

## The Unattainable Text

Raymond Bellour

That the film is a text, in the sense in which Barthes uses the word, is obvious enough. That as such it might, or should, receive the same kind of attention as has been devoted to the literary text is also obvious. But already not quite so obvious. We shall soon see why.

The text of the film is indeed an unattainable text. In saying this, despite the temptation of a play on words, I do not mean to evoke the special difficulties which very often make it impossible to obtain the film in the material sense or the proper conditions to constitute it into a text, ie the editing table or the projector with freeze-frame facility. These difficulties are still enormous: they are very often discouraging, and go a long way to explaining the comparative backwardness of film studies. However, one can imagine, if still only hypothetically, that one day, at the price of a few changes, the film will find something that is hard to express, a status analogous to that of the book or rather that of the gramophone record with respect to the concert. If film studies are still done then, they will undoubtedly be more numerous, more imaginative, more accurate and above all more enjoyable than the ones we carry out in fear and trembling, threatened continually with dispossession of the object. And yet, curious as it might seem, the situation of the film analyst, even when he does possess the film, any film, will not change in every particular.

I shall not linger over the indisputable fact that one does not have the text, the 'methodological field', the 'production', the 'traversal', as Barthes puts it, when one has the work, the 'fragment of substance'.<sup>1</sup> But without going into the theoretical labyrinths opened up by the notion of the text, I shall stress two

---

1. 'De l'œuvre au texte,' *Revue d'Esthétique* n 3, 1971. The quotations that follow are taken from this same article.

20 things. On the one hand the material possession of the work alone permits one full access to the textual fiction, since it alone allows one a full experience of the multiplicity of operations carried out in the work and makes it precisely into a text. On the other, as soon as one studies a work, quotes a fragment of it, one has implicitly taken up a textual perspective, even if feebly and one-dimensionally, even if in a restrictive and regressive fashion, even if one continues to close the text back onto itself although it is, as Barthes has insisted, and before him, Blanchot, the locus of an unbounded openness. That is why it is possible, in a slide which is both justified and somewhat abusive, like all slides, to speak of quoting the text when by text one means work, even if at a later stage one may be driven, as Barthes has been, to think the literary experience from the starting-point of an opposition between the work and the text. In connection with these terms, but without evading them, I should just like to emphasise here an elementary fatality: the text of the film is unattainable because it is an unquotable text. To this extent, and to this extent only, the word text as applied to film is metaphorical; it clearly pin-points the paradox which inflicts the filmic text and to such a degree only the filmic text.

When one chooses to read, to study a work, to recognise in it the pressure of the text, so close in a sense to what Blanchot has conceptualised as literature, nothing is more immediate, simpler than to quote a word, a phrase, a few lines, a sentence, a page. Omit the quotation marks that signal it and the quotation is invisible, it is quite naturally absorbed into the page. Despite the change of regime it introduces, it does not really break up the reading; it even helps to make description, analysis a special form of discourse, in the best of cases a new text, by a reduplication whose fascination has been fully felt by modern thought. This effect is obviously peculiar to the literary work, more generally to the written work, and to it alone. It lies in the undivided conformity of the object of study and the means of study, in the absolute material coincidence between language and language. That is why only the written work was able to provide, so to speak, a pretext for a theory of the text, or at least for the first effects of its practice. That is why Barthes so strongly distrusts everything that escapes the written, for the meta-language effect is more tangible there, by definition. Indeed, one speaks the more 'about' an object the less one can draw it into the material body of the commentary. At the same time this is obviously to emphasise the absolute privilege of written expression in this conversion of the work into a text. The material reality of a commentary which in its turn comes to have more or less the function of a text constitutes the necessary mediation for this transmutation which in the last instance would like to appear in the absolute guise of a play. That is to say that in fact it aims for an integral reconciliation

between language and language, and between the subject and the subject, receiving from the exteriority of language the absolution that would restore it to its desire. For clarity's sake, one thing should be remembered. This idea arises with the joint emergence of the two concepts literature and science of literature. It arose for the first time, in a still uncertain fashion, with romanticism and the beginnings of literary criticism; a second time at the turn of the century in the first great mutual concussion of literature and the human sciences, in Nietzsche and Mallarmé, Freud and Saussure; a third time today under the internal and external pressure exercised on literature by what Barthes has called 'the conjoint action of Marxism, psycho-analysis and structuralism'. To sum up, let us say that the science of literature has enabled us to recognise in the work the reality and the utopia of the text, but this movement has no meaning unless it dissolves the science into the body of its object, to the extent, in the ideal case, of abolishing any divergence between science and literature, analysis and the work.<sup>2</sup>

It is from the starting point of this both real and mythical level that the apparently quite secondary fact of the possibility of quotation turns out to assign a paradoxical specificity to the cinematic text. The written text is the only one that can be quoted unimpededly and unreservedly. But the filmic text does not have the same differential relations with the written text as the pictorial text, the musical text, the theatrical text (and all the intermediate mixed texts they give rise to). The pictorial text is in fact a quotable text. No doubt the quotation stands out in its heterogeneity, its difference; no doubt there are many material difficulties in its way, difficulties expressing the specifically material loss undergone by the work from the very fact of its reproduction. The format of the book in particular, always reductive, obviously produces an inevitable distortion through the disproportion between the original and its reproduction. But the quotation is on the other hand perfectly satisfactory, allowing a remarkable play on the detail with respect to the whole. From the critical point of view it has one

2. 'In its own way the text shares in a social utopia; before History (always supposing the latter does not choose barbarism), the Text achieves, if not the transparency of social relations, at least that of relations of language: it is the space in which no language has an edge on any other, in which languages circulate (retaining the circular sense of the term). . . . A theory of the Text cannot be satisfied with a metalinguistic exposition; to destroy metalanguage, or at least (for it may be necessary to resort to it for the time being) to cast suspicion on it, is part of the aim of the theory itself: discourse about the Text should never be anything but text itself, textual research and travail, since the Text is that *social* space that allows no language any shelter outside it, nor any subject of enunciation in the position of judge, teacher, analyst, confessor, decipherer: the theory of the Text cannot but coincide with a practice of writing.'

22 advantage that only painting possesses: one can see and take in the work at one glance. Which literary analysis cannot do, except when it has as its object short poems in which vision and reading are superimposed (eg Ruwet's, Lévi-Strauss's and Jakobson's analyses of Baudelaire sonnets). Beyond these, even when it chooses to quote 'the whole text' in limit-case experiments like Barthes's in *S/Z*, it can only rediscover the inevitable linearity of the written.

The musical text, conversely, sets two obstacles in the way of quotation. First, at the level of the score. This is certainly quotable, in whole or in part, like the literary text. But it opposes an infinitely greater heterogeneity to language than that of the picture; that of a specific codification whose extreme technicality marks a break. On the other hand, and much more profoundly (for a society in which everyone could read music is conceivable – was this not the case in the micro-societies of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie?), the musical text is divided, since the score is not the performance. But sound cannot be quoted. It cannot be described or evoked. In this the musical text is irreducible to the text, even if it is, metaphorically, and in reality thanks to the plurality of its operations, just as textual as the literary text. With the one difference that it cannot really be experienced except by hearing it, and never by analysing it, subjecting it to a reading, since then one is no longer hearing it, or only hearing it virtually. Finally, one last problem and not the least: the score is fixed but performance changes. Some more or less aleatoric types of modern music which increase this gap between score and performance take the phenomenon to an extreme, but do not change its terms. The work is unstable. In a sense this mobility increases even further the degree of textuality of the musical work, since the text, as Barthes has said again and again, is mobility itself. But by a kind of paradox, this mobility cannot be reduced to the language which attempts to grasp it in order to bring it out by duplication. In this the musical text is less textual than are the pictorial text and above all the literary text, whose mobility is in some sense inversely proportional to the fixity of the work. The possibility of keeping to the letter of the text is in fact the condition of its possibility.

The theatrical text demonstrates the same paradox and the same division, although in a different way. On the one hand, the work, the text in the ordinary sense of the term, can be reduced unequivocally to the problematic of the literary text, except that the play more or less inevitably brings with it the absence of its performance. On the other, the performance creates a mobile text, as open and aleatoric as that of the musical text. A *mise-en-scène* can be discussed, its principles stated, its novelty, its uniqueness felt, but it cannot really be described or quoted. Its textuality, though indisputable, escapes the text once again through its infinite mobility, the too radical divergence between the text which provides it with a pretext and a material and vocal figurability

without any real delimitation. At most, just as the gramophone record has become the fixed memory of the concert, making an end if not of the variety of interpretations, at least of the internal variability of each performance, one might imagine fixing some *mise-en-scène*, as has been done on all too few occasions, by the only means apt to reproduce it: the film. Which, pushing aside the problem of the theatre, automatically reinforces the paradoxical uniqueness of the cinema.

Indeed, the film presents the remarkable speciality, for a spectacle, of being a fixed work. The scenario, the initial technical cut, are indeed not absolutely comparable with the score or the theatrical play. They are pro-texts, as, without being similar, plans and drafts are for the written work, sketches for a picture. Performance, in the film, is annihilated in the same way, to the advantage of the immutability of the work. This immutability, as we have seen, is a paradoxical precondition for the conversion of the work into a text, insofar as, if only by the abutment it constitutes, it favours the possibility of a voyage through language which unties and reties the many operations by which the work is made into a text. But this movement, which brings the film closer to the picture and the book, is at the same time a broadly contradictory one: indeed, the text of the film never fails to escape the language that constitutes it. In a sense one can no more quote a film than one can a musical work or a theatrical production. However, this is not quite true. The analysis of the film suffers the force of this paradox, which derives from the perfect delimitation of the work, but equally from the mixture of materials whose location is the cinema.

Once it is a talking cinema, it conjoins five matters of expression, as Christian Metz has shown: phonetic sound, written titles, musical sound, noises, the moving photographic image. The first two of these pose no apparent problems for quotation. Nothing is more easily reproduced than the dialogue of a film: publishers know what they are doing when they imply, as they often do, that they are recreating the film for us by printing its dialogue and playing a dubious game with the image to recreate that absolutely illusory thing known as its story. But it is quite obvious that something is lost thereby: written titles belong fully to the written, dialogue both to sound and to the written (it was written before being spoken, and even if it is improvised, it can be transcribed, since it does not change). Thus it undergoes a considerable reduction as soon as it is quoted: it loses tone, intensities, timbres, pitches, everything that constitutes the profound solidity of the voice. The same is true of noises, except that it is much less easy to reduce them to the signified, since this reduction can only be a translation, a kind of paraphrastic evocation. In this respect, what might be called motivated noise, which can always be evoked more or less since it indicates the real, should always be dis-

24 distinguished from arbitrary noise, which can go so far as to serve as a score, then escaping all translatability since it is not even codified as the musical score is (confining ourselves for simplification's sake to music in which the score is still truly determinant). Note that these are only two extremes, extremes which can be inverted: an arbitrary, but simple noise can be delimited, while a motivated but overcomplex one cannot. How in an analysis is one to deal with the noise band of a film like *La mort en ce jardin*, for example, made up solely of the noises of the Amazon forest, but so rich that it substitutes more or less for music? The bird calls in *The Birds* can be thought of in the same way; orchestrated by Robert Burks, thanks to the possibilities of electronic sound, they constitute a true score in this film from which music is apparently absent. In short, noise constitutes a greater obstacle to the textuality of the film the more it is one of the major instruments of its textual materiality. Musical sound obviously takes this divergence between text and text to the extreme: given the specifications implied by the phenomenon of combination which makes film music not a work in itself but an internal dimension of the work, we have here again the problems posed in this respect by musical works. With one difference, and by no means a negligible one. If the division between score and performance, code and sound, remains an integral one, here the musical text is received, thanks to a petrification seemingly opposed to its very virtuality, in that immutability of the work which defines the film.

There remains the image. And with it, rightly or wrongly, the essential. First for a historical reason: for thirty years, with the indispensable support of written titles (and not counting the intermittent assistance of a music outside the material specificity of the work), it represented the film, all films: the cinema. To the extent that even today it is too often confused with it, by an excessive simplification the *a priori* assumptions of which have been unravelled by Christian Metz. The unique situation of the image among the cinema's matters of expression will perhaps allow us, if not to excuse this excess, at least to understand it. The image is indeed located, with respect to the echo it might receive from language, half-way between the semi-transparency of written titles and dialogue and the more or less complete opacity of music and noise. Moreover, it is this which quite logically gives the image as such, as a moving image, the highest degree of cinematic specificity among the matters of expression whose combination, on the other hand, creates many more or less specifically cinematic co-ordinations. Until very recently, no doubt, this insistence on the specificity of the image was usually a convenient pretext to subtract the film from any true critical undertaking and to negotiate, as it were, the image in terms of the scenario, ie of contents, themes. But over and above its distortions, its inadequacies, which are as negative as they are idealist, this contradiction did confusedly

express something absolutely essential: a highly paradoxical relationship between the moving image and the language which seeks to reveal in the film the filmic text itself. This has been clearly seen since the area was turned upside down by the semiology of the cinema and the first true textual analyses. It is no accident that the only code constituted by Christian Metz has been a syntagmatics of the image band, and if most analyses have concentrated, with a kind of quite explicable impatience and fascination, on the textual workings of the image as it were, expressing a voluntarily agreed restriction that clearly never ceases to transgress its limit, since that limit is illusory.

This restriction and fascination derive from the paradox introduced by the moving image. On the one hand it spreads in space like a picture; on the other it plunges into time, like a story which its serialisation into units approximates more or less to the musical work. In this it is peculiarly unquotable, since the written text cannot restore to it what only the projector can produce; a movement, the illusion of which guarantees the reality. That is why the reproduction even of many stills only ever reveals a kind of radical inability to assume the textuality of the film. However, stills are essential. Indeed they represent an equivalent, arranged each time according to the needs of the reading, to freeze-frames on the editing table, with the absolutely contradictory function of opening up the textuality of the film just at the moment they interrupt its unfolding. In a sense it is really what is done when stopping at a sentence in a book to re-read it and reflect on it. But then it is not the same movement that is frozen. Continuity is suspended, meaning fragmented; but the material specificity of a means of expression is not interfered with in the same way. The cinema, through the moving image, is the only art of time which, when we go against the principle on which it is based, still turns out to give us something to see, and moreover something which alone allows us to feel its textuality fully: a theatrical play cannot be stopped, unless it has been filmed, nor can a concert, and if a gramophone record is stopped there is simply nothing left to hear. That is why it turns out that despite what it does allow, the gramophone record (or the recording tape), which might seem the magical instrument of musical analysis, only apparently resolves a basic contradiction, that of sound. The frozen frame and the still that reproduces it are simulacra; obviously they never prevent the film from escaping, but paradoxically they allow it to escape as a text. Obviously the language of the analysis is responsible for the rest. It attempts to link together the multiplicity of textual operations between the simulacra of the frozen images like any other analysis. But the analysis of the film thus receives its portion of an inevitability known to no other: not to literary analysis, which constantly makes language return freely to language; nor to the analysis of the picture, which can partly or wholly re-establish

26 its object in the space of the commentary; nor to musical analysis, irreducibly divided between the accuracy of a score and the otherness of a performance; nor to that of theatrical representation, where the same division is at once less complete and less precise. In fact, filmic analysis, if it is to take place at all, must take upon itself this rhythmical as well as figurative and actantial narrative component for which the stills are the simulacra, indispensable but already derisory in comparison with what they represent. Thus it constantly mimics, evokes, describes; in a kind of principled despair it can but try frantically to compete with the object it is attempting to understand. By dint of seeking to capture it and recapture it, it ends up always occupying a point at which its object is perpetually out of reach. That is why filmic analyses, once they begin to be precise, and while, for the reasons I have just suggested, they remain strangely incomplete, are always so long, according to the extent of their coverage, even if analysis is, as we know, always in a sense interminable. That is why they are so difficult, or more accurately so ungrateful to read, repetitive, complicated, I shall not say needlessly so, but necessarily so, as the price of their strange perversity. That is why they always seem a little fictional: playing on an absent object, never able, since their aim is to make it present, to adopt the instruments of fiction even though they have to borrow them. The analysis of film never stops filling up a film that never stops running out: it is the Danaids' cask *par excellence*. This is what makes the text of the film an unattainable text: but it is so surely only at this price.

Although it would already be to go much further, we might change our point of view completely and ask if the filmic text should really be approached in writing at all. I think *a contrario* of the wonderful impression I received on two occasions, to cite only these two, when confronted with two quotations in which film was taken as the medium of its own criticism. This was in two broadcasts in the series 'Cinéastes de notre temps', on Max Ophüls and Samuel Fuller. One saw, and then resaw while a voice off emphasised certain features, two of the most extraordinary camera movements in the history of the cinema, in which such movements are by no means uncommon. The first in the ball in *Le Plaisir*, just as the masked figure more and more unsteadily crosses the length of the ball room, then collapses in a box where, beneath the mask of a young man an old one is revealed; the second, in *Forty Guns*, follows the hero from the hotel he is leaving to the post office to which he goes to send a telegram, and saves for the end of a long dialogue his meeting in a single continuous field with the 'forty guns' who race past on horseback on the left side of the frame. Here there is no longer any divergence, no need of narration. A true quotation, in all its obviousness. But this sudden quotability which film allows to film (and in the same way sound to sound) obviously has its other side: will oral language ever be

able to say what written language says? And if not, at the price of 27  
what changes? Beneath the appearances of an answer *a contrario*,  
this is a serious question, economic, social, political, profoundly  
historical, since it touches on the formidable collusion of writing  
and Western history in which the written alternately or even simul-  
taneously performs a liberating and repressive function. Can or  
should the work, be it image or sound, in its efforts to accede to  
the text, ie to the social utopia of a language without separation,  
do without the text, free itself from the text?

## **FILM FORM**

### **Theory and Practice in Film Analysis**

The first issue of a new magazine whose aim is to apply  
current development in film theory to the study of specific  
films and film-making practice

### **Number One, now available, includes:**

PETER WOLLEN on North-by-North-West

ANDREW TUDOR on Major Dundee

ANTHONY HARRILD on Red Psalm

STEPHEN CROFTS on Chapayev

CELIA BRITTON on La Grande Illusion

Subscription for one year (three issues):

UK £1.50            USA \$5.00

This issue (including postage):

UK 60p            USA \$2.00

Orders, subscriptions and contributions should be  
addressed to FILM FORM, Room 116, Squires Building,  
Sandyford Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST

**BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE  
EDUCATIONAL ADVISORY SERVICE SEMINAR**

**The Imaginary — The Insufficient Signifier**  
by Jacqueline Rose

*Monday 10 November 1975, 7.00 pm*

*Boardroom, 4th Floor, BFI*

For tickets (limited places) and copies of the paper  
please write to EAS, BFI, 81 Dean Street,  
London W1V 6AA



***Simone Simon in Cat People***

The BFI Distribution Library has recently acquired the long-term theatrical rights of a group of RKO pictures:

**Bringing Up Baby; The Informer; Crossfire; Beyond a Reasonable Doubt; While the City Sleeps; Woman on the Beach; Stromboli; Out of the Past (Build My Gallows High); They Live By Night; On Dangerous Ground; Cat People.**

Because we have the long-term rights we are in a position to offer one or more of these titles to selected educational institutions on long-term lease to facilitate detailed and recurrent study.

Further information from:  
Acquisitions and Distribution  
Manager,  
British Film Institute,  
81 Dean Street,  
London W1V 6AA.

