

Present / responsibility and curation

LFD: Does that mean that the role of film criticism in itself has to got change? I completely agree with what we were just saying about Robin Wood and that self-reflective mode of criticism, particularly the way in which he's always working something out while writing, which is the thing that I feel motivates really good criticism. So it's not just unbridled enthusiasm. It's the things that you were saying, Doug, about the things that maybe puzzle you, or the things that you were describing, Girish, as pushing you out. So criticism is this act of opening outwards, it's never about closing down. That's one of the things that I really love about Racquel Gates' piece, that it's a series of working through things she needs to work out or state in moving to a larger conversation. You can never say everything about something, it's not exhaustive, but rather it's that enthusiasm is an offer of another kind of conversation. If that is the thing that we're valuing about criticism, and our role, if we think in those terms, as gatekeepers in the face of all of this content, then the questions of how we navigate through it, or how we come to it, how we make sense of it ourselves are worth reflecting on. Do you think criticism itself has to

change or recognise those issues? Are there things that we do differently now than we would have done 20, 50, however, many years ago? I'm wondering about the project of criticism and how it might have to change.

GS: I think the landscape of film criticism has changed enormously in the last couple of decades. In the 1990s, when I first became a cinephile and started reading and loving film criticism, there was a relatively small number of critics writing for a large number of cinephile readers. This meant that the handful of critics I read on a regular basis – almost all white folks, such as J. Hoberman, Jonathan Rosenbaum and Pauline Kael – took on the aura of heroes in my mind. But as we transitioned from 20th century 'old cinephilia' to the 'new cinephilia' of the Internet era, the number of critics I began to read regularly just exploded. They may not all be as prolific or as widely read and experienced as the foremost critics of earlier generations, but these younger critics are collectively more diverse, and representative of a broader population. They bring fresh, new perspectives, write from distinct life experiences (as women and people of colour, for example), and give film criticism a much wider range of voices. These days – despite the singular voices of these critics – I tend not to view film criticism as primarily the work of a handful of heroes (which was probably a masculinist tendency on the part of my younger self, anyway!). Film criticism today seems more like a large, collective project to me. The pieces they write may not always be grand or long-form or ambitious, but they often teach me something, even if they are often modest in scope. In the print era past, I often placed a huge responsibility on the relatively few critics I read (and idolised), but now I see the weight of that project being borne by a much larger and much more varied group of critics. Despite all that has been lost – print space for film criticism, for instance – I see this as a net gain.

DP: But there's more than one dimension to the responsibility, isn't there? You're not wanting to put the kind of weight on the small number of critics that you started by reading. Certainly for me too, there was a tiny number of critics that I first started reading. So your expectations of, the responsibility you would put on critics, have changed, but there is

the responsibility of the critic too. It's true that out there are many people sharing on a variety of platforms in a variety of ways, their responses to movies, and the context of movies and so on. But, when we're talking about criticism, and the future of criticism, it seems to me vital that there are people out there who also feel the responsibility to look in detail. And that requires looking not just at individual films, but looking closely – very much Racquel Gate's point. If you don't look at the detail of films, what you end up with is a mess of subjectivity, reductiveness, impressionistic observations. In some of which you can pick up wonderful resonant phrases and ideas from people, but if there isn't that disciplined, detailed assessment, appreciation of movies, then the discourse has no root, no basis, nothing is feeding it. And the risk then is that what we end up doing is valuing things that really shouldn't be valued, and valuing them because their heart seems to be in the right place, or they're representing things that we approve of, and then we're back precisely to where *Movie* started in trying to combat that. The responsibility of the critic, it's not a singular thing. As part of the *Movie* tradition, our commitment in *Movie: a Journal of Film Criticism*, is to the close examination of films, but as we've indicated, it's never just a formal analysis, it always connects to wider issues, however they're conceived. So I just wanted to jump to the other dimension of responsibility, as it were, the responsibility of the critic; it's not just the responsibility of the receiver and the weight that you put on the things that you're reading. There's a need for that constant engagement with the texture, the detail of movies, the ways in which they articulate their material.

GS: I agree, Doug. I would add that it is, particularly, scholars who model this close and sustained engagement with the cinematic complex of formal detail since they have the luxury of time in comparison to working critics who might have tighter deadlines and who might be freelancers juggling multiple gigs to make a living. And because the work of scholars – both in academic journals and in public-facing outlets – is more visible in film culture than it has ever been before thanks to social media, it is also more available for all critics to read and learn from. At the same time, I want to point out that we should not forget the flesh-and-blood critic who is performing the work of close analysis: this person is not a neutral, universal Critic but someone whose engagement with a film

is always embodied, and filtered through their life experience as a woman and / or Black person and / or queer person, etc. Formal analysis that emerges from a deep, lived consciousness of these factors has something new to say about even those films that straight, white male critics might have been writing about for a very long time.

DP: That is precisely the thing that made Robin Wood unique among the *Movie* critics, that his life was on the page all the time. And his life changed and he made it clear, by and large. Another thing about the *Movie* tradition, but it's also true about much traditional criticism, is that it is written in a mode – 'impersonality' isn't quite right – that doesn't reveal in the way that Robin's work did. Your family situation, your gender orientation, or any of those things remain, depending on the language you use, suppressed or unrevealed, irrelevant. And you're absolutely right. Precisely because the wider political context, cultural context has changed, we're getting a lot of new voices, not just women's voices, but a variety of ethnicities, identities, nationalities. It is necessary for them to break down that inherited mode – 'keep your life out of it'. There is a momentum or a necessity, to actually put yourself on the line in a way that Robin did, which I've never done and which on the whole, the other *Movie* writers didn't. I do think that has been a very important shift.

LP: What was striking me, Girish, when you were speaking was that you were talking very much as a consumer really of these different perspectives that you're encountering and so on. And I was thinking that also writing about film, thoughtfully sharing films with others and so on is an act of curation. And that *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* as a journal, a curated group of perspectives on films or accounts of films, is still engaged in that process today, as you are in your own blog, in your own writing, Girish, as well. So I wondered if we could perhaps just for a moment reflect on the ethics of that act of curation. Because I think that there's something interesting here, when we talk about curiosity, and enthusiasm, and so on: we can think about it in the abstract, and we can think about it in terms of our own lived experience of particular moments that we encounter. But when we're thinking about representing that work, or those encounters we are curating it seems to me that that's where activism has a place.

That's where an ethical selection, which perhaps tries to counteract some of those histories of marginalisation, which are also part of this history that we're talking about, need to be considered. We need to think about them and reflect on our practices of curation. And in a way, it speaks to Doug's point as well, that huge heterogeneity of all possible things you could encounter. What do you choose to look at? Sometimes that's a very personal choice: do I have the energy to encounter something which is very distant from my own cultural situatedness? Sometimes, yes, and sometimes no, and that's fine. But when we're running a journal, when we're writing in a journal, or if we're writing on a blog, we are also involved in inviting enthusiasm from others. That seems important to me. And as those wider conversations about histories of marginalisation have acquired a particular force and sharpness in our current context, it seems even more important to have that conversation on the surface of things. I'm not suggesting we're going to come up with answers here, but I thought we should at least register that.

JG: That's interesting, Lisa. I suspect, for all of us, there are quite complex personal reasons that have shaped the choices about the films that we're moved to write about. I'm thinking about your own engagement with certain forms of action cinema, for example, and visual effects. I hope I'm not putting words in your mouth but I think I can see where some of these enthusiasms come from, because I know you. What made me want to write about *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1956) and *Candyman* (Bernard Rose, 1992)? As Doug says, in certain traditions of writing that's effaced, Victor being a good example. As we've said, there are all kinds of things which motivated Victor which you might not have got to know about unless you knew Victor. He's often regarded as not being a political figure but Victor was actually a very political person, wasn't he, Doug?

DP: Extremely political, and with very trenchant views, but you would hardly know that from the criticism.

LFD: I think you can define it in certain ways, but I'm thinking in particular about his affinity for films like *Letter for an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls, 1948), which centres a woman's experience, like many films that he wrote about.

One of my favourite pieces is his writing on *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), where he describes the first time that Dix (Humphrey Bogart) sees Laurel (Gloria Grahame) (1992). I've always felt that as this lovely moment of recognising how Humphrey Bogart sees her, but also, Laurel as a person and how Gloria Grahame's performance evokes that. So yes, his work is not on the face of it hugely political, but I think there's something about things that he embraced, and the kind of films that he wanted to write about and who he wanted to write about in those films that always spoke to me as kind of political acts.

DP: I think that's right, and quite interesting to look at the chronology. Victor was a huge enthusiast for *Letter from an Unknown Woman*; he taught it throughout his career. He first actually put words to paper as it were, in the late 60s, in the scripts for a schools television series – a very remarkable BBC series – but then he didn't write about it until, what's the first piece John, the early 80s? He wrote about it three times. And I have no doubt that the ways in which he writes – and that's true of the *In a Lonely Place* piece which is later still, in the early 90s – no doubt that the ways in which he writes about those films and about women within those films, is, I don't want to say influenced by, but aware of those debates within feminism and the wider culture. Remember too, he had been married to Tessa who was a feminist sociologist. So you don't find those things directly referred to but I'm sure they feed the ways in which Victor articulates his responses to Lisa (Joan Fontaine) in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* particularly, and sees her ideological entrapment. To some extent his language changes, it doesn't take on the language of ideological analysis, but it's lurking.

JG: And Maud (Barbara Bel Geddes) in *Caught* (Max Ophuls, 1949) for that matter.

DP: Yes. That's right.

LFD: One thing that I'm thinking about in response to Lisa's question concerning the ethics of selection, is that it doesn't feel like it's enough. Not that it's not enough, but that responsibility of there being so many choices you could make, so the

need to be very conscious of the choices that you do make, as well as the intellectual challenge to yourself, along the lines that you were talking about, Girish. It's both a confluence of a natural curiosity, and being aware that when there are so many choices that you could make, you want to make choices that push you beyond what is comfortable or familiar.

DP: Yes, if criticism becomes comfortable, then there's something a bit wrong with it. Criticism should always be pushing at something. Otherwise, what is it? We haven't talked a lot explicitly about value, though it's been threaded through the discussion in various ways, but of course, it's the issue which lurks very close to the surface as soon as you talk about criticism, because criticism as we generally think about it is involved with elucidation, interpretation, and evaluation, and where value resides, therefore, becomes an absolutely crucial set of questions. Value can reside, depending on where you're coming from and what your context is, and what the perspectives are you bring to bear. You can find value in a whole variety of different things, which don't necessarily have to include, for instance, aesthetic complexity.

LP: And I think this is why I wanted to use the word activism. Maybe I can just be a bit grumpy for a minute. It's important to recognise that for people in communities that have been marginalised, culturally, there is a history of trauma that is associated with that marginalisation, and we quite often pretend that that's not there, because it makes people uncomfortable. Okay, so we want to politely negotiate a renewed space of some kind, a more centred space. We don't want to make a big fuss. I'm using 'we' in a very inverted comments way, right? I think for a start, what's really invigorating about the wider cultural conversation around marginalisation now is people have stopped trying to make other people feel comfortable. But they have also started to acknowledge out loud that there is a trauma associated with marginalisation and that actually that trauma demands a change in practices of curation. And I think that's really important for us to acknowledge in a conversation like this. It is not to dismiss all of the qualities of close analysis and connection outwards to political and cultural and social contexts that have been the meat and drink of key elements of *Movie*'s practices as a journal and in terms

of a collection of contributors, or indeed other kinds of film critics in that history and in the present. It's just to say that active curation is actually really quite critical for us to openly reflect on. It doesn't mean that we all have to speak from our own perspectives in a way that is very explicit. It just means that that act of curation seems to matter very much and should matter. And, of course, I think probably I'm speaking to the converted in a sense, but I think we need to register it as part of this conversation. And that maybe I'll leave it there. But I think it's worth saying.

GS: That really makes sense to me, Lisa. One great example for me in this regard is the work of B. Ruby Rich, the editor-in-chief at *Film Quarterly*, who has always been deeply conscious of the ethics and politics of curation. She has, over the course of the last 8 years, done an absolutely astonishing job of assembling a wide range of writers – women, BIPOC, queer folks, disabled people – from around the world to write for the journal. *Film Quarterly* has had dossiers on Black cinema, new Brazilian cinema, Asian American films, Arab Spring cinema, etc. The clear and accessible style of writing in the journal is also somewhat different from some other journals in the film and media studies discipline because of Ruby's own extensive experience as a journalist since the 1970s. Which helps the work travel and reach a large number of people and have an effect on the ground that helps change the landscape of film culture.

DP: That's very important. Ruby Rich's takeover at *Film Quarterly* has been fascinating. To actually see the effects of that. You're right Lisa, when you introduced curation quite a while ago we didn't entirely pick it up, the distinction between curation and the act of criticism. One of the things that we at *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* have found difficult, consistently, is attracting writers who actually will write within the brief that we have. Obviously, one way of doing that is by invitation, to go out there and to say okay we will focus on this particular topic, would you like to contribute? But – I think there's been some experience of this in earlier issues of the journal – invitation also is difficult, or it can take you into difficult places because you have to make it clear that what you produce won't automatically appear in the journal. There's

editorial control, there's blind reviewing, there are criteria to do with the brief of the journal that have to be met. I was just skimming through the questions/topics for our discussion, a number of which we haven't yet directly touched on. One of your last ones is, How do we make criticism accessible to a wider range of people and inclusive of different kinds of films? Well, clearly curation and invitation are vital to that. We can't simply wait for people to approach us.

Present / publishing and the Academy

JG: It is an interesting problem, isn't it? On launching *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, one of the things that we deliberately tried to do is to challenge a few preconceptions about what sorts of films we'd be interested in, what sorts of filmmakers. And if you look at the films that have appeared on the cover, and if you looked at the range of film and television that's been written about inside, we've definitely tried to seek out a greater diversity of subjects. But we do still have an issue of attracting as many contributors as we'd like to. It's partly because writing detailed criticism is a difficult thing, but there does seem to be something about the tradition of doing that, that is making it difficult for us to connect to as diverse an array of voices as we'd like to. Maybe there are people who'd be able to answer why that's the case better than I can.

DP: It may well be that *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, when people are choosing where to send their work, simply doesn't register in the top three or four that they tend to go for. Clearly people within the Academy, academics, particularly young academics who are making their way, have got to look at what are seen as priorities in the ways in which they publish. So presumably you get some brownie points for publishing in *Screen*, you probably don't get all that many for publishing in *Movie*. I don't know if that's the case, but I rather suspect it might be.

LP: It could be a factor. The other thing that strikes me, though, is that the academic traditions of writing about film have tended, in recent years, to solidify in particular areas. So we, I think, are relatively unusual in having a detail-focused form of criticism as the centre of the methodology. I'm often in conference settings, particularly in a North American context, where people enthuse about how enlightening it is to have some plain-speaking analysis of the close detail of the film to anchor one's points, but what they're saying is, I don't really get to see this methodology very often. So I think that some of those traditions of how we teach film in higher education in these different kinds of contexts also affect how comfortable people are in applying that methodology to their own work, and that means that that narrows the field of contributors who might flourish within the *Movie* context.

DP: Robert Ray is very interesting on that in his recent collection in the series that John and I edit.[3] He's always been very eloquent about the disastrous effect of film theory in US film departments.

JG: Particularly the tenure track and the demand to publish. There are other things he's exploring there, but it's partly that writing detailed criticism is a time consuming business and you do have to spend a lot of time with the television programme, the movie, the object of study.

LFD: I think there is absolutely the straight jacket of being an academic and having to fulfil certain things and, as you say, the very constituent that we would love to see more of, the early career researcher, are most imperilled by where they publish, where they put their energies. But also, the invitation is a bit of a double-edged sword, isn't it? An invitation can expand, and I'm thinking of Ruby Rich's idea of criticism as expanding the room, which I think is such a lovely phrase and I believe is what we want to do. But an invitation can also replicate the room that you're already in, it doesn't necessarily open the door to another room. So it's more a question of how do we reach beyond the people who are already part of that conversation and draw other people in? I think that's coming back to those questions of curation, asking who was part of that conversation, and reflecting on how much that

can replicate itself and not draw on other voices. So the issue is what are the mechanisms to genuinely draw other people in, who you don't know about?

GS: I can recall the 2013 SCMS conference in Chicago, where Lesley Stern (whose presence I miss so much!) was one of the speakers at a session called "Surface Tensions: The Fates and Stakes of Close Analysis." It drew a massive crowd that filled the banquet room. Which made me realise that there is enormous interest among film scholars in detailed close analysis. Two wonderful examples that spring to mind immediately are the scholars Racquel Gates and Michael Gillespie, whose writings on Black cinema pay close, imaginative attention to film form and aesthetics. In the terrific manifesto that they co-authored for *Film Quarterly* (2019), they insist on the importance of formal analysis, while also highlighting the importance of looking at a remarkable range of Black film and media including independent films, TV, and experimental cinema. I think the challenge is to create the kind of environment – for example, at a journal – that would attract people from different sub-disciplines within cinema studies who are interested in close analysis.

LP: There are some correspondences to the economic history of the journal, as you signalled earlier, Doug – to the contemporary space in which we're operating, where it's not just good will. I wanted to add, that there might be dimensions of precarity, or I was thinking about how we threw the net quite wide in relation to issue 10 and the dossier and we were encouraging people to talk about historically marginalised topics, for example, or focusing on marginalised groups, but we're asking a range of people who are experiencing various levels of precarity, or other kinds of institutional pressures, some of which precisely emerge from, you know, those social processes of marginalisation and exclusion, that people have been documenting more broadly in the public space. So I think it's interesting, this whole question of the economics. I think it's got a very specific history in relation to *Movie*, but we come back to economics when thinking of the ways that film criticism gets out there, and who gets to speak it. What I've

noticed is that, for example, scholars of colour tend to bear the weight of lots of requests, because there are less scholars of colour in institutions due to racist histories of education and recruitment. And so because of these kinds of structural, sectoral, and institutional problems that we talked about before, that's just one example of the ways in which actually, there are various kinds of pressures acting on that space of who gets to speak this criticism, and on behalf of whom, as it were.

LFD: I think you highlighted the fact that *Movie*, as one example, is not available in the US to many people, but I think the same is true of the UK. That presents a difficulty, on the one hand, of explaining what *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*'s position is, precisely because people aren't familiar with it. I also wanted to pick up on John's point about open access, and that being such an important part of the journal's publishing model. I think that is borne out of that desire to remove barriers, because we have seen that there are barriers to accessing *Movie*, which also extends to the project of republishing things that haven't been accessible, and making sure that those continuities between print and online journal are represented. There's such an issue in academic publishing at the moment, that there are all of these barriers to publishing, mostly economic, which reinforce the problem of precarity. No one is paid to publish their work; in fact, you're more likely to be asked to pay in order to publish your work, and while our funding means that we can't pay contributors, we can at least make sure it's all freely available and easily accessible. I think we can't underestimate how important the model of open access publishing is to the journal as it exists.

DP: It was extremely fortunate, wasn't it, that when we wanted to produce the successor to *Movie*, the online option was available. We could not have afforded a print publication. Who's going to pay the printer? So that would have been completely out of the question – even half a generation ago it would have been impossible.

JG: As Lucy says, it was also a positive choice in the context of trying to make it as available as possible. Girish, you have experience, of course, of running an open access web-based journal.

GS: Right. Adrian Martin and I co-founded *LOLA* in 2011, and we ran the journal for 6 years, producing 7 issues in all.[4] We had no institutional support, and we featured no advertising of any kind on the site – the whole project was financed by personal funds. We were also enormously fortunate to have a skilled and experienced tech person, Bill Mousoulis, who is a filmmaker and one of the founders of the website *Senses of Cinema*. To be honest, given our resource constraints, there was no way we could have run a print journal, but *LOLA* was fortunate to have a sizable, global cinephile readership.

Present / The 'politics of style' in contemporary criticism

LP: We talked about the history of the – we came up with this phrase – politics of style, and we had that lovely discussion about Victor Perkins and the way that he was very attentive to the way that female representation works in some of these films that he looked at, for example. I wondered where are we seeing current film criticism engaging with the politics of style in whatever way we want to interpret that. Where do we see it? How do we see it manifest?

GS: There are a couple of current examples I could cite that are fresh in my mind. One is the wonderful multihyphenate (critic / scholar / poet / podcaster / activist) So Mayer on Lizzie Borden's 1986 film *Working Girls* in the DVD/blu-ray liner essay for Criterion Collection (2021). Their essay is titled 'Have you heard of surplus value?', which is a line from the film, and it takes up a dizzying variety of topics, such as labour practices of sex work, and women's work more generally, under neoliberal capitalism. And it also explores multiple contexts, such as Borden's career, the history of Marxist feminism, the gentrification of New York, all of which illuminate the analysis. But what's equally remarkable is the close attention the essay pays to cinematic language, like camerawork, décor, and bodily gesture. Erika Balsom's new book on James Benning's 2004 experimental film *Ten Skies* is remarkable (2021). As you might know, the film features 10 shots of skies, and no shots of the ground: it's just clouds and the sky. As you would expect, Balsom pays minute attention to the form of the film, its style,

visual compositions, colour, sound, and so on, but she also discusses, in a deep and insightful way, a range of issues that might appear unlikely at first glance given the premise of the film: such as climate change, American masculinity, the war film, the post-9/11 US "war on terror," and so on. I admire the ambition and reach of these writers and the way that film form, style and aesthetics are integral to their discussion.

DP: I'm just wondering about the phrase 'the politics of style' and how we understand it. It links two key terms with complex histories. So, what do we understand by politics? There's quite a broad range of issues just in those examples you've mentioned. And what do we mean when we talk about style? John and I were talking about our introduction to *Style and Meaning* where we quote the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that gives 28 entries for style (2005). Do we mean just the formal decisions? Or are we looking at a broad, more comprehensive concept of, and practice of, style-based analysis?

JG: It sounds like in the two examples Girish has just given us, he's using 'style' to refer to the decisions made by the filmmakers and the resulting material features of the film – how they shaped the material on a moment by moment basis and how that might then become meaningful.

DP: Absolutely. Style is the heart of the material process of articulation. Not just formal elements, but the interrelationships, as bones and cartilage articulate, and articulation in the sense of speaking, of making meaning. There's a lot of writing which is style-centred in some sense, that doesn't do that. And it's not worthless writing. So it's just wanting to tease out agreement or disagreement about how we're using key terms, and what sorts of baggage we're carrying through the conversation, as we use them.

LFD: Like us making the distinction, if we're being attentive to terms, about politics with a small p and politics with a big P. And where the politics of style is coming from, or maybe not even where it's coming from, but where it's going. The kinds of traditions that we're talking about are perhaps more invested in thinking through a politically informed meaningfulness, rather than an overt Politics. So a tradition of style-based

criticism that is seeking to value films that are speaking from a political perspective, but not declaratively, makes sense.

DP: Yes. Or finding within movies, as one comes to appreciate them more deeply and perhaps from a greater variety of viewpoints, implications, assumptions, whatever, that were not necessarily part of the conscious project of the film. Or, more positively, a mix of material and meaning, some of which is worked into the dramatic and thematic web, and some of which is not. So, those two things: one where the film engages as part of its articulation, as you say, with these political issues, and second, those films which almost inadvertently, because of their context, and because of the material that they're drawing on – perhaps drawing on very intensely – contain things, meanings, that were not necessarily part of the overt project of the film. An example from a very familiar movie. In *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) there's a decision to make some women blonde and others (or is it only one?) dark haired. What's the significance of that? Debbie (Natalie Wood), the character who's captured by the Comanche and not only survives but has become an apparently well-adjusted young woman, is dark haired. Her sister, Lucy (Pippa Edwards), who is captured and then murdered, and is from the outset seen as hysterical and terrified, is blonde. The white captives that we see in that terrifying scene in the film in the cavalry office, are blonde. And two of them seem to have been driven mad by captivity. So what's at stake here? There's a long tradition within American culture of such representations in relation to the West. In Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), you have two half-sisters, one of whom is blonde and one of whom is dark haired. Alice – blonde and blue-eyed – is delicate and frightened; Cora, dark haired and much more resilient. Cora is actually mixed race, which complicates things but also points up how these representations are bound up from the outset with the implications of whiteness. I'm not at all sure that's something that would have been in the forefront of Ford's mind, but he was working within a tradition. There are aspects of the tradition that the film dramatises critically and profoundly, and others, like this, that bring implications from the tradition but are much less worked on

and integrated into the whole. The tradition speaks, as it were. And speaks 'politically.'

This is the sort of thing I was thinking about, in terms of a reading which is not exactly against the grain in the way of many symptomatic readings, but is picking up something which one might at first just accept and not think of as particularly striking or significant.

JG: It partly connects with all those interesting discussions that you were part of, Doug, around genre and conventions, and the meanings embedded in those conventions and the ways in which filmmakers can either unthinkingly reproduce them or engage in an exciting, critical dialogue. The values that are bound up in those conventions can – as organised in the most interesting films – reveal extraordinary tensions, complexities and ideological structures. And it's difficult to guess whether the makers themselves were fully aware of this or the extent to which it was a function of the shared forms with which they were working, isn't it?

DP: It is. Those things come out of the intensity with which they engage with conventions which, seen abstractly, appear to carry the most reactionary and unpleasant of meanings.

JG: We should mention Deborah Thomas' article on *Two Rode Together*, which is directly concerned with some of these questions, in issue 9 of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* (2020).

LFD: We could see that as part of the work of criticism as well, that the job of the critic is to illuminate the film's meaningfulness but also to put it in conversation with context, with convention or tradition, and not to collapse what the makers may or may not have been doing, but to think through what meanings are produced. Thinking about the questions of how we're doing that now, where we're seeing that now, particularly when you're looking at older films, there's a question of how you come to an articulation of a film that was of a particular time? How do you reassess it? How might you want to make a claim about the film, particularly when those traditions or

conventions are uncomfortable or even offensive? What we might judge differently in 2022?

JG: There is an interesting tension here. There are plenty of examples of films where we think 'well, that's very much of its time', and excuse the film to some lesser or greater degree. Then there are situations where things that were always present in a film come into focus in a new, revealing way. We were talking about Victor and Ophuls in relation to this earlier in the conversation, and how his position might have been informed by wider movements in thinking about culture over time, and perhaps through his relationship with Tessa. In the case of some films, we look back and say, 'you wouldn't get away with that these days, that's awful, shameful' and other films we suddenly think, 'oh my goodness', we can suddenly see what this film is articulating and exploring in a way that wasn't available to us before we had those political perspectives; we are in a particular moment in culture and time when we're now able to have that engagement with the work.

Present / the personal is political

LFD: Another dimension of politics and style is the politics of the critic. I mean that with a small p, although it could be either. I think the examples that you gave us, Girish, it strikes me that they're just the kind of writers who are engaging with the politics of their circumstances, and are bringing new kinds of perspectives to thinking about style. So that question of who gets to speak about films, who gets to write about films is very important, precisely because of that, because of what people bring to the film, in their articulation of its articulation.

LP: Yes, that's a good point Lucy. We've talked about the personal dimension to the lived experience of viewing, and the lack of visibility that people experience if they're from particular marginalised communities. That can drive the politics of the critic, and you see that with, say, So Mayer being really angry about stuff, and rightly so. It's actually really invigorating to read an angry critic. Perhaps that's just me and where

I'm at! Girish is talking about this current historical moment, and the pleasure of experiencing lots of different perspectives now. There's so much out there that you can get to, and then to just see something from that person's perspective. And I don't think that means it's a partial analysis or assessment or evaluation. I think you can have both, and we see that in many of the examples we've talked about today already.

GS: I'm often drawn back to a Richard Dyer essay from the late 1990s, which is an overview of the film studies discipline (1998). It's a short piece in which he identifies two poles in film studies: the formal-aesthetic pole, and the social-ideological pole. To be located at one of these two extremes is a problem. Because, for example, viewing cinema from the formal-aesthetic pole means that one's investments excessively lie in cinema as a unique medium with unique powers of expressivity – but this position lacks a serious and sustained engagement with social or ideological issues that are crucial in the world today. And thus, one has to ask: what are the stakes in occupying this position – in being wholly committed to the formal-aesthetic? How is this helping to engage with what's happening in the world today? On the other hand, being located at the social-ideological pole means using cinema simply as a pretext for writing about larger issues in the world – which is also unsatisfactory. So, the task for the critic and cinephile becomes: how to synthesise these poles in a way that draws deeply from both, that gives equal time and substance to both? Speaking just for myself, having come of age as a cinephile during the 'old cinephilia' heyday of auteurism, for the longest time I was much more invested in aesthetic appreciation of film, and not very interested in making sustained, deep connections between 'film' and 'world'. But especially in the last decade or so, I've been much more interested in trying to split my time between both, spending equal effort learning about both. If there's a general prescription here, I would say: as cinephiles, our challenge (different for each one of us) is to try to move, a little bit with each passing year, towards the pole that's more distant from where we currently are. Thus helping to better synthesise these two sets of tools (formal-aesthetic analysis and social-ideological analysis) in order to produce more complex and balanced criticism.

JG: Quite a few of the people we celebrated earlier in the conversation have been interesting precisely because they're good at moving between those two poles, or making the links between the question of detailed articulation and how that illuminates a matter that's of political significance. Not exclusively, but a lot of the work that we were talking about in part one of this discussion – the Robin Wood or the Andrew Britton – was certainly engaged in that process, wasn't it?

DP: Absolutely – we pointed to the increasing overtness of ideological/social concerns in *Movie* writing from the 70s on. It's very useful to pose the two extremes and clearly they have existed. But it needs some caution: John mentioned earlier that there were other strands of writing, parallel to early *Movie*, that were very politically engaged. And we suggested that *Movie* was informed by the wider culture in various ways.

But the other thing that I was taking from where you started, Girish, about all these voices, relates to how, in the introduction to *Style and Meaning*, we were thinking about what criticism is or should be. And I say 'should be' because, looking back, I'm sure that quite a number of the things I've written over the years really didn't come across as invitations to conversation! But what we were arguing – and it was something Victor insisted on – is that criticism should invite dialogue. What I say about a movie is not 'truth' – as Victor says, it's not a proof, it's an argument. And it's an argument that needs to be engaged with, that you can take to the next time you see the movie, and you can come back and say, 'No, well hang on a minute', or, 'Actually, that's fine as far as it goes, but …' or, 'Actually, you've got this completely wrong'. Each piece of criticism is not a hermetic thing, although it can appear like that. Part of the problem with published criticism is that when it's any good, it can seem – to students, for instance – so convincing as to seem almost beyond dialogue. What they don't see is the process that went into it. All the messy thoughts, the blind alleys, the conversation you have with yourself. Ideally, criticism needs to be an invitation to a conversation with others, not just implicitly, but perhaps explicitly too. The conversation may be provoked directly by what you say, or it may be less direct, like the kind of thing you're talking about Girish, where as you develop your own criticism, you're

drawing on this range of other things that you're coming across and feeding them in. I'm sure we can all see that in our own work, where were we when we started? At what point did this sort of perspective begin to come in? Criticism as a dialogue, criticism as an invitation to conversation.

LP: If I can just pick out one final thing from Girish's comments. That question of self reflection, I think is really important. That you might on a reasonably regular basis say, okay, what position am I writing from? And I think that's perhaps one of the things that Girish you were finding in Dyer: the encouragement to reflect on one's own position. I think that that's quite an interesting challenge when one has developed a writing style and also in the context of the mainstream press and blogging and the institutional context encouraging us to adopt an authoritative persona. That's been a fairly conventional way to speak about film. What I find exciting about the increased foregrounding of one's own personal lived experience in some of this work now, is that it makes that invitation to dialogue very explicit in a way that perhaps some of those more conventionally authoritative ways of speaking have suppressed it? And one has to know the rules of the game to know there's a dialogue, as it were, and these other ways of speaking criticism, I think, can actually make that more explicit.

LFD: I absolutely agree. One thing that I've been thinking about during the course of our conversation particularly as we talked about people like Robin Wood, and how much we valued the ways in which he was engaging in a personal reflection on his work and tastes, is that you can see that personal reflection is coming out of a particular identity position. I wanted to bring that together with what Lisa said, about Racquel Gates not feeling like she was included, so she had to intervene. I was thinking about that conversation and the kind of value that we were placing on Robin's work and how personal that was for him, and that not seeing yourself in those main spaces means that you have to think about identity more, that you are forced into a position of reflection if you are not the 'norm'. If you are not the straight white man, that you are inevitably placed in a position where you have to think about that. Coming back to Girish's point about the two

poles, if you're out of the convention, you might feel like you have to approach things from that social-cultural perspective, because that's precisely what you're forced to think about. I have that feeling reading Racquel Gates' piece, that you have to fight your way through being forced into a certain position in order to get to the aesthetic part and so explicit engagement with politics is crucial. I agree that those two approaches are not divorced in the writing that we're talking about, but that maybe perceptually they are, or they have been traditionally, divorced. Similarly to you Girish, I am now more conscious of those things, that there are issues of identity politics that are more important to me now than they once were, because I'm being forced to think about them.

GS: I think that our moment poses certain special challenges for the film critic and cinephile, because in addition to all the time we need to spend watching, thinking, discussing and writing about cinema, it has become imperative to cultivate a similar, deep understanding of the social / political / economic / ecological issues in the world that cannot be kept apart from our analyses of films. Further, they demand not casual invocations but substantive engagement in our film writing. And this is a daunting task: it takes great time and effort to develop our understanding of those issues before we can incorporate them into our writing in a significant and assured way that interweaves them, puts them into intimate conversation with the aesthetic complex mobilised by a particular film. This is a new kind of work – at least in scale if not in kind – that sets anew the terms of our engagement with cinema.

LP: Yes, that's very interesting, because I was thinking about how in social media in particular, that question of who gets to speak is also very fraught from a different direction, right? So the 'you don't get the right to speak on our behalf', for example, is one of the kinds of debates that happens. So it's a fraught context if one wants to speak one's criticism across different platforms as well, and depending on what one is choosing to speak about. I don't mean that in a particularly fearful way, it's just interesting. It's another layer on top of the one that you've described, Girish. Is it the right moment to talk about how video essays have intervened into this space as well, because it feels like, when we talk about film criticism, and it

taking different forms and evolving, we're also talking about the arrival of the video essay, which itself has manifested as a spectrum or a proliferation of different modes. And whether we want to introduce the term politics, whether we just want to sit with what it is as criticism?

Present / videographic criticism

LFD: Pondering this question about where are we seeing work that's invested in the politics of style, I definitely thought of the ways in which video essays are doing that work, and that you're seeing different kinds of interventions. Also that there's something about the encouragement of the form in general; not that every piece of videographic work is actually thinking about style, but you're having to deal with style by making the video essay, so that's encouraged people to think through those things more prominently. But I think of your work, John, 'Say, have you seen the Carioca?' (2019), as a really lovely example of using the form to think through other kinds of questions of history, of identity, and that it would be very difficult to do what you do there in writing. I think what you achieve in that essay gives a really exciting example of thinking about the intersections of style and politics. In relation to what we've been talking about in relationship to criticism of authority and hierarchies I also think of people like Ian Garwood, Liz Greene, Cydnii Wilde Harris, Kevin B Lee (and many more), all of whom are bringing multiple perspectives to that question of what is the politics of style.

JG: I think you're right, absolutely, that one of the exciting things about videographic work is that it insists you think about form. All good criticism involves finding the right form for the argument but it's a particularly dynamic experience when you're working videographically. As you and Lisa are both suggesting, there is a wonderful plurality of things going on in the field of audiovisual essays. I was interested in trying to produce work in this area because of what it offers for extending the methods of style-based criticism, a new and dynamic set of ways of engaging an audience with evidence and analysis. But from the outset, I was attracted by the kinds of access it might provide for people who might not have an

affinity for written criticism. I'm thinking about that from a student point of view, in particular. We've all had those students in our classes who have been brilliant in discussion but haven't been able to capture that understanding on the page, despite their and our best efforts. But maybe they would be great at articulating their understanding in the form of a video essay, of one kind or another? This has proved to be thrillingly the case. And again, as you suggest, part of the fun is that video essays are an area of development in both the academic field and the wider cultural conversation.

LFD: When we were having our conversation about the issue of institutionalisation, of how publications are supported, accessed and so on, I was thinking about the huge number of other journals and magazines that were interested in film criticism from the 1960s and 70s that have completely disappeared. But we might say that videographic criticism is going through a similar moment, that the plurality, abundance and access to videographic work produced by scholars and film enthusiasts alike is not completely dissimilar to that moment of the 60s and 70s where there were lots of platforms for film writing. For Catherine Grant, Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell and others involved in the Middlebury workshop and *[In]Transition*, the issue of access is certainly hugely important, that those projects are underpinned by collective experience and collective expression. We were talking about the messiness of criticism being hidden and only getting to see the final thing, but here we have a journal where you're much more aware of the process through mechanisms like the open peer review being published alongside the finished piece.

DP: There is this debate about the 'scholarly videographic essay', the kind of work that would have some sort of status within the Academy, God help us. And part of the way in which that's developed – and *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* does this too – is to get the makers to write a statement of a few hundred words, to actually contextualise what they're doing. Something similar happened with practice as research that was submitted for the UK Research Assessment Exercise. And then in *[In]Transition*, they go a stage further, as Lucy says, and publish the reviews, so that you actually

have alongside the work maybe a couple of thousand words of commentary, explanation and context. There's something very interesting about the use of language to validate in a way the scholarly status of videographic work. It can even seem quite paradoxical when in quite a lot of videographic work there seems an impulse to escape language and particularly to avoid voiceover. It's a different but related issue but I've seen the argument that voiceover is somehow hostile to the essence of the form of videographic criticism. I'm always very sceptical when essences of forms are raised. Like movies, videographic criticism is a messy hybrid – or a rich mix if you prefer – and it's the hybridity that should be celebrated.

JG: One quick observation: the opportunity to develop an open peer review process was a major motivation for Jason Mittell's involvement in launching *[in]Transition* (2017).

LP: I agree with you Doug, about being suspicious of when people invoke essences. I think there's an interesting question around voice, which is the history of the technology of the recorded voice and what it does to people who aren't big, booming, blokes. That way in which recording technology has not really been designed to accommodate women's voices, for example, and one can think of other voices that weren't really accommodated either. This is an important context when we speak about whose voice is featured in the video essay's voice over narration, and who feels comfortable to do that kind of voiceover narration. Some of those who eschew voice over and find other video essay forms for their reflections on a film are doing so for these and related reasons. Jace Alexander Casey's decision to have a computer voice narrate her 'New Forms of Racism in the Post-Cinematic Dispositif' video essay (2017) is a potent political choice in light of this history and her video essay's argument.

JG: Ian Garwood's excellent 'The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism' (2016), addresses some of these questions directly.

LFD: It comes back to what we were talking about before, the idea of the film critic as the authority, so when we're talking about the film critic as part of a conversation, as much as the video essay can open a space for further access, it can also reinforce some of that authority of someone to speak.

JG: Potentially in a more seamless way than sometimes appears with a piece of written work. Yes.

DP: It's difficult, isn't it? I take absolutely these points particularly about male voiceover... But your gender is a bit inescapable. John and I were having an interesting discussion, because we've been trying to get together a video essay on Max Ophuls' film *Le Plaisir* (1952), which partly draws on some writing that I did some time ago.[5] A good deal of the essay would be about the representation in the film of women and also the use in the film of male voiceover. We haven't talked about it in great detail, but fairly rapidly we began to kick against the question of 'Well, okay, what happens when we add to Ophuls' male voiceover, our male voiceover?' And clearly, it's not an answer to that to say, 'Oh, well, we'll get a woman to do the voiceover' because the woman would just be a 'front,' as it were.

Potentially a way of trying to escape the tyranny of the male voiceover is, of course, not to use voiceover. But you're still a male filmmaker, making choices about putting bits of video together and presumably trying to create perspectives. That's what I mean by there are, inevitable partialities that come with your gender identity. I can take away my voice, but I'm still making the decisions. Does the fact that I'm making

the decisions, but my voice isn't there anymore, is that more liberating in some way? Does that allow a greater degree of freedom for the spectator? Not sure how one squares that small circle; it seems to me in a way that you may appear to be solving one problem but maybe you just kicked it into a different mode of discourse.

JG: And *Le Plaisir*, of course, is film which deliberately problematises its narrator.

DP: Exactly.

JG: Which is why we were having debates about this in the first place. But it does raise interesting questions.

LP: What's interesting about that is, you didn't ask for a solution, but it seems to me that you could say what you've said, at the outset of your essay, and then people take it and run with it, don't they? This question of being self-reflective, on the page or in the video. That's what Jason Mittell's pushing towards, right? It's about exposing the workings, the process, and thereby making that process more available to a wider range of people.

DP: So that's good. We had not thought in detail, but we had begun to wonder about trying to do that kind of thing in a more questioning way.

Present / authority and accessibility

LP: As you can tell, I'm completely preoccupied these days with how to better democratise some of these things, without that being an incredibly naive statement. It's clear that

there are some barriers that one can't possibly overcome as an individual film critic. But earlier we talked about the kinds of objects we put in front of people, as critics as well, and I think that for me is part of the 'how,' and we've talked about some of the challenges in that process of selection and prioritisation and curation. So for me, that is a key part of the whole question.

LFD: I think we've talked quite a lot about the 'how,' in terms of the conversation that we've been having about self-reflection as part of criticism. I think that last point, that exposing what's going on makes things more accessible, is right. So seeing that reflection is a springboard to making that conversation happen, rather than it being the critic and their criticism being hermetically sealed and impenetrable. That's been a really helpful conversation for me and I think it's useful to think of it as an ongoing process.

GS: Lucy, your point about self-reflection as a springboard to conversation makes me think (yet again) of Robin Wood, and how each time one of his books came out in a new edition, he would seize the chance to write a long foreword (sometimes dozens of pages!) that would situate the edition in his own personal and intellectual trajectory since the previous edition – that would foreground his own personal, lived experience and show its interconnections with the way he approached cinema, and how this was constantly evolving. There is bravery and honesty in this kind of self-situating, self-interrogating, self-assessing practice. And I think it also invites other people to engage more with your work than if it were more impersonal, authoritative, neutral and objective in tone.

I must say: it is also a kind of practice I find not very common among straight white male critics in the history of film criticism.

LFD: I absolutely agree. That's what I've been thinking about as well, in terms of how that practice sets out an opening for you to engage with as well. Whatever that person's position is, you don't have to agree with it, it doesn't have to be yours, but it gives you a foothold. That in itself is inviting.

LP: I think that's absolutely right. For me, it's quite an essential part of it. We talked earlier about the institutional context and

for me it seems crucial to make sure that you're a clear speaking academic, you know, that people actually understand what on earth you're talking about. I don't think any of us in this roundtable are particular fans of the obfuscatory assertions of academic authority that we might find in certain branches of academia or from certain scholars and I'm pleased to see that, that that's a tradition. And I think in the same way, I'm excited by the both the range of critics that we are now seeing across these different platforms that we're talking about, but also that they are wanting to bring their life experience. It's precisely for the reasons that Girish mentions he admires about Robin: because it becomes a conversation. And it's not about jumping on one political soapbox or another, it's actually about opening up that conversation. And I think that what's really interesting, if you're not a straight white male, speaking from my own position is that you have to think very carefully, particularly early on in your career, about how safe you think it is to speak about certain films in certain kinds of ways. Whether that's going to be positively received, which, of course, is terribly important early on. So if one sort of extrapolates from that, there are lots of people thinking that way, in all kinds of contexts, not just institutional contexts, or perhaps in very difficult institutional contexts. So we're talking about swathes of people who may be interested in and fantastically good at speaking about the form of film and its connections with the world who persuade themselves away from it. It feels very important to me that that kind of inclusive way of speaking about film, is there, not as a pose, not as a worthy thing. Really actually just to try and include more voices at the table.

LFD: Yes, it's really vital to think about how revealing personally it can be to respond to a film whether in person or in print, and, as you say, that can be a daunting process, if you're not sure where you stand. It makes me think about the practices of criticism that I was lucky enough to have as models and to be involved in, with The Sewing Circle and similar spaces, which I found incredibly helpful for practising responding to a film with a group of other people in front of whom I felt comfortable expressing myself.[6] Not everyone has access to those kinds of forums and, as you say, particularly at the beginning of your career, giving a paper at a conference, it can be quite nerve-wracking thinking what's going to happen if you don't have a platform of theory to stand on, it's just you

and the film or whatever object that you're thinking about. So yes, I think that's a really good point.

LP: And I was thinking maybe back to the 'safety' of the canon, really, because I remember being very concerned when I was first teaching. I felt at the time I couldn't possibly teach a lesbian film because I was a lesbian: it would be seen by the student – this is I'm sure all conjecture on my part – but it would have been seen by the students as a kind of a way of 'pushing my agenda'. I was teaching first in the early 2000s, and I think it was a very different space really, politically, I mean, in the UK context, certainly, than it had been when John was reminiscing about the 1980s and the way that the department, that we both moved through, manifested itself at that point, in terms of its really vibrant political scene. I didn't see that when I was starting teaching, in that context, and in the student population at that time, and I was extremely concerned. I certainly did not want to be accused of pushing an agenda, and I wasn't sure that I wanted to tie my colours to the mast in that way, as it were: I wanted to be taken seriously as an academic and a scholar and a tutor, so there were no 'chinks in the armour' that I wanted to give away there. Much later, at (virtual) *SCMS* in March 2021, I went to a great session, 'Beyond Resemblance: Theorizing Representation and Methods in Media Studies'. Jillian Baez, Racquel Gates, and Kristen Warner, all wonderful African American scholars, were talking (among other things) about how they are sometimes challenged in the classroom. Students demand, 'Why are we looking at this', and can really rail against aspects of the curriculum they are finding uncomfortable. So, I think we encounter this question of who can speak, in all kinds of ways in all parts of our lives, when we're speaking about film as teachers, as well as scholars, and it can be fraught, as we've said before, and I think that we often in our lives wear a number of hats, and we may be teaching as well as practising film criticism, and all of these lived experiences, of negotiation of your space and status, and freedom to speak, affect both how you speak as a critic, but also how you might want to.

LFD: Absolutely. I remember when I first started teaching, in 2007, how resistant students were to talking about gender, for instance; we're talking about musicals, or Hitchcock, so how could we possibly talk about gender or identity? It's really

encouraging to think how much that has shifted – I've just spent a whole week where all of the conversations that I've had with students are about interrogating institutions, authority, gatekeeping and hierarchy in relation to filmmaking and how we write about film. These are the things that I want to talk about and they're keen to talk about it. I can't imagine having the same kind of conversation with students 13 years ago.

LP: So what's exciting about that, I think, is that there's an implication that the audience for criticism is ready to have that conversation, not being just enabled and able to, but actually being ready to have it.

Looking to the future

DP: I was interested in another question which is in some ways related: what are the arguments we'd want to leave behind? And perhaps there are some answers to that kind of implicit in some of the things that we've been more recently saying, but I just wondered what people's views were about that. I'm very uncertain, certainly in relation to the discussions we've had about the nature of criticism that we want to encourage, the significance of detailed criticism and style-based criticism, I wouldn't want to leave any of that, I want to carry that forward and encourage it to be developed in every new context, including the wider political (big or small p) context that we've been touching on, as a basis for working on film. But do other people have a sense that there are really arguments that we should consign to history?

GS: Rather than leaving anything behind or 'consigning it to history' (which has echoes of the problematic 'cancel culture' debate), for me it's a question of identifying what has been centred in the past – and what can be centred now to pursue avenues that have been overlooked or marginalised. For example, historically there has been an enormous investment in auteurist cinephilia – the director's vision and genius, their individualistic and heroic struggle against forces that seek to curb or dilute their vision, and the fight for sole creative control. But in this present moment of rich and imaginative TV, this traditional auteurist model is being productively questioned, and we are seeing a focus on dispersed authorship. The

show *Reservation Dogs* (FX, 2021-) – which has an all-Native writers' room – is a good illustration of this (and one of the very best things I saw on a screen, big or small, last year). The show was created by Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi, but the episodes have been written and directed by a variety of people. And yet, the show has a remarkable coherence, a set of values and ethos that is rooted in community. It is brilliantly entertaining, funny, and moving, and it is not made for (and addressed to) a primarily white audience. It's available for everyone to see and enjoy but it's primarily made for other Native people, which gives it a powerful authenticity. Not only is it a show that centres communities that have been disenfranchised in moving-image history and criticism, it is also helping to decentre the genius auteur model and in its place centre new models of reading, analysing and appreciating moving-image work.

LFD: I really like that idea of decentering certain things, rather than getting rid of them. Maybe it's a question of thinking about critical vocabulary too, that there are certain kinds of words, like 'genius', that aren't helpful. Also that through a critique of auteurism, for example, you don't want to just displace that onto something else that's equally unhelpful. So it's about dismantling certain structures as criterions of value. What are the words or ways of thinking that we might be want to let go? That's not to say we should cancel them, but what words and structures are not valuable?

DP: I think that in some ways, the role of the auteur and auteur approaches in relation to the history of criticism has been a bit overplayed and undifferentiated. At the same time, what we have to recognise is that the approach to the director that developed in *Cahiers* and then was picked up by *Movie* and so on, was hugely productive and not just productive in terms of identifying individual directors, but actually in opening up a whole popular cinema, Hollywood, to serious discussion, pretty much for the first time, certainly in the English-speaking world. But as those discourses have developed, they've developed to take much more account of collaboration, so there's more work – on the designers, the writers, the cinematographers, often these people who worked together time and time again. And we need more of the work that digs away in the archive. It's not to devalue the coordinating

and creative role of the director, or to claim that authorship should be given to somebody else, it's to acknowledge that, actually, the processes – as we were talking about earlier on – have always been hugely collaborative. And no single person could ever have been responsible for those movies. So decentering the auteur, I'm all for that. I think we should regard the more extreme versions of auteur theory as an historical moment, and the field has moved on. And where we move to is not necessarily to get rid of the notion of the director as a central figure within this collaborative world.

LP: In lots of ways, I'm sympathetic to that perspective. I think what's interesting, though, is you talked about the way in which that focus on the director opened up an area that was previously consigned to the margins of film criticism. What are the mechanisms by which we can similarly open up those sites that have been historically marginalised? The question of what is valued seems to be shifting now, and I'm encouraged by that, but it needs emphasising. I was thinking, for example, of the kinds of marginalised groups that cannot get funding for movies in the conventional sense, that find themselves making web series on the internet instead, try and build up cash for something in the future. The kinds of people who might necessarily have to work in an extremely collaborative way where actually the director isn't really a thing, that actually what you've got is interplay between a number of creatives who are working on an absolute shoestring. One can argue the importance of valuing shoestring budget filmmaking, but I don't see that always playing out in the kind of objects that we bring before us in more formal settings like journals. So for me, it's about taking the opportunity to recentre people who haven't had that central place in terms of who is the object of criticism, and it's also about being quite reflective about what we have and have not historically valued in terms of production budgets and all the rest of it, and trying to deal with the proliferation of moving image works that we find so as to try and be as expansive as possible, which brings its own problems of course in term of examining form, but I'm okay with that. I'm kind of okay with the discomfort.

Lucy Fife Donaldson is Senior Lecturer at the University of St Andrews. She is the author of *Texture in film* (Palgrave, 2014), co-editor of *Television performance* (Red Globe Press, 2019) and general editor (with founding editors Sarah Cardwell and Jonathan Bignell) of Manchester University Press' 'The Television Series' and co-editor of the 'Moments in Television' collections. Lucy's research focuses on the materiality of style and the body in popular film and television and she is an editor of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* and a member of the editorial board of *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture*.

John Gibbs is Professor of Film and Research Dean for Heritage & Creativity at the University of Reading. He is an editor of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* and series co-editor of *Palgrave Close Readings in Film and Television*. His publications include *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation* (2002), *Style and Meaning: Studies in the detailed analysis of film* (2005), *The Life of Mise-en-Scène* (2013) and *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (2017), the second and fourth of these co-edited with Douglas Pye with whom he has also made a number of audiovisual essays.

Lisa Purse is Professor of Film at the University of Reading. She is the author of *Contemporary Action Cinema* (2011) and *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema* (2013), and co-editor of, with Christina Hellmich, *Disappearing War Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cinema and Erasure in the Post-9/11 World* (2017); with Ute Wölfel, *Mediating War and Identity: Figures of Transgression in 20th- and 21st-century War Representation* (2020), and, with Chris Holmlund and Yvonne Tasker, *Action Cinema Since 2000* (2023). Lisa's research explores the relationship of film style to questions of representation particularly in genre cinema and special effects cinema. She is an editor of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism.*

Douglas Pye is Senior Visiting Research Fellow in the Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading. He edited *V.F. Perkins on Movies: Collected Shorter Film Criticism* (2020) and, with John Gibbs, *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (2017) and *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film* (2005). His other publications include *100 Film Musicals* (2011), with Jim Hillier; and *Movies and Tone* (2007/2015) now a Movie ebook. He co-edits with John Gibbs the series *Palgrave Close Readings in Film and Television*. He was a member of the editorial board of *Movie* and is now an editor of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism.*

Girish Shambu is on the faculty at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York. He is the author of *The New Cinephilia* (2nd ed., 2020) and editor of *Film Quarterly's* online column, Quorum.

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Endnotes

1 See *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* issue 8 (2019)

2 See https://www.anothergaze.com and http://another-screen.com

3 *Palgrave Close Readings in Film and Television:* https://link.
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4 http://www.lolajournal.com

5 This has now been published in *NECSUS'* (Gibbs & Pye 2022)

6 The Sewing Circle is a close reading group established in the
Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of
Reading.

The uses of perplexity: A conversation with Robert B. Ray on the art of film, music and pedagogy

Trevor Mowchun: While reading your recently published book, *The Structure of Complex Images* (2020), I found myself doing quite a bit of writing. I filled the margins with various responses and sent you a slew of questions, or provocations, that together reflect my thought process while reading what is, I think, a most energised take on how movies can push us into uncharted aesthetic and philosophical territory, calling for novel ways of thinking and in some cases experimental forms of writing. I see many places to begin, but is there a particular question I posed that strikes you as most pressing, urgent, irresistible to your way of thinking about film that we might discuss further?

Robert B. Ray: Maybe the first one, the way to perplexity via film because that's the key to this book. And the key to what I've been thinking about. I think it also encompasses several of the questions that are at the heart of this book. The question about perplexity is also related to the question of method, and my rather unorthodox method in this book of writing about writing itself, working with student material, and the avoidance of what Roland Barthes called motionless phrases. But I can come back to that. Let's start with perplexity and how movies in particular are so good at generating it, sometimes against our will as spectators, if we remain open to their powers of both revelation and concealment.

Mowchun: I can think of no better way to begin discussing just about anything. The perplexity stirred by cinema is not the perplexity of a math problem. There is no solution to the mystification that is the power of movies. Sometimes, in certain moods, I just want to accept it instead of probe it – to accept the mystery. But I can't sit still about it for very long.

Ray: I can start by saying that Isaiah Berlin, the intellectual historian, distinguishes between two types of questions which can be expressed as follows. If I asked you what is the average shot length of *Anatomy of a Murder* (Otto Preminger, 1959), you may not know the answer, but of course you do know how to find that out. Now what if I asked something else: in *The Caine Mutiny* (Edward Dmytryk, 1954), José Ferrer (as defense lawyer Barney Greenwald) looks at a note his client (played by Van Johnson) has passed to him, and then dismissively crumples it up with his left hand. (His right hand is bandaged from some sort of crack-up that's never explained or made significant.) So why does that small quick action, completely irrelevant narratively, interest me the way a good question does? More to the point: Why does a film's appeal in general turn on such details? That's the kind of question which, for Berlin, does not seem to contain a pointer for an answer that will satisfy us. This is the kind of question he calls 'philosophical,' and those who ask such questions are, he remarks, 'faced with a perplexity' (Berlin 2013). There are no definitive answers. Dictionaries, encyclopedias, experts, orthodoxies, and so on, are ineffectual guides. So, if you object to such questions, you might say that they don't lead anywhere or that they're childish. In fact, they do resemble the annoying questions of a small child who keeps asking 'why?' about everything. And it's not a coincidence that the philosopher Gareth Matthews, from whom I borrowed the idea of perplexity as a research tool, wrote two books of philosophical dialogues with 8–11-year-old children. He asked questions like, Can a dog think about tomorrow? And if not, how do *we* think about tomorrow? Matthews admired a definition of philosophy as 'institutionalised naiveté' (1982). The kinds of

questions that interest me about the movies can often seem naive or childish in their concreteness. And you ask – and I think it's a good question – how do you prompt this attitude of naiveté and genuine perplexity? That's the very question I was trying to answer in this book, which offers several methods for doing so. As such it amounts to an extension of what I was attempting in *The Avant Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (1995), which used the avant garde arts, especially surrealism, and theoreticians, especially Benjamin and Barthes, as generative sources for experimental methods. *The Structure of Complex Images* continues this project by using different sources – Thoreau, Wittgenstein, Cavell, Empson. I'll say a couple of things about two of these thinkers. I've been interested in Wittgenstein since I was in graduate school, but I've only begun teaching him in the last five or six years. He seems to exemplify this interest in naïve-seeming perplexities that resonate with me. How do you teach a child the meaning of a word like 'game'? How can you describe what happens when you suddenly notice that someone's face resembles that of someone you know? For Wittgenstein, the best method for dealing with such matters was *description*. As he famously said, 'We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place' ([1953] 2001). Cavell, of course, was profoundly influenced by Wittgenstein (you know this better than I maybe). And his first film book, *The World Viewed* ([1971] 1979), begins with asking us to recognise how little we actually know about things we think we thoroughly understand, such as photographs. He says it may be felt that he makes too great a mystery of these objects, for example, but adds that his feeling is rather that we have forgotten how mysterious these things really are.

Mowchun: This point reminds me of Wittgenstein's idea that the true task of philosophy, insofar as there could ever be only one, is the assembling of reminders for a particular purpose. Knowledge depends on remembering what we already know, recognising what is already in plain sight. Perhaps the desire to describe is not unlike the desire to remember, to redeem what we have forgotten or taken for granted to the point of blindness. Is this what you mean?

Ray: For the moment let's say that in general I'm less interested in theory than in method and that the methods that appeal

to me often begin with descriptions. If you're not attuned to this approach, a book like *Walden* ([1854] 2004), can bore you to death with its meticulous accounts of the seasons and their variations in weather, and even Wittgenstein and Cavell may seem to be spinning their wheels. But I always want my students to recall Gertrude Stein's dictum: 'description is explanation'. And Wallace Stevens' intensification: 'description is revelation'. I think André Bazin would have agreed with both of those claims as they pertain to the ontology of film.

Mowchun: It seems to me all sorts of fruitful paths or tangents can be forged from these descriptive moments in movies, moments like the one you mentioned from *The Caine Mutiny* that seem to almost untether themselves from the narrative and encapsulate something essential about a specific character or context. And perhaps this is a big question in terms of writing our responses to movies that move us in ways we don't always clearly understand or expect. *The Caine Mutiny* is a film whose narrative structure you follow step by step, (its workings may be complex but it is not in itself a cause for perplexity) and yet this particular moment from the film (the crumpling up of the note) holds a meaning which jumps out at you and eludes you. It summons you to attention in a way that the film's story and dramatic tensions do not. Now if you're going to write about these types of moments which perplex you and fill you with a kind of wonder, you might be reluctant to search for an explanation that takes you away from the truth of the moment in all its brevity and subtlety. At this point you are interested in a particular moment and not the film as a whole, though a full account of the moment will likely lead you beyond it and back into the film's diegetic world. This and similar moments are also embedded in the fabric of your own experience, and having made an appeal to your experience, there is the accompanying realisation that a moment – any moment that dawns on your consciousness, as Wittgenstein might say – may carry little if any weight in the experience of others. It could be just as easily lost. Moments are 'missable', a term which Stanley Cavell and Andrew Klevan discuss at length during their own exploratory conversation piece, 'What Becomes of Thinking on Film?' (2005). Then I wonder if catching such moments, or being caught by them, perhaps caught off-guard, is already on the way to describing what they consist of and how they come to life like

a phenomenon in nature, to echo Bazin. They are not questions awaiting an answer but *forces* commanding some sort of response. The method of description begins with seeing, not thinking, or seeing-as-thinking. You have to be able to see what's in front of you, facing you, without there necessarily being any 'truth' behind it. And because its importance lacks an obvious explanation, you may have to describe it as you see it in order to know what an explanation would be in service of (I think Cavell might suggest something similar). Now when someone hears the word 'description' in this context they may think, well, there's really not much to it then, you're just repeating mimetically what is already there standing before you (even if you're the only one for whom it stands out with such forcefulness) – but I think by description you mean something more.

Ray: I do. I mean an intensification or vividness of attention, which is what Thoreau was doing daily in Walden. He meticulously records the temperature at given times of the year, or the exact dates on which the pond froze or melted, and it's always different. He was there for two years and four months. So it's different in different years. And why is he interested in that? He does not say why outright – but he is, and he's interested in other very small details, registering the various sounds, for example, that occur of the seasons as they come and go. At first, when I was teaching *Walden*, I would have the students read it twice in a semester. The first time they would read it they often complained of being bored, but the second time, interestingly, they were not bored at all. Their rhythms of attention had adjusted to what Thoreau was doing, and they were starting to look at things differently and notice things differently. That's a skill to be able to evoke that degree of attentiveness in young readers, and film has the capacity to evoke it, too, but the difference is that film, unlike literature, as we all know, is moving at a certain tempo. That's the great advantage of DVDs and Blu-rays: we can stop the film and we can go back and watch it again, but previously most people couldn't attend to a film in this way. And a lot of things were missed, like the gesture I was referring to in *The Caine Mutiny*. I wanted to test the intensity of this minor gesture further by comparing it to Robert Altman's version of *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial* (1988), which just focuses on the court martial and not the whole story, based as it is on Herman Wouk's

play version of his own novel. And it's interesting to see in the Altman version that the defense lawyer's hand is not bandaged. Nor does he make this same gesture with his left hand. So, this is clearly a detail that is not conceived of as narratively central, or even central to the characterisation of Barney Greenwald. The only thing we know is in the Bogart version of *The Caine Mutiny*, when Greenwald first arrives to introduce himself to his potential clients, his hand is bandaged, and one of them asks, 'Did you have a crack-up?' And he replies curtly, 'Yes, something like that.' It's never explained further. I believe that in the original source, maybe in the novel or the play, it's explained that he's a Navy carrier pilot when he's not working as a lawyer, and he's had a crack-up on one of the carriers and burned one of his hands, his right hand. Still, we don't need to know that. There it is in the first version; it is absent in the second version, perhaps missing. It's that gesture with the left hand just dismissively crumpling up the note that captivates me, brings me to attention, perhaps *back* to attention, and compels me to describe this detail in equal detail to figure out why it is the way it is and what other details may be lurking about unnoticed.

Mowchun: Of course, my having seen the film – seen its story, recalling its major dramatic events on ship and in court – will not help me much in following your micro-response here. So let me get this straight: the lawyer crumples up a note from his client with his unbandaged hand, dismissing the content of the note while drawing our attention (or I should say your attention) to the crack-up which is never explained. My initial thought may be useless but let's see: If his right hand were not all bandaged up, he would probably have used it to receive and crumple the note. Instead, he does it awkwardly with his left and is questioned about it.

Ray: He is probably right-handed. Maybe that's why the crumpling gesture stands out: it's the first time he's doing it like that, the character and, possibly, the actor too. Rarely are actors deprived of their 'good hand' in films.

Mowchun: Not to mention their good looks! Jack Nicholson's nose injury in *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) is coming to mind, but I better nip this tangent in the bud. Okay, yes, this moment from *The Caine Mutiny* does appear to leave

something unsaid in terms of what you might call the history of this injury about which another film could delve into – but not this one. It's also describable as a contingent moment, an unnecessary yet by no means arbitrary state of affairs that reminds us just how singular, unpredictable, and cryptic everyday life can be even when its representation pretends to status quo normalcy. Perhaps it's not all that far removed from those seemingly mundane moments in Thoreau's *Walden* that call for keen and recurrent (if not obsessive!) observation. But I would also suggest that such a moment or gesture could be intended to give the viewer pause (to induce perplexity) while still embodying the accidental for-itself character of something 'natural' which may or may not pique our interest. What I mean is that it is always possible for a filmmaker or any artist to not know the reasons *behind* their intention. I will put down my own example of a film moment featuring the crumpling up of a note, from *Badlands* (1973), Terrence Malick's first film with Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek. Have you seen it?

Ray: A long time ago when it first came out. I haven't seen it since.

Mowchun: We can do some rhyming with our respectively cherished film moments that leave us perplexed, even though (or perhaps because) the film pays such moments no further regard. The one in *Badlands* occurs when Kit (Martin Sheen) and Holly (Sissy Spacek) are holing up à la Bonnie and Clyde after a string of murders perpetrated by Kit. For a luxurious rest-stop the couple invade a palatial 'rich man's' house reminiscent of the farmer's mansion in *Days of Heaven* (Terrence Malick, 1978). Having restrained both the owner and maid before plotting their next move, someone unexpectedly knocks on the door asking for the owner of the house. Kit, who looks very suspicious right now, claims the owner is indisposed. The well-dressed man at the door concedes, somewhat reluctantly, but mostly puzzled, and says he would like to leave a message for the owner. This message comes in the form of a written note which Kit takes into his hand before closing the door. Now he's holding this note in the foyer, at a loss for what to do with it. He seems to want to get rid of it as quickly as possible, as if it were a crucial piece of evidence against him – and it may very well be. In the corner of the foyer stands a

tall vase. Without further thought, Kit crumples up the note and drops it inside the vase, staring down after it as if its base were bottomless. It is a very good hiding place considering he isn't thinking things through very carefully at the moment. I am always struck by the arrival of this note, how Kit becomes so frazzled by it, and what he ultimately decides to do with it under pressure. A decorative vase that is merely for show (like so many things symbolising splendor) suddenly lurches out of the background and becomes very useful. Things get more interesting (and funny). The man who wrote the note, calling it 'a message', is the film's director, Terrence Malick himself playing what may be an architect, complete with a set of 'blueprints' under his arm – the grand telltale message of the film. It's like a comedy routine at this point: the director's message is handed over to the main actor who is either perplexed by it or, seeing its truth, is eager to hide it from himself. The 'message' is crumpled up dismissively, no doubt for the better, and the film continues along without it – yet I do wonder what Malick's message whispers at the bottom of that dark vase.
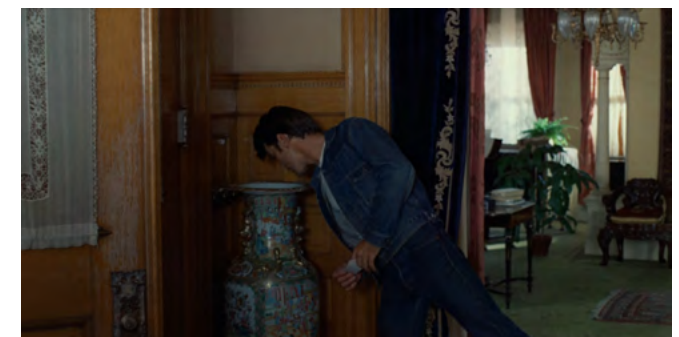
Ray: Let's call it the mystery of contingency – conceding to the unpredictable and ambiguous. Clearly the weather at Walden is contingent. Thoreau has no control of it. We'll never know the origin of the detail of José Ferrer crumpling this piece of paper up with his left hand – did the director tell him to do this? Is it the kind of thing that would appear in a script? Doubtful. He could have been told to do it, or he just did it himself, perhaps in only one of the takes. We'll never know. Now as I think about it, the incident from *Badlands* is clearly all intended. Perhaps it's a parable about the limits of intentionality, but that's not the same as contingency – though it might *feel* contingent. I'm interested in both kinds of details – do we have names for them yet? – but I do want to distinguish between those two.

Mowchun: It's strange how compelling contingencies in film can be without necessarily being central to the films in which they function (or fail to function). Such moments keep me from knowing for sure that what I am seeing is merely ('merely') a fiction. In theory, I suppose, I want the line between intention and accident, necessity and contingency, fiction and fact, to blur in art, but when a film actually succeeds in blurring this boundary beyond recognition, I find myself wanting back the line, with some sort of confirmation of where the film stands with respect to its events. To return one last time to the scene from *Badlands*, the man leaving a message (the director leaving a message for his actor) is certainly all intended, as you rightly point out; but thinking about it again – particularly the shot of Kit scrambling in the threshold, not knowing what to do with the note and impulsively dropping it inside that vase – that part seems improvised to me (or it was made to feel that way). Suddenly the character is reacting to a situation that the film itself, so to speak, has no knowledge of, as if the film is also reacting to the suddenness of it, reacting to the instincts of Kit / Sheen. When a work of art flows like nature, beautifully patterned yet wildly unpredictable, how are we to speak of it? Abbas Kiarostami's middle section in *Tickets* (Ermanno Olmi, Abbas Kiarostami & Ken Loach, 2005), which you write about at length in your book, quietly stumbles onto this kind of flow where all the events – not just the more dramatic or punctuated ones – embody both the spontaneity and mundanity of

everyday life. There's some kind of alchemical give-and-take interplay between intentionality and improvisation in 'getting things right'. I'm sure we will come back to this film. And I may come back to this word 'alchemy' too.

Ray: Such an obsession may be a consequence of trying to convert a purely philosophical or speculative question into an empirical one. Because presumably, if you want to know whether an apparent contingency was necessitated or not, you could ask the people involved in making it. Did they intend this gesture? Did they shoot it multiple times, and then pick this one for whatever reason? So that would be an empirical research problem. It's like shot length: you would know how to find it even if you may not be able to find it right away. But the more philosophical question relates to this elusiveness between documentary and fiction film, as you point out. Let's come at this again from another angle: Should film scholars study film scripts? One of the things I ask in the book is why film scholars generally don't study scripts. We could but generally don't, which is strange because many directorial intentions and answers to our various questions and perplexities could be found there. Despite that, my answer would still be: only in special cases should we study film scripts. At the moment I'm interested in *All the President's Men* (Alan Pakula, 1976). Christian Keathley has shown me that the scripts for this film (there are several) are much less narratively opaque than the resulting movie, which is marked by ellipses and contradictions that Woodward and Bernstein objected to. I find this interesting because as journalists, they privileged clarity and communication over aesthetics – but clearly the filmmakers wanted something that straightforward storytelling, marked by logical transitions, would not have achieved. In a case like this one, scripts can prove very useful. In general, however, we don't study a script because, unlike the text of a play, it doesn't constitute the definitive instance. And that fact alone tells us something important about the cinema. In 'The Third Meaning' (1977), Barthes referred to what he called 'the filmic' and its fundamentally indescribable meaning. In other words, there's something essential to a film that is not possible or communicable in the script. Yes, a script could contain a direction for Greenwald to crumple up the note with his

left hand or for Boudu to kick up the dust that thrilled Bazin, but the gestures themselves, no matter how meticulously described in writing, are inexhaustibly specific, individual. And the movies consist of such gestures, over and over again. They are determined to some extent, I think, by the connection between the nature of a recording and an experience of astonishment or surprise. What would a book on the connection between the nature of recording and surprise be like, or between movies as recordings of unpredictable events and our capacity as viewers to be continually surprised even if we have seen them more than once? Now, before the advent of digital manipulation (CGI, autotune, and so on), films and records were essentially recorded improvisations. Of course, we know that the filmmakers and musicians rehearse and work hard to get things as intended, but recording reveals human differences, and some of them surprise even their makers. Take a thoroughly professional actress like Audrey Hepburn. Watching her work in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Blake Edwards, 1961), Buddy Ebsen, who was in the movie, noted that 'No two takes are identical. The 'nowness' of one moment is gone forever and can only be played back, never duplicated. In one's delivery the timing varies by split seconds or the weight of the word switches by audible milliseconds' (Wasson 2011). And anyone who has spent any time making a movie or record (and I've done a lot of the latter, you the former) knows how often you can be surprised by the rushes or the playback. The camera and the microphone don't see and hear exactly as we do in the room. We have photogénie or, in the case of music, its audio equivalent. Katharine Hepburn used to say, 'I photograph better than I look'. And some singers sound better when recorded than they do live (Marvin Gaye would be a good example). The absolute best case of the connection between recording and surprise is the record of 'Louie Louie'. I have a CD that collects 16 versions of this semi-novelty song, many by professional musicians like *Paul Revere & The Raiders*, *The Beach Boys*, Otis Redding, and *The Kinks*. But only *one* version, by a shambolic group of semi-amateurs (*The Kingsman*) is any good, and it's the one we know. It was made in one take with an overhead vocal mic that the singer had to stand on tiptoes to sing into. The drummer loses the beat midway through, and the singer starts to come in too soon after the

ragged guitar solo. In other words, it's a mess; and yet, in a way, it's perfect. Any book on how the recording arts differ from writing should start with 'Louie Louie'. Why? Because of the mystery of recording. A performance, however deliberate and well-rehearsed, is caught on tape and sounds surprisingly good for reasons unknown to you. It's also the reason why in recording people spend a lot of time chasing demos. A musician or one of the songwriters does a demo of the song on a handheld or portable cassette player, or something like that in those days, and then brings it in the studio and you can't quite recreate the sound that you wanted, that was on that cassette. That's how Keith Richards said 'Streetfighting Man' arose. He recorded the acoustic guitars on a portable cassette player which had a built-in compression. And the acoustic sound was so good; it sounded like a punched up electric. And they couldn't get that sound in the studio, so they had to play the acoustic guitar cassette – the demo – back through a loudspeaker system and record that and put it on the track. But that's a common practice of chasing demos. The extremes to which people will attempt to repeat something caught accidentally in a recording – in a futile attempt to recapture the original sense of surprise – is absolutely common. In this sense filmmaking involves hoping, or less desperately trying to ensure, that when the shooting happens the actors, the technicians, the director, etc. catch a really good day where it is up to the camera, as it were, to capture something truly special, inimitable and lasting. You can keep trying until you do, but sometimes it just doesn't happen.

Mowchun: So, there's an element of luck at play here? To press 'record' is to roll the dice?

Ray: Yes, but we should be careful not to romanticise the role of chance in the creative process too much.

Mowchun: Well, you must have some solid insight into the complexities of this process from your experience as a musician. During your time playing with *The Vulgar Boatmen* you produced a few commercially released records. How did making these records shape or expand your understanding of the specificities of film art in your work as a scholar?

Ray: Answering this question requires a bit of autobiography. I grew up in Memphis where the dominant culture, for obvious reasons, involved music rather than film. I saw Elvis before he went into the Army, and he was truly something. Astonishingly, people like Bo Diddley, Jimmy Reed, *Hank Ballard and The Midnighters*, and *The '5' Royales* regularly played for high-school parties, and the big auditorium shows included Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and Jackie Wilson. A little later, those shows would also have James Brown, Sam and Dave, and Otis Redding. At this early age, I was much more interested in music than film. Certainly, I went, or was taken, to an occasional movie. I remember seeing, for example, *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen & Gene Kelly, 1956), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1956), *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959) and two art-house choices of my parents: *The Red Shoes* (Emeric Pressburger & Michael Powell, 1948) (which I still don't like) and *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot / Mr. Hulot's Holiday* (Jacques Tati, 1953) (which my whole family loved). I also recall Saturday morning movies on a local television station, especially the Charlie Chan, Andy Hardy, and Basil Rathbone Sherlock Holmes films. And I was lucky to have a superb high-school English teacher (apparently a former Lionel Trilling student) who quickened my already existing interest in reading. In my fourth year at the University of Florida, a decisive event occurred. With *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema 1930-1980* (1985) on the verge of publication, I joined a band called *The Vulgar Boatmen* that was started by art majors who had studied with me. I had played in groups during college, but not ones with their own songs. Over the next decade, I became the engineer, producer, and co-writer (with an exceptionally gifted Dale Lawrence) of three records, commercially released and reviewed. We had a *success d'estime*, if not of money, and managed to perform two numbers on Jools Holland. While this music work almost certainly caused the ten-year gap between my first and second books, I have absolutely no regrets about that time. Given where I was from, music had always been crucially important to me, and now it began to inform my career as a film scholar. Because of both the microphone and camera's automatisms, recording music resembles filmmaking. As

a result, I became attentive to the effects of various artistic and technical choices made at every stage of production, and I began to apply that attention to the cinema. I think about music all the time. The other night, while watching a DVD of *Roxy Music*'s 2001 tour, I began thinking about the oddness of that group's sound. The next day, I happened upon one possible explanation: *Roxy*'s songs often originate from Bryan Ferry's limited, two-finger piano playing, which tends to leave out the third of a chord's triad. Since whether the third is flatted or not determines whether that chord is major or minor, Ferry's chords are ambiguous, and so is the band's sound: he sings as if in a major key, while the musicians (at least some of them) seem to think it's a minor. I'm interested in exactly this kind of thing, and with film study I increasingly think about how such choices, limitations, and anomalies at various levels of production contribute to a film's specific rhythm and style.

Mowchun: Perhaps your next book should be on music in film! Of course, all artistic mediums are susceptible to this tension between control and chance, intentionality and ambiguity, in different ways, but I am tempted to say that your equal commitment to film and music as recording mediums suggests that they are immune to being wholly grasped by will or reason, be it in the mode of a maker or scholar. The artists do their work and the medium, i.e., the recording devices at the heart of film and music, does its work too. I imagine theatre actors experience this effect forcefully, if not traumatically, when crossing over into the medium of film.

Ray: The very lesson that Jimmy Stewart said Margaret Solomon taught him when he moved from doing theater work and entered the movies. She kept telling him, 'less, less'. In other words, meet the medium halfway.

Mowchun: Directors give this sort of criticism to actors all the time. 'Less is more', 'take it down.' Of course there are exceptions. I know you're not a fan of Stanley Kubrick's work, but his unusual approach to directing actors by doing take after take, recording after recording, as a way of bringing the actors back up to a level of intensity and excess verging sometimes on irony that is not realistic at all, that I would say is often

deliberately *un*realistic, perhaps this exception proves the rule that the camera, in the end, is the decisive critic, the great unblinking eye, the convincing of which is anyone's guess. Jack Nicholson and Shelley Duval in *The Shining* (1980) had to undergo what must have felt like an endless procession of cinematographic recordings in order to *surprise* Kubrick. I'm fascinated by the various approaches filmmakers take to catch what appears to them as real or true, whether it's on the side of spontaneity, subtlety or extreme artifice. In the case of Kubrick, an actor may feel he has given the right performance at take 10, however the director often pushes his actors well beyond that, forcing the actor to do things he has never done before, or never thought would fly on film. There's also the legendary story of Hitchcock pouring cold water on Janet Leigh in the hopes of getting the ideal scream. Filmmakers in this sense 'trick' actors into losing control in the right sort of way so as to deliver something substantial and living (not necessarily realistic) to the camera, a technique by which character is revealed through the actor's voluntary or perhaps involuntary self-revelation.

Ray: And sometimes it's the actor who calls the shots because for whatever reason he can see himself more clearly from the perspective of the camera than the director can. My favorite instance of this features an actor I really like although he's not very well known: Peter Riegert, whose two most famous roles are in *Animal House* (John Landis, 1978) and *Local Hero* (Bill Forsyth, 1983). The movie I'm thinking of now is *Crossing Delancey* (Joan Micklin Silver, 1988). Riegert's character has just had a quarrel with a woman with whom he has fallen in love. There's a scene where he gets in an elevator, and he just stands there, idling, before the elevator finally closes. Silver shot this and said, 'You got to give me something. Give me some emotion here.' And Riegert retorted, 'It'll be okay.' And she persisted, 'No, I need something.' 'No, it'll be okay.' She kept insisting that he amp up expressiveness, and he kept refusing. Then when she looked at the rushes, she saw it was perfect. He knew what the camera was seeing. So sometimes it's not always the director behind the camera but a good actor in front of it who can see himself as a recording more clearly. In general, though, it's the directors who are having to do so because actors tend to project too much.

Mowchun: They have to reel them in and keep the performance balanced. And, there's no science to it. The art of film, however, does depend on science or technology, that is, the machines which are doing the recording. This is a fundamental complexity, or better yet contradiction, of cinema – this tension between the mechanical and the poetic, which is echoed in the tension between the commercial and the artistic, or the institutional and the auteur.

Ray: There's another point about this. This is from Bill Evans, the jazz pianist who played on *Kind of Blue* with Miles Davis. He's been talking about Miles in this interview, specifically about experimenting with improvisation. And that's what we're talking about here, essentially. When thinking about jazz, Evans says, 'Unfortunately, many of our best performances are out there in the universe someplace, and you still as professionals have to go in at 10 o'clock on Wednesday and make a record and hope that every few records you might catch a really good day.' So that's what it's like with recording music. Even though musical improvisation is different than recording rehearsed performances, you're still hoping when you film, say, an actor or a scene, that it's a good day, that there's chemistry between the contradictory elements.

Mowchun: There are some filmmakers who seem to rely almost exclusively on improvisation. The recent work of Terrence Malick immediately comes to mind. He has been known to work without a script, gravitating towards contingencies like the weather or qualities in the light as the basis for what and how to film. For a less obvious example, I was just listening to some audio interviews that Kubrick did with Michel Ciment, and it was surprising to hear Kubrick's openness to chance given how controlled his films are. While it seems that very little is left to chance, Kubrick confesses that despite all the preparation that would go into a film like *Barry Lyndon* (1975), in the end he would arrive on the set and feel the pressure to *rediscover* the scenes from scratch. For example, the camera position was a surprisingly open question 'on the day'. You can't necessarily entrust a scene to meticulously planned storyboards if it doesn't feel like the right decision anymore. Some of those striking visual compositions as they appear in the film, many of which were modelled after paintings from

the period, were in a sense discovered or rediscovered on the day of shooting – but, I want to add, only because so much research and preparation had already gone into it.

Ray: I would've thought that everything was storyboarded, in advance.

Mowchun: It was, but the storyboards were not, let's say, copied out by the camera. Preparation puts you in good shape so that when you are on the set you have a better chance of having 'a good day'. I would make a distinction here between preparation and memorisation.

Ray: The specifics of the situation demand acknowledgement. To insist on your preconception, despite what a situation affords, amounts to acting rotely.

Mowchun: Yes! Fritz Lang and Jean-Luc Godard have debated the very same issue. Have you seen this remarkable filmed conversation between them? Godard still feels like the student here, genuinely appealing to Lang to explain the way he directs films with such force and conviction. Lang basically says, I think a director needs to have an intention, a clear plan. I know Jean-Luc, you like to improvise, and that's all well and good when it works. But I, he says, I just can't work that way. I can't improvise in the studio, for the most part, because I absolutely must know where the camera has to be in relation to the actors and their environment. He goes on to describe a hypothetical director's situation where you have an actor at a desk in the corner of a room preparing to leave, but if it turns out that the exit door is on the other side of the room, it becomes clear only during shooting that it will take too long for the actor to get from the desk to the door, and vice versa. He says he doesn't want to waste any time with such problems that real locations present, not to mention improvising in those locations, so he needs to work in a controlled environment like a studio and plan out everything in advance. If he's well-prepared he can be both creative and economical. In avoiding the unexpected he can avoid the disaster of falling behind in the production schedule and going over budget. Now Godard's reply reveals just how irreconcilable these filmmaking approaches are: he says I can't just move the position

of the door in the built set to wherever I please for the simple reason that I've chosen a real location; I've cast rather than built my set; I must respect in a documentary sense the location that I've chosen. If I really can't stand where the door is, then I need to find a different location, a different apartment or café to shoot in. In the end the two filmmakers agree that a good film needs both methods, and yet in doing so they confess, I think, that they are who they are.

Ray: The best thing I've read recently on this problem is a book, *The Cinema Hypothesis* (2016), by the former editor of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Alain Bergala. Bergala was working with the Ministry of Education in France. And he was part of an organised discussion of how to teach film to young kids, not just high school age, but younger, middle school, even elementary school. And so, part of the book is clearly that kind of bureaucratic document that has to be filed, but parts of it are really interesting. One thing that Bergala says is, there's always a resistance, or a gap, between a script or the original intention that the filmmaker has and the actual filming of it, the actual result. And he said part of it is rooted in the locations of moviemaking. You know exactly what you're talking about here: you choose a room to shoot in and then you have to fill it with things. He gives the example of *Le Mépris* (1963) where Godard rented an apartment in order to film some of these scenes between Bardot and her husband played by Piccoli. And he said, okay, the room's empty, and I've got to put furniture in, choose what colour the furniture is, put something on the walls, arrange all the furniture, and so on. These are the kind of constraints, already the kinds of resistances to the original idea that a director has of what he wants to shoot. But this is the real point: the single greatest resistance is the actors themselves because you have some vague conception of the film in your head. But these are specific and complex human beings, with their own distinct voices and distinct physical appearances and ways of moving and walking. And if you can't accommodate them then you've either got to recast it or you've got to give up on your original idea, however vague it may have been. That's a really interesting idea. So, to a certain extent, some films are conceived from the start with actors in mind, and the director is always thinking

about this particular actor. For example, Howard Hawks liked to work with well-known stars because, as he said, they're more predictable. Perhaps at times this reliance on the same stars was a kind of laziness on his part, but even then, he still had to cast all the other roles. There's some kind of gap there in the art of casting, of people as well as places, that cannot be traversed in a controlled or predictable manner.

Mowchun: Is this the sort of ontological gap / resistance that we should be pointing out to our students as a possible storehouse of ambiguity or mystery that cannot be easily ascribed to an author, and so a possible starting point for the analysis and interpretation of films on their own terms?

Ray: I think a lot about ways of getting my students – and myself no less – to experiment more with film analysis. I first started citing student work in *The Avant Garde Finds Andy Hardy*, and I've continued to do so in the four books that have followed. We often hear the cautionary platitude about combining research and teaching, but in my case the platitude has proved useful. I wouldn't have written any of my six books if I hadn't been teaching. I'm not saying that I wouldn't have written *any* books, but certainly they would have been entirely different and probably less interesting to me. This way of working with student responses resembles somewhat Duke Ellington's compositional method. By most accounts, Ellington, for all his skills with harmony, orchestration, arrangement and rhythm, was not especially gifted melodically. Many of his most famous songs ('Mood Indigo', 'Don't Get Around Much Anymore', 'I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart') had their provenance in snatches of melody that one of his musicians had improvised while warming up or just noodling. Ellington would overhear these phrases and build a song around them. Sometimes he would give a co-writing credit; sometimes (as in the case of Barney Bigard's 'Mood Indigo' melody) he had to be badgered into doing so. One of his disgruntled bandmates once confronted Ellington by saying, 'You're not a composer, you're a compiler.' And he was half-right: Ellington was a compiler, but he composed out of his compilations, and the musicians who provided source material never achieved as much on their own as they did with

him. He established a collaborative context that enabled an enormous amount of music. I certainly don't want to compare what I've done to Ellington's monumental accomplishments, but I have also composed or at least found inspiration in what I've compiled from my students, which often amounts to their noticing something I had missed. And I've always given them name-credit when I've used what they wrote for me. My point is this: Ellington kept his band going until he died, long after the big-band, swing era had ended, and long after keeping a large band together made any kind of financial sense. He used his royalties to keep the band going because he said he needed to hear what he wrote, but he also needed the compositional collaboration. Some important film professors like James Naremore and David Bordwell have continued to produce books after their retirements. Without the stimulation of teaching – preparing for class, thinking through the material, the class itself – I'm not sure I would be able to do so if I'd stopped teaching. I've been lucky to spend my career at a university where, despite its enormous size, most of my undergraduate classes are between 20-30 students, so I rarely lecture, and discussion is the norm. I'm not sure, however, that student responses are always necessarily fresh. Especially juniors and seniors often bring certain theoretical equipment with them, for example race, class and gender templates which predispose them to thematic, even social science ways of looking at films. I'm not saying such things are without value, but they aren't exactly 'fresh'. To summon the kind of attentiveness I'm after, I rarely confront such theoretical habits head-on. I prefer giving specific assignments that, by summoning a different kind of response, often surprise the students who write them. Take, for example, someone I cite in this book, Harvard Ed school Professor Eleanor Duckworth and her moon-watching assignment as described in *The Having of Wonderful Ideas* (2006). My daughter took her course and on its first day Duckworth tasked the students with observing the moon every night over the course of the semester, recording their observations and any questions that came up. My daughter reported that initially these sophisticated graduate students scoffed at what seemed to them childish work. Nevertheless, it very quickly began yielding interesting things. One student noted that a half-moon seemed to open towards both the

left and the right on the same night. Is that possible? It turns out, yes. In my chapter on cinephilia and method, I report on some of the results of using Duckworth's framework. I asked students to choose a brief scene from *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) and watch it for seven consecutive nights, doing nothing but recording what they noticed, and how what they noticed gradually evolved. I got wonderful work from students who said they would never have predicted what they eventually wrote. Duckworth's maxim is one of the best starting points for film study: *Tell me what you notice, not what it means.* Students have been trained since middle school to do the latter, to say what something means; getting them to report on what they notice requires a different kind of assignment. In *The Avant Garde Finds Andy Hardy*, I found that certain surrealist games proved especially effective in generating surprise (which the field of information science saw as the necessary ingredient of information). After all, if you know the message in advance, the learning process contains no valuable information for you. We have to learn how to see all there is to see, which may involve an act of un-learning, seeing *before* thinking. It then becomes possible to be taken by surprise by what we've been calling perplexities, because to see and hear everything there is in a film – and especially in nature – is almost by definition to be perplexed.

Mowchun: I found it interesting (no, surprising) that sometimes, at the end of a chapter, one of the student responses to a prompt or perplexity is framed as an example, but actually we're not quite sure what's being exemplified here. It's more the experience of perplexity and surprise that you successfully introduce inside the text. You then resist the temptation to bracket these experiments in observation and discovery with your own concluding summations – a 'motionless' ending to the chapter. Instead, a chapter can end with this kind of dialogical shift, dramatising a genuine moment of perplexity. I also see this method as an attempt to preserve the latent energy of these student responses by allowing them to stand on their own terms, to a certain extent, speaking from within the hold of perplexity itself.

Ray: Yes, but that's not always true. For instance, in *The Avant Garde Finds Andy Hardy*, but especially in the Thoreau book, *Walden x 40* (2012), I often use something a student had noticed as the generator for my own comments. And I typically indicate in different ways whether I was quoting a student directly or using his or her remarks as the starting point for something else. So often the valuable thing that students will do is simply point to something and say, 'Look at this', and not necessarily say what it means or not necessarily have any kind of extrapolation. And, obviously, we know more than they do. We're more ready to extrapolate. And we can take it in other places, we know more films, we know more books, we know more things. And that can be a disadvantage too, however, because it can prompt a rush to interpretation or rush to a conclusion, instead of leaving things open-ended. So, I just want to make it clear that I'm not always leaving these discoveries, these perplexities as we've been calling them, just as they are, such that I don't have anything more to say about them. Often I do have much to say about what the students point out. I prefer to look and see before jumping to conclusions.

Mowchun: These strike me as questions about writing too, and writing about film specifically. To return to the moon-watching assignment you adapted from Duckworth where students write repeatedly on a particular film, initially they may worry that they will just be repeating themselves, but they may also discover that every time they watch the film, or a particular scene, they will notice different things, if they are paying attention (and altering their angles of attention). I'm wondering if we are trying to get the students to expand their awareness and appreciation of the filmic elements so as to be able to come to an understanding or a meaning that is going to be interesting, pressing, and in tune with the filmic text itself; or is the goal rather to cultivate in their consciousness as viewers a kind of film grammar, as it were, as if they (all of us) don't really know – or too easily forget – how exactly film functions and signifies. In other words, we don't really know (or keep forgetting) the language or the grammar of cinema because generally we're too eager to reduce it to a narrative or

to a thematic so as to make better sense of it and apply it to our own lives. Do you think that we actually have to cultivate a form of criticism where we just completely avoid any kind of interpretation in terms of what might be going on in the story, the minds of characters, or the filmmaker's intentions? And then once we have a robust criticism in hand, one that can handle as many variations as possible, only then are we fit to read films and reach conclusions about them, however tentative they may be?

Ray: That's a very complex question. And one that I've thought a lot about. I'm extremely interested in pedagogy. I'm extremely interested in pedagogical methods and communication. And the first thing I would say is, I think we would be – how can I put it? – disappointed would be a mild term, *devastated* might be better, to see how little our students remember of what we've said even a month after classes end. So, if we impart to them a general series of abstract theoretical points about the cinema, those are going to be forgotten fairly quickly. One of the things that's interesting from a pedagogical standpoint is that if you choose a concrete example, and the concrete example has *embedded in it* the points you want to teach, they're going to remember that example – but only the example and not necessarily what was said about it or 'the point' of it. Maybe some of the general points that you're trying to impart to them through the example will be retained, but they'll remember that example and they'll know there's something about it, something at stake in it. I'm really interested in that phenomenon. I'm probably as interested in Wittgenstein's teaching method as I am in his philosophy. The method is so eccentric, as you know, with one of his lecture series famously beginning with the remark, 'What we say will be easy, but to know why we say it will be very difficult' (Ambrose 2001). And as far as I can tell his method was to proceed by one concrete example and problem after another, with very few connected links and even fewer, if any, general theoretical summaries of what he's doing. One case study after another, to use today's terminology. And he cared a lot about teaching and seems to have depended on teaching to generate

ideas. A lot of people said he really needed the classroom to properly work out his ideas. William Gass has remarked that it was almost impossible to remember anything Wittgenstein said, and yet it was the single most intense pedagogical experience of his life. It's a performance, thought in action, a real process of discovery with all its accompanying pitfalls. I'm interested in that. I'm also interested in what Kierkegaard called 'indirect communication', which he understands as the inability to change someone's mind or even convince them of something by confronting them head on. You have to tell stories or jokes or something like that to get them to see differently. Claire Carlisle, the writer of a biography on Kierkegaard, claims that indirect communication is common practice in debates on religion. Jesus works in parables whose meanings are not readily apparent. This makes sense for a discourse like religion which is based on faith, but we're not used to that so much in philosophy, and we're probably not used to it in film studies either. Telling stories, making jokes, pointing to things – these are rather strange methods but I think they can be extremely valuable ways of teaching.

Mowchun: It's true that often we don't remember the words of our teachers or the philosophers we read. We may not even remember being convinced by them! Can we know something without remembering it? Perhaps the unremembered knowledge has made our minds and hearts more pliable, more open to new knowledge. Or perhaps it exists in a dormant state, coming back to us when it proves to be useful in some way. Life experiences *can* be had from books and in the classroom. In any case, we may not really want to possess the words at all. What would that get us save for a sack of readymade quotations? The power of an idea is best measured by whether or not it has an effect. How do we know if ideas have, let's say, causal and constructive effects? We don't. And what would count as a meaningful effect 'beyond the words'? That's not for us to say. But if the teacher is *affected* then there's a good chance the students will be as well. You find yourself genuinely perplexed while teaching – it's a struggle, of course – and you let that perplexity affect you so that you have

trouble finding the words or perhaps are at a loss for words, the right words – 'stopped', as Cavell says in conversation with Klevan. Mid-thought silence can be striking if the urge to dance around one's limitations or violate the strict demands of patience with empty talk is finally resisted. Coming from a position of knowledge and authority, we may feel that we're not at liberty not to know, to be silenced in this way. But that really could be what the students will remember most – the problem that gave us pause and compelled us to reject the easy way out. Now isn't that much easier said than done!

Ray: Right. As it happens there are accounts of Wittgenstein just stopping in the middle of a class and there would be – though it's hard to imagine – 2-3 minutes of dead silence. But he was trying to think his way through a problem and not give voice to anything less than the truth. I must admit, I'm neither self-confident enough, or perhaps self-absorbed enough, to do that in front of a class. If I'm stumped for something I'll just simply say, I'm sorry, I don't know. I'll have to think about it. But I can't answer it right now. I suppose I am silencing myself on an impassable question and will move onto something else about which I can speak.

Mowchun: While we're on the subject, it seems to me there aren't very many compelling, edifying, yet unsentimental depictions of teaching in movies. These figures tend to be vapidly inspirational, like Robin Williams' character in *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989), or completely disillusioned with their profession, which can manifest in a speaking voice that is either too authoritative or bereft of conviction, like Jake Gyllenhaal's teacher-character in *Enemy* (Denis Villeneuve, 2013), to take a recent if unusual example that's been on my mind. Of the handful of films on the lives of individual philosophers, few to my knowledge show much consideration for their work in the classroom. Movies generally regard the classroom as a space to escape from, not unlike the stereotypically dehumanizing depictions of office space in movies too numerous to name. It's *outside* the classroom where the real drama of teaching / learning begins, according to these

films. However, I do greatly admire the scenes of Wittgenstein (played by Karl Johnson) teaching in Derek Jarman's eccentric biopic *Wittgenstein* (1993), a film constructed entirely in a studio against black undressed backgrounds. I love all those scenes of him teaching to a small group of reclined, enamored, yet mostly frustrated students. And if you recall, there's a genuine moment of learning – call it an epiphany, without sentiment – that occurs (and this is crucial) *after* one of the classes comes to an end, during that special interval where students can approach or even confront the teacher with questions they weren't able to ask during the class itself. Here a student (played by Ashley Russell), unconvinced by Wittgenstein's argument against the existence of a private language, confesses that he still feels it is possible or natural for him to say, 'I know I am in pain.' So, in a way the class was a failure, because the student is still tempted to say something that Wittgenstein demonstrated makes no logical sense. Wittgenstein's response to the student comes in the form of a rather straightforward example – but just an example for him to think about. He asks the student a question along these lines, 'Why would you want to say that the sun revolves around the earth and not the other way around?' The student hesitantly replies, 'Well, I suppose because it appears that way.' Now here comes the moment of silence we were talking about. Wittgenstein looks deeply into the student's eyes and waits with baited breath for him to make the realisation for himself. He does not intercede by saying, 'It's natural to say the sun revolves around the earth, but that does not make it so. We cannot leave truth in the hands of appearances. That is why we have logic …'. Instead the Wittgenstein character's method is to go back to Copernicus and invite the student to apply an old fallacy (the sun revolves around the earth) to a new one (I know I am in pain). The student is no longer on the defense, his mind has been opened, he's willing to *change* his mind. He says, 'Yes, I see what you mean.' See. And he's smiling joyously in the light of insight and truth, a light he has chosen to face, however blinding it may be (think Plato's parable of the cave). It's the Achilles heel of the human condition to become arrogant when in the know and hostile when questioned or

proven wrong, but the combination of Wittgenstein's gentle, non-didactic method and the student's well-timed humility and openness make this a victorious moment that surely will be remembered, by both student and teacher.
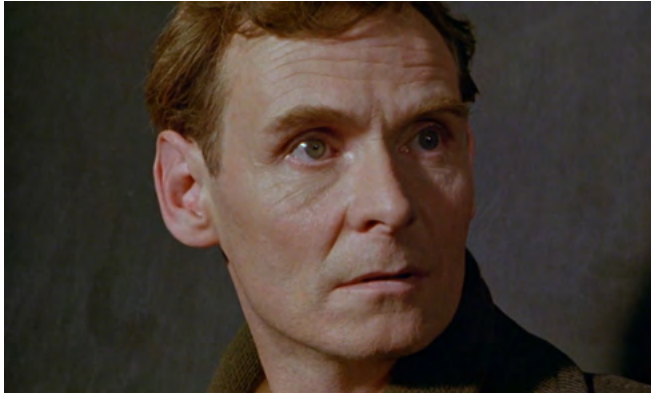
Ray: This is what Wittgenstein calls effecting an aspect change, which for him is always subject to the will. You can be prompted, but in the end you must take it upon yourself. And in fact, he said aspects invariably involve communication with another person. 'Don't you see the duck?' 'This person looks like this other person.' So, a request for comradeship is also involved in aspect change. But I wonder if higher education in general is going in a different direction where

such things are being devalued. I don't think we've quite fully digested how much the economic / business model and its vocabulary colour everything universities now do. Simply by talking about how college education is a good investment, for example, we've immediately deployed the economic model, as if that's the only reason you should go to college, because it's an investment and it will pay off professionally and financially. Part of that economic model is the measurement of outcomes. The economists want to measure whether this is a productive enterprise, whether it's an efficient enterprise. And so, we have these silly student learning-outcome models that we have to figure out. But the humanities are marked by curiosity, digression, and a sense of delay. So much of a humanities education and the way it affects us will only show later on, after the classes are long over or even years later, when you've had the time to contemplate how it has affected you. My colleague, Greg Ulmer, now retired, once said that the humanities proceed on a sort of time-bomb theory: you know, there's a bomb here, but you don't know when it will go off until 10 years after you graduate. Oh, so that's what that was all about! In reality, the 'I see' moment experienced by the Wittgenstein student happens much later, and probably more gradually than this bomb metaphor suggests. In this sense the humanities is a tough sell. It's not like science where you can measure the outcome more readily. You absolutely must know x, y, and z about physics in order to proceed to the next stage. For us, we are not even sure what we need our students to know. And if we think we know, we all disagree about it.

Mowchun: My feeling about this is that as soon as we find ourselves in this corporate environment where we have to justify what we do by quantifying and monetising the value of humanities work, we have altogether lost what is uniquely valuable about the humanities. We lose what most people, not just scholars, I think, regard as the value of life beyond mere survival, success, or conventional paradigms of progress. In the classroom we may feel that the audience of students is looking for some concrete results, which we could actually give them by saying, 'the point of x is y' or 'this particular

detail in x amounts to y', etc. But in making this assumption do you think we might be completely mistaken in underestimating what our students actually value? Is it better to assume, whether we are right about it or not, that students who sign up for a film or literature course are doing so precisely because they are looking for values and experiences outside of or opposed to the university's corporate model, that they are actually seeking out classroom environments that serve as reprieves from the corporate capitalist culture that seems to have infiltrated the university, not to mention everyday life in so many parts of the world?

Ray: Yes, I think that's certainly true of some students. I also think some students don't know why they're there.

Mowchun: Which could be a good thing …

Ray: What better way is there to be surprised and enlivened by perplexity than not knowing the subject and not knowing yourself, at least not fully. It may also be the key to the power of movies. Too much knowledge about film – call it film studies – can have both positive and negative effects.

Mowchun: Do you think the field has done more harm than good in that respect?

Ray: Not exactly, although this question has started to get asked about MFA creative writing programs. A recent book analysed what they called 'program writing' for its effects on fiction and poetry. The Coen Brothers, whose movies I don't care for, seem an extreme example of the film school aesthetic – sophisticated irony about genre conventions. But I think film history has seen at least three more significant influences on moviemaking than film schools. The first, of course, involves the emergence of sound which, as Pauline Kael observed in her book on *Citizen Kane* (1996), brought the movies back down to earth, away from the pseudo-poetic melodramas of the worst of silent cinema. The second was the Hollywood studio system whose structure and stable of contract players

and technicians enabled the production of a huge volume of work. If you're making 50 feature films a year, as MGM was in the 1930s and early 40s, you can afford to experiment because your hits will cover your flops. The studios had embraced Taylorism as a production model. Remember when Universal opened the first Hollywood studio they didn't get a show-business figure to cut the ribbon, they got Henry Ford. That was their ideal. Another enterprise that did the same thing was Motown, the recording studio in Detroit whose founder Barry Gordy had worked in the automobile factories. If you have the singers and the studio musicians and the songwriters and the producers all under contract, and if you maintain a strict division of labor (at the outset, only Smokey Robinson performed his own songs), you can make a lot of hit records. Of course, the studio musicians don't participate in the royalties, and the would-be songwriter / artists get frustrated, but as soon as Motown relaxed that division-of-labor rule things went downhill. The third biggest change is the one we're now living through. It is partially demographic, mostly technological. With the rise in digital streaming services and the retreat from theatrical exhibition, American film production has increasingly concentrated on super-hero comic-book movies, reliant on CGI, to appeal to the remaining part of the audience, young people who still go to the theaters (though this is changing too). The best thing written about the effect of CGI and other digital tools on the movies is Dai Vaughan's little essay, 'From Today, Cinema is Dead' (collected in his book, *For Documentary*). There Vaughan says, and I will quote him at length:

'Let me make it clear that I am not concerned here with mendacity. I am not concerned with the possibility that people may be misled by a doctored picture. What concerns me is that we shall wake up one day and find that the assumption of a privileged relation between a photograph and its object, an assumption which has held good for 150 years and on which ciné-actuality is founded, will have ceased to be operative. And when that happens, it will not be because some thesis has been refuted but because the accumulation of countervailing experiences—of the simulation of the photographic idiom, of the electronic recombination of photographic elements,

of 'photographic' processes where intervention between the registration and reproduction of the image is not only easy but inescapable—have rendered null that 'trust' for which the idiom has simply been our warranty. And once we have lost it, we shall never get it back' (1999: 188-9).

So, the more we move towards the digital, the more we regress to making cinema a kind of writing rather than a break from writing. Because what digitisation is frequently used to do is to control or eliminate improvisational errors. My wife (who's a professional violist) and I were talking about this last night. Take something like auto tune, which corrects micro pitch adjustments to make the singer hit the note in the center all the time. According to her, that's not the way genuine musicians work. There's such a thing as expressive tonality. Sinatra is famous for it. Sinatra has micro pitches as he's singing, and he's not always in the center of the note. He's around the note rather than dead center all the time. So, it's remarkably expressive and moving. And it's the same way for string players: they are not just hitting the dead center of the note every time as auto tune would have you do, rather you're moving around the note. I think the same is true for acting: if you use digital actors, you just don't have real people. They will have a kind of rote, perfect behavior, whereas a live actor may have an idiosyncratic kind of behavior that's not quite what the director had in mind but is pleasantly surprising to the director. To me, that's even more important than the ubiquitous conversion to comic-book movies. But I wonder: has the spirit of digitisation been constant throughout the history of film? I think from the start either filmmakers themselves but mostly people thinking about film were trying to make film a kind of writing again, because writing is fully controllable. When we were talking about surprise earlier, a painter can't really be surprised by something. There's the old story of people making period films, and all of a sudden an oil derrick appears in the background or something like that. And they have to retake it. But you can't imagine a painter doing a crucifixion scene, saying, how did that oil derrick get here? So, the painter is much less likely to be surprised by his own work unless he's working in some kind of surrealist way. And a writer is in the same situation too. We know that the surrealist

exercises like free associative writing, automatic writing, and so on, were designed, as Breton said, to be like a snapshot of thought. But now we've reversed it. And film keeps being dragged back into a kind of writing because it's so controllable. After all, that's what's so appealing about film – it animates things. Someone can just sit at an animation table or use digital equipment and produce something that's no different than writing. I have very little interest in animation for this reason. I like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Walt Disney, 1937) as much as the next person, but what I'm really interested in is how film differs from writing.

Mowchun: It's true that most moving images today are being heavily manipulated and controlled on computers in some way. As a result, you have so many films where a formulaic look has been grafted onto each shot, crushing the contingencies of the world into a colourized uniformity that is mistaken for mood. At least this is the case for the post-production side of digital filmmaking. On the production side, however, digital cameras are smaller, lighter, cheaper, and more efficacious than they've ever been. You can turn on a digital camera and see an image right away, the world is there on a dime, as it were, whereas on celluloid you have to know how to light and expose it – the world is not necessarily ready-to-hand. You actually have to exert some cinematographic control in order to get a good exposure, and then it has to go to the lab for processing before you can see it the next day. Digital is strange in this regard: first the world pours in and then, in post-production, it's shut out or, to use your term, overwritten.

Ray: Has this been your experience as a filmmaker who has worked with both film and digital?

Mowchun: My first feature film, *World to Come* (co-directed with Daniel Eskin, 2015), was shot on film and was even colour-timed on film, but for various reasons the project was finished digitally. I definitely felt the ontological shift from one medium to the other (though I never used that term with any of my collaborators!). During the shoot (and I did most of the camera operating myself) I was hyperaware of the heft

of the camera and especially the vibration of the film running through the gate, hence of the finitude and fragility of film stock. Planning a shot under conditions of celluloid is like getting dressed up for a special occasion, for once the take begins and the film starts to roll I think everyone involved feels a certain invigorating pressure, a silent respect for the medium. It's hard to describe. The shot is being recorded, etched, onto something physical. It's not permanent but it will likely outlive its makers. The shot is also being recreated to serve as a potentially invaluable piece in a larger whole, the film, whose 'greatness' beyond a mere sum of parts depends on what is accomplished in a given part, rather than on how these parts are made to fit or flow in editing. Even though the part ultimately serves the whole, when you're shooting on film the feeling, for me, is that the part is also its own whole, and if it's not alive at the moment of shooting then you know ahead of time to cut it out. Now with digital cameras being the way they are, including the cell phone as camera, almost anyone at any time is in possession of a movie camera, and they can just turn it on and start filming, spontaneously and without thinking. In principle, this is a perfect set-up for being surprised by the world. But *who* is being surprised? I would say generally it's the filmmaker and not the viewer, or at best a niche group of viewers. The average viewer, so to speak, may be indifferent to what, for the filmmaker, is a personal novelty or obsession. Viewers today are also oversaturated with the sheer volume of moving images and their instantaneous accessibility. Did you ever think you'd see the day when you could watch the films of, say, Andrei Tarkovsky or Stan Brakhage at the click of a button? Or the day when the Criterion Collection, which began by distributing their home viewing releases on laserdisc and charging top dollar for their rare DVDs, would start their own streaming channel with access to what feels like their entire library, arranged as immaterial tiles of information on a screen, for a relatively small monthly fee? I don't mean to complain about such a cinematic paradise, but I do want to register the fact that as quantities increase so dramatically, certain qualities like *attention* can slide into decay, especially in the realm of arts and culture. I associate quantity with

'information' and quality with 'art'. It's as if the film as artwork has lost its gilded frame and is walking casually, almost anonymously, in the streets as part of a dense crowd crudely referred to today as 'content'.

Ray: I've written about this before, but the quick way to say it is that to a certain extent cinephilia is a function of scarcity. The more obscure or difficult it is to find something the more it is likely to be valued, and often for the wrong reasons. I can remember when I first got interested in movies. I was at Harvard Business School, of all places. And this is just before the advent of videotape and DVDs. But Harvard, and Boston at large, was a fantastic place to start seeing movies. Near Harvard was the Harvard Square Theater, the Brattle Theater, and the Orson Welles Cinema, all of which were repertory houses. Then each of the Harvard houses had its own Film Society, and they would show one movie on Friday and another on Saturday night. And you know, they each cost 50 cents or something like that. You could see a lot of amazing stuff. But I can remember, when I first started attending, a Marx Brothers movie that was the most difficult to see was *Animal Crackers* (Victor Heerman, 1930). For some reason there were just no prints of it circulating. They would have other revivals of Marx Brothers movies, but not that one. And all of a sudden it showed up at Tufts. I remember making my way to some student union or something at Tufts to see it. The result is I probably greatly overvalued the movie when I saw it, given how difficult it had been to see. But when everything's available all the time, you may put off forever watching Rossellini's *The Rise of Louis XIV* (1966). Because it's there, and you can see it whenever you wish, you may say to yourself, 'I don't need to see it today.' Whereas if it were obscure and only came around once every 10 years, you would probably drop everything and go see it, devoted cinephile that you are.

Mowchun: I wonder if we are less likely to watch the Rossellini film in full than to catch a glimpse of it somewhere in the digital ether, perhaps recontextualised or reappropriated beyond

recognition. Today, a clip from a film can stand in for the whole film, and these clips can be woven together with clips from, say, other Rossellini films that may reveal a pattern of aesthetic or thematic development. Movies can be contextualised or recontextualised within a much bigger picture, the great epic movie that is the internet, and the specific details of the whole are glossed over or forfeited because there isn't the same time and attention for them. It's like being satisfied with a trailer, whereas the point of a trailer, of course, is to tempt you into watching the *entire* film. We must commit (in the sense of monogamy) to watching an entire film these days.

Ray: It's interesting. Alain Bergala, whom I mentioned before, has a chapter called 'Toward a Pedagogy of Fragments'. One of his first experiences with the cinema was through a TV show in Paris that simply showed little clips of things, one after another, without any explanation, without any discussion – here's a fragment of this movie, here's another, and he said it was surprisingly compelling and interesting. Connecting this back to pedagogy, he said one of the ways you can awaken student interest in film is by showing them a film fragment, a fragment here, a fragment there, and say 'look at this!' So that's not necessarily a bad thing. It can be a good thing. While I'm still very partial to the grain of the camera working with film as opposed to digital, it's the digital medium that better allows us to teach by pointing and recalling film fragments that carry some special meaning for us.

Mowchun: If mediums have corresponding moods, celluloid could be called contemplative while digital is more casual in its means. Both have redeemable qualities and, more importantly, both 'moods' can be activated aesthetically, with or against the specific cinematic substrate that is being used. And this brings me to the rich work you do in *The Structure of Complex Images* with Abbas Kiarostami's contribution to the omnibus film *Tickets*. Am I justified in describing his section as both contemplative *and* casual, drawing on possibilities inherent in both mediums? Like much of Kiarostami's work,

on a first viewing the film can appear haphazard and we may not give it a second thought. But it beckons, doesn't it? The question is *how*, when it so lacks the seriousness of conventional arthouse cinema while at the same time preventing us from having a routine, predictable experience at the movies.

Ray: Seemingly haphazard, dashed off, just for fun … But no, no, not at all.

Mowchun: It's one of Kiarostami's signature tricks as a filmmaker to downplay dramatic importance, negate aesthetic pretense, only for the film to creep up on you in its own peculiar and often revelatory way. And upon rewatching this simple story constructed through a series of contingent encounters on a train, I thought I detected what may be a parable on the digital medium itself – a digital consciousness even – as a systematic thwarting of the poetry and perplexity of a life unmediated by technology. Do you know what I mean?

Ray: Maybe.

Mowchun: It emerges in the longer conversation scene between Filippo (Filippo Trajano) and the young girl (Marta Mangiucco) he meets on the train, whose name I can't recall …

Ray: We don't ever learn her name.

Mowchun: Okay, another interesting fact that I think is relevant to her character. At first we see her listening to music on a portable player while riding on the train. As many travellers know, the experience of listening to music on a moving vehicle has the power to synchronise the music with the landscape scrolling through the window, making for one of life's many special sensorial concoctions – but it occurred to me that she may not be savoring this experience as someone whose default consciousness is, in a way, already conditioned by technology. She lives a 'plugged in' existence, as it were, until Filippo interrupts her virtual solitude, forcing her to remove her earbuds and engage with another person face-to-face. In this sense it is fitting that she remains nameless, for she seems to be only half-present. The ensuing

conversation between the two characters bears all the freshness and urgency of birds debating life on a branch. Through Filippo's inquisitiveness she recalls that they actually met before, during a game of hide-and-seek outdoors where she chose a tunnel for a hiding place. She is a young teenager now from the looks of it, reminiscing about her childhood, her age of innocence, while appearing at the same time not to have lost this innocence. We gather from her story that she remained hidden away alone in that tunnel for far longer than expected; she emerged from it all wet and fuming at having been excluded from the game by Filippo, who, it turns out, was playing a very different 'game.' She then confesses that only later, upon growing up and awakening, did she actually understand what Filippo and his lover were doing there. She had known nothing – or nothing of what she now knows – about the sexual exploits of the adult world. So for her, this experience became quite a pivotal moment of change. At

the time she was merely annoyed, but in retrospect, having thought about it more, she turned this memory into what we call an *experience* and kept it with her as she set forth along the path of adulthood. Then Filippo asks her, 'What would you do now?' She is taken aback, thinks about it, and responds with a hint of melancholy, 'We don't play there anymore.' 'You don't?' 'No, we just text and we watch the internet.' Kiarostami may be suggesting here that the digital world has severely limited the scope of play and passion in today's youth culture. We don't play hide-and-seek anymore, and who would dare venture deep inside a dark dank tunnel, for all our discoveries, such as they are, lie before us on a sheltered screen as a never-ending stream of options, effects, and (for the most part) instant gratification. It makes me wonder what the chances are that a child or teenager today will have an experience like the one she describes? What will the memories of the future be like? …

Ray: Hiding in that tunnel and getting wet and finding oneself thrown into one's solitude while waiting to be found – it's all relayed through casual conversation on a train and yet you can picture it so vividly. It turns out trains and tunnels are connected. This is Kiarostami's autobiographical memory, by the way. He was hiding like that. And he didn't realise these people were trying to get rid of the kids in playing this game. It was his memory that he gave to this young girl and in doing so he gives her an inner life.

Mowchun: Interesting. There is absolutely nothing autobiographical about the film per se – nothing sentimental, nothing self-reflexive – and yet it uses autobiography as raw material for building a character that one would never imagine to be a surrogate for the author.

Ray: Yes, it does in that moment. Other moments are different. The film is like a succession of moments.

Mowchun: And there seems to be no desire to tie them all together. They don't need to be tied together. In fact, this looseness is vital to the film's versatility and spontaneity so as to better shift its emotional weight, to pivot in new directions.

It is what allows for this feeling of melancholy over the loss of childhood innocence and predigital adventurousness to pervade briefly in an otherwise lighthearted and playful film.

Ray: The moment becomes melancholic, I see, but another moment soon comes – the film shifts its weight again, as you say, and you can't stop the train, as it were. Nothing is more cinematic than a train.

Mowchun: (laughs) The train flows like the creative process itself in dialogue with a world of others, rather than like a river whose flow is more constant and introspective, let's say. To be honest I don't fully grasp the logic (that's probably the wrong word) of the film's creative process, the passage it takes through / on the train of life. It all begins with a large well-dressed woman on her way to attend the wake of her husband. She is accompanied by Filippo, a man half her age. We don't know the nature of their relationship; this unfolds gradually in time but is never really confirmed. Rather than answer these narrative questions, the film shifts its focus from the woman to Filippo. Kiarostami changes his mind, becomes interested in something else. Someone else. Filippo. He's the main protagonist – or is he? We are curious about Filippo, too. Someone else is curious about him – the young girl we were just speaking about. Through Filippo she remembers the tunnel, the game, childhood, and her first vague glimpse of sexual awakening. And this is actually Kiarostami's memory, as you point out. What narrative versatility, controlled improvisation, life as poetry! (Kiarostami was a true lover of poetry, especially Persian poetry.) You discover the film's liveliness near the end of your book. Did these qualities strike you immediately upon seeing it?

Ray: It took me time. The first time I saw it I was just charmed by it, and I was interested in it. It took me awhile to figure out why because nothing much seems to be happening, and yet, I'm interested in it. It's strange. It's maybe one of the hardest things to do in art: to create the effect of off-handedness or improvisation. Like an organic piece of music, it feels totally off-hand and improvised and yet, it's not. It's all worked out meticulously – it has to be to get it that way. That's really the hardest thing to achieve. For instance, I'm not at all interested in Cassavetes because the improvisation has not been sufficiently worked out. Cassavetes has not accepted or internalised this paradox and therefore I'm bored by it. You don't want life in art but the *effect* of life in art. Kiarostami, somehow, creates that effect – you have pointed out some features of it, but no one actually knows *how* he did it – and I'm enchanted by it.

Mowchun: It's as serious an enterprise as it is an amusing one for Kiarostami, I think. He pours his soul into it, while laughing. He's playing a game, very seriously playing, blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction, life and art, the most beautiful and dangerous game, perhaps. In fact, this is something he has always done, and by the time he makes his piece for *Tickets,* he has mastered it.

Ray: Those boundaries were always being blurred. Well, it's the movies. That's the way the movies work. I'm very taken by something Irving Thalberg once said: 'In the future, the movies will be the best record of how we once lived.' In other words, just the documentary evidence of how people dressed, talked, what slang they used, how they checked into a hotel or got out of a car. All of those things are just there. To give you a concrete example: after Jean Harlow's husband, Paul Bern, had either killed himself or been murdered (when Harlow was not at home), she took only two days off from work before returning to making *Red Dust* (Victor Fleming, 1932) at MGM. If you want to see documentary evidence of what she looked like just after her husband's shocking death, I can point you to a scene in the film where she comes down the stairs to greet Clark Gable – deliberately filmed from a distance, in soft focus to obscure slightly her face, swollen from crying and exhaustion. That shot is documentary evidence in a fictional movie. And it's always been like that – watching fiction while witnessing fact. We should keep reminding ourselves of this mystery of the movies, and of the need to find ways of talking about it without losing its magic.

Trevor Mowchun

Trevor Mowchun is Assistant Professor and Director of Film and Media Studies at the University of Florida. He is the author of *Metaphysics and the Moving Image*, and his scholarly essays and criticism have appeared in *Film International, New Review of Film and Television Studies, Cineaction, Evental Aesthetics,* and *Senses of Cinema*. He also co-wrote and directed *World to Come*, an experimental drama on the spiritual disenchantment that plagues a religious community in the wake of tragedy.

Robert B. Ray

Robert B. Ray is the author of *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980, The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy, How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies, The ABCs of Classic Hollywood, The Structure of Complex Images*, and (with Christian Keathley) the forthcoming BFI Classic Films Guide to *All the President's Men*. He was also a member of the band *The Vulgar Boatmen*. He is Professor of English at the University of Florida.

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MOVIE
A JOURNAL OF FILM CRITICISM

CREDITS: Issue 10

This issue coordinated by Lucy Fife Donaldson and Lisa Purse

Designed by Adam Powell, with Kate Stolyarova
https://www.linkedin.com/in/adam-powell-021a13227

Production team
Lucy Fife Donaldson
John Gibbs
James MacDowell
Adam Powell
Lisa Purse

With thanks to the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication and James Lloyd at the University of Reading.

Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism is a joint venture between the Universities of Warwick, Reading, and Oxford.

Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism, is the successor to *Movie*, the print journal that was edited, designed and published by the late Ian A. Cameron from 1962 to 2000. All rights in the original *Movie* are the property of Cameron & Hollis. Please see cameronandhollis.uk for more information and for details of back issue availability.

Editors

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University of Bristol

Andrew Klevan
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Lucy Fife Donaldson
University of St. Andrews

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Edward Gallafent
University of Warwick

Lisa Purse
University of Reading

John Gibbs
University of Reading

Douglas Pye
University of Reading

Kathrina Glitre
University of the West of England