

ARTICLES

In Search of a Film's Character

One might imagine that characterising films would be common and even necessary in film studies. However, with some exceptions in the field of film criticism, including within this journal (even if they were not labelled or offered as 'characterising'), we find it to be mostly absent or incidental to the discipline, and rarely an end in itself. Although many of the supervening perspectives and concerns in film studies – the formal, the narratological, the ideological, the cultural, the historical, the theoretical, the philosophical, the thematic, or even, simply, the presiding topic – illuminate films, and sometimes discern aspects of their character, the focus is principally elsewhere. Relatedly, our core activities in the discipline – analysis (of say a structure or the composition of an image), interpretation (of meaning), application (of an argument, a theory, or some topic or subject matter), evaluation (of a feature's worth), contextualisation (in terms of a genre, period, country, or culture), or simply explanation and information (about some matter arising) – are mostly too directed to manage the task, seeing a film through a design, an argument, a theme, a theory, or a culture. Characterisation requires more flexibility, an agile calling upon, and moving between, different concerns and methods, as required. And crucially with the priority of serving the illumination of a film's character.

This differs from, for example, standard approaches to film interpretation – thematic, theoretical, philosophical, cultural, or otherwise. While these tell us what a film might mean or what it is about, and this will bear on its character, they will not necessarily give a sense of its attributes, personality, attitude, behaviour, complexion, bearing, disposition, or temper. Our proposal is that characterising a film may be a valuable addition to the worthwhile activities of film study, disclosing important aspects of a film's nature and being.

Although characterising is rarely prioritised in film studies, it tends to be afforded more centrality in film reviewing. Here is a sample of how a range of film reviews, cited on the streaming site MUBI, characterise *Fallen Leaves* (Aki Kaurismäki, 2023): 'deadpan'; 'impassive'; 'slender'; 'slight'; 'bittersweet'; 'cool'; 'measured'; 'poignant'; 'amused'; 'absurdly laconic'; 'succinct perfection'; 'epically unfussy'; 'plainspoken melancholy'; 'formal sturdiness'; 'tenderly coaxes [the characters together]'; 'inflected with sadness'; 'not judgy; just jaded [at the limitations of men and alcohol]'; 'droll precision of Samuel Beckett'; 'modest and achingly sincere'; 'a quiet but persevering playfulness'; 'bone-dry yet filled with yearning'; 'endowed with the spirit of a fable'; 'unsentimental packaging and martini-dry wit'; 'crisp autumn breeze of a movie'; 'somehow suffuses every frame with feeling even if [the story] is so pared-back it is almost unfeeling'; 'the particular blend of formal rigour, narrative straightforwardness, and nimble playfulness'; '[not] complicated or dense, but deeply alert to sensory pleasures... which is what elevates it above the miserabilism latent in its scenario'; and 'There is no fluffy dreaminess here... [its] aesthetic realms are harsh and hardscrabble, gritty to the point where the textures are almost tangible. That solidity enhances the realism, imbues it with an incontrovertible quality that is also the source of its sobering beauty'.¹ Offering well-chosen adjectives is an important part of characterising ('deadpan', 'impassive'), but it also takes the form of explaining ('That solidity enhances the realism, imbues it with an incontrovertible quality which...'), framing a tension, an antithesis, or an apparent contradiction ('bone-dry yet filled with yearning'), calling on the character of other works or artists to compare or contrast ('droll precision of Samuel Beckett'), and positioning, seeking to distinguish what the film is from what

it is not ('not judgy; just jaded') or from what it might have been ('There is no fluffy dreaminess here... [its] aesthetic realms are harsh and hardscrabble').

We consider all these assessments of the character of *Fallen Leaves* helpfully apposite and taken together they provide a faithful and vivid impression of the film. That is no small achievement. Our experience has been that film studies can often be condescending towards, and dismissive of, film reviewing. Yet, in their need to portray a film succinctly in distilled formats to the non-specialist reader, film reviews can offer crisply insightful characterisations, and they can be efficiently thought-provoking.² However, there are limitations. Longer format criticism has the space for more thorough investigation: it can justify and support with more evidence; it can tease out the different relationships between characteristics, test the validity of widely accepted ones, or adjudicate between closely adjacent possibilities ('crisp' or 'brittle?'; 'delicate' or 'fragile?'); it can move away from a holistic encapsulation of the film to characterise particular moments, scenes, sequences, or patterns across a film, and offer a more complex and varied profile; it can examine the contribution of broader categories, genres, conventions, and traditions; it can draw on and engage with commentaries and scholarship from within the academy and elsewhere; and it can demonstrate more systematically through analysis how form and style may create, adjust, and transform the character of part and whole.

Another way of thinking of a film's characteristics is in terms of qualities where a quality would be, as our dictionary describes it, 'a distinguishing characteristic, property, or attribute; the basic character or nature of something; a trait or feature of personality' (Collins, 2000). Not *all* characterising is equivalent to, or best described as, identifying qualities – for example weighing up the relative importance of generic components or positioning in relation to other works to signify difference – but it is an important aspect of it. Our interest in ascribing characteristics partly stems from the work on 'aesthetic qualities' in the philosophy of criticism. Frank Sibley is the most cited and respected philosopher in this area, and he provided what is a list of examples of qualities which may be possessed by an artwork which included: unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, sombre, dynamic, vivid, delicate,

trite, or sentimental (2006 [1962]:1). Most of these are evaluative qualities, which was Sibley's main interest, or as he called them 'aesthetic concepts'. Evaluative qualities can also bring out a moral dimension, for example, sincere, serious, or mature (or insincere, trivial, or immature).³ And characterising an artwork can often be like characterising a person especially when the ascriptions relate to its personality or attitude. Although ascribing evaluative qualities are an important part of characterising, we are also interested in a wider category which would include non-evaluative qualities. (Of all the adjectives in Sibley's original list, 'sombre' would be the closest to a non-evaluative quality.)⁴

Qualities appear to be properties that are present in the work and, indeed, in the philosophical literature, another name for aesthetic qualities or aesthetic concepts is 'aesthetic properties'. Paradoxically, this draws attention to the fact that qualities are not obvious properties. Qualities cannot be straightforwardly and objectively pointed out in the way, in normal circumstances, a location can be pointed out, or an editing scheme, or a camera movement, or a composition, or a plot trajectory, or a physical body, or a sound, or a colour. This lack of concreteness may be the reason why we have been wary of emphasising them in our accounts of films. Indeed, for several aesthetic philosophers, for example, Mikel Dufrenne, Roman Ingarden, and Roger Scruton qualities are 'emergent', potentialities whose actuality is not predetermined and which are revealed and 'concretised' in the process of perception (Mitias 1988: 28; Chojna 2005: 225). According to Kendall Walton, qualities also depend on categories, genres, conventions, and traditions outside the work, and some qualities will only be perceived when the work is considered within these broader areas (2008 [1970]).⁵ At the same time, despite their indefinite status, Arnold Isenberg believed that qualities could declare themselves with the same immediacy as, for example, colours or physical configurations (1973: 36–52). A film may be original or derivative, supple or clunky, lucid or muddled, and any one of these characteristics may be experienced as more prominent or powerful than objects, places, figures, and dramatic action on the screen. (Isenberg discussed 'pretentiousness' in this regard [172–83].) Isenberg's understanding of the experience of qualities does not contradict the idea that

they may be emergent because although properties may not always present themselves immediately, when they do present themselves, they can do so with immediacy. Someone might not initially see a film as novel or banal, but should they come to see it this way the novelty or the banality could be as striking to them as more concrete features.⁶

The realm of character and quality overlaps with other aspects of filmic demeanour that, while not quite becoming prominent concerns, have been recognised in film studies, for example, tone (Pye 2014) and mood (Sinnerbrink 2012).⁷ Pye's work is particularly interested in tone as the attitude a film exhibits to its material and its audience, through its point of view structures, but tone can be more inclusively qualitative depending on how liberally one is defining it. Nevertheless, not every characteristic or quality is usefully described as tonal. Returning to our earlier list of adjectives used to characterise *Fallen Leaves*, some terms on the list – for instance

'slender' – are not designators of tone. And in addition to tone, we may wish to characterise other aspects of films such as performers/characters, compositions, narrative, or generic features. In his article advocating attention to a film's mood, a dimension he finds neglected in 'intellectualist or rationalist approaches to film narrative' (2012: 62), Robert Sinnerbrink describes, across various sequences, *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1920) as having a 'hypnotic' atmosphere, *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) as having a 'delicate' and 'melancholy' mood (157), and *Talk to Her* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002) as offering 'romantic nostalgia' modulating into a 'darker' mood registering the 'pathos of loss' (160). However, although mood is part of a film's character, taken alone, as with tone, it is too circumscribing. A film may have a sombre or sullen mood, and this may be reflected in a dull colouration, where 'dull' characterises the film's colour palette but not its mood (and indeed 'dull', unlike 'sombre' or 'sullen', is not normally a description



of mood). This is no criticism of the work in these areas as it did not intend to be more expansive, yet because it operates in similar or overlapping territory, tone and mood may be received or understood to be more thoroughly characterising than they are.

Perhaps the most interesting overlap, given the amount of attention it has received, is with 'affect'. The word affect has been used variously and capaciously, but affects tend to refer to emotions, feelings, energies, or intensities. Many important characteristics are of that type, but some are not, or not best understood in that way, for example, those related to values, such as 'sentimental' or 'muddled', or those related to genres or categories such as 'naturalistic' or 'surrealistic', or those related to a work's constitution such as 'delicate' or 'brittle'. Furthermore, one aspect of the affective turn in film studies, via phenomenology, has been an interest not only in the affects of the film, but in the way the viewer is affected by the film. However, this distinction may become unhelpfully blurred and it can be useful not to collapse feelings exhibited by the film with those felt by the viewer. A film may be sad or cheerful, or express sad and cheerful things, but we have long known it is fallacious to believe that a viewer will be similarly emotionally affected (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1949). In addition, many characteristics of a film, for example 'delicate', unlike 'sad' and 'cheerful', do not correspond to an equivalent emotional response (even though they may be affective in a range of unpredictable ways). Our suggested approach encourages us to make claims about the character of the film, which may be disputed, rather than presuming any kind of response, or indeed the character of any viewer. Moreover, we think the process of characterising should try, as far as possible, to avoid claims such as 'powerful', 'stirring', or 'inspiring' which appear like descriptions of the object but are in fact reports about the feelings of the subject.⁸

In this issue of *Movie*, we present two essays which are devoted to characterising, and addressing it as a practice. Andrew Klevan offers, partly self-consciously for methodological purposes, a qualitative portrayal of the film *Rabid* (David Cronenberg, 1977). Alex Clayton, in his essay, takes *L'Atalante* (Jean Vigo, 1934), a film that has received an array of characterisations and is most commonly associated with

'poetic realism' (itself a term that conjoins two characterisations). The essay uses the example of *L'Atalante* to explore and unpack four prospective attributions, demonstrating a method of specification that weighs adjacent and related terms in order to obtain a more precise and faithful characterisation. This introduction represents our early thinking around the matter of characterising films, and we hope to refine this thinking in future work to better understand and distinguish the enterprise.

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- ¹ The array of reviews is available here: <https://mubi.com/en/films/fallen-leaves-2023/critics-reviews>. Accessed 26.06.25
- ² Interestingly, although film studies is normally keen to distinguish itself from the film reviewing mode, it can sometimes slip into a pale imitation. Brief characterising terms are offered which are associated with the type and provenance of the work (genre, author, studio, mode), for example, 'uncanny', 'comical', 'noirish', 'quirky', 'gritty', 'sentimental', 'grotesque', and 'moving'. These are often received characterisations, offered typically as uncontentious designations of material rather than ventured and developed (or cited) as claims.
- ³ Michael Bell claims that this was an important feature of F.R. Leavis's literary criticism: 'Leavis's best criticism lies in the penetration and accuracy with which he defines moral or emotional quality in the work' (1988: 71).
- ⁴ Alan Goldman (1998) has devised potentially helpful sub-categories what he calls qualities (which we are thinking of as 'characterising terms') and his list gives a sense of range and type:
Broad evaluative qualities: 'beautiful, ugly, sublime, dreary'.
Formal qualities: 'balanced, graceful, concise, loosely woven'.
Emotion qualities: 'sad, angry, joyful, serene'
[...]
Behavioural qualities: 'sluggish, bouncy, jaunty'.
Representational qualities: 'realistic, distorted, true to life'.
Second order perceptual qualities: 'vivid, dull, muted, steely, mellow (said of colours or tones)'.
Historically related qualities: 'derivative, original, daring, bold, conservative' (17).
- ⁵ A striking example of qualities generated from a context outside the work is offered in the essay on *Rabid* in this issue.
- ⁶ Some of the material in this paragraph and the previous one repeats, with slightly different emphasis, Klevan on 'Aesthetic Qualities' (2018: 52–53).
- ⁷ Another overlap we would like to acknowledge is Lucy Fife Donaldson's work on texture in film (2014).
- ⁸ We recognise that such distinctions are not always cut and dried. And one might want to characterise a film as, say, 'eager to be inspiring'.