
Analysis in Flames

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ANALYSIS IN FLAMES

RAYMOND BELLOUR

Film analysis has finally become an art without a future. The fact is that it has never been, in itself, anything more than an illusory object. That is why, paradoxically, it could appear to be a particular activity endowed with a sort of intransitivity. As it happened, it laid claim to this quality without worrying about the confusions and false divisions that would result from it. At the other end of the chain, this tendency was confirmed by the accumulated bibliographies: useful, but ambiguous, they helped make film analysis a separate theoretical genre, with no justification other than the false sense of plenitude that can derive from the act of analysis itself.

There are two reasons for this misleading effect of analysis: the nature of the "cinematic signifier," which effectively distinguishes film analysis from all other enterprises of the same type; and the coincidence of concern (which was self-evident) between a new interest in films and the general movement in many zones or research that crystallized for a time around the idea of text. Right away, because these two reasons converged with one another, film analysis got to the bodily core of its text. But this seductive body is an elusive body: it cannot really be quoted nor grasped. It is polysemous as well, in an excessive way, and its matter, moulded by iconicity and analogy, pushes language into check. This irreducibility of the filmic substance, which fascinates and stimulates (as do all such elusive objects), serves to limit analysis: the readings of films have been unable to produce the equivalence brought out in readings of "Les Chats" or in *S/Z*.¹ This does not simply result from the analysts' lack of genius, but primarily from the exceptional resistance put up by the analytic material.² This resistance has too often led film analysis to take refuge in its own domain, and thereby to add to the illusions and inevitable developments that are proper to the accumulation and the organization of knowledge a special fascination for the circle within which film analysis, since its beginnings, has not been able to avoid turning. As a result of this it still can happen that film analysis will mistake itself for something it is not.

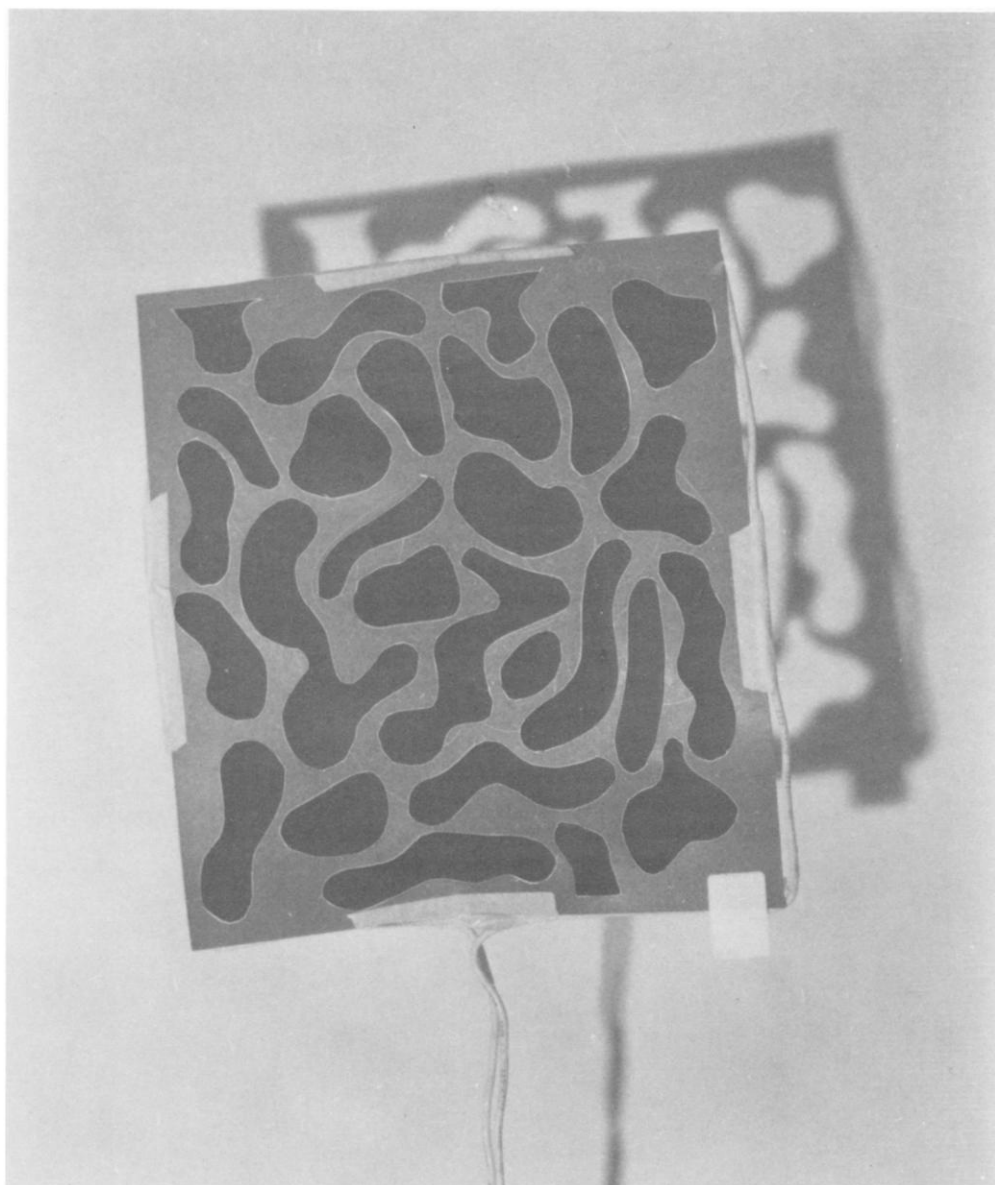
In truth there are no longer, or should no longer be, any analyses of films. There are just gestures. Free gestures, made possible now because one day a new intellectual practice that had to be called film analysis allowed (then at the cost of great difficulty) for the *stopping* of films. And for looking at them with a new and, as it were, cleansed eye. An eye at last freely fascinated. These gestures seem to me, today, to be four in number.

First there is this unsurpassable gesture: fixation on the image, the freeze frame. We can never say adequately to what extent it remains the magic gesture *par excellence*. A paradox: the video recorder, the ideal instrument for analysis, is also what has killed it. Via an excessive generalization, a passage to the infi-

¹[Translator's note] *The allusion is to famous analyses of Baudelaire's poem "Les Chats" by Lévi-Strauss and Jacobson and by Riffaterre, and to Roland Barthes's book entitled S/Z.*

²*For example I recently received a fascinating manuscript containing both an analysis and a thorough description of Tourneur's Cat People, drawing in some respects from Barthes's procedures in S/Z. The author, Dominique Zlatoff, was conscious and rightfully proud of having reached a limit by producing a "mad" work: in its essence very hard to read, and yet often remarkable, if only because of this limit that it made perceptible.*

Cookaloris
Kalewipoeg (theme of the three (?) caskets)



nite, we can henceforth possess—freeze—every image. Alone, caught up in one's own thought; in bed, touching one's companion, exchanging with her and the image an idea-bearing look; with one's students, at the moment sought by everyone (the seminar is perhaps the only place where film analysis still exists for itself: covered by the pedagogical alibi, we are enacting an apprenticeship in magic, a collective experience in fascination and dis fascination, which does more to displace the givens of knowledge than it does to regulate them). The freeze frame which moves the film closer to the book, is a turning of pages. But struggling against the "natural" procession of the images, it is also more: a game, a permutation, a diversion [*dérive*]. . . . A creation set adrift.

Quite naturally criticism (good criticism) has emerged from this state of things in a modified condition. If we read carefully the articles of Serge Daney (who today is our most scrupulous and inspired film critic), we see how certain stops in his sentences correspond with freeze frames that are projected into the reader's mind. Of course that has always been done to some extent, but not with this determination, acuity, and especially this connivence that assumes we have entered, *vis-à-vis* moving images, into another era. Their number has grown immensely and will not cease to increase. But they also give the impression of moving more and more and of proliferating because the gaze of the viewer henceforth knows how to freeze them. Consequently, how to fix them and make them move in another way.

The third gesture concerns theoretical work, and in the very first place cinematic theory. From now on it will be free of the ghost of film analysis since it can, in the best cases, incorporate it into its processes in an almost natural way. It can do so in spite of the resistance proper to the image, which remains intact. But the impossible element—embracing *the* system of the film as well as the mad desire to touch the film itself—this excessive lack has disintegrated, like a love that dies from no longer repeating its gestures. In addition we have a practically complete inventory of the range of possibilities that allow for playing on the lack or the excess of the absent image (in any case, in the conventional form of the article and the book). So that each can determine, then, at each particular point, how to make the strategy of analysis comply with its stakes (this is as much an internal calculation as it is a function of the material instruments available). I would say that the work of Jacques Aumont has been, in France, the best example of this process of relaxation. In the small milieu where film theory is produced, it has been impossible not to notice the quite sympathetic skepticism he has insisted on voicing (at the risk of helping canonize the genre) toward "textual analysis of films." This skepticism stems from the simple fact that Aumont chose early on to focus on a general reflection concerning problems of montage and imaging: it was necessary for him to work through certain films that inspired his inquiry, often in a very precise fashion, yet he could not run the risk of seeing his research defined in an excessive manner by this process. In particular he could not allow that perception of his work to gain a foothold. Hence his precautionary measures, which at times may have seemed rather finicky, but which were in the last analysis invaluable. Another example is afforded by the work begun long ago by Marc Vernet concerning the *film noir*: today it seems to have escaped from the tension between film and cinema that was sustained too long within the whole of the field,³ and to have reached, at the same time, the possibility of becoming an organic work. Reading the latest articles by Vernet, we can imagine him from now on passing freely from film to film, as from a concept to a photograph, in order to tell how America was defined, at a certain moment of its history, as much by modes of plot and dramatization as by what he so aptly terms the "flickerings of black and white."

Finally there is the encounter, often oblique or indirect, yet so very suggestive, of film analysis with the cinema. Its transformation, its dissolution in cinema and video. We can envisage it in three ways. First, as an answer of the image to the image. I have spoken often of the possibility of citing, at last, the "unattainable text," of making us aware of this "truth" of the film around which the analysis could only turn in vain. Something there has remained in suspense. A portion of an answer has been given by the best moments of the broadcasts that

³Visible in this distinction is Metz's famous dichotomy—a fine example of the way in which a distinction, however useful it may be, can contribute to forming, at other levels that the one for which it was strictly formulated, a sort of mental block.

television has devoted to the cinema: from the unsurpassable “Cinéastes de notre temps” to the *magazines* of today. But that is very little. Theory has not really been able to arrive at the image – to speak, to hold to, to live by the image; infinitely less has it been able to retain the image in its words. Perhaps this union of theory and image is an impossible marriage. Yet I continue to believe in the surprises that could arise, at this level, from encounters of the word and the image.

Quite other is the answer – for it involves a leap – that has been given, with the help of video, to a reading of films obsessed with the idea of cinema’s forward movement. In this regard the most worthy example is that of Thierry Kuntzel. In the video-art in which his work takes its place beside others that are novel and important, he keeps the trace of an insight that is its own. Is other. Is marked by the origin it leaves. In his video fiction-reflections, film analysis has literally gone up in flames.

The final encounter is a double history, full of holes and unrealizable, yet worthy of being evoked here: the film analysis that appears, develops, gains a momentary self-confidence and then dissipates into the theory of the cinema; and the history of the cinema that advances upon receiving some effluvia from this adventure that it considers obviously minor, and that it had in part provoked. Serge Daney recently recalled that Truffaut had ended his first feature film (*The Four Hundred Blows*) with a freeze frame (for the first time perhaps in the history of the cinema).⁴ A few years earlier, Truffaut had pushed criticism a notch ahead toward analysis by following closely the development of the number 2 through *Shadow of a Doubt*. He had “fixed” upon this film of Hitchcock as he would later on the final shot of the story he would seek to tell. We see here how the logics pile up, from criticism to directing, from theory to creation. Since then, the cinema has not stopped moving while always seeking more intently after a stop or freeze. Through its own acceleration, triggered by that of all the “new images,” it would grasp itself, come back to itself, and thus never cease to reinvent itself. Seen from a distance, that might be the finest result, however minimal, of film analysis: also to have burned for the cinema.

Given all this, nothing will prevent a dreamer from deciding one day to start up (again) in all simplicity the analysis of a film, in order to understand something never understood. But it would take much foresight to predict whether this move would give rise to a new theoretical proposition or to a new form of narrative.

⁴In an answer given in response to a questionnaire for the festival “Photo et Cinéma” (Photogénie 5).