THE LANGUAGE AND STYLE OF FILM CRITICISM

Edited by Alex Clayton & Andrew Klevan

ROUTLEDGE

The Language and Style of Film Criticism

The Language and Style of Film Criticism brings together a range of original essays from international academics and film critics highlighting the achievements, complexities and potential of film criticism.

Film criticism is a form of writing which evaluates film and in contrast to the theoretical, historical and cultural study of film, it has been relatively marginalised, especially within the academy. By revealing its quality and distinctiveness, the book shows that film criticism deserves a more central place within the academy, and can develop in dynamic ways outside it.

What particular challenges does the medium of film present for writing and for critical judgement? How is the relationship between critic and film reflected in writing? How can vocabulary and syntax be used appropriately and imaginatively? A range of essays addresses these questions and more, focusing on the methods, concepts and ideas associated with the expression of film criticism.

The book is essential reading for all those engaged in the activity of writing about film – academics, teachers, students, and journalists – as well as readers of film criticism who wish to understand and appreciate its language and style.

Alex Clayton is Lecturer in Screen Studies at the University of Bristol, where he teaches a module on Screen Style and Aesthetics for the MA Cinema Studies programme. He is the author of *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick* (2007) and has published elsewhere on performance, comedy, colour and music in film.

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We dedicate the book to Sarah and Vivienne, our fairest critics.

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INTRODUCTION

The language and style of film criticism

Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan

We characterise film criticism as a form of writing which addresses films as potential achievements and wishes to convey their distinctiveness and quality (or lack of it).[1] For many people film criticism is something by an opinionated journalist, a film critic, who tells you whether a film is worth seeing. The most characteristic trait of a newspaper or web review is the announcement of judgements on the acting, story and cinematography (often narrowly conceived). If the writer avoids the temptation to indulge in superlatives and hyperbole and stays clear of well-worn adjectives such as 'gritty', 'dark', 'glossy', 'cinematic', 'stylish', 'thought-provoking' or 'true-to-life' – along with the stultified system of values to which they appeal – such reviews can be a source of pleasure as well as utility. But for the editors of this volume, film criticism can do a great deal more. We find the best criticism *deepens* our interest in individual films, *reveals* new meanings and perspectives, *expands* our sense of the medium, *confronts* our assumptions about value, and *sharpens* our capacity to discriminate. Moreover, it strives to find expression for what is seen and heard, bringing a realm of sounds, images, actions and objects to meet a realm of words and concepts. Engaging with film through criticism therefore means involving ourselves not simply with a series of points and arguments but with language and style.

In a thorough and eloquent essay exploring the history of film criticism and analysis, Adrian Martin has asked why, in accounts of criticism, 'the *materiality* of the writing of [Manny] Farber – or [Jonathan] Rosenbaum or David Thomson or Meaghan Morris – [is] so often rendered immaterial, a wasteful luxury, mere surplus value … *écriture* is again divorced from content, to be damned or indulged accordingly'. Pointing out that 'writing is always more than simply "badly done" (dense, circumlocutory, baroque) or a "good read" (witty, racy, stylish, etc.)', Martin calls for a better sense 'of the *action* of critical writing, what it can conjure, perform, circulate, transform'. 'In writing as much as film,' he adds, borrowing a phrase from Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'we must come to close terms with what is "at once mysterious and materialistic" in

matters of style' (Martin 1992: 131). This volume of essays aims to answer Martin's call. Coming 'to close terms' with matters of style and language will yield a sharper recognition of the '*action* of critical writing', and, in turn, a stronger sense of the achievements and potential of film criticism.

That potential has been, in our view, underestimated. If in broader culture, criticism has been too often conflated with cursory forms of reviewing, it has had parallel fortunes within academic Film Studies. Although film criticism exists within the academy, it has never quite cemented itself within the discipline (unlike literary criticism). As Film Studies became institutionalised, criticism was thought lacking in analytic and scholarly rigour; socially, politically, culturally or historically blind; purposeless in its failure to address 'important' issues; theoretically unsophisticated and not suitably self-reflexive; and linguistically naïve in its attachment to ordinary language. Perhaps these assessments are not consciously held or propounded in a way they once were, but they may still operate implicitly as assumptions, and affect the processes and pedagogy of film study.

Sidelined within academia, the purposes and principles of film criticism have been misunderstood. This has been exacerbated by the way film criticism is commonly conflated with 'close textual analysis' (or some variant thereof). Such analysis tends to appear in more or less formalist guises and often distrusts the subjective attitudes of criticism with regards to interpretation and prose style. More recently, 'textual analysis' seems to have been enlarged as a category to include any academic work that refers to a film's image and/or soundtrack. Rather than objects of criticism, most commonly, particular films are objects to be analysed, specimens used to investigate cultural, historical or theoretical positions, contexts and tendencies.[2] This is true even of aesthetically orientated work. Most academic writing aims for a prose that is neutral, objective or informational. It is generally suspicious of personal involvement with films and apprehensive of value judgements, except for ideological critique (for instance, where a film is implied to be 'transgressive' in some way, or its representation of a social group 'positive'). It is felt, perhaps, that serious academic analysis should differentiate itself from the evaluative reactions of the ordinary film viewer – 'he's really good in this', 'this is definitely her best film' – or that 'opinionated' newspaper reviewer.[3] For the most part, films are used illustratively (valued primarily for their usefulness) rather than engaged with critically (valued for their achievements). Despite this, much film writing, of whatever hue, in its choice of films and examples, and in its assumptions, either contains remnants of film criticism, or is haunted by its absence. One ambition of the volume is to help film criticism emerge from this illicit and ghostly existence.

Stanley Cavell provides a useful insight into criticism, by way of Immanuel Kant, which he understands as originating in an experience of pleasure and a desire to communicate value:

> It is a requirement I impose on the choices of the films I take … that they be films of cinematic, or say aesthetic, value, by which I mean two things primarily: (1) that I judge them to be of value (in Kant's sense of aesthetic value,

> the test of which is my declaration that they provide me with a pleasure I am compelled to share with others, a judgement I demand that others agree with, knowing that my subjectivity may be rebuked); (2) that I am prepared to account for my insistent pleasure by a work of criticism (brief or extended) which grounds my experience in the details of the object: in a word, I show that the object is, in the sense Walter Benjamin develops in 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', criticizable, we might say interpretable. What is not criticizable in this sense is not a work of art.
>
> *(Cavell 2005b: 297)*

Cavell emphasises the matter of 'value' as intrinsically linked to the impulse to share it ('by a work of criticism (brief or extended)'). In his collection of essays which explore the relationship between philosophy and criticism, Cavell begins his discussion of *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1953, US) with Fred Astaire walking on a platform, and structures his discussion around it, because it 'singled [him] out for a response of pleasure' which he had a 'compulsion to share' (Cavell 2005c: 26, 9). Cavell calls such pleasure 'insistent': the work will not give up its pleasurable hold on him *and* it urges him to spread the word. The critic puts his or her subjectivity on the line, 'knowing that [it] may be rebuked'. At the same time, this desire to share entails the conviction that others are capable of encountering a form of this pleasure if disposed towards the artwork in a particular way. The judgement of value is therefore understood not as mere whimsy, but as capable of reaching *inter*subjective accord, hence also disputation, when a work of criticism makes the shareable grounds of that judgement available to discourse ('criticizable').

Cavell equates the 'criticizable' with the 'interpretable' and elsewhere he notes that 'for something to be regarded as an interpretation … there must be conceived to be competing interpretations possible' (Cavell 1981: 36). Any single critical perspective or claim therefore implicitly recognises (or should recognise) the existence or possibility of other perspectives. Hence the meaning of a text is plural even though the particular judgement being offered issues from a singular, subjective experience, and the tone may be passionately insistent. The individuality and personality of this critic is watching and writing, in this way, now, and this is *his* or *her* criticism. The passage quoted above from Cavell acknowledges three interlinked aspects of criticism: its testimonial or proclamatory aspect (a 'declaration that [an artwork] provide[s] me with … pleasure'); its rhetorical or petitioning aspect ('a judgement I demand that others agree with'); and its justifying or evidential aspect ('which grounds my experience in the details of the object'). The latter aspect is important because the claim is authenticated by an appeal to features of the work which are capable of independent affirmation.

For this reason, and despite the fact that criticism by necessity originates in personal experience, the aspiration towards intersubjective understanding means that it cannot straightforwardly be called 'subjective'. Nor, of course, could any critical claim be called 'objective'. Indeed, the 'subjective–objective' relation is one of those false dichotomies that nevertheless holds a surreptitious power. Misgivings about criticism

being subjective are addressed by Roland Barthes in his cogent little treatise on the identity and benefits of literary criticism, *Criticism and Truth*:

> One usually understands by 'subjective' criticism a discourse left to the entire discretion of a *subject*, which takes no account at all of the *object*, and which one supposes (in order more effectively to attack it) to be nothing more than the anarchical and chattily long winded expression of individual feelings. To which one could reply for a start that a subjectivity which is systematised, that is to say *cultivated* (belonging to a culture), subjected to enormous constraints, which themselves had their source in the symbols of the work, has, perhaps, a greater chance of coming close to the literary object than an uncultivated objectivity, blind to itself and sheltering behind literalness as if it were a natural phenomenon.
> *(Barthes 2004: 35)*

Barthes' defence, faced with suspicion of the 'subjective' in criticism, is to point out that subjectivity is not an asocial, nebulous entity turned in on its own haphazard feelings, but is already related to the world, shaped by it and participating within it. More radically, throughout his book, he implies that even if the work is from a different time or place, the critic can only come 'close' to the object, reveal its 'truth', through his or her own subjectivity. The phrase 'sheltering behind literalness' could fairly describe much modern methodology, where an acknowledgment of the writer's subjectivity is feared to contaminate the impartiality of the 'findings'. Quite a lot of contemporary work in Film Studies has seen 'the self' as an untrustworthy guide, and has sought to initiate and justify claims outside it, often in reference, explicitly or implicitly, to an objective spectator (however complexly conceived).

The problem here, as George Toles has pointed out, is that 'If all issues pertaining to *personal* identity are infinitely problematic … where do we derive our assurance that we can construct meaningful diagrams of "others"?' (Toles 2001: 83). Toles feels he cannot write from this position because he 'cannot *know* this average spectator well enough to speak for him or her' (Toles 2001: 99). He continues:

> I cannot see the point … or the theoretical usefulness, of continued reports on what other spectators are supposed to have 'seen' in a movie if they are not accompanied by some kind of personal accounting. What have we seen for ourselves, and how has the complex bundle of desires and fears that all our experiences draw from helped to shape what we have seen?
> *(Toles 2001: 99–100)*

For Toles, this 'complex bundle of desires and fears' affects our viewing and as insecure as it may be that 'bundle' may also be our only reliable starting point.[4] He writes: 'As is so often the case with art, the first intimation that a film has achieved something difficult and worth understanding may be the depth of our imaginative identification with what we see' (Toles 2001: 81). Much film criticism builds out of an 'imaginative identification'. Unlike most contemporary forms of textual

scholarship which stress the importance of a work's origins, its historical, cultural or national context, more often than not criticism emphasises those qualities that are discovered through an imaginative engagement with the text, and with each other (through dialogue, during teaching). Good criticism does not operate in a vacuum and it is interested, implicitly or explicitly, in comparing and contrasting one work with another, identifying, for example, generic or stylistic variation in order to assess possibilities and discriminate. It may draw on a film's context to recognise the achievement of creative personnel or to grasp parameters and choices. It may be stimulated to reference society, culture and art as matters arise, happily bridging different times and places. However, 'external' information is not foundational nor does it legitimise the assessment. Ultimately, criticism is observational and responds to the work as it appears. Lack of knowledge will result in aspects of the work escaping, maybe even in misunderstandings and mistaken attributions, but the compensation is the revelation produced by new connections. Much contemporary scholarship situates the film elsewhere, out there, but it is equally interesting to ask how we find it *here*. Given that the work may be a long way from home, why does it *appear to me* as an achievement?

The distrust of subjectivity and scepticism towards evaluation go hand in hand. From the point of view of the critic, however, evaluation is not simply something one might do, something optional; it is intrinsic to the viewing experience. This is how the text makes sense to us: *what it means to us*. Viewers feel a work to be deft, tender or delicate, or perhaps condescending, smug or arch as much as they feel for characters or their situations (indeed, whether the fiction affects them or communicates to them at all will depend on the quality of the expression). Moreover, one might argue that most, if not all, films are made to be good and this objective is an integral part of their presentation and address. For film criticism, the tension between a film's aspiration or potential and its actual achievement is as palpable to a viewer as that generated by plot or character or composition. The viewer monitors the success with which the film handles its elements; and this is not of supplementary interest, but of pressing importance every step of the way. It affects the moment-by-moment viewing of the film.

Such monitoring is not straightforward. Films have a special talent for concealment, paradoxically perhaps because of their directness, materiality and capacity for demonstrative revelation. They appear to be simultaneously too ordinary in their easy recording of reality and too extreme in their easy use of affective devices. They inevitably have a concern for surface, which means they often appear to be superficial, banal and vulgar. This is especially true of popular cinemas, where commercial production exploits the ease with which the medium can sentimentalise and seduce. Separating the genuine from the fake, or the creative from the compliantly conventional, has been the task of criticism on all the arts, but film renewed the challenge. The projects, in the 1950s and 1960s, of journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma* (in France) and *Movie* (in the UK), were precisely to reveal the artistry in despised genres and forms of Hollywood and to show that their product was not enslaved to populism and commerce. The mass production of films in studio-era Hollywood, with its

instincts to recycle conventions and conceal craftsmanship, required new ways of approaching the old critical problem: how to identify genuine accomplishment?

Grappling with Hollywood films has been particularly testing and fruitful for film criticism. The famous ending of *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946, US) might appear to be conventional, sentimental and conservative, but George Toles considers it to be otherwise. To claim this is not straightforward, however, because the scene's power evidently depends on convention and sentiment:

> Capra seizes on conventions as the quickest route into a scene, just as Astaire sidles his way into a dance by a series of simple, orthodox steps which are minimally communicative about the flights of invention that his motions will inscribe later on. Conventions bring the *ground* for scenes into preliminary focus, but the scene-structures that feel their way into being on that ground are meant to shed this easy affiliation with the usual setup and become self-sustaining. Capra is not at all interested in the habitual, somewhat protected mode of response that conventions necessarily bring with them. What he consistently strives to distil out of them is a moment that effectively bursts the bounds of the familiar situation. His goal is to powerfully transcend convention without undermining it … Convention allows Capra to bring the viewer swiftly into the midst of a strong dramatic situation.
>
> *(Toles 2001: 57)*

Toles writes in a way that refuses the customary dichotomy between 'conventional' and 'unconventional', where the former is rendered a synonym for uninventive, derivative, inexpressive, plodding. On the contrary, the comparison of Capra, who 'seizes on conventions', to Astaire, who 'sidles his way into a dance', offers a vivid way of grasping how conventions can enable and not merely restrict. Rather than conventions being a creative dead-end or feeble resort to cliché, they are recast, in Toles' language, as facilitating the emergence of something agile. Steps, like conventions, may be 'simple, orthodox', 'easy', 'habitual' and 'minimally communicative', but what is crucial is the potential they afford, as moments and scenes 'feel their way into being on that ground'. A sense of this potential is conveyed by the prose style, in particular the striking use of verbs, where those that convey liveliness – 'to seize', 'to sidle' – push through to those that are positively transformative – 'to shed', 'to burst', 'to transcend'. The metamorphosis (caterpillar into butterfly) imagery may not be spelt out but its insinuation is vital for the passage's full effect. A convention, like a chrysalis, may be inert and sheltering – but what it produces may 'shed that easy affiliation', 'become self-sustaining', capable, indeed, of 'flights of invention'. The problem is not that some cinemas are conventional (e.g. Hollywood) and some are not (e.g. Experimental), because every type of cinema has conventions, characteristics, generic or otherwise, and constraints, but that our *own* conventional ways of seeing and categorising – our 'easy affiliation[s]' – might lead to misjudgement. Toles' writing aims to ease us out of static understandings, not simply by explaining Capra's use of convention, but by rendering its trajectory and dynamic.

One way that criticism wins a reader's trust is by conveying a sense of tussling with the experience of the object and therefore trying to avoid complacency, solipsism or self-regard. This might be especially important in relation to films which could easily be dismissed on the basis of what seem like obvious deficiencies. Despite all the problems of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967, US), a film Andrew Britton evidently dislikes, he is still alive, 'all the more so' in fact, to Spencer Tracy's 'enactment of genuine emotion' in the final scene where:

> Spencer Tracy's astonishing delivery [is] strikingly at variance with the cautious reformism to which the film portentously commits itself. In a film characterised by the turgid factitiousness of its dramatic effects – by a false and self-serving sincerity – the speech is remarkable for its enactment of genuine and substantially realised emotion.
>
> The source of the emotion hardly needs to be pointed out, and the scene is indeed very moving, all the more so for our sense that it is potentially extremely distasteful and exploitative – Tracy's impersonal intensity manages to counteract the dangers of corrupt and luxurious feeling obviously latent in [the] scene.
>
> *(Britton 1995: 173–74)*

Given what Britton feels about the film, it would have been easy for him to see and proclaim everything in it as irredeemably tainted. On the contrary, he recognises such moments of apparent contradiction where the boundaries of good and bad are not easily separable. Hollywood's territory of sentimentality, even when it is crude and objectionable, as in this instance, may still produce and be inhabited by vestiges of honourable emotion. Indeed, the impurity of the register is what, for Britton, makes this scene remarkable and moving. Rather than disregard the qualities of Tracy's delivery as having been swamped by the overall tenor of the scene, Britton lets them tug at each other in his sentences ('Tracy's impersonal intensity manages to counteract the dangers of corrupt and luxurious feeling'). The scene is moving, for Britton, not because we are seduced like suckers by 'the turgid factitiousness of its dramatic effects', but because of a redemptive, 'genuine' quality in Tracy's delivery which requires in turn an active recognition of the film's project being 'distasteful and exploitative'. Britton's contempt for that project (evident in the spitting alliteration of 'self-serving sincerity') does not collapse into condescension, nor does rage blind him to what may still be valuable.

Effective criticism may be forceful or muscular, in this way, and demonstrative; it also may be measured, and measuring. V.F. Perkins attributes to Hollywood films exceptional capacities for eloquence and his writing is carefully inflected and modulated to reflect this. The following passage is taken from one of the best-achieved pieces of film criticism, exploring the complexities of narration in the Hollywood film *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948, US), and it is quoted at length to give a sense of argumentation:

> The challenge to the film is to arrive at order and comprehensibility without falling into an impoverished neatness. It is vital to its effect that it should not

solicit a literal reading of its devices, and that it should arrive at a persuasive form while blocking any coherent understanding of the relations between the words of the letter, the speaking voice and the movie's images. No rational time-scale or system of subjectivities holds the key elements in harmony.

…

It is in those devices that bear on the relationship between the letter and the flashbacks that Ophüls and [Howard] Koch are boldest in their defiance of narrative logic. The design is, I take it, to ensure that we cannot come to feel that there is a real world within the fiction where Lisa's [Joan Fontaine] writing of the letter can merge with Stefan's [Louis Jourdan] reading. Their coming together occurs only in and through the artifice of the film. Beyond that we are blocked from giving them the responsibility for the information and viewpoints that the film presents. Fictionality extends from the story to the narrative method with the film's flaunting of impossibility … [A]n old lecher in an officer's uniform crosses the room away from his wife to engage in a sly consultation with Mme Spitzer [Sonja Bryden], who is seated at her desk on the other side of a railing at a level below Lisa's stage. More could hardly be done to stress that theirs is an intimate and furtive conversation as the officer, with his back turned from Lisa, hears the disappointing news that 'she is not like that … Every evening as soon as the shutters are closed, off she goes – straight home'.

The next words are Lisa's, delivered in the narration: 'Madame Spitzer spoke the truth. I was not like the others … ' The lines are written to disturb our understanding. Lisa seems to have heard the words that were so conspicuously withheld from her. But if she could not have heard them then, where is she that she can comment on them now? Boldness is balanced with delicacy in the achievement of this impossible continuity. No words intervene between Mme Spitzer's and Lisa's, but their lines are spaced by a dissolve through time and a move from inside to out. A new action has begun with the women's departure from work into the snow-strewn evening streets before we hear Lisa's comment. Through his pacing Ophüls ensures that the effect is not to explode the narrative into absurdity with a gag, but subtly to position it between any real time and space.

…

Ophüls unites precision of form with openness to possibility rather than making it serve the definition of a thesis. His precision shows in the preparation of the material that will be the subject of repetition, variation or inversion in the film's development. The boldness of presence and the strength of shape given to the repeated features determines whereabouts the later references fall on a scale between faint allusion and bold statement. In a film so concerned with the significance of memory it is appropriate that the eloquence of its effects should depend on its capacity to stir our recall, with varying degrees of definition, of moments and patterns we have seen before.

(Perkins 2000: 41–45)

A strategy of 'defiance' is not commonly thought to be something Hollywood cinema of this period would undertake, especially when allied to what Perkins calls the film's 'flaunting of impossibility', its 'blocking' of certain types of narrative comprehension and its impediments to the impression of 'a real world within the fiction', 'between any real time and space'. The words 'radical' or 'modernist' suggest themselves but such familiar labelling or pigeonholing would upset the sense, being built in the criticism, that the film evades *definition*. The writer chooses not to characterise the film by situating it in relation to artistic movements and classifications, nor to assert the film's worth through association. If in this instance Perkins values the film's 'flaunting of impossibility', this is not because such flaunting is a quality to be admired in itself. The critic takes on the responsibility to show *how* a feature is working, in relation to other qualities, and to make the case for its worth on this basis, on *this* particular occasion. The film's 'defiance of narrative logic' might be considered profound or perverse but in Perkins' writing it is the logical outcome of a precise calibration.

The passage shows that the film's singularity resides not in the novelty of generic permutations, but in the assured way it manages to balance perspectives, methods, gestures and effects. Perkins recognises, and puts it to us to recognise through prose that is careful to weigh, competing options and their risks. So the effort to reach 'order and comprehensibility' could easily collapse the film into 'impoverished neatness'; 'precision of form' is attained but not in order to 'serve the definition of a thesis'; features are 'repeated' without being flatly repetitive since they appear 'on a scale between faint allusion and bold statement'; and the film's '[b]oldness is balanced with delicacy'.

Correspondingly, Perkins' writing achieves a balanced integration of description and commentary. One notable feature is the elegance with which the prose lays the ground for observations to follow. In his account of the Mme Spitzer episode, for instance, Perkins offers a concise description with just enough sharp detail to 'stir our recall' of the space ('seated at her desk on the other side of a railing') and tone ('engage in a sly consultation') to prepare our assent for the ensuing remark: 'More could hardly be done to stress that theirs is an intimate and furtive conversation'. 'More could hardly be done' paves the way for the adverb 'conspicuously' (in 'words that were so conspicuously withheld'), and that in turn secures our recognition of the design's '[b]oldness'. Meanwhile, that same brief descriptive passage sets up a recognition of the design's 'delicacy'. Only a paragraph break, between the quoted words of Mme Spitzer and 'The next words are Lisa's', silently suggests the film's jump in continuity. Hence, the form of writing evokes discretion with discretion. It is not until later in the passage that we are given it more directly as confirmation of Ophüls' finesse: 'No words intervene between Mme Spitzer's and Lisa's, but their lines are spaced by a dissolve through time'. The film does not proclaim its 'impossible continuity' by 'explod[ing] the narrative into absurdity with a gag'; nor does Perkins' writing trumpet the film's balance of boldness and delicacy by resorting to assertion. Instead, we are immersed in the film as the critic sees it, hence brought to share a deeply involved perspective from which vantage the organisation of features appears a consummate achievement.

FIGURE 0.1 'Boldness is balanced with delicacy in the achievement of … impossible continuity.' *Letter from an Unknown Woman,* 1948

It is worth bearing in mind that Ophüls' films were at one time regarded, in some quarters, as elegant frippery. One task of criticism is to highlight significance where one might not have thought it to be; it brings to our attention what we missed or only latently experienced. If film has a particular propensity for the disguise of significance, some critics distrust films that appear to proclaim it. For Manny Farber, pretentiousness is not just a relevant critical criterion for judging films, it is a going concern, and its occurrence is tantamount to a sin. Some of his best criticism is concerned with why a film is bad rather than good, and it is avenging. Through the agility of his language and style, he reveals a film to be a sluggish sham. *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962, UK) is 'almost a comedy of overdesign, misshapen with spectaclelike obtrusions … While the other technicians are walloping away, the actors, stuck like thumbtacks into a maplike event, are allowed – and then only for a fraction of the time – to contribute a declamatory, school-pageant bit of acting' (Farber 1998: 146).

Farber's distinctive compacting of words – 'stuck like thumbtacks into a maplike event' – helps us *feel* what he takes to be the film's clumsiness despite, or because of, its attempt to signpost. There is a tongue-twisting density of consonants in 'stuck like thumbtacks'. The clutter of the phrase evokes a bungled military procedure, humorously calling to mind the film's imagery of Empire and turning it on its head. The hamfisted amateurism of 'stuck' is joined by the damning transformation of 'school-pageant' into an adjective. The judgements bombard us – no time to mince words.

The target is not simply the film but its positive estimation by critics who think it looks clever and artistic (criteria perhaps overvalued by film and viewer insecure about the medium's worth). This is criticism as satire: it has the feeling of a safety valve where one is relieved to read someone speaking against ruling assumptions. It has a scurrilous, rebellious, blasphemous air, terrorising sacred texts.

It is relentless. In the space of a few lines we are told, of *Jules et Jim* (François Truffaut, 1962, France), that it is 'cartoonlike but in a decorous, suspended way'; that 'most of [its] visual effect is an illustration for the current of sentimental narrative'; that its scenes are 'reduce[d] … to scraps of pornography'; that it displays 'an idiot concentration on meaningless details of faces or even furniture'; that 'the scenes themselves are without tension, dramatic or psychological'; *and*, if all of that wasn't enough, that '[t]hanks to [the director's] fondness for doused lighting and for the kind of long shots which hold his actors at thirty paces, especially in bad weather, it is not only the people who are blanked out; the scene itself threatens to evaporate off the edge of the screen … As the spectator leans forward to grab the film, it disappears like a released kite' (Farber 1998: 141–42).

At its best, Farber's writing has a feel for the physicality and materiality of films (and he recreates these qualities in his writing). He is also attuned to what appears to him to be a stretching and thinning in modern cinema where form loses tension and tangibility (and he exposes this by intensifying these qualities in his writing). He writes: 'From *The 400 Blows* onward, [Truffaut's] films are bound in and embarrassed by his having made up his mind what the film is to be about. This decisiveness converts the people and incidents into flat, jiggling mannikins … in a Mickey Mouse comic book, which is animated by thumbing the pages rapidly. This approach eliminates any stress or challenge, most of all any sense of the film locating an independent shape' (Farber 1998: 140). Meanwhile, Michelangelo Antonioni gets

> his odd, clarity-is-all effects from his taste for chic mannerist art that results in a screen that is glassy, has a side-sliding motion, the feeling of people plastered against stripes or divided by verticals and horizontals; his incapacity with interpersonal relationships turns crowds into stiff waves, lovers into lonely appendages, hanging stiffly from each other, occasionally coming together like clanking sheets of metal … [the] need to get mural like thinness and interminableness out of his mean patterns … His talent is for small eccentric microscope studies, like Paul Klee's, of people and things pinned in their grotesquerie to an oppressive social backdrop. Unlike Klee, who stayed small and thus almost evaded affectation, Antonioni's aspiration is to pin the viewer to the wall and slug him with wet towels of artiness and significance.
>
> *(Farber 1998: 142–43)*

Sometimes his judgements too easily appeal to 'common sense' and anti-intellectualism. Despite this, and even if one might disagree with the specific targets, Farber compels vigilance in critical judgement because he brings pretentiousness and inflation alive as important concerns, and viscerally attempts to describe

what they may look like in film.[5] Furthermore, his descriptions are potent and apposite regardless of the negative context, and can be rescued. For example, Farber's choice of the word 'glassy' encapsulates suggestively a prevalent aspect of Antonioni's visual style.

For some critics, such as Farber and Raymond Durgnat, lexical agility is an important part of their written style. Here is the fizzing opening of Durgnat's review of *Pierrot le fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965, France) on the occasion of its re-release in 1990:

> Twenty-five years on, *Pierrot le fou* remains fresh, lively and very poignant; no masterpiece, but a titivating ciné-salad of fiction, lyrical-narrative poem, digressions, discursions, and formal fiddle-faddle … the story is a suite of sketches; the ideas range from exquisite to idiotic, but the assemblage achieves something between pop-art tragedy and modernist *belles-lettrism*, à la Queneau. Its narrative 'fragmentation' is almost as widely understandable as, say, pop lyrics which, well before the Stones and Dylan, subordinated narrative to oblique fragments, lyrical feeling, fantastication … and zany obscurities.
>
> *(Durgnat 1990: 241)*

Durgnat's fragmented, pointillist style meets Godard's with wild, imaginative idea-bursts. If *Pierrot* is a 'ciné-salad', then the review is crit-salad. A multitude of references to ideas, art and culture are sliced and diced, mixed with pointed nouns and adjectives, and tossed together. He likes images and ideas to be close, orbiting around each other, forming unexpected associations. The relationships between words are not always clearly fixed; sentences and structures are rarely well behaved, sensible or straightforwardly explanatory. All this along with informal phrases such as 'formal fiddle-faddle' suitably honour the *quality* of Godard's 'pop-art tragedy'. Durgnat can hold a conversation in the language of the film.

Somewhat like Durgnat, Farber writes sentences packed with words wriggling around and jostling each other, illustrating the 'termite' qualities that he liked in films:

> [John] Ford films … have been marred by a phlegmatically solemn Irish personality that goes for rounded declamatory acting … [In contrast, John] Wayne's acting is infected by a kind of hoboish spirit, sitting back on its haunches doing a bitter-amused counterpoint to the pale, neutral film life around him. In an Arizona town that is too placid, where the cactus was planted last night and nostalgically cast actors do a generalised drunkenness, cowardice, voraciousness, Wayne is the termite actor focusing only on a tiny present area, nibbling at it with engaging professionalism and a hipster sense of how to sit in a chair leaned against a wall, eye a flogging overactor (Lee Marvin). As he moves along at the pace of a tapeworm, Wayne leaves a path that is only bits of shrewd intramural acting – a craggy face filled with bitterness, jealousy, a big body that

> idles luxuriantly, having long grown tired with roughhouse games played by old wrangler types like John Ford.
>
> *(Farber 1998: 136)*

Farber's words, like the films and performers he admires, are termites, 'nibbling' away, eking out the sentence, forming its shape and direction. Note the listing of words without an 'and' – 'drunkenness, cowardice, voraciousness', 'a craggy face filled with bitterness, jealousy, a big body that idles luxuriantly'. One description comes on the heels of another, as if the sentences were unravelling a little unsteadily, sometimes too quickly, then too slowly, with no obvious termination. Although words flood the paragraph, some stand strong, alone, as essential distillations (and go unrepeated). A single word, 'flogging', as in 'eye a flogging overactor', is intended to evoke, and judge, a style of acting. One word, one right word, is all it needs – and deserves.

The passage above is specifically describing *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962, US) but it plays out as something more generally applicable. It could be a description of Wayne in countless films. This is true also of the following piece of writing by Durgnat comparing Gary Cooper and Frank Sinatra:

> Gary Cooper and Frank Sinatra personify two great currents of American culture. One can hardly imagine a film in which the two of them could co-star; Cooper's Western virtues seem hard to key in with Sinatra's jaunty cynicism. Coop, grave, slow, decisive, rode in from the open spaces; he is a rustic, a small town man … Coop worries, with dignity; the sudden, bleak, black rage of fear, never dwelt on, but briefly glimpsed, gives much of its strength to his portrayal of Mr Deeds, as to that of the sheriff in *High Noon* (and its absence is the weakness of Wyler's *The Westerner* [1940, US]).
>
> Coop dreads, and punches; Sinatra shrugs, or drugs, or drinks, or takes a tranquillizer, or another girl, or a plane. Coop is rural, small-town, middle class, inner directed. Sinatra's cocky grin has the tough derisiveness of an alley cat, a gritty sensitivity, nerves as taut as his cheekbones. His easy assurance goes with a forlorn vulnerability. His bitchy petulance is that of the cosmopolitan orphan … The same qualities inform Sinatra's singing – his voice is brassy and warm, can open up in a rhapsodic boost, jaunt along cagily, wrench out the sudden dramatic punch, the jab of pathos. However ingenuous the lyrics he goes along with them, wholeheartedly, in hope. He sings a tourist's panegyric about Granada, and we know that he knows that Granada, like every other town in this over-trotted globe, is just a nightclub with broads, but his warm, even ebullience amounts to a reckless defiance of disenchantment, the raw half-tones easily sidle up to jubilation.
>
> *(Durgnat 1976: 173–174)*

The sentence which describes the 'qualities' of Sinatra's singing also re-dramatises them: as it develops it 'open[s] up' with more descriptions, it has enough clauses to

'jaunt along', and the final point comes like a 'jab'. In both the passages by Durgnat and Farber, the vividness of vocabulary is not necessarily put to the task of recording an instance as accurately as possible, or penetrating into the complex internal network of relationships (as Perkins does) but rather to create a telling distillation that captures an essence. There is a pictorial quality to the writing in that the picture they draw gathers and condenses all those moving images. This concentrated, abbreviated quality is also poetic: 'Coop dreads, and punches; Sinatra shrugs, or drugs, or drinks …'

Farber and Durgnat show that precision of observation need not develop from a sustained sequential close reading, moment-by-moment, shot-by-shot, or take an analytical form. However, one important feature of a lot of good criticism is sequential close reading (for Film Studies, this should probably have been called 'close viewing and listening'). This practice, in order to reveal the detail of a film, should be distinguished from 'close textual analysis', which has different aims.[6] The aim of classic 'textual analysis' in Film Studies – examples from different periods would be those by Raymond Bellour (in *The Analysis of Film*) or David Bordwell (*Narration in the Fiction Film*) – was to locate the underlying structure of an individual film or a group of films (e.g. 'The Classical Hollywood Cinema'). They are written as if they are 'scientific' studies, unadorned, transcriptions of data (the text would often be accompanied by shot breakdowns and many images from the film) and apparently objective, neutral explanations of this data.

In many such film analyses, a single piece of vocabulary is heavily repeated to draw out similarities between moments in films or between films, or to nullify differences. Sometimes, the repetition is to persuade us that films from a certain period of the Hollywood cinema, say, are all essentially doing the same thing even if superficially they appear otherwise. The motivation may be to uncover suspicious ideological formations (all differences are illusions) or to label in order to emphasise the key determinants of a system. The writer believes them to be pervasive and *categorical* (for example, in Bellour's case, 'the look'; in Bordwell's case, 'cues' and 'devices').

The formal demeanour of textual work declares that it is doing the serious business of 'analysis'. This was useful to the process of legitimising film study as it established itself within wary institutions. It also partly explains why currently any examination of a film's components within the university is usually labelled 'textual analysis'. Although it is rare now to see pieces of 'textual analysis' as formal and systematic as Bellour's or Bordwell's, echoes of the approach still prevail, sometimes as unknowing assumptions, in the practice, and teaching, of film analysis and 'close reading'. Consequently, the distinctive aspects of criticism are usually subsumed, or drowned, and the alternatives that it offers overlooked.

This is an extract from Raymond Bellour analysing a sequence near the beginning of *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963, US). Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) has deposited lovebirds at the Bremmer house and is returning on her own by boat to the pier, where Mitch Bremmer (Rod Taylor) awaits her, having driven round the bay to meet her. En route, she is attacked by a gull. Out of context, this is a difficult extract to follow but it should give a representative sense of the style of writing (the numbers refer to shots that are listed and pictured in the text):

> The next four shots (76–79) are all static ones. They alternate two shots of Melanie (76 and 78) with two of gulls (77 and 79). But a double variation complicates this simple alternation of static shots. The first relates to a change in the object of vision: Mitch, who has just appeared on the pier (75), then the gull that crosses the sky (77). Shot (76) juxtaposes them: the disappearance of the smile that has been on Melanie's face since shot 72 marks the change. The second variation relates to the conjunction seeing/seen (or seeing/seeing) in the same framing: in shot 77 the gull strikes Melanie on the head. This confirms a correspondence between Mitch and the gull or, to be exact, between Mitch's look and the gull.
>
> …
>
> Melanie seen by Mitch is at the same moment looking, not at Mitch, but at her glove, red with blood from her wound. In the second place, the inversion marks the fact that the symbolic punishment that strikes her in Mitch's look in the metaphorical form of the killer birds has, from the beginning, spoken in her own look, in the first metaphor that her indiscretion proposed to Mitch with the symbolic gift of the lovebirds. If Mitch's look reverses and precipitates the sequence, Melanie's look guides it and organizes it until the moment of the meeting.
>
> *(Bellour 2001: 59–60)*

Bellour's essay reveals aspects of continuity and discontinuity of structure and patterns, and the role of displacement and substitution in shots, both obvious and obscure. However, what may appear scrupulous and dispassionate in Bellour's account is no less precariously selective or impressionistic – as film criticism was once charged to be, with lasting damage – than one which does not purport to be systematic. Bellour's point of view on the sequence is no more or less than an interpretation, and should be valued as that, but the writing, whether intentionally or not, implies more. It is given credence, grandeur even, by the formal notation (and there are no doubt pleasures to be had for some readers in the spare style that nevertheless has an algebraic density).

Again, it depends on the repetition of a few chosen, key words. There is the persistence of the words 'look' and 'looking'.[7] Bellour writes at one point, 'To be rigorous, we must clear up a point of detail here' (59), but rigour is achieved less by clarification than by severity concerning the choice of vocabulary. The pool of words is small so the prose is not tainted or infected by outside invasion. The elements under discussion are limited and controlled, *ceteris paribus*, so the laboratory experiment can take place. It is pseudo-microscopic.

It is instructive to compare the Bellour *analysis* to Camille Paglia's piece of *criticism* on the same sequence from *The Birds*. One of the features which allows the Bellour essay to appear analytical is that it is emphatic about breaking up the film into constituent parts. Consequently, it is drawn to the edit, which is the most literal point of breakage in a film, but this also means that the edit is overemphasised in determining meaning.[8] For Bellour, the arrangement of shots, linked together by 'looks', produces

meaning. By contrast, Paglia's essay follows movements, sensations and implications, barely mentioning the relationship between shots, although no less attentive for all that to collisions of forms and meanings within and across them. Whereas Bellour tends to restrict the production of meaning, hence the restriction in vocabulary, to a few structural aspects, Paglia shows the expressive capacities of the sequence to be extensive and diverse:

> Melanie is gliding so fast, she seems to fly – like a cormorant skimming the water. Mitch, who is wearing a white fisherman's sweater and a dapper blue ascot (named after the British race track), beats her to the wharf and, hand on hip, waits for her with blasé, macho delight. At this moment, Melanie is at the height of her power, like Cleopatra sailing into the Cydnus on her barge. She wears an ambiguous, mocking Mona Lisa smile, her coral lipstick sparkling like pink diamonds. By ambush and provocation, she feels she has the upper hand. But the air and water, grey-green dappled with violet as in Manet, have turned perceptibly darker.
>
> Just as Melanie cocks her head and gives a geisha-like moue of florid flirtation, a gull dives into the frame and slams her in the head. It's grotesquely shocking, no matter how many times one has seen the film. Nature and culture collide … Hitchcock has wonderfully choreographed it, so that as Melanie gasps (the bird's cry seems to speak for her), her right hand flies to her forehead while she makes a spasmodic, angular motion with her raised left arm that is half-kabuki, half-Martha Graham. The whole thing has the asymmetrical beauty of a chance gesture in Degas. The blow causes a collapse of social forms, like the portentous, grinding fracture of the stone baluster in *Last Year in Marienbad* [Alain Resnais, 1961, France].
>
> Next, Melanie inspects her palm in horror, with a look of complex thought on her face, as if she were reading a letter with dreadful news. Finally, there's a close-up of her now-soiled, suede-gloved fingers, with a crimson splotch of blood on the index tip – a Surrealist reversal of her lacquered red fingernails. She resembles the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth ('Out, damned spot!') facing her moral culpability, as well as the sex-tortured hero of Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dali's *Le Chien andalou* [1929, France], transfixed by ants (uncontrollable desires) running all over his palm. Archetypally, the shot is a *memento mori*: as if looking into a mirror, the painted socialite sees the skull beneath the skin and counts the blood-price of woman's romantic games.
>
> *(Paglia 1998: 35–36)*

Bellour's shot-by-shot analysis make it appear 'close' to the film but it is less observant (whatever its other merits) than Paglia's criticism which is not formal or methodical. In Paglia's account the vocabulary is varied, and as a consequence she makes the film appear substantial (as distinct from skeletal). Her criticism is less tied to a system of analysis, and so it appears as if she can, ironically perhaps, register the elements of the film in more detail than Bellour. Paglia's critical flexibility allows her

to respond to sensation ('cormorant skimming the water'), posture ('hand on hip … blasé, macho delight', 'cocks her head and gives a geisha-like moue of florid flirtation'), gesture ('spasmodic, angular motion'), expression ('Mona Lisa smile', 'complex thought … '), mood ('air and water, grey-green dappled … have turned perceptibly darker'), sounds ('gasps' and 'cry'), texture ('suede') and, of course, lots and lots of colour ('white fisherman's sweater', 'blue ascot', 'coral lipstick', 'pink diamonds', grey-green dappled', 'violet', 'crimson splotch', 'red fingernails'). It is worth repeating Paglia on the moment when 'Melanie inspects her palm in horror, with a look of complex thought on her face, as if she were reading a letter with dreadful news. Finally, there's a close-up of her now-soiled, suede-gloved fingers, with a crimson splotch of blood on the index tip – a Surrealist reversal of her lacquered red fingernails'. Bellour writes, merely, in matter of fact fashion, that 'the wounded Melanie lowers the hand she has lifted to her head and looks at it; the highly magnified detail shows the index finger spotted with blood' (61). Regardless of the colourful nature of the film, Bellour's analysis must be without it.

Paglia's particular form of description is comparative**;** her writing reaches out to a multitude of vivid references from life and art. This might appear irrelevant, or knowledge obsessed, or self-aggrandising even, were her connections not conveying that she is in thrall to the wonder of the film and what it is capable of evoking. Furthermore, Paglia is not concerned to prove that the film intends, unconsciously or not, to reference Cleopatra or the *Mona Lisa* but rather to show that it can be evocative in the way they are, it can affect like them, and it might be worthy of them. Moreover, the film is capable of all this, effortlessly and unpretentiously, in simply a few shots.

FIGURE 0.2 'a close-up of her now-soiled, suede-gloved fingers, with a crimson splotch of blood on the index tip – a Surrealist reversal of her lacquered red fingernails.' *The Birds*, 1963

There is no logic or system which determines which comparisons Paglia will draw on. They emerge from a complex relationship between the film's suggestiveness and *her* imagination. Quite often criticism is the meeting point of a film's style with an individual temperament, and the writing reflects both. The film and critic find each other, discover something in each other; they confront, reveal and *affect* one another. Sometimes they seem made for each other. For example, Farber's attitude and writing reveals the unpretentious materiality and corporeal detail of Hollywood 'B' movies of 1930s and 1940s. Perkins' writing has poise, balance and subtlety, and these are the values (he recognises) in the films of certain Hollywood directors. Durgnat's writing is amenable to those films, 'New-Wave' or Surrealist perhaps, which complicate or disrupt continuity or which contain a mix of elements such that they seem unorthodox or curious. The film and critic, and their personalities, establish a relationship, and every word, sentence and paragraph is the product of it. It is the strength and quality of this relationship, and the life of the partnership within the writing, that so often engages interest and secures conviction. Yet, in the main the style of the individual critic and the specificity of his or her language are regarded as subsidiary (or 'immaterial', as Martin put it in the passage quoted at the start of this introduction). We conscientiously extract the 'relevant' points and arguments, abridge, digest, synopsise and then (perhaps) test them against the 'objective' evidence provided by film. In our explanations and exegesis, there is a tendency to detach critics' claims from the words that animate their critical worlds.[9]

Roland Barthes conceives the critic *as writer* and illuminates in the following way:

> And so it is that the critic … becomes a writer in his turn. Naturally, wanting to be a writer is not an aspiration to acquire a particular status, but a wish to exist in a particular way. What do we care whether it is more glorious to be a novelist, a poet, an essayist or a chronicler? The writer cannot be defined in terms of his role or his value but only by a certain *awareness of discourse*. A writer is someone for whom language constitutes a problem, who is aware of the depth of language, not its instrumentality or its beauty. If … criticism has any reality, it is there … in the solitude of the act of criticism … far removed from the excuses of science or institutions. Formerly separated by the worn-out myth of the '*superb creator and the humble servant, both necessary, each in his place,* etc.', the writer and the critic come together, working on the same difficult tasks and faced with the same object: language.
>
> *(Barthes 2004: 23)*

For Barthes, a critic is not someone who provides us with an account of an object or a judgement but 'someone for whom language constitutes a problem, who is aware of the depth of language'. We are pleased to find a democratic flavour to this because it suggests the critic need not only be the excellent or gifted writer but simply someone who is sensitive and mindful about the language he or she is using (in relation to the object). A little later he puts the point again, 'we shall say that the

critic confronts an object which is not the work, but his own language' (Barthes 2004: 35). Even if one might wish to resist the provocation here (preferring, perhaps, not *only* the work), Barthes is capturing a prevalent feeling in art and life, for the editors of this volume at least, that our capacities with language are always being challenged. There is that sudden need to 'put into words' so we can get to grips with something, *capture* our thoughts and feelings, whether we desire to communicate them to others or not. At the same moment we confront something, anything, in the world, we very quickly feel we are confronting language. Perkins highlights that

> hazards are presented by the relationship between the understanding of a film manifested in our response and enjoyment and the understanding that is expressed in an articulated appreciation. [There is not only a matter] of public rhetoric here, a problem of making one's articulation acceptable and persuasive to others, but there is regularly a more important problem with oneself, of finding the words that fit one's sense of the moment or the movie.
>
> *(Perkins 1990: 4)*

Perkins' sense that the 'problem [is] with oneself, of finding the words that fit one's sense of the moment or the movie' joins hands with Barthes who mentions the 'solitude of the act of criticism' with its 'difficult tasks'. This picture of the anxious writer sitting alone, with only the film for company and searching for *le mot juste*, may seem a touch precious or indulgent to some, in a world of more significant problems. Yet, as long as any person wishes to articulate the achievement of artworks *as he or she sees them* there will be no escaping it. Elsewhere, in his book on *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1942, US), Perkins writes: 'Whatever its immediate pleasures or problems, the work of the great directors should challenge us as the pianist Artur Schnabel was challenged by "music better than it can be played". The thrills and rewards of criticism come from trying to rise to achievements we know to be larger than our understanding' (Perkins 1999: 18).

Cavell writes, in reference to *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934, US)**:** 'I knew afresh each time I viewed the film that this moment [a moment where a man and a woman, Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, playing Peter and Ellie, are walking away from us down an empty country road] played something like an epitomizing role in the film's effect upon me, but I remained unable to find words for it sufficient to include in my critical account of the effect' (Cavell 2005a: 136). He announces that it was years before he found he was ready to say something about this moment, but one day, suddenly, he could hardly keep up with the thoughts he was having about it. Cavell devotes a whole essay to this moment but he does not only provide an interpretation, he also articulates his involvement: the problem of trying to find himself in relation to the film, and trying to find the thoughts and words. For Cavell, writing on film is not simply about finding the apposite choice of word, portraying a film vividly or providing the accurate description and judgement. Equally important is recognising in one's writing the journey to that point: reflecting the process of engagement, the intuitions yet to become fully fledged

FIGURE 0.3 'this moment … played … an epitomizing role in the film's effect upon me, but I remained unable to find words for it.' *It Happened One Night*, 1934

thoughts, the thoughts yet to find suitable articulation, and the difficulties of acknowledgment.[10]

Some films refuse to define our feelings for us straightforwardly, and resist crystallising meaning into a message. Yet, in our desire for interpretation to be presented with clarity and conviction, it is easy for us to forget this when we write. Indeed one of the most difficult challenges for criticism is to convey an interpretation we consider important to understanding, and which we feel is consistently and sensibly guiding our viewing, whilst at the same time remaining faithful to those aspects kept in suspension. Articulating something too boldly or too soon can threaten the collapse of that something into nothing much. Amplifying something whispered, as it were, poses the risk of distortion and vulgarisation. Even stating the obvious may require tact. Cavell writes of *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938, US):

> At some point it becomes obvious that the surface of the dialogue and action of *Bringing Up Baby*, their mode of construction, is a species of more or less blatant and continuous double entendre
>
> …
>
> While an explicit discussion, anyway an open recognition, of the film's obsessive sexual references is indispensible to saying what I find the film to be about, I am persistently reluctant to make it very explicit. Apart from more or less interesting risks of embarrassment (for example, of seeming too perverse or

> being too obvious), there are causes for this reluctance having to do with what I understand the point of this sexual glaze to be. It is part of the force of this work that we shall not know how far to press its references.
>
> …
>
> I say we do not know how far to press such references, and this is meant to characterize a certain anxiety in our comprehension throughout, an anxiety that our frequent if discontinuous titters may at any moment be found inappropriate. If it is undeniable that we are invited by these events to read them as sexual allegory, it is equally undeniable that what Hepburn says, as she opens the box and looks inside, is true: 'It's just an old bone.' Clearly George [the dog] agrees with her. The play between the literal and the allegorical determines the course of this narrative, and provides us with contradicting directions in our experience of it.
>
> *(Cavell 1981: 116–18)*

Cavell reminds us that although criticism is inevitably bound up with expressing interpretations it is not necessarily only about that.[11] The work's resistance to a clearly formed interpretation may be one reason why it is good, that is to say, worthy of the interpretive pursuit. Criticism might not wish simply to capture comprehension but to 'capture a certain anxiety in our comprehension'. The challenge for the critic is not simply to surrender to platitudes about the undecided, but to attempt to specify the particularity of the indefinite.

Cavell writes that '[t]he play between the literal and the allegorical determines the course of this narrative, and provides us with contradicting directions' and his understanding here is also responsive to a central aspect of the medium. Film has a special capacity to embody the 'allegorical' and the metaphorical in concrete sounds and images of the physical and real. In film, symbolism takes a peculiarly 'literal' guise. No wonder it is difficult to write about film when we are not at all sure what it is that we see.

This book is not a history of film criticism. The focus is on methods, concepts and ideas associated with the language and style of film criticism (mostly dealing with the narrative fiction film). We hope they will be applicable or adaptable to countries, languages and cinemas that are not mentioned and that the book will encourage others to reveal how criticism and critics we have not discussed may teach us about writing on film.

We invited our contributors to discuss any aspect that interested them. It is fortuitous then that the essays in the volume productively overlap and we have tried to arrange them, as far as possible, to dovetail, so that one feeds into the next. **Alex Clayton**'s essay continues the formative ideas in this introduction by interrogating paragraphs written by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, from their widely consulted textbook, *Film Art: An Introduction*, which form part of a section purporting to provide an instructive instance of film criticism. Clayton reveals its inadequacy, something he attributes to an application of a pre-ordained and restricted vocabulary which prevents the authors from 'coming to terms' with the film, on this occasion *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940, US). For Clayton, their example fails to provide even a rudimentary account of the film, never mind grounds for judging its

quality, and, whatever else it is, it cannot usefully be called criticism. The purpose of his critique is to help clarify what criticism might be and to further this aim he contrasts the Bordwell and Thompson example with some writing on the same film by Stanley Cavell. He finds that Cavell's account is guided by (his viewing of) the film and depends on an exploration of terms in part stimulated by it. Stanley Cavell has been one of only a handful of prominent academics unashamedly writing film criticism over the last few decades because for him the possibilities of the medium are revealed by the achievements of individual films in partnership with critical elaboration. In his work, explicit deliberations on the processes of criticism and the philosophy of criticism mingle with actual criticism, and the form of the writing embodies the meta-critical concerns. **Robert Sinnerbrink** devotes his essay to the importance of style and voice, and the address to both film and reader, in Cavell's distinctive brand of philosophical criticism. How might philosophy and criticism enlighten each other or come together, romantically even, in writing? Like Clayton, Sinnerbrink is drawn to Cavell's inquiring conversation with a film and he examines a passage of Cavell's writing on the film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai des commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975, France/Belgium) where he is challenged to describe sequences and sets of events which are quietly ambiguous and yet in other ways piercingly clear. The matter of description is developed by **Adrian Martin**, who looks at how three critics, John Flaus, Shigehiko Hasumi and Frieda Grafe, make an entry into the self-enclosed world of a film and then find (or construct) corridors to traverse it. Even their apparently straightforward descriptions of surfaces create incursions, and go beyond, suggesting the ineffable. **Andrew Klevan** shows how the 'close reading' of film sequences depends on the art of description through his own 'close reading' of passages by James Harvey, Charles Affron and V.F. Perkins. Klevan illuminates how description is effectively sustained and how aspects of film which are difficult to describe, such as emotional directness, obscurity and absence, are translated by the writers into prolonged passages of ordinary language.

All three of the passages that Klevan analyses describe performers and performance effectively. Affron monitors the movement of Greta Garbo's head in relation to the camera and her co-star, in minute, intimate and sensitive detail; he feels that good performances prompt, perhaps urge, and deserve this form of 'close' criticism. Performer and critic respond, in ways that may mirror one another, to the medium's offer of 'renewable scrutiny' (Affron 1977: 7). In his essay focusing on the evaluation of performance in film, **George Toles** also discusses Affron, but highlights the work of Pauline Kael as he relates the performances in a film to the critic's own 'performance' in writing. As we have already noted in this introduction, judging performances in fiction films is a common activity and yet elaboration has proved peculiarly difficult. Toles' essay, itself an exemplary piece of criticism, shows how we may unpack such judgements as one discrimination is supplemented and adjusted by the next in a process of gradation and refinement that is orderly *and* agile. Despite the nuance, Toles believes the critic cannot completely clarify because 'everything that becomes clear to us feels like an expression of what remains hidden' and this is particularly true when interpreting performance, interpreting human beings no less, as

'[t]he strongest acting light shines in the midst of concealment'. To this end he examines a variety of responses, by James Agee, Walter Kerr and William Rothman, to the closing moments of *City Lights* (Charles Chaplin, 1931, US), in order to lay out the critics' diverse attempts to '"find words" that will do … justice' to *that* final close-up of Charlie the Tramp. Indeed, in his own contribution to this volume, **William Rothman** explores the theme of 'concealment' in relation to another close-up, this time of Ingrid Bergman, in *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1941, US), and ruminates on how his own prose attempts to respond to her interiority and inwardness, to silence and stillness.

From where does the critic speak and to whom? Both Toles and Rothman alert us to the blurred boundaries between the critic and the film, apparently either side of that screen, and **Richard Combs** further explores inter-relationships: the osmosis between critic, film, other viewers and life outside the film. He takes four writers, Manny Farber, David Thomson, Raymond Durgnat and Pauline Kael, and groups them as 'four against the house', characterising their criticism as conceived in relation to, and often against, Others, whether this be a certain constituency of viewers, real or imagined, or the academy. He detects in all these writers a desire, a pathology even, to burrow into the film in order to get at something authentic, something true, something free of pretension – 'the real'. This has consequences for their judgements and their prose, which is often clipped or terse. This perhaps reflects a desire to resist academic laboriousness (often in formats that encouraged encapsulation), but also their eagerness to find bits and pieces of truthfulness and pluck them out. Like all of Combs' writers, André Bazin, in his capacity as a film reviewer, wrote about hundreds of films, covering many rather than, as academics often do, concentrating on a few, and no critic, in his epic journeying through films, is more famous for seeking out 'the real'. So often for Bazin 'the real' amounted to something mysterious, something always on the verge of becoming revelatory. **Charles Warren**'s essay is inspired by how Bazin is 'seized' by the 'real' surfaces of film, hence by the depths of film. Warren shows how crucial 'being seized' might be for criticism, and for the reader's conviction in it. A critic may be seized by anything, of course, and not necessarily anything worthwhile, but Bazin, according to Warren, is 'seized … by what is, so to speak, difficult to seize, something hidden or secret in the work' – inner being, perhaps, or grace, or the soul of things. Warren carefully shows how Bazin seizes the reader, and how he manages to bring us to the point, persuasively, where the confrontation between the Priest and the Countess, in *Diary of a Country Priest* (Robert Bresson, 1954, France), really *appears* as a 'dialogue of souls'.

In his essay, Warren also examines the criticism of Susan Howe, who like Bazin is drawn to 'the ghostly status of the image, where what is wanted, or feared, is there but not there'. In Howe's work, criticism becomes a form of personal poetry where the boundary between the critic and the film is dissolved, deliberately and radically, and this is reflected in her unconventional use of punctuation and syntax (for example, the removal of commas and the slippages in continuity). **Lesley Stern** gifts the volume just such an example of a personal and poetic piece of criticism. She asks herself how she should write about *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett, 1977, US), 'a

fiction that feels like a documentary, a document of a place and time that feels like a poem, a film that is intriguing to watch but whose narrative intrigue is decidedly tenuous'. Her answer is a 'critical improvisation', one that moves freely between her own life and the film, and thrives off the permeability. She asks how she might '*write* the coming into consciousness of film', recognising 'how realizations arise out of the images and how, in the process of writing, somatic apprehensions come into consciousness like fragments of a dream, rising, whirling, caught in ideational clinches for a moment only to be tugged apart and set adrift again'. Stern and Howe are eager for their writing to respond to the sensations and stimulations of a film, its tone, its rhythms, its echoes, and **Christian Keathley** rounds off the collection by suggesting how a form of poetic criticism, not unlike that achieved by Stern and Howe in prose, might manifest within an audio-visual form. Keathley is especially fascinated by the cinephiliac strand in critical appreciation, one that falls in love with certain images, sometimes to the point of fixation, and then wishes to find ways of celebrating them by holding on to them, extending their power, re-contextualising and re-figuring them.

The book would like to highlight the complexities of film criticism as a genre of writing for those who are interested to read it, and those who might wish to write it. We would like to see film criticism gain a more central place within the academy and develop in more dynamic ways outside it. This is because, ultimately, we believe a vibrant culture of criticism, however that manifests itself, is essential for the understanding and appreciation of an art form. Without it we are far more isolated and insecure in our individual tastes, and deprived of the encouragements of others to grasp works in ways we would not have foreseen. As Perkins writes: 'Insofar as it hopes to illuminate a whole film or body of work by drawing attention to overall patterns and representatively eloquent detail, an important test of [film criticism's] validity and usefulness will be the degree to which we can internalise it and use it to enrich our contact with the film. That is one reason why response is of critical rather than merely sentimental importance' (Perkins 1990: 6). Film Studies has produced scholarship which has equipped us with the tools to discuss the relationship between film and theory, philosophy, history, culture, politics, gender and nationality with sophistication and finesse. Some of this material is beneficial to criticism and critical judgement. Yet, as academics, teachers, students, journalists – writers – we are relatively ill equipped and unprepared to appraise the qualities of a film or to assess and elucidate whether and why we think it works. What language should we use?

Notes

1 We are deliberately not using the term 'criticism', as it is sometimes used, in the very broad sense, to refer to *all* writing that analyses artworks or cultural objects. In *The Nature of Criticism* (1981), Colin Radford and Sally Minogue understand it to be concerned with 'judgement' and 'excellence' in art. Similarly, Noël Carroll devotes much space in his recent book, *On Criticism* (2009), to arguing that 'evaluation' is fundamental to criticism. Criticism, understood in this way, has been recently examined in other disciplines, especially Art History (for example Elkins and Newman 2008), and in works by Paul Crowther (such as *Defining Art, Creating the Canon: Artistic Value in an Era of Doubt*, 2007).

2 It is worth noting here, however, that theory should not be seen as necessarily opposed to criticism. There is, for example, theory that speaks to criticism, the theory or philosophy *of* criticism, most famously, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Much 'Film Theory', classic and modern, advocates or celebrates a certain type of film (for example that by Siegfried Kracauer, Rudolph Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein) or considers certain films exemplary (Gilles Deleuze, Vivian Sobchack, Steven Shaviro). Criticism and theory are inseparable in those works which attempt to understand achievement in the context of examining the nature of the medium, for example, by André Bazin (2005), V.F. Perkins (1972), George Wilson (1992) and Stanley Cavell (1979). Sometimes quite abstruse or abstract theory, often psychoanalytic, ingeniously combines with evaluative criticism of individual films, for example, in the work of Tania Modleski (2005), Lee Edelman (2004), or Slavoj Žižek (2001).

3 The possibility of continuities between 'ordinary' viewing and academic study is one of the attractions of criticism.

4 Politics and ethics are important when judging a film, and with regard to these areas, as in others, the subjectivity of the critic may be a hindrance as well as a help. The substantial body of work on cultural representations has shown that subjectivity may blinker the viewer and make ideologies look natural. The bias of critic and film should be troubled and tested. At the same time, there is a place, as much for ethical reasons as aesthetic ones, for the critic appreciating and explaining how, for example, in his or her view, this actress successfully manages to express this thought or this emotion or this occurrence in life, with the help of this particular lighting, and this particular tilt of the camera, after her head and eyes shifted in just this way, after walking across the room with just this pace and gait, accompanied by music of just this volume and tenor, and after saying her line of dialogue with just this timbre, accent and intonation. Most studies of representation concentrate on the nature of characters (and plot) *within* the fiction. Less attention is given to the achieving *of* the fiction, which we are also watching. That is, I am not merely evaluating Stella Dallas, I am valuing Barbara Stanwyck's portrayal of Stella Dallas (whereby her successful rendering is itself a scrutiny of the *role*).

5 Farber did not just attack the European Art Film, he was equally unforgiving of Hollywood's attempts to produce what he called 'White Elephant Art'. Many of these films were precisely those celebrated by the critics who wrote for *Cahiers* and *Movie*.

6 It should be noted that the term 'textual analysis' in Film Studies means something rather different to literary studies where it refers to the comparison of versions of a text, for example, the folios of Shakespeare's plays.

7 In the original essay in French, Bellour uses 'le regard' or 'regarder' repeatedly. On one occasion in the quoted passage, Ben Brewster's translation adds an extra 'look' but it is mostly faithful.

8 To be fair to Bellour, he does acknowledge such problems in his work.

9 Most books and essays on the theory of criticism tend to explore criteria for judgement and conditions for excellence (for example, beauty, moral worth, coherence, unity, credibility) and the nature of critical argument (for example, logical deduction, reasoning). These explorations are valuable, and we would like to see more of them in Film Studies, where they have barely figured. However, they often undervalue the importance of the particular critical engagement, the way that the unique relationship between *a* film and *a* critic, *manifested in the writing*, is capable of orientating or adjusting the criteria and values by which we judge a work. Different values and criteria may emerge or gain prominence when reading different critics.

10 See also Klevan (2011).

11 For a good recent volume exploring the relationship between film style and interpretation, see John Gibbs and Douglas Pye, *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film*. Their cogent introduction emphasises different aspects of the critical process to ours but is usefully complementary.

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1

COMING TO TERMS

Alex Clayton

In a textbook which has been required reading on virtually every Film Studies undergraduate programme for a generation, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson present a section entitled 'Film Criticism: Sample Analyses' offering a series of 'model' essays which purport to 'exemplify a sort of writing characteristic of film criticism' (Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 431). This is quite a claim, and, given the widespread influence of *Film Art* and its manifest pertinence to the concerns of the current volume, it seems important to assess here. What 'sort of writing' is offered as exemplary? What are students being called upon to emulate under the banner of film criticism? The short essay on *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940, US), commencing the series, begins as follows:

> The dominant impression left by *His Girl Friday* is that of speed: It is often said to be the fastest sound comedy ever made. Let us therefore slow it down analytically. By breaking the film into parts and seeing how the parts relate to one another logically, temporally, and spatially, we can suggest how classical narrative form and specific film techniques are used to create this whirlwind experience.
>
> *(Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 384)*

The style of this passage, whilst unremarkable in many ways, is somewhat indicative of the attitude and approach being urged. Whilst words like 'impression' and 'experience' cautiously suggest a realm of personal response, the manner of writing, here and throughout, remains sober and remote. The claim of the paragraph's first clause, for instance, is presented as objective report; the second clause, linked by a colon to indicate the production of evidence, seeks justification for that claim by assuring us of what other (unidentified) people 'often' say. At this point, the paragraph moves from hearsay to strike a note of gravitas – 'Let us therefore': an

invocation of logical consequence. What is the implication of 'therefore'? The film is *too* fast – we need to 'slow it down'. The impression of rapidity has been noted, it seems, not to prompt an account of that experience but as the very rationale for 'breaking the film into parts'. The metaphor of dissection here bestows a sense of scrupulousness and discipline to proceedings, a pastiche of scientific method capped by a trio of serious-sounding adverbs: 'logically, temporally, and spatially'. Amidst this vocabulary, the phrase 'whirlwind experience' sticks out as the sole piece of colourful language. Despite being a clichéd expression, it gestures towards a riotous, thrilling and unmastered contact with the film. The phrase feels out of place in the paragraph because its sense is at odds with the passage's general tenor. There is no requirement, of course, for criticism inspired by the giddiness of a 'whirlwind experience' to indulge a giddy style of writing. But given this brief early appeal to vivid and visceral sensation, one might have expected some elaboration. Instead, the writing is impersonal; no testimony is offered.

The essay's second paragraph retreats even further from that experience, fulfilling its promise to break the film into parts. Terms like 'unit' and 'segment' affect clinical detachment as the film is chopped into bits:

> *His Girl Friday* is built on the common unit of classical narrative cinema: the scene. Typically marked off by editing devices such as the dissolve, fade or wipe, each scene presents a distinct segment of space, time, and narrative action. We can locate 13 such scenes in *His Girl Friday*, set in the following locales: (1) the *Morning Post* office; (2) the restaurant; (3) the Criminal Courts pressroom; (4) Walter's office; (5) Earl Williams's cell; (6) the pressroom; (7) a precinct jail; (8) the pressroom; (9) the sheriff's office; (10) the street outside the prison; (11) the pressroom; (12) the sheriff's office; (13) the pressroom. All of these scenes are marked off by dissolves except for the transition between 8 and 9, which is simply a cut.
>
> *(Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 384)*

It is unclear how the writers think such a catalogue could be found to 'exemplify a sort of writing characteristic of film criticism'. The passage hardly reads like criticism. Paragraphs of critical writing tend to be shaped so as to move the reader to share a sense of what is important. By contrast, the ceremonial listing here works to *equalise* all locales and strip them of the action that defines them. Where critics might tend, for instance, to exploit the natural tendency of a paragraph to lend special weight to its closing sentence, the final sentence of the paragraph quoted here appears as a stolid report of just one more feature.[1] 'Speed' having been identified as the salient critical issue, the immediacy of the cut from the pressroom to the sheriff's office may justifiably be assumed to be pertinent. But an exception to a general pattern is noted without the provision of grounds for its noteworthiness. Even more striking is the use of numerical listing of scenes partitioned by semi-colons. Contravening the promise to show how the film has created a 'whirlwind experience', the regimented structure of the paragraph actively works *against* any sense of tumultuous passage, making the film

seem almost tediously measured. Since counting is not an activity this film invites, what is the *significance* of there (allegedly) being numerically thirteen rather than twelve or fourteen scenes? And what of the phrase 'we can locate'? The use of 'we' here is telling: it refers not to 'we viewers' but to 'we analysts', an imagined community who agree upon the relevance of keeping tally. Conversely, the conventional use of 'we' in criticism would attach itself to the description of an encounter and appeal in that description to the memory, judgement and renewed experience of an imagined community of viewers. Whilst criticism is apt to involve analysis, it aims to do so without 'breaking the film' and without straining for a plateau above experience. Aims and features such as these mark the difference between formal analysis and film criticism.[2]

Having enacted its dissection, the next part of the essay now makes more comprehensive claims, permitted by an assertion that the individual instance exactly fits the general paradigm:

> The scenes function, as we would expect, to advance the action. As we saw in Chapter 4 (pp. 108–10), classical Hollywood cinema often constructs a narrative around characters with definite traits who want to achieve specific goals. The clash of these characters' contrasting traits and conflicting goals propels the story forward in a step-by-step process of cause and effect. *His Girl Friday* has two such cause-effect chains.
>
> *(Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 385)*

It is as if the film has been sedated or solved. Where once the unpredictable whirlwind had reigned, now the scenes 'function' – 'as we would expect'. If the motif of propulsion returns us vaguely to the idea of speed, 'step-by-step' soon slows things down again. Moreover, the vocabulary has become diagrammatic. Scenes are cast as 'functions' in a 'process'. Metaphors of 'chains' and 'lines' straighten out the film. Solid-seeming words like 'advance', 'definite' and 'clash' bear no relation to tangible sounds or images in the film. Instead they help camouflage a move to impersonal abstraction in which onscreen figures are defined not by the way they talk and move, but by their 'traits' and 'goals', the 'clash' of which is bodiless and silent. Most diagrammatic of all are the references to 'cause' and 'effect', which seek to translate narrative depictions of social life into the language of physics. The metaphor of a 'cause-effect chain' offers the film as something like a vast queue of dominoes, each domino causing the next domino to fall, the various lines of dominoes splitting and converging in an intricate (but essentially meaningless) display.

Nothing stands outside this sequence. Bordwell and Thompson state that 'no event [in *His Girl Friday*] is uncaused':

> An event at the end of one scene is seen as a cause leading into an effect, that is, the event that begins the next scene. For example, at the end of the first scene, Walter [Cary Grant] offers to take Bruce [Ralph Bellamy] and Hildy [Rosalind Russell] to lunch; scene 2 starts with the three of them arriving at

> the restaurant. This exemplifies the 'linearity' of classical narrative: Almost every scene ends with a 'dangling cause', the effect of which is shown at the beginning of the next scene.
>
> *(Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 386)*[3]

The claims are emphatic, so much so that we could easily overlook the strange use of language. Does it really make sense, for instance, to say that Walter's offer to take Bruce and Hildy to lunch constitutes a *cause*? Hence that their arrival at the restaurant is an *effect* of Walter's offer? Doubtless part of what is amusing in this moment is the feigned innocence of Walter's arm-twisting: 'glad to do it', he exclaims, ushering them into the elevator – 'after you': the language of polite invitation. Bruce leads the way, blindly, Walter steering from behind. In a film centrally about coercion, both political and personal – a film about the power of the press, the force of suggestion, the rhetoric of momentum – the question of why people are compelled to act as they do is hardly one we can afford to brush aside. But the vocabulary of 'cause' and 'effect' obstructs what is significant. I push a glass, the glass falls over: the glass falling is an effect of my pushing. On the other hand, Hildy's acceptance of Walter's offer crucially involves a degree of will.

Bordwell and Thompson confuse causes and *reasons*. Unlike the glass, Hildy could have found a way of resisting – and it is surely a narrative possibility, maybe even an expectation, at this early stage in the film that she might protest at Walter's insistence on making fun of her new fiancé. Recognising that Hildy might have objected to the offer and to his behaviour more strongly, or even flatly refused, opens up the potential question: why didn't she? The picture invited by the vocabulary of cause and effect is suggestive of a broader way of seeing in which the question 'why' has a narrow remit. When asked of character behaviour, for instance, it urges us to identify a mechanical trigger rather than a set of interlocking motives. Asking *why* a particular domino fell in the way in did makes no sense except by pointing to the domino preceding it. Everything can be traced back to an originating cause and leads forward to a final conclusive point. In an encapsulation of this idea in *Narration in the Fiction Film,* Bordwell describes the 'classical ending' as 'the crowning of the structure, the logical conclusion of the string of events, the final effect of the initial cause' (Bordwell 1988: 159). Bordwell and Thompson tell us that, in *His Girl Friday*, 'lines of action are clearly resolved at the end … Bruce, having gone home with mother, leaves Walter and Hildy preparing for a second honeymoon no less hectic than the first', adding, rather smugly: 'So much for causality' (Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 386).

But let's not be hasty. Have we really been urged to see it as a matter of *logic* ('the logical conclusion') that Hildy should end up choosing the charming bastard over the affable dullard? How could a structure of causal inevitability contain within it an event of choice? And are we even sure we saw such an 'event'? It is no small measure of the film's mesmeric force that we shall find it difficult to trace steps back from its final image: of Hildy lugging that suitcase behind Walter Burns, the fade-out swift and comic and brutal. To see her choice as having been caused is roughly the substance of Bruce's earlier charge against Walter, his accusation almost lost in a

whirlpool of words: 'You're doing all this to her! She wanted to get away from you! But you caught her and changed her mind … ' The accusation is of something like brainwashing or hypnosis – and indeed we have been urged to see Walter's incessant manipulation as the work of someone like a conjuror. But we have also been shown that Hildy is deeply versed in Walter's tricks and can at least match his powers of persuasion. At any rate, to find Hildy merely the fool of a shotgun wedding would provide no grounds for merriment at the film's close. A wedding may be forced, but a marriage cannot be caused.

FIGURE 1.1 'Does it really make sense … to say that Walter's offer … constitutes a cause?' *His Girl Friday*, 1940

FIGURE 1.2 'It is no small measure of the film's mesmeric force that we shall find it difficult to trace steps back from its final image: of Hildy lugging that suitcase behind Walter Burns, the fade-out swift and comic and brutal.' *His Girl Friday*, 1940

Problems result from the way a ready taxonomy of terms ('cause', 'effect', 'event', for example) has been forged outside of and prior to any specific critical encounter and then *applied* as descriptive vocabulary. General terms lack grip once forced to fit the particular. The shortcomings are perhaps most evident in the essay's plot synopsis, where the term 'goal' is, it seems obsessively, tagged to no fewer than four different characters. We are told, for instance: 'Hildy Johnson wants to quit newspaper reporting and settle down with Bruce Baldwin. This is her initial goal' (Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 385). The peculiar inaptness of this claim is worth discussing. Its placement at the head of a summary offers the claim as neutral statement rather than critical interpretation. Conviction and brevity of utterance imply that the film pronounces this information with comparable starkness. The dogmatic second sentence – 'This is her initial goal' – moves not to justify but to *classify* the content of the first. Yet the militant connotations of 'goal', suggesting a concrete point of achievement (in common with words like 'mission' and 'objective'), fails to agree with the sense of someone wanting, rather less definitely, to 'settle down' – 'to live like a human being', as Hildy herself puts it. Nor, in a more elaborated account, could the word's minimal designation of a remote and difficult-to-attain state of affairs tally with the fact that at the start of the film Hildy has nothing to stop her settling down with Bruce (the divorce is confirmed, the train tickets are booked, the wedding is tomorrow); nor with the fact that in the film's first scene Hildy does not merely express the aim of quitting at some point in the future, she announces that she *is* quitting, which is to say, she *does* it ('I'm through!' she declares, performative present-tense, 'goal' accomplished). *Nor* could the delicate way she observes Walter as he takes in her engagement ring (the cut to closer two-shot giving prominence to Hildy's evidently mixed feelings, with the fond tilt of her head on 'you would start reminiscing') find happy congruence with the no-looking-back, knowing-one's-own-mind resolution entailed by the notion of a singular 'goal'. Such facts and implications would counsel a critic to find an alternative, more apposite word or phrase. Counsel will go unheard if the analyst's unspoken 'goal' is the preservation of a cherished Category.

What Bordwell and Thompson cannot escape is the fact that any descriptive word choice necessarily embodies an interpretive stance. The phrase 'initial goal', chosen primarily to recap the paradigmatic vocabulary advanced elsewhere, has nonetheless been picked from an available range of potential descriptions which might have included 'vague wish', 'heartfelt desire', 'ill-defined plan' and 'cover story'. Each would construe Hildy's situation in a slightly and significantly different way. The critic James Harvey fondly puts it as Hildy being 'determined to have just what she really knows better than: a "halfway normal life", as she calls it' (Harvey 1998: 441). Gerald Mast characterises it as 'a conflict between her conscious intentions to be "a woman" and her unconscious instincts as "a newspaperman"' (Mast 1984: 227). In each of these two instances, the use of quoted lines ('halfway normal life', 'a woman', 'a newspaperman') testifies to the critic's attempt to formulate the matter using the film's own formulations. The phrases recall the film for us, each of them standing within its world for a set of ideals and qualities. In particular, Mast's placing of the

FIGURE 1.3 'Hildy's evidently mixed feelings, with the fond tilt of her head on "you would start reminiscing",' *His Girl Friday*, 1940

two identities in an even syntactical structure works to suggest that Hildy is torn by equally insistent pulls. Where Bordwell and Thompson's phrase 'initial goal' implies a linear series of on-the-surface wants, his distinction between 'conscious intentions' and 'unconscious instincts' offers a picture where judgement and impulse are at odds. Nevertheless, despite the more compelling terms of description, we might still find the formulation unsatisfactory – too schematic in its easy resort to Freudian language, too quick to posit Hildy's 'instincts' as wholly 'unconscious'.

Stanley Cavell, in his essay on the film in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, tries another avenue. He starts by asking why Hildy has come back to see Walter in the first place:

> Hildy Johnson … attributes reasonable motives to herself, but none of them quite sticks. … Evidently [she] does not know why she has come back to see Walter. I do not say it is obvious why. If it was merely to tell him something, give him a piece of information, she could have telephoned him or sent him a telegram. And why did she bring Bruce … along? … Walter seems to know why she has come back. What does he know? He knows that she is not being straightforward with her explanations to him and he knows that she knows from his unending messages to her – by telephone, by telegram, by sky-writing – that he wants her back and hence that he will use his endless resources of manipulation to get her back. It must follow for him that she has come back to see him because she wants this of him. But why? If she wants to get back together, why does she not, in return, just say so?
>
> *(Cavell 1981: 163–64)*

For Cavell, Hildy's 'motives', far from being reducible to the specification of an 'initial goal', are found to require careful consideration. As readers we are invited to share a train of thought, chalked by the repeated use of 'if' and 'why'. In contrast to

Bordwell and Thompson's terse summary ('This is her initial goal'), Cavell's repeated use of questions dramatises the critic's *search* for a satisfactory account. The style of writing manifests an ongoing and sympathetic involvement with the film rather than a stance of disinterested mastery. The film would simply not be of interest if it were 'obvious' – that is to say, if what it offered were easy to articulate. The matter is certainly not one to be *solved* by the introduction of a paradigmatic term. Instead, the passage sketches the ground of difficulty through ordinary language, undulating syntax borne of lexical semi-echo ('by telephone, by telegram') and combinations of simple verb forms: 'to want', 'to know', 'to come back', 'to get [someone] back'. This section of the passage bears repeating:

> he knows that she knows from his unending messages to her – by telephone, by telegram, by skywriting – that he wants her back and hence that he will use his endless resources of manipulation to get her back. It must follow for him that she has come back to see him because she wants this of him.
>
> *(Cavell 1981: 163–64)*

The form of words opens up the film's invitation for us to entertain a complex order of intentionality. Whereas *supposing* that 'Hildy *wants* to settle down with Bruce Baldwin' would involve mere second-order intentionality (our supposing, Hildy's wanting), our *inferring* that 'Walter *knows* that she *knows* … that he *wants* her back' involves fourth-order intentionality.[4] The point here is that Cavell's assembly of a dependent structure of verbs articulates our intuitive grasp of multiple and mutually responsive states of supposing, wanting and knowing – a grasp which is part of a fuller experience of the film. An acknowledgment that Hildy acts with the knowledge that Walter will seek to persuade her to return (and, in all likelihood, to insist on meeting Bruce, and, in all likelihood, to try to show him up) needs to enter into our account of what she is doing there. After further consideration, Cavell ventures the following:

> I take it that he is being asked to help her escape not from unhappiness – what Bruce offers her is something she genuinely wants – but from a counterfeit happiness, anyway something decisively less for her than something else.
>
> *(Cavell 1981: 165)*

The deliberation has allowed the concept of 'wanting' to be prized apart in ways that a term such as 'goal' would refuse. It allows us to acknowledge Hildy as genuinely wanting a form of happiness which she may suspect to be counterfeit (or not 'for her'). Moreover, it becomes possible to see her actions as an appeal to Walter which she may not have been willing (or even *she* may not have been able) to put into words. 'In order to prove that nothing has come between them,' Cavell writes, 'he has, so to speak, to arrange for her to free herself from her divorce, to prompt her to divorce herself from it. This seems to be what freedom in marriage requires' (Cavell 1981: 164). Cavell's criticism moves flexibly between the film and a wider realm of

ideas pertaining to freedom, marriage and divorce – allowing the film to move us towards an understanding of freedom in marriage, for instance, as requiring not just the option of divorce, but the possibility to actively decide *not* to divorce (the prospect of divorce from divorce). The fact that freeing oneself may depend on the prompts and encouragements of others makes the matter of personal freedom complicated.

Crucially, the matter is raised not to show how the film helpfully illustrates an issue, but to show the missable complexities of the film *and* as a further way of engaging with what it undertakes. The purpose is not chiefly to link the film's concerns to an item of interest beyond it (discussions of free will in philosophy, for instance). Nor is the idea to fit the film to the terms of an established paradigm. On the contrary, the vocabulary seems *called for*. For instance, the word 'divorce' comes into play not on grounds that it was a socially relevant issue at the time of production, but because Cavell sees the film actively courting the concept – for instance, with Walter's quip that 'Divorce doesn't mean anything anymore, it's just some words mumbled over you by a judge', comically invoking the doubtless logic that if marriage can no longer seek validity from the church, then neither can divorce from the state. Similarly, the word 'counterfeit' in the passage quoted above is occasioned by what Cavell sees as the film's concern with 'knowing the real value of things', exemplified by Walter's henchman Louie (Abner Biberman) and his canny estimation of the value of counterfeit dollars (Cavell 1981: 177). Similarly, the word 'escape' recurs throughout the essay, finding kinship with the word 'reprieve', prompted by the film's suggestive parallels between Hildy and the prisoner Earl (John Qualen), both of whom yearn for respite from what Cavell and Mollie (Helen Mack) jointly call a 'heartless' world. Here is Cavell on Hildy at the instant of Earl's jailbreak:

> Go to the moment at which, furious with Walter for having had Bruce arrested on a phony charge, she is standing at the doorway, belongings in hand, and making a speech of farewell to the chumps of the newspaper game, delivering her declaration of freedom, of her escape to normal life. Machine gun shots ring out, and then a warning bell and siren signal a prison break. These violent sounds of emergency are as if in response to Hildy's speech. They have a farcical, or symptomatic, aptness to Hildy's claim to be getting out, that is, breaking out. 'What's going on?' a reporter yells out of the window. A voice from nowhere replies, 'Earl Williams escaped!' Given a moment's thought we might almost laugh at the implied comment or conspiracy of the world, mobilizing itself to prevent Hildy from escaping, but there is no time for the laugh to express itself, or to recognize itself as such, so its energy further heightens the excitement of the moment. To the extent that our more settled idea is that the alarm is as of a conspiracy against her, or let us say, a piece of bad fortune, then the implied comment is that Hildy can no more escape this edifice, and what it means, than Earl Williams can. But to the extent that we read her as wanting the escape not from Walter but from Bruce, that is, an

> escape from her separation from Walter, then our idea of the alarm is as of a piece of good fortune, a perfect diversion to cover her getaway.
>
> *(Cavell 1981: 173)*

Key terms of this passage are 'escape', 'freedom', 'fortune' and 'conspiracy'. Other terms which recur through the essay include 'adventure', 'reprieve', 'insanity' and 'improvisation'. They may not be words we might normally expect to hear in discussions of romantic comedy, but nor are they plucked from the air. The passage does not catalogue them as themes, although it would be possible to describe them as such. Better to think of them as concepts around which various aspects of the film cohere. The word 'fortune', for instance, recalls and connects a number of the film's features, including Walter's laughing reference to a 'higher power', the newspapermen cursing their card-playing luck, Hildy's wish of good fortune to Earl, and her invention of a superstition concerning the rim of a hat. The word 'conspiracy', meanwhile, evokes various occasions of kidnap, trickery and deceit, whilst also seeming prompted by a certain choreographic quality of the film's style, the impression of things falling into place and order as if preset to do so at just the right time (conjuring a sense of that 'higher power', perhaps – and in a godless realm of double-crossing and backroom-dealing, the difference between fortune and conspiracy may be difficult to judge). Concepts are generated and developed by the film, which then become terms deployed, examined and flexibly related to one another through criticism.

No concept, no word, can be taken for granted. Even words such as 'violent', 'energy', 'heightens' and 'emergency' can be seen not just as ways of conveying the scene's content, but as expansions on the concept of 'urgency', in turn relating to a wider perception of the role of the film's rapidity. The phrase 'no time for the laugh to express itself' conveys a vivid sense of that thrilling haste (the breathless quality noted provisionally as 'whirlwind' and subsequently abandoned in Bordwell and Thompson's account). More importantly, it registers that the film's rush might not actually allow for complete or clear reactions, let alone measured assessment. In this context, 'given a moment's thought' captures the *irony* of the way it steams ahead, refusing us the chance to settle, as if in mimicry of propaganda's hustle. Acknowledging the possibility of indecision or disorientation in our response, Cavell poses contradictory readings – of the world mobilising against Hildy or else giving her a helping hand. Writing about the film afterwards, of course, can lure us into accepting merely our 'more settled view'. Counter to this, Cavell urges us to recall how the film runs when it runs in full flow, to consult our memory of the momentary. To consult but not necessarily to privilege it. After all, response is not just a matter of instantaneous reaction; our responses to good movies keep unfolding long after their endings. Perhaps criticism can then be considered a communion between the critic's present and past selves, as well as between the critic and the work. At any rate, articulating the developing nature of a response is forged through an undertaking to reconnect with the film on its own terms, ideally *in* its own terms (its own terms as the critic construes them). Where the disengaged vocabulary of formal analysis may

threaten to divorce us from this possibility, the language of film criticism aspires to the condition of remarriage.

Notes

1 Ironically, given the tenor of scrupulous objectivity, the list is incomplete and the final observation mistaken. The scene in which Hildy's farewell to the reporters is interrupted by gunfire and alarm bells is unaccountably omitted (it falls between what Bordwell and Thompson call scenes 9 and 10). The transition to this scene is also a straight cut, which makes the paragraph's definitive closing statement inaccurate.

2 Whilst my critique of Bordwell and Thompson's essay concentrates on how written style relates to matters of responsiveness and interpretation, perhaps the clearest difference between formal analysis and film criticism concerns the degree of transparency with which evaluation is performed. One view would have it that formal analysis does not judge the quality of works of art, it merely analyses them. Certainly there is little presented in the Bordwell and Thompson essay which would or could persuade someone that *His Girl Friday* is any good. But evaluation sneaks in through the back door, since it follows from their insistence that the film is so completely *typical* of Hollywood that the film is *undistinguished*. Here I would direct the reader to Andrew Britton's powerful critique of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* in 'The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole: Wisconsin Formalism and "The Classical Style"', to which the current essay is indebted. Britton's examination shows how, despite disavowing any interest in evaluation, passages in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* nonetheless, 'again and again, … fail to conceal, a judgment of value' (Britton 2009: 450).

3 Performers added in square brackets. One remarkable feature of Bordwell and Thompson's essay is that they manage to write several thousand words on *His Girl Friday* without so much as mentioning the names (let alone evoking the particular physical demeanours) of Cary Grant, Ralph Bellamy and Rosalind Russell.

4 Here I am beholden to Robin Dunbar's intriguing suggestion that grasping complex orders of intentionality (inferring that someone knows that another someone wants them to know, and so on) may be fundamental to the human experience of the art of storytelling. (See Dunbar 2005.)

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2

QUESTIONING STYLE

Robert Sinnerbrink

> Criticism, as part of the philosophy of art, must aspire to philosophy.
>
> (Stanley Cavell 1979a: 202)

Styles of thought

According to tradition, philosophy begins in wonder. We might add that it usually ends in one of two ways, either in self-assured mastery or in thoughtful perplexity. Philosophical reflection on film presents an intriguing variation on this theme. Here too we find wonder at the cinema: what it is or how it works, what makes it so arresting, enchanting, or overwhelming. Nonetheless, like traditional philosophical reflection on art – think of Plato's anxiety over the role of poetry in the *polis* – philosophers of film often end up disenfranchising cinema by reducing it to an instrumental example or passive theoretical object. Alternatively, however, philosophy can engage in a thoughtful meditation that accompanies film, translating the experience it affords into a different register and in doing so perhaps also transforming itself.

Is this simply a matter of different perspectives? Does style matter in philosophy? Such questions seem naïve, even archaic today. The dominant strain in contemporary philosophy of film, for example, has embraced a model of theorising that is naturalistic rather than humanistic, explanatory rather than hermeneutic, scientistic rather than aesthetic (see Rodowick 2007). We might call this the 'analytic-cognitivist' turn in film theory, though such a rubric is bound to displease (see Sinnerbrink 2010). Whatever the name, this turn was prompted by a rejection of the older paradigm of film theory, which Bordwell and Carroll famously dubbed 'Grand Theory'. According to its critics, Grand Theory suffered from 'a strategic use of obscurity' (Allen and Smith 1997: 6), including indiscriminate punning and conceptual free association; it thus expressed a pernicious proclivity towards pseudo-argumentation that runs 'counter to the clarificatory impulse of the analytic tradition' (Allen and Smith 1997: 8).

At issue in this dubious dispute between advocates of analytic clarity and proponents of Continental rhetoric is the question of style in philosophy. From the rationalist perspective of the analytic philosophy of film, clarity and objectivity are paramount; philosophy is about framing arguments, giving reasons, developing theories that seek to account for or explain various phenomena, or else critically analysing the ways in which such theories are framed, applied, or defended. From this point of view, language is supposed to be clear and perspicuous, revealing underlying argumentative, conceptual, or analytical claims without irrelevant adornment. Persuasion is a function of the rationality of arguments rather than the rhetoric of statements. From this point of view, the various attempts of so-called Continental thinkers to convey, through novel forms of discourse, the complex affect of film can only be construed as 'pseudo-argumentation'. Proper philosophy is handmaiden to science rather than companion to art. Style, from this point of view, is irrelevant.

Continental philosophers, for their part, have often (though not always) questioned the assumption that philosophy is best modelled on the natural sciences (or on logic or on mathematics). The importance accorded to the description of subjective experience, notably in phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty), the critical questioning of rationalism in modernity (Hegel, Nietzsche, Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, Critical Theory), and a 'linguistic turn' orientated towards semiotic, pragmatic, and expressive-disclosive dimensions of language (in hermeneutics, the later Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and poststructuralism), all pointed to an alternative way of thinking committed to the critical and transformative potential of philosophy. From this point of view, the language of philosophy is itself expressive of what is to be communicated; philosophy is a performative, rather than simply representational, kind of writing. Style makes, rather than masks, the thought.

What role might a poetic thinking play in our contemporary cultural situation? This question is by no means new. The early German romantics, for example, called for an 'aesthetic mythology of reason': a 'transcendental poetry' or (philosophico-poetical) *criticism* that would overcome the divisions between philosophy and literature, universal and particular, reason and feeling, science and art, and thus provide a (utopian) image of the unity of thought and imagination (see Critchley 2004, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1988). Given the finite character of human reason, romantic thinkers (like the Schlegel brothers and the poet Novalis) argued that we can disclose the universal only indirectly, through a combination of conceptual and poetic means. A poetic thinking must therefore acknowledge its partial and finite character, expressing the complexity of reality in a plurality of perspectives, through fragments, while also giving voice to the individual subjectivity of the thinker. Philosophy and art must rejuvenate each other; aesthetic and poetic means of expression combining to supplement, and transfigure, rationalistic theoretical discourse.

There is a lesson here, I suggest, for the contemporary quarrel over analytic versus Continental philosophy, a contentious and problematic distinction perhaps better described as a disagreement between *rationalist* and *romanticist* styles of thought. In our context, philosophical writing on film – what I would like to call *romantic film-philosophy*, inspired by romanticism's conception of criticism – could supplement the more

rationalistic approaches to thinking film that have gained favour in recent decades. It might even contribute to reversing philosophy's traditional disenfranchisement of art, opening up the possibility that philosophy, no longer defined as the other of art, might transform itself through its encounter with film.

Exemplary of this kind of romantic film-philosophy is the work of Stanley Cavell, which combines, in a distinctive voice, aesthetic receptivity with philosophical reflection. Philosophical writing on film, in Cavell's view, is not simply a matter of framing arguments, undertaking analyses, or debating theoretical claims; it is also a matter of aesthetic experience and its rhetorical presentation, of how philosophical insight can be married to literary expression. Can philosophy admit art, literature, poetry – not to mention subjectivity – back into the realm of reason? Can it accept thought at the hands of poetry? Cavell gives an answer, in the form of a question, apropos the famous couplet in Shakespeare's *Othello*: 'Certainly not so long as philosophy continues, as it has from the first, to demand the banishment of poetry from its republic. Perhaps it could if it could itself become literature. But can philosophy become literature and still know itself?' (Cavell 1979b: 496). We can transpose this question to the encounter between philosophy and film. How can philosophy think (with) film? What happens to philosophy in its encounter with film? Cavell has addressed such questions as much in his manner of writing as in the claims that his prose makes. Such writing adopts a *questioning style* sharing elective affinities with what film enables us to experience as well as what philosophical romanticism attempts to express.

Giving voice

Cavell tells the story of how his coming to philosophy coincided with his experience of an encounter between philosophical and non-philosophical texts. Cavell singles out Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as the first that 'staked its teaching on showing that we do not know, or make ourselves forget, what reading is' (Cavell 2006: 28). He also names three films that suggested to him what philosophy might become should it chance re-orientating itself towards different modes of thought: Bergman's *Sommarnattens leende* [*Smiles of a Summer Night*] (1955, Sweden), Resnais and Duras' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959, France/Japan), and Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960, France/Italy). For Cavell, each film was concerned, in different ways, with 'the question about whether something new might happen', and shadowed by that asking whether love is an exhausted possibility, 'a question incorporating some residue of a fantasy of marriage' (Cavell 2006: 29) – a striking anticipation of Cavell's abiding concerns in writing on film. These three films not only altered American perceptions of what 'foreign' (indeed 'Continental') films could do, they also opened up the question of what constitutes 'a medium of thought'. They were films that served 'to alter the iconography of intellectual conversation' (Cavell 2006: 29), not least the possibility that film might be an apt and equal partner to philosophy, or that some kind of marriage between the two might be possible.

I take Cavell's anecdote to be significant for understanding the possibilities of philosophical writing on film. It raises the question of the *future* of film-philosophy. It might seem grandiose to talk of the future of something called 'film-philosophy', by which I mean aesthetically receptive writing that develops philosophical insights from our experience of film rather than via the traditional or technical problems of philosophy. This approach can be distinguished from the more familiar 'philosophy of film', which (like other versions of the 'philosophy of X') takes film as the object of theoretical analysis or rational explanation (see Sinnerbrink 2010). Cavell makes a similar distinction in his Preface to Eyal Peretz's recent book on Brian de Palma: 'A way to put the difference in what I might like to see become the field of Film and Philosophy, anyway in how I have conceived my writing on film to be motivated philosophically, is that it takes the fact of film itself to become a challenge for philosophy' (Cavell 2007: xiv). Cavell's imagined field of 'Film and Philosophy' takes film to pose questions to philosophy, to challenge philosophy's claims to best articulate what art – or in particular the art of images – strives to show.

As Cavell remarks, however, it is striking how ambivalent the film-philosophy relationship has traditionally been. On the one hand, for example, there is philosophy's persistent avoidance of film, as though philosophy were aware of film's power to challenge it (Cavell 2007: xiv). On the other, there is an affinity between film and philosophy, as though they were made for each other (Cavell 1999: 25), the one presenting a 'moving image of scepticism' that the other both courts and attempts to dispel (Cavell 1981: 188–89). Such an encounter, however ambivalent, between avoidance and acknowledgement, should not just mean that philosophy can now rejuvenate itself by appropriating film. The point, rather, is to show how the opening up of philosophy to non-philosophy, and of non-philosophy to philosophy, transforms both philosophy and film. Cavell's 'Film and Philosophy' or what I am calling 'film-philosophy' expands how we might imagine thinking to occur, revealing film as a medium of thought that accompanies but also questions philosophy, inviting us to transform philosophical expression in light of what film allows us to feel and to think. For film can disclose the everyday in ways that bring to our attention the unfamiliarity of the familiar, the difficulty of acknowledging others, the problem of our sense of reality, the meaning of being human, the question of scepticism or nihilism, the possibility of love – all things that philosophy has traditionally asked about, and that film has now rediscovered, questioned, and reanimated in its own distinctive ways. Cavell intimates as much in pointing to the three films he mentions as having been decisive not only for his own philosophical experience but for transforming the possibilities of 'intellectual conversation' *between* film and philosophy.

We might call this the problem of *giving voice* to philosophy's transformative encounter with film, and to film's opening up of philosophy to cinematic exploration. What happens to the way we think, which is to say write, once philosophy is engaged by film? In what follows I address this question by considering some of Cavell's writings as case studies in film-philosophy, suggesting that what is at stake in the encounter between film and philosophy is less a matter of interdisciplinary debate than a question of inventing new styles of thought.

Achieving conviction

In an interview with James Conant, Stanley Cavell remarks that philosophy without theory – philosophical writing that avoids modelling itself on scientistic or explanatory modes of discourse – implies the necessity of attending to style. It requires attention to how one says, indeed writes, what it is that film gives one to think. Style in philosophical writing becomes important when one eschews the kind of *rationalist* view that currently dominates, for example, mainstream aesthetics and film theory. Style makes the thought.

Such an approach, however, presents its own challenges. As Cavell observes, if you give up

> something like formal argumentation as the route to conviction in philosophy, and you give up the idea that either scientific evidence or poetic persuasion is the way to philosophical conviction, then the question of what achieves philosophical conviction must at all times be on your mind. The obvious answer for me is that it must lie in writing itself. But in *what* about the writing? It isn't that there's a rhetorical form, any more than there is an emotional form, in which I expect conviction to happen. But the sense that nothing other than this prose here, as it's passing before our eyes, can carry conviction, is one of the thoughts that drives the shape of what I do. Together with … the sense that … if there is any place at which the human spirit allows itself to be under its own question, it is in philosophy; that anything, indeed, that allows that questioning to happen *is* philosophy.
>
> *(Conant 1989: 59)*

Cavell's comment calls for reflection on the ways in which one might approach writing (philosophically) on film. Such reflection also demands, in keeping with the view that philosophy means putting into question, that this kind of writing also remains a questioning, putting itself into question as much as questioning what it is given to think. As Cavell remarks, poetic persuasion may capture imagination or arouse our enthusiasm (for a film, an image, an idea), but this does not necessarily mean that such writing carries 'philosophical conviction', by which Cavell presumably intends both the philosophical conviction expressed by the prose and that to which it may give rise in the reader. The question, then, is how to achieve such philosophical conviction in the kind of writing on film that does not rely principally upon formal argumentation or poetic persuasion. This is what is at stake in the question of style: where it is only the prose one writes – how one gives voice to thought on film – that assumes or evokes the tasks of reflecting and acknowledging, persuading and questioning, which are essential to philosophical conversation.

Can aesthetic description persuade philosophically? As Cavell observes, thinking of his works on romantic comedies of remarriage and melodramas of the unknown woman:

> Now we are at the heart of the aesthetic matter. Nothing can show this value to you unless it is discovered in your own experience, in the persistent exercise of your own taste, and thence the willingness to challenge your taste as it stands, to form your own artistic conscience, hence nowhere but in the details of your encounter with specific works.
>
> *(Cavell 2005a: 93)*

Cavell's remarks preface his extended discussions of two fine Hollywood films, discussions described as posing questions: one on a moment in Howard Hawks' *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940, US) and another on 'the mood of *Pennies from Heaven* [Herbert Ross, 1981, US]' (Cavell 2005a: 94). The fact that Cavell frames his approach in the form of posing 'questions' to particular films is significant. For the film-philosophy dialogue here is precisely a matter of questioning, a *questioning style*: one that questions film, indeed particular films, but also allows film to question philosophy. As Cavell remarks, film can rediscover, and thereby challenge, what philosophy claims to have discovered, and can inflect such discoveries in novel or provocative ways (Cavell 2005b: 190–92). This is one way of taking what I am calling *romantic* film-philosophy, which draws on the idea of the 'literary Absolute' in German romanticism, where literature becomes theory and theory literature; on the romanticist conception of *criticism* that is at once aesthetic, philosophical, and theoretical; and on the tradition of philosophical romanticism, a style of thought orientated towards aesthetic forms of world-disclosure that can illuminate novel or marginalised aspects of experience.[1] This would be a manner of philosophising on film in which the question of style is intimately related to that of achieving philosophical conviction: acts of philosophical criticism that begin with the primacy of the particular – be it a particular film, scene, or moment – and then elaborate the critical meaning, philosophical significance, and theoretical implications of these instances via detailed aesthetic engagement. It is philosophical-critical writing that depends as much on aesthetic as on argumentative persuasion.

From this point of view, aesthetic experience precedes and informs philosophical reflection. Such reflection, in turn, opens up or illuminates one's experience, which in turn fosters the kind of transformative thinking that calls for novel means of expression. We might call this a virtuous aesthetic-hermeneutic circle. The embrace of this aesthetic-hermeneutic circle is why Cavell, and others who might be described as engaging in romantic film-philosophy, can philosophise on film without necessarily doing film theory or 'philosophy of film' in the more conventional sense.[2] Theoretical investigation of film, for its part, should certainly be done (though often is not) in conjunction with detailed and receptive aesthetic inquiry, paying attention to the details of one's encounter with specific works. More typically, however, philosophical writing on film ('philosophy of film') tends to reduce particular films or individual scenes to readymade examples of assumed theoretical problems, concepts, or arguments. Cavell's writing on film thus differs in a number of ways from the conventional style of the 'philosophy of film'. Such writing is less an adversarial intervention designed to refute or retire the flawed proposals of others than an

invitation to think for oneself in dialogue with a community that is fragmentary or dispersed. It involves an effort to do justice to the aesthetic (and philosophical) experience that film can afford us; to communicate the non-conceptual ways of experiencing and understanding that film is uniquely able to disclose.

Whether this kind of writing carries philosophical conviction for the reader depends, in part, on that reader's own aesthetic and philosophical orientation, his or her openness to self-questioning, including the questioning of what he or she understands (or has been taught) that philosophy (or film) should be. On the other hand, it is also dependent on the power of the writing – its philosophical and rhetorical style – to persuade the sceptical reader that an attitude of open questioning, ideally shared by author and reader alike, might disclose otherwise obscured or unnoticed aspects of our experience of film. Aesthetically effective writing not only illuminates new aspects, it sensitises us to new ways of seeing, educating us as to how we might see film better. Such intensification of one's filmic experience provides aesthetic evidence that the kind of experience evoked by a particular film demands novel or exacting means of expression. And here it is not just the philosopher-critic's prose style but the film too that carries aesthetic and philosophical conviction. As Cavell remarks, it is just this openness to questioning and to being questioned, to having our habitual ways of seeing and thinking put in question, that makes film *philosophical* in the deepest sense. Film's philosophical vocation, ordinarily elusive, becomes luminous in its aesthetic disclosure of the familiar as unfamiliar, as marvellous, as demanding thought.

Collecting fragments

There are many ways in which the romantic style of film-philosophy can engage the reader, elaborating philosophical insights via the detailed engagement with film. Let me take as an example Cavell's discussion of Chantal Akerman's extraordinary film about the ordinary, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai des commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975, Belgium/France), which occurs in the middle of an essay entitled 'The World as Things', originally published in 1998 as part of an art exhibition catalogue and then republished in *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow* (Cavell 2005c).[3] A remarkable case of performative writing on film, this essay comprises a collection of fragments – fragments of thought and fragmentary thoughts – on the nature of collection; a re-collection of various ways of thinking about collecting that does not narrate or theorise so much as enact or display (like a cabinet of wonders). It *shows* rather than *tells* us what the passion for collection means. As J.M. Bernstein observes, Cavell's essay is itself 'a collection of curiosities, a thing of things, a series of fragments on the meaning and being of fragments' (Bernstein 2003: 135).

'The World as Things' is not an essay on film as such, although two films feature importantly in its composition: Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* and Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (Chris Marker, 1983, France). It belongs, rather, to those of Cavell's essays concerned with the way that films can evoke philosophical reflection through non-philosophical means, provoking us to think in ways that are cinematic and

philosophical at once, challenging philosophy by rediscovering what philosophy has thought but doing so by distinctively cinematic means.[4] It is an instance of what I am calling romantic film-philosophy, as distinct from the more traditional and rationalist philosophy of film (see Sinnerbrink 2011).

The essay commences with Cavell's meditative responses to a medley of theories on collecting: from Jean Baudrillard's 'System of Collecting', Kryzystof Pomian's study *Collectors and Curiosities*, Foucault's *The Order of Things*, to Benjamin's essay, 'Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian'. These reflections on the nature of collecting are then linked with a more traditionally philosophical voice, the Platonic discourse on the One and the Many (the One collecting the Many particulars under a universal Form in which they participate and find their meaning). Various dissonant counter-points to the Platonic theory of collection are then added, from Wittgenstein's reflections on family resemblances among elements of particular language games to Heidegger's meditations on the Thing as gathering together the 'fourfold' of earth and sky, mortals and immortals. These counterpoints are then submitted to complex conceptual variations: Benjamin's thoughts on collecting are gathered together with reflections on Edgar Allan Poe, scepticism, Hume's 'bundle' theory of the self, Simmel on modern cities, and theories of collecting in art. Having assembled this cabinet of wonders, this collection of thoughts on collecting, Cavell turns to the realm of film.

The passion of Jeanne Dielman

Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* is introduced halfway through the essay, one of two films added to the collection because of their particular treatment of collecting. It is adduced, Cavell tells us, 'because it can be taken as a study, or materialization, of the self as a collection, in the particular form in which the one who is the subject of the collection is not free (or not moved?) to supply its narrative' (Cavell 2005c: 253). The film is a study of the self, one that presents the idea of the self as collection in relation to the life of a very particular, feminine self; a self that cannot (or will not) supply the kind of narrative that is supposed to both reveal and give consistency to such a life. Not that there is much of a narrative to supply. The film is resolute in its slowing of time and gesture to the minutiae of the everyday, showing everything that would ordinarily be absented from such a cinematic narrative (waking up, shining shoes, making coffee, making beds, doing chores, bathing, cooking dinner), leaving open whether we are being shown a sympathetic portrait or a critical witnessing of the life of the character in question.

It is noteworthy that Cavell underlines a questioning attitude as appropriate to the film's domestic scenes. Is it that Jeanne is simply incapable of narrating herself to herself, or is it that she is indifferent, 'not moved' to do so? Is the film's patient presentation of her daily routines documentary or didactic, indifferent or indignant? Cavell leaves the question open: 'It is hard to know whether everything, or whether nothing, is being judged' (Cavell 2005c: 253). Cavell thus underlines the need for a responsive uncertainty to the film: questioning one's ability to 'read' the undecidable

character of the film's patient and passive recording of Jeanne's routines, actions, and gestures.

We might compare Cavell's self-questioning responsiveness with a more assertoric account of the film. In a recent philosophical work, we find the following passage:

> now that camera movement has become a commonplace, holding the camera stationary for very long periods of time is correctly construed as making an expressive point. For instance, in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1[0]80 Bruxelles* (1975) the camera is stationary in each interior shot in the film, and this comments on the trapped existence of the eponymous character: the camera cannot move, Jeanne Dielman cannot escape.
>
> *(Gaut 2010: 39–40)*

Akerman's expressive choice of static interior shots is presented here as a straightforward example of a director's aesthetic choice; the shots themselves are described as 'commenting' on (rather than simply showing) Jeanne's own capture or immobility, her domestic incarceration. The language used to express this parallel is concise and matter-of-fact; a point is identified, a conclusion reached. The assumption guiding the remark and choice of example is that there are familiar, even obvious, meanings attaching to certain aesthetic choices (like a director's use of certain shots), and that here we are dealing with an example that makes a clear parallel between entrapment and immobility, stasis and capture. The parallel is remarked again in the doubling of 'cannot' in the concluding clause ('cannot move,' 'cannot escape'), which has the effect, we might say, of compounding the entrapment to which Jeanne is said to be subject, this time by means of an interpretation that closes down, rather than opens up, the mesmerising quality of Akerman's meticulous images, the wordless ambiguity of Jeanne's actions and gestures.

We might ask, however, whether things are as obvious as Gaut's comment suggests. The static shots, for example, could be equally understood as bearing witness to what ordinarily passes unnoticed, not only on film but in our lifeworld more generally, with its gendered distributions of time, tasks, and meaning. The long takes of Jeanne bathing herself could also be taken as expressions of intimacy and attentiveness; the sustained sequences of ritualised domestic activity – cooking meatloaf, washing dishes, making beds, shopping for buttons – as acts of bearing witness, or of acknowledgement, for what ordinarily passes unnoticed in film as in life. Indeed, it is the ambiguity of Jeanne's gestures, actions, and responses – reflecting the ambiguity attending the decipherment of an Other's actions more generally – that give the film its arresting dramatic tension, despite its apparent 'uneventfulness'. The film's signature static shots unsettle and question, through time or duration, our habitual ways of seeing and responding to intimate images of the life of another. Akerman's choice of static shots suggests, if anything, that the familiar is also uncanny, the obvious opaque, the inner life and motivations of others irreducibly ambiguous. The aesthetic experience afforded by a film like *Jeanne Dielman* demands a language suitably receptive

to this ambiguity, open to the plurality of overlapping, even conflicting interpretations that it might evoke.

As Cavell remarks, the film presents events from three days in the life of Jeanne Dielman in a way that is unsettling rather than obvious: 'I sketch from memory certain events, already knowing that while little happens that in customary terms would be called interesting, the way it is presented, in its very uneventfulness, makes it all but unthinkable to describe what happens in sufficient detail to recount everything shown to you' (Cavell 2005c: 253). *Jeanne Dielman*, in Cavell's hands, is recounted as an *experience*; one that the thinker or critic recounts, to which she attempts to give voice, but one that resists definitive interpretation. In doing so, one always remains conscious of the fallibility and uncertainty that accompanies this enterprise, that is, once we abandon 'formal argumentation as the route to conviction in philosophy'. The point is less to confirm, through example, what we already think we know than to bring novel or unexpected aspects to light. It is to transform our experience and our thinking via an open-ended dialogue or critical conversation with the film.

Cavell's recounting of the film – 'I sketch from memory certain events' – foregrounds the repetition of tasks punctuating its uneventful yet mesmerising narrative. The opening scene is of a woman standing by a stove, 'putting on a large pot under which she lights a match' (Cavell 2005c: 253). As Cavell notes, the camera remains 'unmoving' throughout: it takes up various 'posts' around the apartment, following the round of tasks and activities, always presenting individual figures from the front and taking in enough of their bodies to locate them within particular rooms or spaces (Cavell 2005c: 253). We remain uncertain, Cavell remarks, as to whether this impassive presentation of Jeanne's routine is studiously indifferent or sharply judgemental. Indeed the rhythm of long takes and static shots is such 'that you recognize you are in a realm of time perhaps unlike any other you have experienced on film' (Cavell 2005c: 253). Cavell's ambiguous use of the second person address here is significant. It articulates an experiential point of view, one that remains ambiguous between Cavell's own experience, and that of the reader or viewer, who is thereby invited to evaluate his or her experience against that which Cavell describes. This appeal to one's own aesthetic experience of the film is the only plausible way of establishing the philosophical conviction and aesthetic receptivity or openness that Cavell's recounting of the film asks for or invites.

The description of the opening sequence of the film collects (or recollects) details more as a list of singular actions than a coherent narrative episode:

> A doorbell sounds, the woman takes off her apron, walks into the hallway to a door that she opens to a man whose face you do not see but whose hat and coat the woman takes and with whom she exchanges one-word greetings and then disappears into a room. The camera observes the closed door to the room, a change of light indicates the passage of an indefinite span of time, the door opens, the woman returns the coat and hat to the man, who now appears in full length. The man takes money out of a wallet and hands it to the woman, says something like 'Until next week', and departs. She deposits the money in a

> decorative vase on what proves to be the dining table, bathes herself, an evident ritual in which each part of her body is as if taken on separately, and then returns to the preparation at the stove.
>
> *(Cavell 2005c: 253–54)*

This recounting of Jeanne Dielman's routines continues for another page and a half, into which Cavell begins to interweave brief digressions. These philosophical asides are simply placed alongside the descriptive prose, with a striking use of parataxis, description set alongside reflection without any attempt at definitive interpretation:

> The second day, for instance, we see the preparation of the potatoes for the soup, watching each potato being peeled. Kant says that every object which enters our world is given along with all the conditions of its appearance to us. I should like to say: Every action that we enter into our world must satisfy all the conditions of its completion, or its disruption. (Every human action is, as Kant says, handled, performed by the creature with hands, the same action in different hands as different, and alike, as different hands.) With this knife with this blade, sitting in this garment at this table, with this heap of potatoes from this bowl, within these walls under this light, at this instant … the woman knots herself into the world. Thoreau says the present is the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future. How does a blessing become a curse?
>
> *(Cavell 2005c: 255)*

Cavell's use of parataxis here arrays careful description alongside philosophical rumination, elements that are less juxtaposed than arranged via counterpoint: descriptive lines and reflective lines intersecting at various points, diverging at others, and yet composing a poetic conversation that is marked by gaps, elisions, or openings between individual sentences and thoughts. From the familiar action of peeling potatoes to Kant's conception of action as 'handling' something; the listing of singular things and elements (this knife, this blade) which conspire, unsettlingly, to 'knot' Jeanne into her domestic world; the sudden leap to Thoreau's thought (recalling Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*), on the present as the intersection of the eternities of past and future. Description, thought, and reflection are gathered together in the devastating question – how does this domestic blessing become 'a curse'? Cavell's prose deliberately eschews explanation in favour of description, analysis in favour of suggestion, conclusions in favour of questioning. His paratactic style takes the form of a list, a collection, a medley of thought and reflection. The reader is thus entrusted with the insight to bridge the gaps between thoughts, to arrive at his or her own intuition, to experience a way of thinking that approaches the condition of poetry. Such writing attempts to evoke the experience of Akerman's film, which similarly trusts the viewer to participate in a meditation upon the significance of Jeanne's life and to question his or her understanding of its tragic denouement.

For many philosophically trained readers, however, such paradoxical, poetic prose might seem alien or obscure. Indeed more traditional philosophers of film might be

FIGURE 2.1 'With this knife with this blade, sitting in this garment at this table, with this heap of potatoes from this bowl, within these walls under this light, at this instant … the woman knots herself into the world.' *Jeanne Dielman*, 1975

tempted to ground Cavell's poetic flights of fancy in the clarity of argument or the solidity of theory. This familiar demand for explicit argumentation – an expression of the traditional Platonic prejudice towards art as inarticulate, ignorant, or deceptive – would, however, miss the point of Cavell's deliberately elliptical style. It is not that one needs to refer to Kant or to Thoreau in order to understand what one is seeing; the point, rather, is to suggest how film rediscovers, in its own way, what thinkers like Kant and Thoreau have also uncovered, but in a manner resisting reduction to a philosophical thesis. It is not a matter of finding a 'deeper' philosophical significance in this mesmerising sequence depicting a woman – played by Delphine Seyrig, no less – peeling potatoes while seated quietly at her kitchen table. In Cavell's hands, rather, the experience that this sequence affords is one that fascinates and unsettles, that perplexes and prompts thought. Cavell attempts to give voice to this experience by linking detailed description to philosophical intuition, singular insights requiring the reader's own imaginative involvement and reflective participation for their completion. The performative and experimental character of the passage is evident in the questioning style of Cavell's remarks: 'How does a blessing become a curse?'[5] Cavell's question concludes this passage, which combines attention to the minutiae of an everyday task, the question of what is an action, with the disclosure of a domestic world. It expresses a subtly constraining and suffocating mode of life into which Jeanne, gesture by gesture, 'knots herself' – a slow, imperceptible, prefiguring of violence. Cavell's enigmatic question thus concludes the passage's evocative dance of description and reflection, subtly hinting at the film's devastating conclusion.

The question concerning the proximity of domesticity and domination becomes increasingly apparent as the film unfolds. As Cavell observes, on the second day, certain things or conditions begin to go awry: 'a button is missing from the son's jacket, a wisp of the woman's hair is out of place after finishing with that day's client, she lets the potatoes burn, she cannot get the coffee to taste right', and so on (Cavell 2005c: 255). Once again, Cavell adopts a paratactic style, using the syntax of the sentence to evoke its meaning, listing the familiar elements that comprise the

domestic routine of Jeanne's daily life, but with an accelerating rhythm, suggesting a gradual accumulation of frustrations, minor failures, and subtle obstructions. The connecting of cascading clauses creates a sense of accumulating tension, an effect that would be very difficult to evoke by conveying each element through discrete, individual sentences.

Here again the prose style strives to emulate the quickened rhythm and rising tension of the film, which on the third day nears its conclusion. This time 'we are not kept outside but accompany the woman and that day's client into her bedroom' (Cavell 2005c: 255). After 'an abstract scene of intercourse' in which Jeanne appears, despite her indifference, to be involuntarily brought to orgasm, we see her rise and begin to move towards the dressing table where she had left a pair of scissors used to open a present (a nightgown) from her sister in Canada just before her last client arrived for his afternoon appointment. At this point Jeanne

> walks over to the man lying on her bed, stabs him fatally in the throat, and slides the scissors back onto the dressing table as she walks out of the room. In the dining room, without turning on a light, she sits on a chair, still, eyes open, we do not know for how long.
>
> *(Cavell 2005c: 255)*

As Cavell remarks, this 'selected table of events' – a descriptive phrase recalling the list-like summaries used in historical accounts or court cases – attempts to recount 'the sense of how little stands out until the concluding violence' (Cavell 2005c: 255), while also capturing the impossibility of ever being able to recount, in truth, all the uneventful events that mark Jeanne's three days, events indelibly coloured by the unexpected violence at the end of the film. Indeed the narrative, for its part, might suggest to us that the stabbing

> was caused by any of the differences between one day and the following – by burning the potatoes or failing to get the coffee to taste right or being unable to decide whether to go to Canada or receiving the gift of a nightgown from her sister or slipping against her will into orgasm.
>
> *(Cavell 2005c: 256)*

Here there is a subtle but significant shift in Cavell's paratactic style, which functions throughout to co-ordinate the various listed elements as enjoying a similar or equivalent status. In this passage Cavell includes a series of disjunctions ('burning the potatoes or failing to get the coffee to taste right or … ') that complicate the question of explaining Jeanne's action, of establishing its cause, by erasing differences of level between things and actions, events and decisions, pleasure and distress. The listing of seemingly disparate elements and attitudes, linked through parataxis, enables Cavell to enact the slide (the slip) from Jeanne's cooking, musing, and receiving, to orgasm. What are we to make of this levelling of Jeanne's domestic routines, her inner life, and her slip into violence?

FIGURE 2.2 'slipping against her will into orgasm'. *Jeanne Dielman,* 1975

As Cavell notes, the film adds two crucial features to this levelling of Jeanne's activities: one is the static camera that never moves of itself 'but is from time to time displaced'; the other is the recurring action and sound of doors being opened and closed, and lights being switched on and off, each time Jeanne moves from one room (and activity) to another (except after the stabbing) (Cavell 2005c: 256). Akerman's film thus manages to convey the subtle proximity between domesticity and domination, offering, in Cavell's striking phrase, 'a new discovery of the violence of the ordinary' (2005c: 257). Here one's attention is again drawn to the way film and philosophy are presented as sharing in a task of mutual discovery: the discovery of the ordinary, philosophy's retreat from scepticism, coupled with the question of violence, now ordinary rather than spectacular, hidden in the familiar, and which Akerman's film presents with devastating clarity.

Questioning style

Cavell's interweaving of film commentary with reflections on the self as collection concludes with an observation on the compartmentalised character of Jeanne's life: 'The spaces [of Jeanne's life and daily routine] are kept as separate as a cabinet of curiosities. (What would happen if they touched? A thought would be ignited.)' (Cavell 2005c: 256). This enigmatic question and parenthetic response call for interpretation. For Cavell's prose here becomes elliptical, crystalline, to the point of poetry; a poetic thinking in response to the enigma of Jeanne's life. The discrete tasks and roles defining her experience are carefully compartmentalised within her apartment and temporally dispersed throughout her routine. When these discrete elements of her life do touch, when the boundaries of her compartmentalised world are violated, she responds with a sudden, otherwise inexplicable, violence. Is this the igniting of thought to which Cavell alludes?

Cavell's concluding question does not explain the film's shattering denouement, nor does it make explicit links between Jeanne's compartmentalised life and her final act of violence. On the contrary, Cavell's question and elliptical response are ways of inviting the viewer or reader to think *with* the film, to enter into a conversation with it by responding to the film's own questioning. The parenthetic response to his

question gestures, poetically, to the possibility of a thought being sparked, leaving it to the reader to decide whether this refers to the character, the viewer, the critic, or the film itself. Indeed the film as a whole shows what happens once these disparate elements of Jeanne's life touch each other, a touching made palpable in Cavell's elliptical, poetic prose. The reconnecting of these disconnected parts of Jeanne's experience *is* the (cinematic) work of the film, which is also a work of thought. Not just a portrait of violence but an igniting of thought, which leaves open the possibility that (philosophical) thought might also involve a certain proximity to violence.

This 'shock to thought', as Gilles Deleuze might put it, opens up a space of mutual encounter between film and philosophy, a space of cinematic thinking that Akerman's film discloses with a quiet and devastating intensity. It is a space carefully limned in Cavell's receptive and evocative prose, his questioning style, which mirrors that space of thinking in which these questions insist, like Jeanne Dielman's tragic life, awaiting our response. It is this attentive receptivity that Cavell carefully mirrors in his conversation with *Jeanne Dielman* – an invitation to think with, rather than on, film, to discover what film-philosophy might become.[6]

Notes

1 See Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe (1988), Critchley (2004), and Kompridis (2006). Kompridis' volume, *Philosophical Romanticism*, includes an important essay by Cavell (2006) on how philosophy (with literature and film) might think possibility, novelty, and the future.
2 For diverse examples of this 'romanticist' approach to writing on film, see Bersani and Dutoit (2004), Klevan (2005), Peretz (2007), and Singer (2008).
3 The essay appears under the title 'The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting' in the exhibition catalogue, *Rendezvous: Masterpieces from the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Guggenheim Museum* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1998). It also appears (with original subtitle) in William Rothman's 2005 edited collection, *Cavell on Film*.
4 Cf. Cavell's remarks on the agonistic relationship philosophy entertains with psychoanalysis and cinema, 'each calling into question whatever philosophy had hitherto known as representation and reality, pleasure and pain, understanding and ignorance, remembering and imagination, intention and desire' (Cavell 2005d: 295–96).
5 Cavell's question also seems to invert and echo the biblical reference to how Christ redeemed humankind from the curse of the law (Galatians 3: 10–14).
6 My thanks go to the editors for their astute comments and helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this chapter.

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3

INCURSIONS

Adrian Martin

Adventures in ekphrasis

When a seasoned expert in film commentary (writer or teacher) is in a position to assess and correct the written work of a novice (such as an undergraduate student), a common mistake frequently pops up and is immediately crossed out: the literary description of a film's action in the past tense. 'Robert Mitchum grabbed his keys and drove his car': the thought of reading an entire text in this mode is unbearable. And so we point out politely or brusquely to the beginner that films should always be described in the present tense. This is not only the most natural but also the *correct* way to write about cinema, surely. But why, exactly, do we assume this? It cannot be an entirely natural reflex, since – evidently – people so often get it wrong until they are disciplined and trained to do otherwise.

For the critic who has successfully undergone his or her professional 'formation', this assumption of the present tense shelters an entire, unspoken theory of film. Movies *happen* in the 'eternal present' tense; that is how they unfold, that is how we experience them. Robert Mitchum grabs his keys and drives his car: even if we have already seen and studied this film (say, Otto Preminger's *Angel Face* [1952, US]) fifty times over, we will always leap, in our analysis, back into this continuum of action in which nothing is known in advance, in which everything is open and remains to be decided.

The sub-literary bungler, on the other hand, has an alternative notion: for him or her, the film experience is always something in the past, something that happened yesterday or last year or five minutes ago – in other words, the moment in the past when he or she last (or first) saw that film. And so anything, everything, in the film falls into that cavernous past tense, where all events come sealed up in an aura of predestination: Robert Mitchum started his motor, the car went backwards, and he went over a cliff.

Mistakes can be interesting; they throw our conventional ways of doing things into sudden, glaring relief. For isn't there an entire strand in the reflection upon the photographic arts that indeed stresses the ubiquitous *pastness* of the image, the 'it has happened' aspect, and happened often to places and people long gone from us, like Mitchum and Jean Simmons in *Angel Face*? Once upon a time, on an RKO movie set, a famous actor grabbed a set of keys and got into a car while a camera rolled and a crew watched …

Around fifty years ago, a remarkable piece of film theory put the issue of a film's 'presentness' under a uniquely critical and pessimistic microscope. The piece is almost unknown and uncited today in the Anglo-American academy, although the film-maker Raúl Ruiz assures us that, in his Chilean youth, it 'brought down a storm of declarations, counter-declarations, and reprimands, enough to fill dozens of volumes' (Ruiz 1995: 32) – truly a lost moment in the international annals of film criticism. It is a 1963 pamphlet by the French philosopher Roger Munier – still alive and very active as a writer-thinker – titled *Contre l'image* ('against the image'); a summary of its argument appeared in English a year earlier as 'The Fascinating Image' (Munier 1962).

For Munier – taking issue explicitly with Jean Epstein, implicitly with Siegfried Kracauer and prophetically with much contemporary reflection on the film-and-philosophy relation – the presence of the visible world in film is a lure, the source of an unprecedented form of social alienation. The realities of the world, the thingness of its objects or the beingness of its actions, do not reveal themselves when they are captured and projected on a screen for us, the cinema's viewers. Rather, these objects and beings become mute, self-enclosed, *self-manifesting* in their 'unconceptual hitherness' (Munier was a translator, friend and disciple of Heidegger). They no longer require our intercession or interpretation as viewers or readers; they declare and interpret themselves. The world is 'projected by itself, reaching us without our being able to exercise any real grasp upon it, without the possibility of any dialectical relationship between it and us' (Munier 1962: 94).

Even the newly wrought lyricism of beings and things on screen, bequeathed upon them by the special properties of the film medium, is a facet of this spooky withdrawal:

> The graph of movement reveals time in its essence, as pure element. … Here, space allows *itself* to be looked at from all sides. A lyric space, a space, as it were, freed of the world of objects, a space which bounds, recoils, stands erect, expands, is compressed. A space in which, as for filmic time, all places throng and merge. … In this new graphology, space and time are revealed one by means of the other.
>
> *(Munier 1962: 92)*

Munier's account is a denunciation neither (as would be more familiar and politically palatable to us today) of the mere spectacularity of cinema *per se*, nor of a medium's populist-industrial dumbing down. As we have just seen, he does not exclude the

poetic from his account of film's workings. But the core of his polemic rests upon the possibilities – or impossibilities – for a *discourse* to *intervene* in what unfolds on screen. His comparison point is the French poet-essayist Francis Ponge who, while scrupulously respecting and striving to convey the objectness of things in his minimalist verse-prose, nonetheless 'tries to make an incursion into the beyond of things by means of words … forcing entrance into it by a verbal instrument' (Munier 1962: 94–95). By contrast, for Munier, films are incapable, by their very nature, of any such intervention.

His principal demonstration of this resonates uncannily with much contemporary discussion of cinephilia, for it, too, invokes such frequently treasured indexical qualities of cinematography as 'smoke rising into the sky, waves breaking, leaves trembling in the wind', especially as they were experienced by the first, virginal film spectators:

> Up to that time one said: the smoke is rising into the blue, the leaves are trembling; or, the painting suggests such movements. In the cinema, however, the smoke itself is rising, the leaf really trembles; it declares itself as a leaf trembling in the wind. It is a leaf like that which one encounters in nature and at the same time it is much more, from the moment when, in addition to being the real leaf, it is also, indeed primarily, a *represented* reality. If it were only a real leaf, it would wait for my observation in order to achieve significance. Because it is represented, divided in two in the image, it is already signified, already offered in itself as a leaf trembling in the wind. … A thing was being said here which did not have, could not have its equivalent in nature.
>
> *(Munier 1962: 91)*

The present essay does not intend to be a defence, positioning or critique of Munier's theory. I simply wish to use his statements as a springboard to consider – and complicate – the ways and means of *description* in film criticism and analysis. It has been argued – particularly by Raymond Durgnat in a series of detailed essays published during the 1980s – that films themselves already meticulously describe, before a viewer or critic gets to them, all manner of things: worlds, places, objects, behaviours, atmospheres, rhythms. Films do not simply record, depict or show; rather, they delineate, trace, inscribe, focus, animate – in the strongest sense, they *figure*, which is the thrust of the school of figural analysis that has emerged in Europe over the past two decades (see Brenez 1998). The celebrated French critic-filmmaker Pascal Bonitzer provided a clarion call for this figural method when he remarked in 1988 that the particular grace and gravity of cinema derives from its ability to 'represent and narrate, figure and show simultaneously' (Bonitzer 1988: 19).

Criticism, then, begins at a stage that (to loosely employ Freudian terminology) amounts to a secondary elaboration, after the primary elaboration of the film-work itself; it takes on the necessary, even sometimes militant, function of *redescribing* what has already been etched into the screen. In this sense, description is the practice of *ekphrasis* glossed by Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros in relation to histories of

literary and artistic criticism, a redescription which 'is neither literal nor naively representational' (Stern and Kouvaros 1999: 16). The drive behind ekphrasis is double:

> On the one hand, there is a modest desire: for transparency in discourse, for verbal pictorialism … ; on the other hand, there is an extravagant desire: to bring things alive in writing or, as [Murray Krieger] puts it, to 'work the magical transformation'.
>
> *(Stern and Kouvaros 1999: 11)*

But if cinema – following Munier – cannot be easily or unproblematically evoked as the descriptor or conveyor of reality, if it lacks that quality of discourse, then what is critical redescription, for its part, actually describing? What is it doing, and what is it for? What 'real grasp' does criticism exercise upon a film, and can it establish a discourse of 'dialectical relationship' with its object? Critical description – however well achieved, however evocative – remains at the level of mere literary effect and labours under a delusion if it does not manage to pierce that veil of a film's mighty 'hitherness'.

Or to put it in familiar, everyday terms: why laboriously put into writing what is plainly evident for anyone to see on the screen in the first place – that Mitchum gets into a car and drives off? Criticism, in this sense, doubles its object, ghosts it in a process that the art critic Edward Colless (2009) describes as *superabundance*. There is always something excessive, something strictly unnecessary, perhaps even something a little *diabolical* (as Colless would have it) in the act of critical description. The ways and means of critical superabundance have to end up generating their own insight, and even (all proportions kept) their own modicum of art – forever, of course, in the shadow of that greater art which is cinema – or else they will amount to precious little. This is the all-or-nothing risk that ambitious criticism takes.

In what follows, I explore examples from three great critics – all born in the 1930s, all (like Munier) not as well-known as they should be within the international canon of contemporary criticism – who are drawn to description (always phrased within that eternal present), and especially to films that are themselves taken to be highly descriptive within the terms of the cinematic medium. On an initial level, we can say, using the recent words of Victor Perkins in his tribute to Ian Cameron, that all three critics find 'fresh ways of supporting interpretation by tracing patterns in descriptive detail' (Perkins 2010: 2). But description does not have to play only a supporting role in the hierarchy of aesthetic experience. For its effect can be alchemical, transformative … and, in this materialist sense, magical.

I start from the (radical) assumption that all description is a species of fiction; Stern and Kouvaros note 'the fictional impulse at the heart of any ekphrastic endeavour' (Stern and Kouvaros 1999: 17). Out of the enormous possibilities for literary restatement that any shot, image or indeed single frame of a film offers, every writer chooses only a tiny proportion with which to work. The choice is never innocent; indeed it is, in every instance, loaded.

At any rate, the least that can be said is that, on a workaday level, each critic chooses his or her through-line in order to be able to construct some kind of continuity or modulation of certain elements amidst a succession of moments, shots or scenes: that may be the evolution of a character, a colour, a mood, a landscape, a strategy of camera perspectives, a *mise en scène*, or any imaginable interrelationship of such heterogeneous elements. Let us see what kind of word-pictures our chosen critics create from their specific choice and description of elements.

The mimic: John Flaus

Criticism has always been involved with the ancient technique of *mimesis* – description through imitation or mirroring. Some writings mimetically slow down the literary unfolding of the passage of a film as if to *accompany* (Raymond Bellour's word) it in its tiniest and most telling fluctuations (see Bellour 2004). It is this act of slowing down which allows an analysis or commentary to insinuate itself into the words of the description.

One of the finest examples of this technique is a review of Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le samouraï* (1967, France/Italy) written by the Australian critic John Flaus (born 1934) for a 1974 issue of *Cinema Papers*. Indeed, the text itself announces, late in the game, its dual procedure: 'My attempt at a simplified synopsis is interpretative as much as descriptive' (Flaus 1974: 56).

In his general, contextualising introduction (mainly to the director and his work), Flaus sets the tone, the tenor and even the clipped pace of the mimetic analysis that is to follow: 'In his own way, Melville is as uncompromising toward his audience as Bresson, Dreyer or Mizoguchi. Severe, unremitting attention is required of the viewer; a fearful joy may be the reward for his pains' (Flaus 1974: 56). A tenet of aesthetic theory is proposed: 'Melville would incline to the dictum that artifice is a necessity, and evident artifice a virtue' (Flaus 1974: 56). A conclusion that will later be arrived at with more force and persuasiveness after the analysis has taken place is also asserted up front: 'Melville's achievement is to create within us, despite the studied mid-shot detachment of his style and the ambivalence of our feelings, an absorption in the figure of Jeff Costello [Alain Delon] analogous to Jeff's self-absorption' (Flaus 1974: 56).

For most of his text, Flaus concentrates on unfolding the first eight minutes of *Le samouraï*, beginning with a long description of the famous opening shot of Jeff on his bed, with its rigorously subdued colour palette ('apparently monochrome, yet the cigarette point glows red for an instant [an exquisite detail]'), its stop-start, disconcerting camera movement ('we find our perception of distance is subtly altering'), and its general impression of the uncanny ('the apparently unremarkable has begun to communicate a sense of disturbance') (Flaus 1974: 56–57). Flaus is keen to establish the 'thresholds' or 'gateways' of our experience of a film as established at its beginning. He recreates the film in the eternal present of its first, 'innocent' viewing – only occasionally leaping ahead to narrative information we will learn later in the movie's slow exposition. In this instance, 'the shot has done its work', and the film will have

FIGURE 3.1 'the apparently unremarkable has begun to communicate a sense of disturbance'. *Le Samouraï,* 1967

'no need for another shot of such extreme stylisation', since our 'confidence in our perception has been curiously shaken' and henceforth 'we can not afford to our usual complacency in taking for granted much of what passes in our visual field' (Flaus 1974: 57).

Slowing down a film into the gradual cascade or rolling transformation of its details often loosens it from the usual conventions of narrative drive, and leads to a reverie on the detachable pleasures of what seem to be incidental happenings, 'off the track' of the story in any strict sense: hence Roland Barthes' very influential meditation (1977) on the 'excessive' meaning in photographic images, and Laura Mulvey's more recent extension of this approach to cinematic analysis as a whole (2006). In Flaus' case, it sparks a working distinction (of the author's invention) between *narrative* and *plot*, where narrative figures as something like pure filmic description, or a pure, undirectionless flow of (as yet) undramatic events, while plot is the story driving forward in a conventional, linear, suspenseful fashion. That opening shot contained 'nothing for the eye to fix upon as especially informative or dramatic', so from the start Melville has decided to hold us back in a pre-plot lull or interregnum; Flaus' prose allows us to dwell, linger in this space. Flaus is especially interested in this opening eight-minute passage because it is, as he calls it, 'the early part of the film before a plot can be discerned'. It is, equally, the part of the film where 'thematic impressions' can be discerned 'but not yet thematic structures' (Flaus 1974: 57).

Our perception of detail, incident and event is going to work differently in such a passage than when a plot is focussing our attention, and this is what Flaus demonstrates in his attention to the scene in which Jeff coolly breaks into a car and methodically finds a key from his ring that will ignite its motor. 'A shot from outside the car through the rain-streamed windscreen shows what a passer-by might notice: a handsome young man sitting, perhaps a little stiffly, in his car' (Flaus 1974: 57). But there are 'slight differences between our perusal and that of the passer-by. Their

slightness is significant' – and note the way, here, in which the flow of Melville's short, 'one action per image' shots finds its mimetic correlative in Flaus' short sentences. The fact that the 'shot is not travelling, the distance is a little less, the duration a little more' creates a 'higher level of contemplation', a greater attentiveness on our part. The streaked glass 'reminds us metaphorically of the artifice which mediates between what we see and what we make of it'. Above all, the shot illuminates the paradox which is at the heart of the film: 'it is the shot from outside which allows us to shift our sympathy to "inside" the character' since, in the heightening of our contemplative involvement, 'the fascination of seeing him from the outside in his innocent aspect draws us inside to the suspense and audacity of his action' (Flaus 1974: 57). The film is thus a lesson in perception.

In the time and space before thematic *impressions* become solidified or clarified into thematic *structures*, what happens for the 'viewer in process' that Flaus' description evokes? 'Ambiguities abound, there is no explanatory dialogue or omniscient narrator but only inference about observed behaviour. We will not all infer the same things from Jeff's behaviour and situation' (Flaus 1974: 57). Such 'democratic' openness or freedom of interpretation is important for Flaus, but he recognises its limits and constraints. 'Yet even then we know his *style*, and can deduce or intuit some judgements about him' (Flaus 1974: 57).

In a metacritical mode, Flaus then engagingly reflects on the 'many temptations for us to explicate [the film] by simile, the imaginative process of "as if"'. What is the perceived or implied problem with simile here? Perhaps Flaus considers it too reductive, too much of a translation or abstraction of the material processes at hand; simile may tempt us to wander off too far from the film. Flaus rejects some of the filmmaker's own metaphoric glosses on the action of his film – Jeff as lone wolf, police inspector as figure of Destiny, the woman as Jeff's projected death-wish. Discussion-by-simile is, ultimately, a gamble – 'I have been tempted to assert a number of similes and constructions which will seem strained to others' – but one that Flaus judges worth taking. His conclusion is upbeat:

> Nevertheless, I believe it is both valuable and appropriate to explore and compare our responses to a film like *Le samouraï*, to assist each other in trying for common ground in 'as if' territory. It is another paradox of this work that it should be so rigorously self-strictured and yet liberate the figurative imagination in its viewers.
>
> *(Flaus 1974: 57)*

Both *valuable* and *appropriate*: the critic speaks here from a position both outside the work – comparing it to other films, and to broad issues of perception, interpretation and understanding, hence the invocation of value – and inside it, mimetically, attempting to honour it in the way that is most appropriate to its own style, mood and purpose. It is Flaus the respectful mimic who ties up his Melvillian prose by way of a striking motif: from the invocation of 'fearful joy' at the beginning, via the mid-way story-so-far assertion that 'narrative and contemplation contend and balance; the film

is taut', through to the splendid final sentence, as definitive as the film's own endpoint: 'The entire work is so phased that it is utterly still because it is utterly tense'.

Ultimately, *tension* is both what Flaus is after in the film-work at hand, and also an affect he hopes to stir in his companion-readers. It is a striking aspect of his critical career as a whole: Flaus always seems poised between what he calls here the 'stillness' of 'classical restraint' and 'sublime, Orphic transports'. He seeks to place us in that in-between state through the rhetorical, performative action of his writing, giving us the tools to play off the extremes of aesthetic and cultural experience, never entirely settling at one end of the spectrum or the other. And such productive tension has passed into several, grateful generations of Flaus' colleagues, students, listeners and readers in Australia.

The pointer: Shigehiko Hasumi

The Australian critic (and Hitchcock expert) Ken Mogg frequently tells the story of a Zen Buddhist Master who, in response to the insistent questioning of his student, responds not with words but with a gesture: he points at something in the world which is visible at that very moment. Cinema, too, frequently points, and not simply because the camera is rolling: it has many means, strident and subtle alike, of underlining, of making manifest.

'Early on the morning that his wife has just breathed her last, a father (Ryu Chishu) stands at the edge of a wide-open garden, looking out at the sea over the rooftops of the clustered houses' (Hasumi 1997: 118). So begins the English translation by Kathy Shigeta of 'Sunny Skies', an essay on *Tokyo Story* (Yasujirô Ozu, 1953, Japan) excerpted from a book on Yasujirô Ozu (published in Japanese in 1983 and French in 1998) by the Japanese critic Shigehiko Hasumi (born 1936). This start is characteristic of Hasumi: no preliminaries, no contextualising intro, no theoretical preamble; we are immediately 'inside' the film and the unfolding of one of its key moments. This is, in part, no doubt a mark of modesty.

But such modesty is also a method. Hasumi's approach to writing about and teaching film (he has influenced an entire generation of Japanese filmmakers including Kiyoshi Kurosawa and Shinji Aoyama) proceeds upon two principles. Firstly, one must really attend to what is there to be seen and heard on screen; and secondly, one should resist bringing to bear that which is operative 'in a domain outside the film' (Hasumi 1997: 121). Simple principles, but with complex ramifications! Within his own prose, Hasumi handles both the simplicity and complexity through a gradual, accumulative, spiralling-out approach. He describes a specific moment from a specific film – which may involve a gesture, or a line of dialogue, or even an item of clothing. Then he links this to similar moments in other films by the same director – in this case, all the moments in Ozu's cinema where characters look up at the clear, blue skies and casually remark something on the order of: 'It's gonna be a hot one', as the father does in the *Tokyo Story* example.

A certain filmic rule or logic is thus gradually established. Any telling exceptions to the rule – striking inversions of the usual logic which, of course, serve to enforce the

rule – are noted. Finally (three pages into our example), Hasumi will open out to a broader cultural context: in this instance, the polite but firm statement – directed against those Western commentators (Donald Richie, Paul Schrader) who perhaps partake of 'the easy solidarity of those who would ignore the screen' – that 'calling Ozu Yasujirô a *very Japanese* director is a huge mistake' (Hasumi 1997: 120).

Why a mistake? Hasumi alights on a detail that is perfectly visible, entirely obvious, yet so little noted by viewers and students of Ozu's work: the sky is always sunny, the weather is always clear. Hasumi reiterates this at least half a dozen different ways in the course of his essay: 'No Ozu film made on a predominantly cloudy day exists' (Hasumi 1997: 119); '"Existence" in an Ozu film means that everyone inhales the air of a clear, sunny day' (Hasumi 1997: 119); 'In Ozu's films, the sky can only be sunny' (Hasumi 1997: 120); 'The skies are forbidden to cloud ambiguously; typically, only fine weather is allowed' (Hasumi 1997: 121); and so on. Thus – despite the clichéd metaphoric associations we too readily read into the titles of his films – Ozu's work plays by the rules neither of the reality of Japanese weather (this 'subtropical zone with a rainy season'), nor of the poetic rhetoric of the seasons embodied, above all, in haiku, a tradition mined by other Japanese directors including Akira Kurosawa and Kenji Mizoguchi. So Ozu – and for once this word is the right one – indeed creates his own *world*.

In the beginning of his piece, Hasumi describes actions, gestures, looks, words spoken and the part of the environment ('the sea over the rooftops of the clustered

FIGURE 3.2 '"Existence" in an Ozu film means that everyone inhales the air of a clear, sunny day.' *Ohayo,* 1959

houses') that is visible. Nothing really about camera angle, movement of figures within the frame composition or construction of on- and off-screen space – in other words, the standard practice for many (perhaps most) critics of old or new schools. In part, this is the critic's 'populist' mode of address: anyone can pick up this discussion from its perfectly ordinary start, no one is alienated by any kind of specialist terminology at the outset. More strategically, Hasumi mentions or 'plants' only those stylistic aspects that will become important for him to unfold within the ever-expanding line of his argument – and, in this, he is a truly superb rhetorician.

The line of the rooftops, for example: Hasumi is about to unfold this in several directions. Ozu, he asserts, 'consistently avoids giving a scene depth through vertical composition'. Thus, in a series of brief, early morning shots (immediately following a clear sign of the mother's death) which use the line of the rooftops to form a 'series of horizontal and vertical compositions', we 'must recognize the conversion of Ozu's audacity into something visible' (Hasumi 1997: 123–24). And this visible audacity is also, and again, a matter of weather and light: 'that indeterminate time and space depicts, beautifully and absolutely, the fact that it is the beginning of a fine, hot day' (Hasumi 1997: 123). Within the context of the story, and the mother's passing that it relates, the 'double shift' from life to death and from night to day is 'conveyed through the dull, dry sensation of the early-morning scene' – thus preparing for the impact of the shot with which Hasumi began. If we want to explain why *Tokyo Story* is 'an incredibly moving film', these are the sorts of details which, according to Hasumi, we must understand. And once you have closely read his essay, you truly can never see an Ozu film in the same way again. This is the indelible mark of a great critic, one who transforms the way we approach, regard and even literally *see* the work in question.

I have suggested that, for John Flaus, *Le samouraï* offered the opportunity to teach or rehearse a lesson in perception. The case of Hasumi pushes me to a bolder claim: that the type of critical redescription used elaborates, implicitly, the *allegory of an ideal cinema* which the critic values on many levels. Although Hasumi has written sensitively, knowledgeably and appreciatively about many starkly different kinds of film in his lifetime, it is no secret what sort of cinema he prefers. He likes cinema which is, on the one hand, direct, transparent, based above all on the figure of the limpid gesture. A person walks, sits, takes off her hat, drops her bag: these are the gestures – everyday gestures, but finally very revealing ones, once Hasumi has uncovered their deepest logic and their network across a body of films – that we are given to see and hear in film. Not, in the first place, to decipher or interpret; we must simply take them in, and learn to invest significance and emotion into their surface rendering. This is why Hasumi does not fuss with technical specifications of angle, lens, lighting arrangements or even the elaborations of *mise en scène* in the standard sense: such a load of information would cloud our view of a gesture or a pose performed within the context of a precise setting. Clearly, there is an intense affinity between Hasumi's own aesthetic ethos and the filmmaker he calls 'a broad-daylight director: rather than subtle nuances, he adheres to an excess of clarity' (Hasumi 1997: 121). Hasumi aims for the type of paradoxical transparency – paradoxical, because we still need the

pointer to point it out for us – that Victor Perkins has also expressed in the context of his own critical practice: 'I have written about things that I believe to be in the film for all to see, and to see the sense of' (Perkins 1990: 4).

On the other hand, Hasumi's ideal cinema also has a strongly modernist aspect: a certain *self-consciousness of the medium* is something he prizes in many of his favourite filmmakers – not for the facile point-making of any 'reflexivity', but as the deepest source of meaning and emotion. Indeed, Hasumi joins Raúl Ruiz in the somewhat mysterious and demanding quest for what the latter calls 'specifically cinematographic emotions' (Ruiz 2004: 59) – a quality that, for both men, ideally *bypasses characterisation* and the psychology attendant upon it (hence the 'rooftops' discussion above).

Ozu's self-consciousness of his medium is achieved in at least three ways for Hasumi. Firstly, through all the means by which the director 'bring[s] to the surface the condition of the film's being a film' (Hasumi 1997: 122). Secondly, through the almost surreal self-consciousness that this process of 'exposing the compelling features of his own cinematic world' allows the fictional characters themselves: as Hasumi repeatedly asserts in this piece, when the people on screen remark on the weather, they are effectively – and in 'reality' – reassuring themselves that they dwell within a film by Ozu, where the sky is, as a law, always sunny! And thirdly, in an expression of what is assumed as Ozu's 'antiquarian ambition': in other words, a recreation of some important aspects of cinema in the earliest days of its invention in the silent era – in this instance, a once again surreal insistence by the director on recreating, in and for the Japanese context, 'the light of California, location of the film capital, Hollywood', which Hasumi grasps as 'the characteristic desire of Ozu to be filmic rather than realistic' (Hasumi 1997: 128).

It is always a rare and special moment when a critic manages to rhetorically *arrive* somewhere in the written text at the very same moment that his or her reader grasps the intended meaning of the argument or constellation or 'drift' – this is the 'ah ha!' moment of literary epiphany, when something that has only been hitherto suggested or prepared is finally manifested, revealed. The demonstration of such moments in film criticism would be enough, in my opinion, to prove that a discourse on cinema can indeed meaningfully and usefully 'make an incursion' or 'force an entrance' (in Munier's terms) into a film's own 'self-enclosed' unfolding – while also successfully borrowing a few tricks of art and drama from this wonderful audiovisual medium that we all serve.

Hasumi pulls off such an epiphanic arrival – which is also the serene moment of simply *pointing* – in many of his texts. Something along the lines of Ozu's own 'formal emotion' – the emotion created by the precise placement of a shot with horizontal and vertical lines bathed by a certain light – can be experienced when Hasumi restates, for the final time, after all his intricate detours, the 'simple facts' that he has unostentatiously brought to light: 'Within the "existence" created by Ozu, everyone's fate is to die on a hot, sunny, midsummer day. And those present at the funerals and memorial services must wear mourning clothes' (Hasumi 1997: 127).

The seer: Frieda Grafe

Discussions of the film criticism of the past often opt for the virtues of a supposed 'timelessness', some quality that transcends the 'matters arising' of a specific day, age and social milieu – something we would never demand of the writing we ourselves are involved in producing in the here and now. In the case of the German critic Frieda Grafe (1934–2002) – as with the work of Stephen Heath, Laura Mulvey or Jean-Louis Comolli – some contemporary readers may baulk at those aspects of her vast output that are intensely 'of their time', especially in an era that has set about busily (and often with a suspect zeal) disowning, repudiating and dismissing the intellectual movements of the 1960s and 1970s. And yet we will never truly appreciate the worth of Grafe's contribution without being also able to re-immerse ourselves in the currents of semiotics, psychoanalysis, Marxism and feminism that fed her writing.

Grafe's 1974 piece 'Spiritual Men and Natural Women', a survey of the work of the Danish master Carl Dreyer, can appear, to our twenty-first-century eyes, as a peculiarly exotic efflorescence of an 'anomalous' 1970s culture. It is evidence, in miniature, of the many areas of writing and publishing activity – journalism, specialist magazines, books, television, the academy – that she crossed in her lifetime. Written as a piece for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper, it (as the saying goes) wears its learning lightly: no citations of Lacan, only the well-known 'woman is a dark continent' from Freud, but, on the other hand, 'high theory' statements in brutally poetic shorthand: Dreyer 'protests against the notion of the total translatability of everything into everything else. For him there is something that the symbol, the cycle of representation, misses' (Grafe 1977: 80). Hardly the type of thing we are likely to read today in the UK's *Guardian*, USA's *New York Times* or Australia's *Age*!

At the same time, Grafe (like her lifelong partner Enno Patalas, co-author of the 1974 classic *Im Off – Filmartikel* in which the Dreyer piece was collected) practised a variant on 'theoretically informed' film analysis that can seem quite unfamiliar to Anglo-American eyes. Already, in the late 1950s, kick-starting the influential magazine *Filmkritik* in the desert of post-war German film culture, she (in the words of a later *Filmkritik* stalwart, the filmmaker-theorist Harun Farocki) set out to 'detect structures' rather than simply 'noting ideas and impressions' (Farocki 2003). Thus, Grafe was a structuralist long before it became fashionable in many other countries; but she was also eager to oppose a certain orthodoxy within that burgeoning tradition: she 'strictly rejected the semiotic trends from France and Italy, which proclaimed an exact linguistics of film' (Farocki 2003).

Indebted to and inspired by psychoanalysis, Grafe makes fulsome use of *free association*. This gives her writing a creative liberation, a daring; equally, it supplies her with a powerful rhetorical technique that resembles nothing so much, word to word and sentence to sentence, as a cinematic mode of *montage*. Grafe is always leaping, 'cutting' from an image (which has seemingly 'flooded in' to her consciousness) to an incisive new idea – or vice versa – frequently on the basis of a seemingly whimsical, 'unbidded' comparison or simile. (And here, her procedure joins the somewhat more

sober speculation-by-simile practised by Flaus.) This gives her writing its particular rhythm of excitement and excitability, even in the English translation that is excellently provided in this instance by Robin Mann: in *Vampyr* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1932, France/Germany), for example, 'the rhythmic flow of the flour becomes a prison, a trap and a grave for the old doctor' (Grafe 1977: 76).

> There should be so many pictures on this page that written words could only advance in fits and starts. Stills which break through the text, just as in Dreyer's films holes are broken in the walls by objects hung upon them, by mirrors, pictures and windows.
>
> *(Grafe 1977: 76)*

What a way to start an essay! Of its time, certainly – the time of Roland Barthes's reflections (1977) on the still photographic image or the US journal *Camera Obscura* with its early, pre-Internet experiments in copious 'frame capture' illustrations interacting with printed text – but also a device to immediately allow a rush of evocative images from Dreyer's cinema. This inventory economically sketches, unstuffily, a thematic and socio-cultural terrain: male and female roles, patriarchal oppression, family relations. Grafe does not disallow (as many critics of her milieu might have done) 'old fashioned' observations on theme or admissions of involvement with screen characters ('there is still a little sympathy for this rather repulsive patriarch … there are no heroes and no villains' [Grafe 1977: 77, 80]). But the quality of *newness* she seeks – for every important critic is in pursuit, in her or his own special way, of something radically new – exists on another, more exacting plane altogether.

By her fourth paragraph, Grafe is already zeroing in on this newness. The 'holes broken in walls' with which she began are amplified: 'For Dreyer, white walls consist of a multitude of glowing, transparent, tiny fragments. Reality becomes diaphanous, contours and stable features dissolve' (Grafe 1977: 76). Later she returns to these qualities in Dreyer that are so hard to pin down, so tough to describe accurately or well without breaking through to a new kind of description and analysis: 'The crucial thing is not what is behind the images, but what is visible in them as a speck of white' (Grafe 1977: 80). Grafe here is reaching for something almost impossible to describe, virtually a pure intensity: a hitherto unimagined imbrication of form and content in cinema, each one abstracting and yet concentrating or distilling the other.

The present-day caricature of what cinema-psychoanalysis was (and is) about reduces this tendency to a bunch of coarse topic-templates: Oedipus complex, stains and blots, castration, body-sex-gender symbolism – and sometimes this is what it indeed comes down to. Grafe's work reminds us that the only psychoanalysis of film worth a damn must be a psychoanalysis of the signifier, not (only) the signified. This was the substance of her opposition or resistance to the dominance of formalist linguistics in film theory: cinema is a reservoir of drives, surges and displacements of energy, waves of unruly emotion contending with myriad repressive forces – or else it is nothing, mere literature or theatre. Hence her attention, for example, to the materiality of sound and speech: 'Before they are exchange of meanings, his dialogues

are modulations, musically overdetermined, a modulation of accents' (Grafe 1977: 77). Indeed, her entire analysis of Dreyer might well find its own psychoanalytic 'condensation' in this superb nutshell of a sentence: 'But sometimes one can hear the rustle of the long dresses: some little intimacy is established' (Grafe 1977: 78). Dreyer aims, in Grafe's account, for an 'event beyond all interpretability, outside any context. A zero point, another white speck, a gap in the chain of causality' (Grafe 1977: 80).

The co-ordinates of Grafe's 'reading' – another linguistic term she disliked – of Dreyer may be overly familiar to us today: female desire versus a masculine Symbolic Order, desire and hysteria versus hyper-rationality and oppression. All of which, we must add, is very true to the cinema of Carl Dreyer. Yet, even within the high historical moment of this particular critical-theoretical discourse, Grafe gives it a decisive twist. For her, Dreyer 'changes the normal relation between sign and idea'; he 'uses cinema not just to show reality, but also the sign-laden nature of reality, he makes the Symbolic Order and its constraints visible' (Grafe 1977: 80). Another way she phrases this: Dreyer's cinema is not about transcendence, his films do not show or reveal the 'ideal depths' of some Beyond or Utopia, or if so, only implicitly, only as something that is pointed to. 'The centre of Dreyer's films never appears directly. Only its outline is marked' (Grafe 1977: 80). The profound drama of Dreyer's films is truly all on the surface, on those white walls, between those frames-within-frames, and in those curious, gnawing specks of light: 'The images are only scraps of the infinite, of the unformed, the possible' (Grafe 1977: 80).

FIGURE 3.3 'The images are only scraps of the infinite, of the unformed, the possible.' *Ordet*, 1955

Grafe, too, situates Dreyer as a man and an artist of his time – and yet also 'not of this world' (Grafe 1977: 80). Was he aware, she asks, of his exemplary, opportune position between the end of German Idealism and the beginning of that Modernism ushered in by cinema? No matter, she concludes. The films themselves vibrate – in their time as well as for all time, or maybe 'untimely', outside any strict, specific time – as 'corridors, transitional worlds' (Grafe 1977: 77). They allow energies, investments, ideas and passions to pass through and be transformed, expanding and illuminating everything around them. And it is precisely in this same way that the writings of Frieda Grafe form an invaluable corridor and an infinitely rich transitional world.

Ministry and mystery

In 1992, I concluded a survey of critical approaches to *mise en scène*, and film style more generally, with the following *cri de cœur*:

> Why is the *materiality* of the writing of Manny Farber – or Jonathan Rosenbaum or David Thomson or Meaghan Morris – so often rendered immaterial, a wasteful luxury, mere surplus value? I believe this is an important question – and it is particularly addressed to those who, at present, issue disapproving pronouncements about the 'unrestrained verbal play' characterising several decades of cultural commentary. In a split that we can well recognise from the history of *mise en scène* criticism, *écriture* is again divorced from content, to be damned or indulged accordingly. But writing is always more than simply 'badly done' (dense, circumlocutory, baroque) or a 'good read' (witty, racy, stylish, etc.). What about some sense of the *action* of critical writing, what it can conjure, perform, circulate, transform? In writing as much as in film, we must come to close terms with what is 'at once mysterious and materialistic' [Rosenbaum 1983: 195] in matters of style.
>
> *(Martin 1992: 131)*

Considering the work of John Flaus, Shigehiko Hasumi and Frieda Grafe has allowed me a way to formulate a response to my own challenge. Of course, so much, perhaps most, writing on film is banal, formulaic, conventional, tiresome, mechanical, rote – a matter of pre-set protocols, slavishly following the most parsimonious, least inventive logics of the culture industry. This is what Raúl Ruiz (2007) would call the dull, obedient 'ministry' of film writing. But, as he well recognises, ministry inevitably calls up its double, its shadow, its ever-present obverse: mystery. And the task for we who wish to penetrate the secrets of the most brilliant critical writing on cinema is to catch this magic in flight not as something ephemeral and wispy, but – very precisely – material, a matter of words, images and dynamic rhetorical structures.

My three chosen exemplars set themselves an exacting task: not merely to grasp 'what is there' on screen but, ultimately, to say something about the film that it does not – cannot – say about itself. That is how – to respond to Roger Munier's initial

provocation – film criticism can strive to 'make an incursion into the beyond of things by means of words' (Munier 1963: 94).

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4

DESCRIPTION

Andrew Klevan

> That film is overwhelming is also a fact about it, the richness is overwhelming, 90 or 100 minutes and you have been taken through a larger span of passion and feeling than really 90 minutes of almost anything else … And you have the sense often about how terribly little of a film is articulated, as if, if you don't say anything about the film now, the experience of the film will vanish with the film. The density of stimulus is a fact about what's happened to you. Not to come to terms with it is to have something that has happened to you go unremarked, as if intellectually oppressive.
>
> (Stanley Cavell 2005: 180)

> [D]escription is a question of how to bring into existence, how, in the course of analysis, to evoke for a reader that lost object … Ideally we would like to write in such a way as to bring the film into imaginative being for the reader, so that she views it in the process of reading. In reading she becomes a film viewer.
>
> (Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros 1999: 7–9)

> [F]ilmic analysis … 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] 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.
>
> (Raymond Bellour 2000: 26)

Introduction

How do we quote from a film? An essay on a novel or a poem may transcribe words, making them available for a reader's consultation, but the non-literary arts are more

troublesome for the writer. All the arts, even the literary ones, present the challenge of the 'lost object', its unavailability, problems of referencing and description, its difference now from then, but film – visual, aural *and* moving – is a particularly slippery art form. In 'The Unattainable Text', Raymond Bellour vividly expands on this topic; for him film sets up peculiar problems for analysis and description because it is tantalisingly present and yet always escaping (Bellour 2000).

One type of good film criticism has made a virtue of this predicament, and taken the matter far beyond the requirement, or need, to quote. Description is not merely a necessary step on the way to the meat of analysis, it contains the analysis. Through careful choices about how to describe, discriminations are made subtly and implicitly. Description also reflects the impulse, true of much criticism on the arts, to articulate and share an experience. A film may be experienced differently, some things noticed, others not, and by reading the description we come to see a point of view. This may be *a* correct description, but not the only correct one: it is a *way of seeing* the film. One type of film criticism is inspired by the endeavour to 'capture' a visual and aural medium in a different medium (words): to see how it may exist, and how its existence may be extended, through writing. Indeed, this has been an important, and possibly underdiscussed, motivation of criticism on the visual and aural arts. This essay examines three passages of criticism each of which exemplifies a different challenge for film description: the description of presence, absence and something between both of them, the obscure.

Describing presence

There is a moment in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1942, US) which, even after many viewings, I find elating. It occurs at the Ambersons' Ball when Eugene (Joseph Cotten) dances with Isabel (Dolores Costello). James Harvey shares the feeling and, in his book *Movie Love in the Fifties*, describes it as follows:

> They are all coming forward now on the surge of the music and the heightened feeling, walking together: Isabel at the center, Jack and Eugene on either side leading her onwards, with Wilbur (characteristically) lapsing to the rear. Jack is now almost beside himself with happiness: 'By gosh!' he exclaims. 'Old times are certainly starting over again!' Eugene replies over his shoulder, drawing Isabel towards the dance floor: 'Not a bit! There *aren't* any old times. When times are gone, they aren't old, they're dead – there aren't any times but new times!' And with this he takes Isabel into his arms and into the dance, as the ragtime music rises irresistibly and carries them off, the camera following them.
>
> *No times but new times* – that's crazy, of course (especially in a movie as lovingly about the old times as this one is), and hopeless. But the craziness only makes it feel more infectious and jubilant; the hopelessness only makes you laugh – on the sudden rush of music and movement and feeling that Welles brings off here. Not only by the way he builds to this dance, but by the way

> Cotten says his lines, his voice full of that brimmingness I mentioned (he does it better than anyone else), rising with the ragtime music like a singer-actor saying the words that lead into his big song number, leading here instead to his sweeping Isabel onto the floor in his arms on the rollicking ragtime beat. Costello, a very stately woman, looks literally carried away by him and, instead of losing her stateliness, seems to take flight with it – leaning back against his encircling arm behind her, her head and trunk thrown back, drifting and careering on his and the music's movement, as they wheel and rock, the camera receding before them, across the floor among the other couples – and then out of the frame.
>
> *(Harvey 2001: 292–93)*

The writing unrepentantly embraces the joyful burst. It does not resist by becoming guarded or judicious. Moments of heightened feeling, or those that are emotionally direct, are difficult to handle within the conventions of analysis, especially academic analysis; one becomes aloof and dispassionate, and neutralises their force. Perhaps they are so present to us that there appears to be nothing we need to say, or nothing left to say. Or the direct force of vitality makes us shy away. There are equal worries of emoting and embarrassment, being caught off guard, of betraying naivety (not *knowing* enough). It is to Harvey's credit that he meets the vigour here and dwells upon it. He goes with it. Many narrative films, and not only those from Hollywood, are direct or directly emotional in this way. Film challenges criticism to confront emotional directness while not surrendering to sentimentality of response.

Harvey's description of the Ball began four pages earlier when Eugene and Lucy arrives. It takes us through the development of the sequence so that, like the film – 'the way [Welles] builds to this dance' – the writing can lead us to this heightened moment. 'They are all coming forward *now* … [my italics]': the description maintains the sense of things moving in the present. In moments like this, the writing does not appear as a piece of film analysis but as a passage in a novel ('"By gosh!" he exclaims'), a retelling, as if Harvey had adapted the film back again – it was originally a novel by Booth Tarkington – now a book based on the film. Undue emphasis on dialogue often betrays inexperience in film writing. One can sometimes see this in the essays of students new to studying film, struggling to find a way of articulating their thoughts about the medium. They understand they must reference the 'text' but they represent their insights and their thoughts about the meaning of a work through dialogue quotation as if they were attending to the script of a play. In other contexts, one is also aware of detaching dialogue, reducing it to striking or witty aphorisms, or 'great lines', as if they were accompanying lavish stills in a glossy coffee-table book. Nevertheless, one can overcompensate and ignore the importance of dialogue for fear that it is not 'cinematic' enough. Even if one has good intentions, quotation of dialogue can be laborious and cumbersome. Harvey solves the problem of its integration by re-establishing the fictional charge of lines, dramatically situating them, rather than letting them stand apart as quotation, or as discrete example. So as Eugene says, 'Not a bit! There *aren't* any old times. When times are gone, they aren't old, they're

dead – there aren't any times but new times!' he is *replying* 'over his shoulder' and *drawing* 'Isabel towards the dance floor' and *taking* her 'into his arms and into the dance …'

Italicised and emphatic, '*No times but new times*' is an incredulous response by the author ('crazy, of course'), taking issue with the sentiment, and seems to mark a point where he steps out of the flow of description. Yet, it also has the effect of repeating Eugene's words, albeit in a condensed version, like an echo, given further resonance by the italics as if the moment will not go away, pulling the writer back to a fuller description. The critic participates with the characters in turning over what has been said and meant. The italicised words also lean forward, mirroring the 'surge' and the physical momentum of Eugene and Isabel. The use of 'of course' is often rhetorical (if the craziness is so obvious why does it need to be pointed out at all?) but here signifies realisation, and resignation – 'of course I realise this now' – coming to one's senses after being swept along. It is also indicative, along with the use of 'crazy', of the colloquial tone, which some may feel is, for any number of good reasons, inappropriate. However, it does achieve the sense of being in conversation with the film ('*No times but new times* – that's crazy') and with itself ('*But* the craziness only makes it feel more infectious and jubilant' [my italics]). It *speaks* to the moment, and recognises the movement of (the) experience, which formal writing often erases. Correct formalities of academic prose will not necessarily faithfully evoke the physical and emotional energies and dynamics. This style also, refreshingly, understands the colloquial as honestly reflecting our engagement with stories, especially those in Hollywood movies, which is happily ordinary, relaxed and open, even productively naïve. The risk is that the writing becomes lazy and sloppy or insubstantial to read, something that Harvey does not always avoid. Often, however, he shows it to be a risk worth taking, as slangy outbursts morph into involvements that are more considered and intricate, and whose accuracy stems from sensitivity to immediacy.

This quality is present in the use of 'brimmingness'. Harvey had mentioned earlier that 'the sequence takes its power a lot from the way Welles (the radio veteran) gets his main actors to *sound*: with that peculiar brimming quality, close to *tears* of happiness, that people get in their voices at the top of their feelings' (Harvey 2001: 292). The use of 'brimming' was already befitting and the addition of the extra syllable makes it read as even closer to overflowing. Harvey's writing shows that the experience of a film includes a consciousness of experiencing it, and the articulation of that consciousness. A writer will be especially aware of translating the images and sounds into written language, but any viewers thinking about what they see will be involved in an act of construal, forming descriptions in their minds, gathering their experience into words.

'Costello, *a very stately woman*, looks literally carried away by him and, *instead of losing her stateliness*, seems to take flight with it [my italics]': Costello, despite being 'carried away', maintains her upright quality, and so the sentence, despite its forward movement, is twice stabilised by 'stately' and 'stateliness', each time *held up* by the clause within the commas. The dash further pushes the sentence forward into 'leaning back' ('seems to take flight with it – leaning back against his encircling arm behind

her'), as if it were pressing into it (especially forceful in the typeface, Garamond No. 3, used in the book where the dash is long and almost touches the lettering). It captures the tension between momentum and configuration – pushing forward and leaning back, perhaps also holding back. After all, the 'surge' is relative. Their dancing remains quite steady, formal and controlled, and Harvey's language of 'careering' and 'thrown' and 'rock' might suggest too much speed. These movements are present but they are checked and slightly retarded; Eugene and Isabel are, perhaps, savouring their brief reunion rather deliberately.

Single dashes are used quite frequently in *Movie Love in the Fifties*, perhaps too frequently, four times in this second paragraph (though the final two may be taken as a pair), and for some their overuse may signal over hasty writing. Nevertheless, they can be effective at evoking the dynamics of the film and a viewer's involvement. Moreover, there is a variety of effect. The first use in this paragraph marks an abrupt response, a burst of common sense, and a sudden movement out of the film ('*No times but new times* – that's crazy, of course'). The second time it captures the 'sudden rush' that 'makes you laugh'. The third has that pushing and pulling quality. The final occurrence acts as a beat's delay, just holding off their departure, '– and then out of the frame'. The main clause between the two final dashes is 'careering', one aspect of movement following from another, a little too hurriedly, nearly out of control,

FIGURE 4.1 'Costello, a very stately woman, looks literally carried away by him and, instead of losing her stateliness, seems to take flight with it – leaning back against his encircling arm behind her.' *The Magnificent Ambersons*, 1942

'her head and trunk thrown back, drifting and careering … , as they wheel and rock, the camera receding' and yet securely held together by the rhyming 'ing's – 'leaning … encircling … drifting … careering … receding'. Moreover, this burst of movement is contained tightly, trapped even (hence the thrill), within the sentence by the dashes, and in the film by space and by circumstance.

Portraying an unfolding response is as important as the one-off, discrete encapsulation (achieved, for example, through a pertinent and apposite piece of vocabulary). Eugene's sentiment about 'new times' is 'crazy', but this only 'makes it feel more infectious and jubilant'; it is also 'hopeless' but, 'the sudden rush of music', 'makes you laugh'. Cotten's voice is 'full of that brimmingness', and although 'brimmingness' is apt, the film's effect also depends on 'his voice … rising with the ragtime music': the 'real time' description ensures not only that a precise point has been made but that it is being made at this precise point, and conveyed.[1] Eugene's leading of Isabel is described three times, first when 'he takes Isabel into his arms', then, when he is 'sweeping Isabel' and then the final euphoric description with 'his encircling arm'. The moment each time receives a more vivid, exact and fulsome expression, reflecting the moment opening up and out, and the giddy sense of release. The writing here dramatises the process of refining a description, the desire to find new ways of describing, and the need, as new ways dawn on you. It also signals, whether intentionally or not, self-reflexively, the process of description. It inscribes an effort, and suggests that a moment is not easy to *get at* in one go. The repetition also reflects that the memory of this 'infectious and jubilant … rush' might recur during a film of repression and oppression, of moments missed and lives unfulfilled. *How do we come to terms with it?*

Indeed, for Harvey playing out the drama once again in prose, each sentence re-building the scene with words, is perhaps a therapeutic process. Even if the film is immediately in front of him, *recalling* it, or learning to call it (something), becomes revelatory. For the reader, it is perhaps a way of understanding how Harvey comes to see (how one thing leads to another) because of the opportunity to experience it through his eyes. Rather than simply giving *a* view of what happened, the writing conveys the drama of viewing as it happens and the reader, rather than checking off discrete observations, follows the progression. The writing recognises the film unfolding in time, instead of conflating it, after the fact, into a brief summation that reduces instance to example.

Describing obscurity

Harvey tackles a moment that is emotionally direct. In a passage describing a scene in *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Golding, 1932, US), Charles Affron similarly rises to the challenge of Greta Garbo's intensity. Yet, the sequence has further challenges because Garbo makes it somewhat obscure, almost perverse in its movements, and pushes against the conventions of credibility. As Affron writes, 'She thrives on silence, the unsaid, the paradoxical, the ambiguous' (142). Garbo often makes use of irregular rhythms, but they are especially agitated on this occasion, and therefore threaten the

breakdown of sense and seriousness. Her movements test our tolerance: perhaps too effortful and contrived, they face accusations of artificially straining (after effect).

Affron argues that only by careful monitoring will we discern her purpose. This is what he attempts to do in this exceptional piece of description:

> The meeting with John Barrymore signals the disappearance of the ballerina pretext. She is relieved of that category of impersonation to concentrate on emotional states, their essential mechanics, their formal rendering in a physical context. Prey to anxiety, surprised at finding a man in her room, and interrupted in her suicide attempt, she looks at him as if to penetrate his face, but her body barely betrays her agitation. She makes a gesture for the phone, a requirement of probability in the script, but she does it so uncommittedly that the theatrics do not intrude on the personality of her playing.
>
> …
>
> The context has been transcended by her ability to accept fully and to integrate any circumstance into her being – meeting an old lady as she is getting into an elevator, or seeing a strange man in her boudoir as she is contemplating suicide. Garbo's gift is not naturalness, but rather the power to make a whole range of events, from the utterly common to the utterly preposterous, extensions of her self.
>
> The mysterious man in her room becomes something necessary, indeed, expected. The suddenness of his profession of love is no surprise to an audience attuned to the commonplaces of the genre. It is Garbo's reaction that transforms a stock situation, supplying it with a complexity, a richness, and a duration to which it has no birthright … During his pleadings, she turns her face three-quarters to the camera, and then the metamorphosis begins. It is not a set of grimaces, cliché masks that pass for expressions in acting, but the clearest graphics for ambiguity and change. The actress succeeds in summoning deepness to the surface of her face without betraying depth and without simply being murky. She finds a style pertinent to the wordless situation. Now, the face questions, presents a blank to be filled in and a receptivity to the voice that professes love.
>
> Garbo's eyes widen, reaching up, searching for the alertness required by Barrymore's presence; the outline of the mouth becomes fuller and sharpens. If an answer is not immediately to be found, she begins to entertain the possibility of its existence. This face, unrelated to anything previous in her Grusinskaya, is exempt from script, and, I suspect, from direction. In the shortest interval of time, without a trace of discomposure, Garbo registers varying degrees of self-consciousness through the alteration of the relationships between her features. This is a truism, for, in fact, it defines facial expression. Yet in Garbo's face, the alterations are visual events controlled by the star mask that she carries through all of her films. The mask is both cherished and jeopardized, and the rhythm and degree of alteration constitute her screen personality. The alterations in the preceding four frames seem enormous, but they are actually very slight – shifts of chin, mouth, and eyes that, because of our familiarity with her face, cannot

> fail to be noticed. The rapidity of the transformation heightens our awareness. Each time I see this shot I experience the same nervousness as when I hear a great singer about to negotiate a very difficult passage – will she get all the notes in on time? will she do it beautifully? will the fixed shape of the phrase contain the vitality of the performer? With Garbo, we see the notes, and their articulation in no way destroys the pattern and integrity of the sequence.
>
> She then yields a bit. The turning in toward Barrymore is accompanied by a tilt of the head, a reservation only partially belied by the half-smile on her lips. This initiation of a profile creates an ambiguous movement by directing that expanse of face away from us toward her costar and withholding the plenitude of her expression, and she offers him something even less penetrable than we have seen. The play of profile/full face is an essential element in this film; the dynamics of encounter is often outlined in its terms …
>
> The full profile is achieved, replete with smile and a sense of relief and the trust that would logically precede a clinch, or, as this scene has it, a kissed hand and an even franker smile. Yet as soon as Barrymore's eyes no longer meet hers she withdraws into confusion and perplexity, the same as in the beginning of the shot, with the smile melting into an expression of wonder. The effect is pursued to the last instant; her head actually comes closer to Barrymore's but her features remain as distant as they were at the outset.
>
> *(Affron 1977: 147–51)*

The writing has a shrewd strategy for strengthening its own critical criteria by implicitly dismissing, in the course of describing the scene, other criteria. Some viewers may consider the ballerina role important to her characterisation but Affron sees it merely as a 'pretext'. The purpose of the sentence is not to propose the possibility of it being a 'pretext', but to assume it and to highlight, at last, thank goodness, that the 'meeting with John Barrymore signals [its] disappearance'.[2] Judging a performance by its success in pretending to represent something is not unusual (for example, someone might say, 'I don't think she was very convincing at portraying a Russian ballerina'), and might provide a clear reference point to stabilise viewing. Affron not only damningly labels this as mere 'impersonation' (and rather clinically as a 'category') but also presents it as something from which Garbo has been waiting to be 'relieved' (as if she were carrying a burden).[3] Similarly, he is not afraid to rescue aspects normally considered bad by happily accepting them in his account. The 'utterly preposterous' and the 'suddenness of his profession of love' are not merely tolerated, but embraced, 'expected', precisely so that a 'stock situation' can be transformed. Neither writing nor film is squeamish.

Garbo does not simply supply a 'stock situation' with 'complexity' and 'richness', two common evaluative criteria, but also with 'duration'. This is a crucial quality for Affron and he thinks film criticism should monitor change and development over time. Like Harvey, he pinpoints instances of change so that it is when 'she turns her face three-quarters to the camera' that the 'metamorphosis begins'. A little later a comma isolates 'Now,' to assert the precise moment that the 'face questions'.

Monitoring her handling of 'duration', her 'alterations', will reveal tension and paradox and render us unable to describe her effect definitely, or definitively.

Throughout the passage, the vocabulary reflects the *movement* between her elevations and dejections, her optimism and despondency, her surface and depth. 'The actress succeeds in summoning deepness to the surface of her face without betraying depth and without simply being murky.' These fine critical distinctions are endowed with the spirit of Garbo and the tone of her performance: her command of majesty and profundity ('summoning deepness') and integrity ('without betraying depth') and sincerity ('without … being murky'). It also holds true for the writing in the passage. It summons Garbo's depth in its evocations – 'Garbo's eyes widen, reaching up, searching for the alertness required by Barrymore's presence' – without 'betraying' it by lapsing into undignified clichés about the 'mysterious' and 'enigmatic' woman. Nor are the descriptive attentions intrusive. Respectfully it does not try to know her by explaining every aspect of her being and yet, equally respectfully, the regard for her individuality prevents the descriptions from 'being murky'.

In a scene where careful adjustments of heads and facial features are crucial, the writer's progression through the shot enables him to discover *and* measure the variations. '[H]er head actually comes closer to Barrymore's but her features remain as distant as they were at the outset', is more than an observation, it carries weight because the internal dramatic logic is already well established by the writer; 'at the outset' is a time which has been well marked for us. Similarly, claims about general

FIGURE 4.2 'Garbo's eyes widen, reaching up, searching for the alertness required by Barrymore's presence; the outline of the mouth becomes fuller and sharpens.' *Grand Hotel*, 1932

stylistic strategies – 'The play of profile/full-face is an essential element in this film; the dynamics of encounter is often outlined in its terms' – are now telling rather than simply told.

Affron is referring to the performer's adjustments and alterations to her 'star' image when he says that the 'star mask is both cherished and jeopardized' but this equally reflects the behaviour of Grusinskaya in the story. The language that analyses performance also describes behaviour within the fiction (and vice versa) so the consciousness of character and performer merge. The description reproduces the dynamic of a viewing experience that vacillates between the detail of the film and a more general understanding of its workings. A description of the face in the fiction, 'If an answer is not immediately to be found, she begins to entertain the possibility of its existence', flows into a reflection of method, 'This face … is exempt from script'. The commentary and the concrete come together, so that a comment on the *performer's* practice – 'I experience the same nervousness as when I hear a great singer about to negotiate a very difficult passage … With Garbo, we see the notes, and their articulation in no way destroys the pattern and integrity of the sequence' – is immediately followed by an observation on the *character's* behaviour – 'She then yields a bit'. 'She' secretly conjoins performer and character (reflecting the duality of performer and character on film). As the shortness of the sentence plays rhythmically off the previous longer one, the fluency of her behaviour in the fiction is a relief after the personal tensions experienced by Affron. The sentence 'yields' to the preceding paragraph as well as its own as *she* 'yields' not simply to Barrymore but to Affron after all his 'nervousness'.

Like the performer he is appreciating, Affron's flow respects the 'pattern and integrity of the sequence' but also 'see[s] the notes'. Garbo's behaviour 'heightens our awareness' so he becomes responsive not only to her movement within the fiction but to his own movement in relation to the fiction. This is quite different from a method that has a series of points or points of view and then reaches into the film for pertinent examples (even if the points were originally formulated out of a response to the film). Here the writing is synchronised with the dynamics of viewing (even if reflection and mediation are part of the process). The charge of the concurrent is caught in the marked move to the first person. It is not what one thought or thinks, but what one is *thinking*, something adjusting with each 'transformation'.

Moreover, at issue is not simply a heightened observational 'awareness' or personal feelings about the content of the fiction but the quality of its achievement. The viewing experience is a critical one, one question formulating after another – 'will she get all the notes in on time? will she do it beautifully? will the fixed shape of the phrase contain the vitality of the performer?' – concerning the relationship between potential and achievement, the success or failure of execution. The film creates anticipation and tension, moment by moment, regarding the possibilities for accomplishment (and this is much less remarked upon in Film Studies than the suspense generated by fictional components). Hence, our sense of a work being *realised* which is intimately related to our own fulfilment.

Affron's frame-by-frame approach – the book is copiously illustrated with the precise image appearing at just the right moment in the text – magnifies 'very slight' movements in the film ('shifts of chin, mouth, and eyes') and the worry might be that this is an artificially slow way of viewing. Yet, in real time, the 'rapidity of the transformation' *already* 'heightens our awareness', so the frame-by-frame attention is perfectly appropriate, and a necessary tribute. Another concern might be over-confidence about our ability to secure individual instances of meaning, as if her interiority could be transparently interpreted, all the obscurities in her behaviour cleaned up, or explained away. Affron writes:

> It is both puerile and unnecessary to ascribe precise thoughts to Garbo during the various stages of this shot – as if she were plucking at an imaginary he-loves-me/he loves-me-not daisy. This is a dangerous temptation when studying the separate frames. The shot's duration and the rapidity of the alterations must be reconstituted. Then, the mechanics of change are once again subsumed into those features, the entity imposes itself on the components, and both are fully perceived. Garbo preserves both, retaining her facial personality while adventuring into such subtle transformations … Garbo rarely plays at being someone else, nor does she use her face like a semaphor. Her face is like a fabric – so rich that its texture is interesting in itself, so flexible that it retains its design in all degrees of tension. In this shot, the banality of Grusinskaya's mind is transcended by the mobility of the face expressing it, as in those moments in Viennese operetta or musical comedy when the conventions of kitsch somehow lead to strength, grace and integrity.
>
> *(Affron 1977: 152)*

Affron explicitly acknowledges 'the dangerous temptation when studying the separate frames'. This is not simply to strengthen his critical claims by exhibiting consciousness of his method but to further highlight *Garbo's* consciousness of the medium.[4] His method is responsive to Garbo's who demands (and deserves) the meticulous viewer, and whose 'mechanics' of performance turn the 'very slight' into 'visual events'. It becomes requisite in a context where no aspect of a film's achievement may be assumed, and where impatience, prejudice and dismissal are possible, even probable, responses, given the 'banality', the 'stock situation' and the abstruse qualities in her presentation. Affron suggests that 'subtle transformations' are not only possible but are facilitated in this environment. Yet, his method respects opacity and obliqueness; it is never simply a matter of 'making things clear'. One indication of 'strength, grace and integrity' in *Grand Hotel* is that the film has elicited these qualities in the writing.

Describing absence

If Harvey examines an exuberant moment of movement in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, V.F. Perkins homes in on perhaps its most 'heart-breaking' moment of inertia near the end of the film:

When Uncle Jack [Ray Collins] reports to Eugene and Lucy [Anne Baxter] on what he has seen during a visit to Isabel and George in Paris, the camera stays rigidly fixed in its concentration on three similarly immobile figures. The setting is a grand reception room in Eugene's mansion, lit by electricity and with a fire burning in the chimney place in the far background. Jack is centred in the middle distance, sitting on a divan to the right of a low table. At right angles to him, away from the table, Eugene sits in a wing chair with his legs crossed and his hands folded in his lap – a posture that he holds throughout. Eugene's figure, at the left of the picture, is the most distant but his face is fully lit and most plainly presented to the camera. Facing him, in the right foreground, at the near end of the divan Lucy is attentive but she neither moves nor speaks. With her head turned from the camera she is a vital witnessing presence that makes a difference to the ways in which Jack and Eugene can speak. If she were to intervene by so much as an intake of breath the fact of it would be registered in the men's reactions; but our access to her expression is limited.

We enter the scene, on a dissolve, at a pause in after-dinner conversation. Jack drains his coffee cup and replaces it on the tray with a care that excuses his glancing only briefly at Eugene then Lucy as he starts to speak, weighing his words: 'I found Isabel as well as usual. Only I'm afraid as usual isn't particularly well.' Two things are immediately apparent. The first is that the matter of Isabel has been avoided until the avoidance itself became too burdensome. The second is the delicacy of Jack's position, negotiating between the different responses – in each case predictably complex and guarded – of father and daughter. Each of Ray Collins' movements is eloquent because when he avoids eye contact he looks straight ahead, in profile; if he addresses Eugene his head turns away; his glances at Lucy create the moments when his face is most revealed to us. Since he looks at Lucy very little, avoidance is again given weight. As soon as Jack puts down the coffee cup he reaches for a cigar and through the rest of the exchange he works it between his fingers as a relief from the pressure of Eugene's gaze. The cigar gives him a reason to stay hunched forward, not to lean back into a posture that would promote contact.

Under Eugene's quiet prodding Jack gives his view that Isabel would wish to return home if George would let her …

The scene is holdingly, heart-breakingly quiet, visually as well as on the ear. The care put in to the exercise of tact lets us see how embarrassed is the avoidance of embarrassment, but also how delicate is the mutual concern of these friends. Most of all the rigid frame gives an image of paralysis in which the events are held. Submission to George, to Isabel's submission to George, has created a deadlock that only death will break.

Even with so rooted a camera as Welles employs here there is no case for condemning the long take as theatrical. The long take (in fact the duration of any shot) gains its effect in part from the continuous availability of the cut, just as the static camera works as, in part, a refusal of mobility …

> The mutually informing relationship between editing and the long take can be seen at work as our sequence starts and ends. We enter on a silence into which, not prompted by any enquiry, Jack inserts his news of Isabel. The ellipse that finds Jack finishing his coffee, and that passes over for instance the initial moments of his reunion with Eugene, is eloquent that only now and at last are the subjects of most significance being broached, and that no way has been found of speaking about Isabel to Eugene without talking to Lucy about George. The lack of movement at the fade-out on Eugene's words of assent uses the rhetoric of an ending to climax the sense of blockage; the meeting between the three is not over, but everything has been said and nothing is to be done.
>
> Throughout the sequence his withholding of reaction shots, most blatantly of the reverse shot on Lucy, shows Welles exploiting the disadvantage of the long take … : its lack of flexibility in the presentation of face-to-face encounters.
>
> *(Perkins 1999: 63–65)*

Like Harvey and Affron, Perkins is attuned to the nuance of performance, and its importance to a fiction film's meaning, structure and effect. Interestingly, those writers drawn to 'ordinary language' description as a mode seem particularly aware of the centrality of the human (in the film), or those writers drawn to the centrality of the human (in the film) feel that such description is most appropriate. Classic pieces of 'textual analysis' (those for example by Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour or David Bordwell) tend to emphasise other aspects of a film, especially editing. They see a film less as a dimensional fictional world, and more as a linear construction; consequently their writing tends to be more dissecting, structural, diagrammatic and programmatic, in approach and tone. In Perkins' writing, features we might characterise as technological, those relating to editing or the camera, are described as an intrinsic part (of the experience) of the fiction. Indeed, this passage takes its place within an analysis of different editing strategies in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and although Perkins does step out of his description to provide a few sentences of overarching assessment ('Even with so rooted a camera as Welles employs here') in general he orientates his criticism around 'the being and doing of the actors' (Perkins 1999: 65).[5]

Perkins writes that 'Each of Ray Collins' movements is eloquent because when he avoids eye contact he looks straight ahead, in profile' and 'straight ahead, in profile' is an unusual juxtaposition. It is fitting for the scene, however, and for Perkins' account, that looking 'straight ahead' entails an avoidance. In simple and ordinary language, it captures Collins' positioning – in relation to the other performers *and* the camera – and the way the scene makes us contemplate it multi-dimensionally. It expresses complexity of position and composition without the need for geometrical or technological vocabulary. Nor does it surrender to that conceptual abstraction, commonly used in Film Studies, 'space' which would be insensitive to the scene's grieving tone. The neatness and concision of the writing matches Collins' head movements, and like them is 'eloquent'. It is also discreet and modest.

FIGURE 4.3 'holdingly, heart-breakingly quiet … The care put in to the exercise of tact lets us see how embarrassed is the avoidance of embarrassment.' *The Magnificent Ambersons*, 1942

Perkins draws out a series of apparently contradictory characteristics of presentation that trouble our sense of prominence. Although 'Eugene's … face is … most plainly presented', his 'figure' is 'the most distant'. (Perkins avoids the straightforward parallels that are sometimes made in criticism, for example, that the character furthest away is necessarily the least noticeable.) Presenting and withholding are complexly related. Most important in this regard is the figure of Lucy to whom Perkins is 'attentive', just as Lucy is 'attentive', even though 'she neither moves nor speaks'. Her 'witnessing' becomes 'vital', emphasising that silence and stillness can be emphatic, but also that the passive is actively present. There is the recognition of that which does not happen, and the potential of her intervention. One may view the scene and sense Lucy's presence, but not be as mindful as Perkins. Because he wants us to recognise her importance, his commentary, by commenting, makes her more conspicuous. The film resists such emphasis because it would compromise the quietness on which the effect of her presence depends.

Here we see an example of the descriptive critic working on behalf of the film, continuing its work, especially in those places where the film relies on the possibility that significance may be disregarded. Description is not simply a matter of telling us accurately or evocatively what we can see, but what we may come to see. The description of the film is often relating simultaneously what we have seen and what we have yet to see, thus challenging our sense of the obvious. Perkins injects the

strength of the possible into his description while remaining faithful to the muted nature of the actual. With '[i]f she were to intervene by so much as an intake of breath', he renders the slight, the deviation and the imagined melodramatically. Yet, he quickly calms things down on the other side of the semi-colon – 'but our access to her expression is limited' – with the visible (and invisible) matter of fact.

At the start of the passage, Perkins sets the scene, not simply for clarity of exposition but to show that the scene is *set*. The writing lays out the characters' positions carefully, because carefulness, of positioning and otherwise, by character and film, is pervasive. Even though the two-minute sequence is simply three people sitting in a reception room, Perkins conveys it as heavy and strenuous. However, he does not state explicitly that this is the tone of the scene, but embeds the sense in his vocabulary and syntax. The paragraph contains words like 'weighing', 'weight', 'burdensome', 'works', 'hunched' and 'pressure'. Thus, aspects of the scene are described in such a way as to subliminally convey the mood. 'Jack drains his coffee cup and replaces it on the tray *with a care that excuses his glancing only briefly at Eugene then Lucy* as he starts to speak [my italics]': the sentence is straining and a little awkward, rhythmically uneasy, and reflects Jack's difficult negotiation. Later, rather than merely saying 'no way has been found of speaking about' the difficult, or tangled, relationships, Perkins writes, 'no way has been found of speaking about Isabel to Eugene without talking to Lucy about George'. The naming of all the characters, needless by this stage for explication, gives us the terms of a complex equation, and conveys the protraction. It is also expressed in the parlance of a difficult riddle. Perkins writes that the characters show not only 'tact', but also the 'exercise of tact', and more, '[t]he care put in to the exercise'. This is true of the characters, the performers, the rest of the film, and the criticism too: one can see in this clause, and the writing throughout, not simply 'care' or 'tact', but something *more* careful, and effortful, '[t]he care put in to the exercise of tact'.

Perkins often adds one more stage into a clause to provide the sense of a succession of elements qualifying and modifying. The words keep speaking back to each other, and it complicates progression, so that the sentences do not travel straightforwardly to conclusion and completion. Such sentences are ideal for describing films that dramatise impediment, ones like *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which are retarding narrative propulsion. We have 'the rhetoric of an ending to climax the sense of blockage' where 'the rhetoric of' and 'the sense of' are used to modify. These adjustments make 'an ending' and 'blockage' appear less (straightforwardly) final and obstructing while their complicating presence makes moving forward appear ever more forlorn ('the meeting … is not over, but … nothing is to be done'). The 'rigid frame' does not only show us 'paralysis', it 'gives an image of' it, where the word 'image' is retrieved from its habitual use in film discussion and its static quality re-established, and emphasised. The scene's 'paralysis' is fittingly caught, and held, in 'holdingly', a word which not only describes the 'holding' quality, but expresses it because of the extension of a syllable ('holding-ly'): it holds on for longer. Everyone, including the critic, is holding their breath. The word is unusual (is it invented by the writer?) but it is brought into the fold by the more common, and obviously sentimental, 'heart-breakingly'

with which it shares opening and closing letters. The variations on 'avoid' mean that the concept becomes increasingly 'burdensome' with 'avoided', 'avoidance', 'avoids' and 'avoidance is again given weight'. Furthermore, 'avoided until the avoidance itself became too burdensome' is remembered in a later, similar construction, with 'how embarrassed is the avoidance of embarrassment'.

Perkins' descriptions are always aware of, and build in, the alternative possibilities for presentation, as he understands these to be intrinsic to how a fictional world operates.[6] Important to him is what the fictional world has established as probable, and therefore can choose to omit. The 'withholding' is as emphatic as anything we can actually see. The 'ellipse' is 'eloquent'. The imagined pervades the actual scene – for example 'the initial moments of [Jack's] reunion with Eugene'. 'The long take … gains its effect in part from the continuous availability of the cut' and 'its lack of flexibility'; and 'the static camera works as, in part, a refusal of mobility'. The possible and the available (but *not* shown), the avoided and the absent, are ever present aspects in a film, and part of one's experience. They also influence one's judgement of a film's achievement. Perkins demonstrates that good description does not only convey what is literally present in a film, or evoke to make a film present. It puts the matter of what is present at stake.

Notes

1 It is worth noting that rarely does an overarching theme or topic, disciplinary or otherwise, prompt or determine Harvey's analysis. His writing therefore is open to register quite striking moments like Eugene's speaking of these words, and is free to choose the terms in which they will be rendered. Such moments may touch us but be easily passed over because they do not fit into a discursive framework. In fact, their ungovernable quality might be what makes them special.

2 Note, however, that this judgement does not occur unexpectedly in the book; it relates to understandings about characterisation and performing which Affron introduces earlier in the volume. See note 4.

3 For Affron the achievement of Garbo's performance has very little, if anything, to do with this character 'Grusinskaya', and he recognises that movie performance in general has less to do with characterisation (in the sense of accurately performing a role), or 'the exteriorization of the character' (Affron 1977: 142) as he puts it, and more to do with the 'essential mechanics' of 'emotional states' in 'a physical context'. Therefore, for Affron, critical assessments should not be based on the manifestation of individual *characteristics*, and the announcement of them as successful or otherwise, but emerge from entering into the 'mechanics'.

4 Affron writes earlier in the book about the medium and its possibilities for 'renewable scrutiny'. For example, 'Effective screen acting exploits … perceptual dynamics – it not only invites and withstands the activity of our scrutiny, it mirrors the activity. It sets a standard for variation, for composition and recomposition, for sets of processes that thrive on the potential for repeatability' (Affron 1977: 7).

5 Perkins emphasises the special relevance of performance during the long take: 'In long take technique, as used here, the characters' experience of change, of simultaneity and succession, convergence and separation, anticipation, process and consequence is made more dependent on the being and doing of the actors' (Perkins 1999: 65).

6 See Perkins (2005).

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5

WRITING ABOUT PERFORMANCE

The film critic as actor

George Toles

In the long, post-*Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977, US) slump in American movie ambition (on the level of narrative if not whizz-bang technology), Pauline Kael's reviews for *The New Yorker* came to rely increasingly on lavish assessments of performers' approaches to inadequate material to maintain her customary creative zest. Kael's contrasting depictions of Gregory Peck and Laurence Olivier struggling to stay afloat in *The Boys From Brazil* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1978, UK/US) reveals her matchless ability to make film performances, even thunderously maladroit ones, achieve entrancing life on the page.

> When American actors are cast too strongly against type, they look ridiculous. Who could accept John Wayne or James Stewart – or Gregory Peck – as a Nazi sadist? Peck strides into *The Boys From Brazil* with stiff black hair, beady little eyes (one squintier than the other), a chalky complexion, and a thin mustache that seems to be coming out of his nose, and when he speaks in an arch-villain sibilant German accent you can't keep from laughing. In this large-scale version of Ira Levin's 1976 novel, he plays the monstrous geneticist Dr. Josef Mengele, who in his jungle hideaway is still carrying on the experiments he began in the death camps, staring into the future as he walks unconcernedly among the zombie mutants he has created. Charles Laughton was genuinely clammy and terrifying when he did this mad-genius-among-his-mutants number in 1932, in *Island of Lost Souls*, but Peck hasn't it in him to inspire genuine terror. His effects are all on the surface, and he looks particularly bad because he's playing opposite Laurence Olivier, who is the aged hero, Ezra Lieberman, a famous Nazi-hunter (and a fictional counterpart of Simon Wiesenthal). Olivier does a mischievous impersonation of aged, hammy actors, such as the late Albert Basserman and Felix Bressart, with their querulous whiny voices and their fussiness – their way of seeming almost helpless yet

> resourceful, sagacious, and totally *good*. He takes off on this cloying humanistic style just enough to be very funny; if an actor to whom this falsetto came more naturally had played the role, Lieberman would probably have been as tiresome as the other characters in the movie take him to be. Only Olivier, with his daring flirtatiousness, could make this old bore enchanting. In the prison sequence, when he sits across a table from a convicted war criminal (Uta Hagen) and must control the loathing that makes the encounter physically painful to him, and later, at the end of a discussion about cloning with a scientist (Bruno Ganz), when he realizes what the ninety-four 'boys from Brazil' are, he rises above his Viennese singsongy charm. He demonstrates that the harmless-old-bore act of the aged can be a way of saving oneself for the things that count.
>
> *(Kael 1980: 451–52)*

Kael's bravura paragraph is crammed with insights not only about the two performances that are her central concern, but also about the possibilities and hazards of stylised acting in movies generally. She sketches out a mini-history of specific narrative types in Hollywood's genre films of earlier decades – some of them dead ends, in her view, others ripe for resuscitation and sly parody. A full summary of Kael's argument in the paragraph, attentive not only to her main points but to her swift, glinting asides and the large implications arising from them, might lead one to suppose that her presentation of her topic would feel congested as well as teeming – too informed in an omnivorous way for its own good. And yet the effect, as one reads, is not of ostentatious erudition, but of light fingered, light-on-one's-feet occupancy of the movie itself. The prose uncannily reproduces the rhythm of movie experience, making us feel that we are flowing through *The Boys From Brazil* kinetically, rather than observing commentary fashioned from outside, after the fact. The ideas are frequently transmuted into sensations without sacrificing the clarity or probing power of a fresh thought. Everything that Kael responds to seems hatched from within the movie sensorium. Whether she is enthralled or put off by what she 'takes in', she is always avidly immersed in the stream of images. Whatever the value of the events going on, she keeps faith with viewing immediacy. The movie is still unspooling in front of her, it is *happening* right now, as she writes. The first condition of our involvement with Kael as readers is that we allow ourselves to be wrapped up, with a kindred intensity and alertness, in her rushing dream of the film's world.

If one has a passing acquaintance with the representative roles of Gregory Peck and Laurence Olivier, Kael makes it possible for the informed reader to feel the exact weight and pitch of the actors' performances on this occasion. Peck, for his part, has disastrously lost sight of the star actor's crucial knowledge of what the camera knows about him, or rather, what his appearance and presence add up to. Film actors can never transform themselves entirely from role to role, in spite of the theatre-based dictate that they can only achieve greatness by doing so. It is not, after all, only 'veteran' American stars who suffer when cast 'too strongly against type'. On film an actor becomes knowable to audiences and a force to be reckoned with when his or

her *type*, however unusual or elastic, comes into self-heightening focus. If a role is vivid and beguiling enough to endow an actor with a persona that rises above one specific story's circumstances (say, Bogart in *Casablanca* [Michael Curtiz, 1942, US]) the actor's previous roles seem to arrange themselves in relation to it, as though these diverse forays into identity manipulation (even the most egregious failures) were pieces of a human puzzle requiring a solution. Henceforth, Bogart could continue to play murderers or figures with a propensity to madness (*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* [John Huston, 1948, US], *In a Lonely Place* [Nicholas Ray, 1950, US], *The Desperate Hours* [William Wyler, 1955, US]), but his credibility in such roles requires some kind of connective threads to one or more aspects of the Rick Blaine persona. Bogart cannot leave *Casablanca* entirely behind, cannot erase his abiding presence there, without severely compromising his knowability, breaking his contract not only with the viewer – who has a generous, capacious yet not limitless sense of who Bogart is and can still *become* – but also his contract with the camera, and its powers of revelation.

Kael makes a preliminary grouping of Peck with other male stars in the heroic mold – John Wayne and James Stewart. All three of these veterans had now and then taken roles that blurred the outlines of the hero they naturally embodied. The bending of the established star persona complicates our perceptions of how these actors' salient qualities might interact secretly with drives that undermine their hard-won balance or throw them tragically off course. Gregory Peck had been memorable early in his career as a near-villain in *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946, US) and *The Gunfighter* (Henry King, 1950, US), but in both instances his main internal conflict is with a quarrelsome recklessness that he has either outgrown or come to recognise as a disabling temptation. The wildness is depicted as steadily at odds with a deeper, truer vein of ardent attachment. In those moments in *Duel in the Sun* where Peck allows his character's damaged, fearful capacity for sincerity to shine forth, or (in *The Gunfighter*) where he retains the integrity of plain speaking even in the midst of bad behaviour, we feel that the impediments to the star's authentic disposition have been satisfyingly fought and overcome. Peck never lives at a great remove from his unforced dignity and his gentlemanly bearing.

With *The Boys From Brazil*, as Kael deftly intimates, Peck betrays with massive misplaced confidence both the truth of his own forthright stance (Mengele's physical stiffness is designed to be an index of his rigid falsity) and the unshowy imposingness of his speaking voice (as a rule, Gregory Peck's style of address tactfully measures words against deeds, and courts a reserve that fends off 'swelling'). When Peck 'strides' into the movie, unmindful of how poorly his acting disguise serves any of his gifts, he thinks he will excitingly skewer Mengele by exposing his appetite for bombast and the ramrod certitude of a man who views all flexibility as weakness. The Nazi doctor is a monster in part because he has no internal defences against fixed ideas. Peck understands Mengele's failings too thoroughly to permit either his body or voice to be possessed by them. He finds no glory in hollow rhetoric's ability to make (often) an enchanting or stirring impression on an auditor. He is unable to use an overbearing military style of movement to intimidate others genuinely or to strengthen the image of his authority. Peck is separated from the resources of

Mengele's power because he cannot become enamored of them. Neither can he believe that his sinister gifts are sufficiently his own to yield himself to them triumphantly, for the happy 'time being' of his performance. Instead he knowingly plays against all of his natural instincts, and assumes that a consistent rational critique is the equivalent of being *inside* Mengele.

Peck withholds himself from the role emotionally, but Kael does not withhold herself from the joy of documenting his humiliation. She sets her writerly confidence against his acting confidence and shows how the latter is imprisoning, while her own releases the viewer/reader from the bogus mode of seeing on offer. The performance is occupied by Kael in a fuller fashion than Peck has occupied it, and it is energised by this rival actor whose delectable impersonation of each wrong decision reduces the characterisation to a lively shambles. The writer becomes the actor awakening from the trance of his misspent labour, realising (too late) how all his 'artful' selections (the nose-generated mustache, the Popeye squint) have come to naught. The new rationale for the Mengele performance is its lucid, unanswerable demolition while it inexorably runs its course on Kael's mental screen. She re-projects Peck's Mengele in prose for *her* audience, and makes it work as hilarious grotesquerie, now that the perspective on the actor's freakish extravagance has been properly adjusted by one who *knows*. Kael is not only the unhinged actor but the director who explains why the confused performer's effects are out-of-scale and internally lifeless. She finally resolves Peck's floundering difficulties by recasting the role.

Charles Laughton would not shy away from Mengele's operatic malevolence, or the rococo travails of his insanity. In *Island of Lost Souls* (Erle C. Kenton, 1932, US), Laughton found himself in a Conradean jungle kingdom much like that in *The Boys From Brazil*. He realised that he must somehow imbibe the primitive 'soundstage' landscape, and become a seething expression of its heat, remoteness and disquiet. Laughton is the most exotic, poisonous flower blooming there. He further understood that virtuoso villainy of the Dr Moreau-Mengele kind is at bottom a vaudeville or musical number. One must devise a rapturous choreography for the mad doctor's fixation and sordid striving. Laughton loved to loan his mesmerising ugliness to the outcasts he portrayed, and to work his way deep into their shared torment. Though he can render, with savage delight, the coarseness of unbridled appetite, his approach to the extremes of depravity resembles his approach to a Quasimodo's extreme suffering. In both cases he supplies a core softness, as though one could sink with the selfsame tremulous vulnerability into the depths of debauchery or the ghastly punishments meted out by the heartless. Laughton curves his soul gently in the direction of any deformity he agrees to inhabit. The 'crooked timber of humanity' has been crooked since Eden, in Laughton's view, and usually for the same, inescapable reasons. One finds one's own crookedness mirrored almost anywhere one chances to look, and that is a cause for wonder and mercy by turns. The pains one delivers and receives are braided from the same rope. If an actor seeks to elicit terror by depicting a grotesque figure, this can best be achieved by imaginatively endowing him (at first) with the qualities the actor most values. There must be something large to lose that can be felt. Then the actor can proceed to twist these prized qualities out of their

benign shape, and himself along with them. 'Peck hasn't it in him to inspire primitive terror' because he cannot truly imagine himself as terrifying. He does not possess Laughton's need to salve the incurable wound by acts of unstinting identification – which are also acts of propitiation.

Kael moves from Laughton's confidence in embracing the 'gaping pig' within (which allows him to generate 'clammy' effects, unlike Peck's, which are all on the surface) to Laurence Olivier's confidence. Olivier elects to outwit the tedium of the Jewish sage he plays by seeing most of his vapid ruminations as a sly masquerade. He doesn't quite believe in his character, as conceived and written. In other words, Olivier succeeds by staying precisely, mischievously *on* the surface, while Peck fails because he could not escape the trap of his laboriously contrived surface disguise. Throughout her long career as a film critic, Kael was unfailingly suspicious of actors' desire to embody goodness in their roles. She understood that goodness is difficult to humanise onscreen because it is ringed round with inducements to *make* oneself lovable by cloying stratagems. The actor joins forces with all his propensities to self-regard, and creates an artificial distance between himself and the unruly drives that are a large part of a star's natural, seductive performing energy. A star performer might begin the walk toward nobility by tamping down the sexual charge of his interactions, or making his presence in a scene welcoming in the manner of a priest at a wedding reception rather than volatile, surprising or invitingly dangerous. One might assume that goodness, against all the evidence of fiery prophets (so often despised and feared), has no business flirting with arrogance or emotional excess. *The Boys From Brazil*, according to Kael, is 'almost belligerently sexless', with both Peck and Olivier obliged to engage in a conflict too floridly ethical to allow for erotic diversions. If Peck's 'belligerence' has no time or room for libido, his heroic, aged adversary can hardly find openings to bring it back into play.

FIGURE 5.1 'Peck fails because he could not escape the trap of his laboriously contrived surface disguise.' *The Boys From Brazil*, 1978

FIGURE 5.2 'Olivier succeeds by staying precisely, mischievously *on* the surface.' *The Boys From Brazil*, 1978

The actor assigned to 'goodness' can easily become entranced by the simple strength of his manifest virtue, and with the satisfaction of leading others by 'selfless' example or by sweetly edifying discourse. Knowing that one's character is virtuous and thinking about how to keep the *appearance* of virtue vivid and trustworthy (like a solid stock investment) can trick an actor into many varieties of pious fraudulence. It is difficult when acting to recall that a consciousness of one's own goodness is one of the most reliable ways of turning it into something specious, and even reprehensible. Such a consciousness, even lightly operative, can lead to a sense of internal elevation in others' company. Perhaps one is admirably exempt from the troubling foibles of all one's acquaintances. The fact of a movie actor's stardom can treacherously combine with the character's inner worthiness to sanction an aura of misty remoteness – relieved at intervals with accepting or forgiving smiles – in the totem manner of Robert Redford.

Kael applauds Olivier's crafty decision to approach his saintly Nazi-hunter by means of a witty impersonation of old Hollywood's Jewish character actors, especially those who were designated specialists in wistful kindliness. Albert Basserman and Felix Bressart both possessed a schtick that alternated crooning fretfulness and irreproachable folk-wisdom. Their moping as well as their occasional irritability were a transparent cover for eye-twinkling shrewdness whenever real life questions were raised. Olivier plays Ezra Lieberman as though he were himself a guileful actor, hiding behind the resilient ploys of earlier masters of the pose of genteel harmlessness. An elaborate display of theatrical Jewishness is superimposed on other, more surreptitious modes of self-awareness and self-presentation. The latter are on view only glancingly, after long, careful suppression. Lieberman might best be understood as an impudent inversion of Olivier's celebrated portrait of Shylock. In *The Merchant of Venice* (John Sichel, 1973, UK), Olivier's theatricalising of Jewishness was equally

about misapprehension and the fulfillment of social expectation. (What sort of Jew do you expect to see? What sort do you imagine, require that I be?) With Shylock, the softness and fathomless affliction are the underground dimensions of the character, while the sly, cruel, grudge-bearing tradesman lives on top. Lieberman, of necessity, plays up his constricting public image as much as Shylock does, to deflect attention not only from what he intends to do, but also from what he knows and acutely feels to be the case.

For the old, sanctimonious bore to be 'enchanting', as Kael takes him to be, he must find a way to watch himself while beaming at others and longwindedly trying their patience. Lieberman knows what ruses are most likely to gain an elderly man indulgence from friends and enemies alike, and how to make his manner hover teasingly between agreeable and aggravating. Olivier *must* refrain from venturing so far in the direction of comedy that he parodies the sentiment his character elicits, as well as trades in. Lieberman mostly believes in the conventional attitudes he expresses, even as he uses the *manner* of his expression as a screen for an unyielding toughness. If Olivier convinces us of Lieberman's goodness, it is curiously by letting us see that most of the time he is merely playing at it. His more meaningful concerns lie elsewhere. Perhaps without his character ever proclaiming a thoroughgoing scepticism, Olivier can show us that Lieberman is bereft of the illusions that might sustain his gracious, courtly demeanour. In all likelihood, he has long since given up the conviction that goodness of a consoling, ennobling sort is possible, or of any real benefit. One can have principles, to be sure, but it is one's hardness that one must rely on to have any of them bear fruit.

Kael is most struck by Olivier's encounter with the war criminal played by Uta Hagen, where his loathing becomes dramatically potent by not *quite* becoming visible to the wary woman who inspires it. How much of Lieberman's charm, in general, is the product of such carefully restrained, but near at hand loathing? In his scene with Bruno Ganz, he briefly jettisons the entire appealing edifice of his grandfatherly Jewish humaneness to offer a real rebuke. His outrage is in a different key from anything that has come before, and issues from a different emotional 'country' than his persona could ever have been in touch with. It is as though Olivier must incinerate his performance before our eyes, make us glimpse for a few exquisitely painful moments all the futile, concealing effort that has brought this 'appeasing' artificial man into being. Olivier knows that the highest objective of his performance is the decisive sabotage of our belief in it, so that Lieberman – like a figure in Beckett – can speak at last from a real position, one with ash-coated ground beneath it. He further realises that the truth of that ground, when it surfaces in a vehicle such as *The Boys From Brazil*, can only withstand exceedingly brief scrutiny, or it too will become mere contrivance, a grandiose, hollow stunt. So Olivier's ultimate task is to steer the viewer back (after the upheaval with Ganz) to the tattered remnants of the actor's Felix Bressart impersonation, and to make this 'outgrown' garment once again feel magically viable, and dramatically sufficient. After we are granted a sudden, searing mental glimpse – as Lieberman's control unravels – of an open, mass grave, Olivier allows us for the duration of the narrative to experience the action as the thing that it

is: a foolish, toiling masquerade. Lieberman's cocked eye may even resume its twinkle, and do so unironically. Such 'trifles' of conventionality as a seemingly warm disposition and an impulse to decent behaviour will have to suffice for his 'character'. They are Lieberman's passport to a realm of restored civilised legibility. As he might put it: 'We must live (if we choose to go on) among those who have been spared what we have seen, what has been done to us, what we have, in the cycle of horrors, done ourselves.'

Lieberman has contrived a performance, a tidily predictable 'act', to see him through, and though we may for a short while be curious to measure its cost to him, we are not obliged to maintain a steady awareness of his past tribulations. The film thankfully dispenses with the flashback 'study guides' of Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1965, US). Our knowing that a canny performance of goodness is in progress does not render Lieberman transparent. We are not exactly sure who the performance is aimed at, how it expresses what is left (emotionally speaking) of the person playing it, and what it renounces in order to claim its small, fleeting advantages. For Kael, the performance Olivier delivers is never about Lieberman's consciousness of goodness, even when the scripted dialogue affords no escape from it, except through the actor's acidulous self-mockery. What Olivier shows us are semblances of goodness cooked up by a ghostly survivor in order to appease others and 'pay his way' (least painfully) to the end.

Is a silly, failed movie which misconstrues its melodramatic nature from the outset, and either guts or foils the development of its few interesting possibilities, worth the limited salvaging operation an inspired (and conceivably desperate) actor might bring to it? What does it mean for one performer to achieve a clear-eyed approach to a dramatic problem when nearly everything around him is in shambles? Will Olivier's efforts to communicate to viewers in a delicate, discordant (with the rest of the narrative) key not be contaminated by the muddle which *is* the performing context? Can this actor be lucid and validly moving when pitted against so much irksome hokum? The case of Olivier's Lieberman is further complicated by his subsequent decision to do inane variations on this role in two films released within a year or so after *The Boys from Brazil* (*The Jazz Singer* [Richard Fleischer, 1980, US] and *A Little Romance* [George Roy Hill, 1979, France / US]). In these films the cunning balancing act Olivier devised to stave off the wholesale collapse of the 'Hitler clones in Brazil' project is replaced by a capitulation to shameless, wheedling flummery. Olivier is now *using* his accent and showing off his artful codger for no purpose greater than empty virtuosity. The characterisations are now about acting and confidence in a diminished sense: the exaggerated insistence on theatrical know-how.

Olivier weirdly decides that his challenge is to *play* an old man rather than simply to be one. Perhaps he resorts to counterfeit elderliness – and touchingly genteel composure – in order to mask the signs of his own physical ailment and infirmity: that is, his alarmingly *real* mortal frailty. He falls well below the achievement of Felix Bressart and Albert Basserman on these occasions, since he lacks the modesty of the character actor who accepts the task of playing his reliable, distinctive notes within an ensemble. Instead, Olivier clamours for centre stage, imposing hammy theatricality as the law of the land whenever he addresses a fellow actor. Can the different register of

the Lieberman performance remain discernible when the actor himself seems to have forgotten what was at stake in it? The Lieberman persona is endlessly, quietly at odds with itself. The character at once *acts* his dazed garrulousness in order to deceive others and is simultaneously afflicted with it. The need to speak at wearisome length is not always within the 'actor's' control. And his kindliness, both genuine and calculating, is steadily under siege. Kindliness is a nearly spent force, part of a useless set of manners that has been preserved, gallantly but also pathetically, from a 'lost' world.

G.K. Chesterton has written memorably in his autobiography about 'edges', and what he says about them is applicable to both film performances and the performance's relation to other elements in the narrative. 'All my life I have loved edges, and the boundary line that brings one thing sharply against another' (Chesterton 1988: 40). A star persona is usually about an edge, where two somewhat incongruous or divergent tendencies are palatably, and mysteriously, brought together. Margaret Sullavan, for example, in David Thomson's unsurpassable description in *A Biographical Dictionary of Film*, had a 'voice and bearing [that] were haughty, frail and bold, like that of a perilously recovered invalid, or a girl in a summer dress on a winter day' (Thomson 1995: 726). Her fragility gains toughness and definition from an always adjacent leaning to haughtiness, and her radiant tenderness seems to break through to its recipient after traversing a severe terrain of pride. Or, to cite Thomson once again, this time evoking the central fault lines in James Cagney: 'Look past that familiar belligerence and you will find a compressed gaiety and a delight in outrageous, inventive movement' (Thomson 1995: 703). Cagney's exuberant, at times almost lighthearted tough-guy cruelty coexists with a disarming daintiness (this last word, perfectly expressive, comes from Thomson). His fights feel authentic, but at the same time yearn to be giddy dance routines, and Cagney can find behavioural grace notes in the coarsest outbursts.

Pauline Kael, like David Thomson, is adept at locating the edges within a performer or style and assessing what's at stake in them, but she is equally mindful of edges separating one *kind* of performance from others in a film. She regularly considers the consequences of acting collisions, small and large, that do not get harmonised or sorted out. When critics argue for a film's greatness they are, as a rule, beholden (often unconsciously) to ideals of unity and balance in a work of art. Kael's governing assumption about the film medium is that it is at heart unruly and ill-disposed to evenness and fair proportion. Moreover, she regards this gravitation to disorder as a strength of cinema rather than a lamentable defect – a weakness forever in need of corrective attention or embarrassed avoidance. Nowhere is the breakdown of a seemly discipline more pronounced than in the realm of performance. One can easily discuss a character's experience in a film without dwelling on the kinds of difference it makes that a given actor is playing her. A characterisation approached in the absence of performance particulars can be viewed as part of a carefully coordinated system of effects, and of appropriately regulated feelings. We can pretend for the sake of an integrated account of a film's narrative structure that characters all stay within the bounds of the allotment of life energy and emotional interest that their functions within a story warrant. A character is the principal character by virtue of the sustained

focus that the director and writer grant her, and the fact that she, to a greater degree than those around her, embodies and articulates the film's themes. Yet the viewing of a film – even a Robert Bresson film – crucially involves the disproportionate amounts of energy and attraction generated by the human presences with which the camera is confronted. However scrupulously a director and editor work to make sure that a performer carries his or her 'fair share' of a scene and nothing beyond it, the mere fact of singular or strong presence can swiftly disrupt these controls. One can predict how much power a particular actor can summon on screen (hence the continued benefit of having movie stars), but a host of moment-to-moment living variables can drastically revise the hierarchies that serve dramatic intention. (Gregory Peck, say, or Denzel Washington may prove less compelling in their central position than they have on other occasions; Laurence Olivier or Russell Crowe may find more opportunities with their underwritten roles – within the same film – than the emotional circumstances dictate, or seem to allow for.)

How does one adjudicate the 'more' and 'less' within these unstable acting compounds? Actors have a beguiling way of not meaning or conveying only what they are *supposed* to. And what *does* emerge from the accidental surplus of their behavioural expressiveness is seldom in a form that a script envisions before a scene or bit is lived out on set. Kael chronicles the ebb and flow of viewer attachment to performance effects in her reviews, and suggests that the intermittent excitement of most movies, good or bad, is more dependent on this slippery, massively subjective investment in acting presence than on anything else. Kael's brilliance as a tuning fork for telling moments comes from her capacity not simply to observe (minutely) but somehow to inhabit film performances. She rightly assumes that the stars we throw in our lot with onscreen attract, confound and disappoint us in much the same fashion that the less concentrated figures with whom we have casual or intimate dealings in life do. And it is invariably a mingling of striving performer and represented character that audiences are evaluating and believing in. Kael knows how to disentangle all the phases and conditions of viewing involvement. She measures the tensions that emerge when a performance briefly loses its grip on us because of some forcing or vanity or confusion. Kael judiciously estimates the effect that an actor is working to produce *in character*, then suggests why it succeeds or miscarries because of harum scarum elements that so variously complicate acting intention. For example, when Lena Horne appears as Glinda in *The Wiz* (Sidney Lumet, 1978, US), 'dressed like a blazing blue-and-silver Christmas tree', could it have been anyone's hope or design that she would utter the simple greeting, 'Hello, Dorothy', with a 'condescension that leaves you breathless'? Countless pieces of film have an emotional aftertaste that pulls us away from the supposedly *clear* dramatic sense. No human action – not even 'Hello' – can take care of itself, or be taken for granted. Very little that people – even 'seasoned professionals' – release to the camera 'goes without saying'. There is not a single word or look or gesture in the human lexicon so small or insignificant that it cannot yield (for better or worse) a surprise revelation, or emotional shift.

It is frequently the case that a single performance in a movie holds the only communicable life that the movie transmits to a viewer. Somehow, as Kael's writing so

often demonstrates, an actor finds a way to exist excitingly or bizarrely in a film's world, and no one else in that world can gain access to the same stimulus, the same provocative summons. The actor builds imaginative circumstances for herself that seem to matter to her, and give her doors to walk through, avenues of response that *lead* somewhere. She is connected to her experience by means as ineffable as Barbara Stanwyck's determined gait or appraising once-over, so that in relation to her alone, the film's projected future lights up. Her actions have consequences of a different heft than those of the other actors who, often for good reason, cannot find their footing in the anaemic artifice of a humdrum genre piece. Actions, for an actress like Stanwyck, matter because what she is *doing* seems to be happening to her, keeping her in touch somehow with a reality beyond the rest of the movie's reach. She keeps faith with her internal relation to place and circumstance, even though the outward manifestation of these things seems comprised of dull settings and dull company onscreen. It is only the light of her attitude to how she is placed, moment by moment, that keeps us engaged. We marvel at her undiminished capacity to respond fully and naturally, and so, to an extent, we see the shabby dramatic trappings around her transfigured, just as she does. This can be said equally of Stanwyck and Kael. As long as Kael is present inside a movie's force field, she makes it seem that there is always something at stake, always something worthy of her attention. Whether the movie is a Gatsby party in full swing or a deadly gathering comprised of oppressively familiar faces, she makes the reader feel that there is a challenge (requiring every bit of her resourcefulness) to stay fully alert, to be up for the occasion. As she takes us from room to room, what perhaps most entrances us is the quality of her involvement. Who knows what might turn up, she teasingly insinuates, just a few steps ahead?

Pauline Kael was seldom interested in film acting as a vehicle for romantic transcendence or 'tear-iridised' spiritual exposure. (Her responses to De Sica's *Shoeshine* [1946, Italy] and Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* [1957, Italy/France] are conspicuous exceptions.) She was most often drawn to performances that are canny and watchful, mischievous and self-possessed. As a result, she was temperamentally ill-equipped to explore the Wagnerian rapture potentially available through the close-up. The close-up in its most daring ventures, as D.W. Griffith discerned practically at the dawn of the medium, can gain access to the all but inaccessible furthest reaches of intimacy and pathos. Charles Affron, in his two remarkable books, *Star Acting: Gish, Garbo, Davis* and *Cinema and Sentiment*, seeks out language which might do justice to these outer limits, with all the attendant risks of cloying excess and unnerving mysticism. Affron's great subject is the star actor's relation to the frame. The frame alternates between being a means of confinement (a physical and psychological cage) and an opening to the freedom of vastly enhanced intimacy. This liberation from conventional, socially dictated limits on expressiveness is most often achieved by the 'face by itself' in close-up, which in the 'fluctuating scale of [figure] presentation' is 'often the final element in a series of magnifications' (Affron 1982: 59). We are led toward the face in the act of discovering, and in the same instant distilling for us, what its owner feels and knows. The face briefly dissolves one of its many social masks and, perilously, lets us – the privileged observers – move all the way in.

The star's placement in the frame typically initiates a contest between self and screen environment. Affron tends to think metaphysically about this issue of placement, referring often to how the star's features and form are *impressed* on the image surface. The frame environment can either submit appropriately to the expressive force of the star placed within it (aligning itself with the star's inner life and energy, channelled, of course, through a character), or seem inertly resistant to the star's need to make space a natural extension of being. This dream of making figure and enveloping space merge (what Affron regards as the effortless 'meld of actor, décor, and sentiment' [Affron 1977: 66]) is more likely to be achieved in black-and-white than colour. For Affron, the pulsing drama of light and dark is always crucial to the process of bringing the viewer into the actor's self-discovery – the full intimacy of revelation. The arena of that revelation in the black-and-white cinema frame is a molten fabric, and Affron's way of evoking it makes us understand how ethics and psychology continually mirror and release one another.

> All that is impermanent and intangible in feeling is respected by light in jeopardy of darkness, light that trembles at the menace of darkness just as feeling trembles at the threat of blatant articulation. One of our anxieties about revelation is our sense that in its apparent completeness it is false to the complexities it seeks to articulate. The double standard of chiaroscuro accommodates feelings in the same way that words and silence do – in flux between virtuality and imperfect, incomplete expression. Not only are we afraid to see/hear all – we know that to do so is to risk denaturing the very experience that moves us.
>
> *(Affron 1982: 63)*

Although this extraordinary passage is occasioned by nocturnal epiphanies on wintry terraces and desolate train stations in Clarence Brown's *Conquest* (1937, US) and David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945, UK), Affron somehow manages to draw into the net of his shimmering description nearly all of the indelible close-ups of classical Hollywood cinema: the boundary bursting moments – especially those involving female faces – when an individual's emotion exceeds the limits of the frame and flows out to meet us (seize us!) where we are.

It is worth considering at some length how Affron works with the complex hide-and-seek demands of intensely intimate views of actors in a specific narrative situation. Here, under the heading 'The Scope of Feeling', is Affron's account of the romantic explosion engendered by the world-eclipsing close-ups of Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor in *A Place in the Sun* (George Stevens, 1951, US):

> Dominant in the affective style of George Stevens's *A Place in the Sun*, the close-up is posited as a sign of observation so penetrating that the characters themselves seem to be aware of its power. No sooner does Angela (Elizabeth Taylor) confess her love to George (Montgomery Clift) than she exclaims in panic that people are looking at them. The only observer who, in fact, has taken notice is the camera, but it has done so through emphatic close-ups that

> explicitly clash with the implied and occasionally glimpsed presence of other couples on the dance floor … The spectacular exhibition of George and Angela's love is accommodated by increasingly large close-ups of the face of Elizabeth Taylor, in tension between adolescence and young womanhood, and Montgomery Clift's introspective glamour. When the declarations of love are resumed on the veranda, just after Angela cries out her fear of being seen, the stars' faces literally become too big for the frame. Stevens is here suggesting that the scope of the camera's grasp of surface, through these magnifying close-ups, is equivalent to the sentiments of the characters. Film appropriates their privacy, making viewers their accomplices. We share their feelings because we see more of them than anyone else in the fiction, sometimes more than they themselves do.
>
> *(Affron 1982: 60–61)*

What is most enlightening about this stretch of film is the split between Taylor's announcement that she is being looked at (and her turn to the camera's forcefully intrusive presence for confirmation) and her immediate location of what she takes to be a secure refuge from prying eyes. She assumes, perhaps rightly, that after catching the camera observer in avid voyeuristic proximity, she can leave the 'otherness' of the camera eye behind, appropriating its capacity for engulfing enlargement and subjective intensification for purely private ends. Her look to the camera, and to us, would at first suggest that we have been spotted – and thus apprehended – as unwarranted trespassers into her rapt communion with Clift. Once she has become self-conscious about the camera's inescapable nearness, how can she, and by extension we, get away from our unwelcome selves? The answer seems to be that she must simply return to her beloved's gaze, making an unqualified surrender of her attention to him and winning a reciprocally comprehensive regard from Clift in mirroring reply. The camera is more *on top* of the lovers than it was before, and if ever the word 'crowding' could be employed to signify camera pressure on the face, it would seem to be here. But strangely, and I would argue, mystically, the camera no longer feels as though it is outside the lovers, scrutinising them from the perspective of a troubling other, as it has just finished doing. It is now inside them. We are beholding their faces as they prepare to kiss from behind the space where their mutually enfolding gaze originates. We are within the charged field of their locked gaze, from which all competing stimuli and stirrings of memory have been (as by a feat of mesmerism) excluded. We too expand within the radiance of their seeing and almost experience, in our tremulous isolation, the transient, totalising connection of their kiss.

It must be added that it is a connection in which vulnerability is powerfully ratified by physical beauty. The force of the beauty on display in the silent testimony of the lovers' affirmation (as they become perfect mirrors for each other) is so extraordinary that it seems to overflow the frame uncontainably. Love is what this beauty is finally made for, we are summoned to believe, and the fulfilment sought and found here, by two previously confused, posturing individuals, cures the rashness and selfishness and mere striving that led up to it. Of course, the soon-to-be-experienced falling

FIGURE 5.3 'world-eclipsing close-ups.' *A Place in the Sun*, 1951

away from this momentous, momentary world of answers casts doubt on its sufficiency. The characters and the viewer are plunged back into the realm of mortal limitations and aggravated separateness. The eventual legacy of this close-up imaging of completeness is a blundering tragedy. We ascended so swiftly to the space where yearning is overcome by an impossible excess of having. The aftershock of gaining free entrance to the place where needs are perfectly fused and met seems to let death loose into the lovers' world, just as it was when Adam and Eve took 'their solitary way' out of Eden. The certainty of unbearable happiness is the certainty of loss.

The close-up which ends Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931, US) seems an appropriate place to end this meditation on film performance and of critics' diverse attempts to 'find words' that will do it justice. I can think of no segment of a movie actor's creation that has received more commentary, or commentary so consistently judicious, searching and delicate, than the last scene of *City Lights*, and especially its concluding shot of the tramp's beseechingly exposed gaze. James Agee, in one of the earliest major essays on film acting, 'Comedy's Greatest Era' (1949), summarises and evokes the emotion of the episode with consummate tact. His description is all the more remarkable, given the fact that he is working from memory; it is possible that he has not had a chance to view the film in years, to confirm his impressions.

> At the end of *City Lights* the blind girl who has regained her sight thanks to the Tramp, sees him for the first time. She has imagined and anticipated him as princely, to say the least; and it has never seriously occurred to him that he is

> inadequate. She recognizes who he must be by his shy, confident, shining joy as he comes silently toward her. And he recognizes himself, for the first time, through the terrible changes in her face. The camera just exchanges a few quiet close-ups of the emotions which shift and intensify in each face. It is enough to shrivel the heart to see, and it is the greatest piece of acting and the highest moment in movies.
>
> *(Agee 1967: 10)*

Agee refrains from telling us where we end up in relation to the emotions which 'shift and intensify in each face', though the phrase 'shrivel the heart' suggests the kind of demands that the last images make on us. He conveys beautifully the emotional tourniquet produced by these 'first times' of seeing and being seen, and the tormenting ambiguities they give rise to.

In the 1970s, Walter Kerr supplied an eloquent supplement to the Agee reading in his magisterial performance treatise, *The Silent Clowns*:

> He can think of only one thing to say, one unnecessary thing to say: 'You can see now?' The girl nods her head, slowly, solemnly, first tears beginning to form in her eyes. Cut to Charlie in gigantic close-up, smiling expectantly, hopelessly, gratefully, unreachably. *City Lights* ends with the close-up.
>
> What else can it do, what else can Charlie do, what else can Chaplin do – ever? His meaning has arrived at stalemate, *is* stalemate. The truth is out and the truth is a stone wall. Nothing more can be said, no further gesture made. Which of these two can move, toward or away from the other? The girl is every bit as paralyzed, as imprisoned, as he. He has even helped create her prison, made her inaccessible. That is what we do to one another at the precise moment we make contact.
>
> … He yearns to believe but he understands sham too deeply, too sweepingly, for that. There is a terrible ache in knowing too much, seeing too much. 'You can see now?' are the cruelest words of all, severing pretended bonds, pretended unions, forever. The end is isolation, face to face, smiling through ice.
>
> *City Lights* is an utterly stable film about total instability. Its pieces come together in perfect harmony, shutting its people out. Without the least loss of laughter, Chaplin has remade the world in his own despairing, but unyielding, image.
>
> *(Kerr 1975: 351–52)*

My favourite portion of this lyrical hymn to paralysis and imprisonment is Kerr's rationale for the close-up as an inescapable endpoint. Neither the tramp nor the blind girl seems at liberty to take a step, 'toward or away from the other'. Such a step, of course, must eventually be taken in any human situation, but these two cannot yet imagine a way to extricate themselves from a set of feelings (astonished, grateful, helpless, lacerating) that can go no further. They would help relieve each other's

embarrassed pain and isolation if they could, but the truth of the encounter dictates that they have already begun, inwardly, to turn away from each other. There is really no alternative possibility, except the sort concocted by a demeaning, wholly inadequate pity or pretence. 'Here, you can have a job in my shop.' 'That's very kind of you, but I can't accept it. I wouldn't fit in there.' But when we part company with them, they haven't yet managed to break eye contact. Outwardly they are still tremblingly confronting the other's tender, intolerable look. Surely some better option must reward their desire to be more for each other than they can be, at this fateful juncture. How could 'first seeing' and 'final seeing' so drastically coincide? How much does it matter in Kerr's insistence on ice, despair, unyieldingness that the blind girl *does*, in fact, reply to the tramp's question. She says: 'Yes, I can see now.' How far does her seeing go? What besides a shattered image of gentlemanly nobility, handsomeness and largesse does her seeing give her access to? And also, does it matter that Kerr leaves out of consideration the rose that the tramp clutches, and the laughter that briefly forces itself into play behind the strained to the breaking point smile?

William Rothman devotes an entire essay (1988) to the end of *City Lights*. He launches his reading with a gentle corrective to Walter Kerr, or at least Kerr's employment of the word 'despair' in his effort to pinpoint the mood of the closing shots. 'Not despair, but a passionate wish and a palpable terror are at the heart of

FIGURE 5.4 'no segment of a movie actor's creation … has received … commentary so consistently judicious, searching and delicate.' *City Lights*, 1931

Chaplin's films; the wish and terror of overcoming the barrier for which film is a metaphor, the wish and terror of making or allowing a dream to become real. In the ending of *City Lights*, as I understand it, he believes this wish and faces this terror by, in effect, calling upon us to imagine that no screen separates him from us' (Rothman 1988: 56). Rothman's metaphysical conundrum about the possibility of images removing all barriers from the spectator, including our sense that what we behold on a screen is mediated, and therefore less 'real' than our itching elbow or the person sitting next to us, is a puzzle (as well as a dream) shared by actors – and by film actors most of all.

How do actors employ an apparatus of deception and make-believe to 'step forward' and make a full disclosure to the camera (of the sort we find in Chaplin's final close-up)? And is it possible that they attain at such privileged moments a degree of expressiveness and conviction more authentic, less susceptible to doubt and second-guessing than any 'signs' of life that the actor's face carries in his real life engagement with others? Rothman describes the last shot of *City Lights* and then immediately follows it with an insistence that the tramp is no longer distinct from Chaplin. He further contends that Chaplin, in turn, is as present to us – arguably more present – than we are to ourselves. He is present and not separated from us. He is inside us and he is outside, and though we are barred from touching him, he is as manifest to our senses and the imagination woven into them as anything else we might claim allows us 'to trust our eyes'. There is nothing in the world of appearances that confirms more to us of lived reality than this image does:

> We cut to a medium close-up of Chaplin, with only the edge of the Girl's hair visible in the frame; it feels very much like a shot from her point of view. His hand is still raised to his mouth, his rose still between his teeth, his gaze still locked with hers, his eyes still filled with dread and terror. And yet – he beams, he smiles, he laughs, as though struck with the realization of how irresistibly funny this wonderful, terrible moment is. Then the scene fades out, and his face is engulfed in darkness.
>
> In describing this last moment, I am no longer willing to refer to his human figure as 'the Tramp'. It is *Chaplin*, this human being of flesh and blood, who stands exposed in this frame, revealed in his mortality and his desperate longing to be loved. This revelation by the camera is also a declaration of the camera, a declaration by the film's author that he *is* the pathetic Little Tramp. Chaplin completes his design by stepping forward.
>
> *(Rothman 1988: 57–58)*

What Rothman audaciously means by stepping forward – when no actual step has been taken – is that he has 'stepped out of the world of the film and into our presence, that no "window" separates us, no screen' (Rothman 1988: 58). Such an assumption, which I applaud and resist in equal measure, seems to depend on the image's attainment of a complete revelation, an exposure that grants all that we could wish or need to know. Rothman is not disconcerted, as I am, by the length of the

shot. I always feel that it fades from view too quickly, when I am still poised on the threshold of the revelation that will take me all the way inside. He concedes that we anticipate (and may well feel deprived of) another reaction shot of the Girl. Her response to what we are seeing might give further guidance on how far we are meant to go with our probing. Perhaps, as things stand, we are immobilised by what is 'unyielding' in the situation, as Walter Kerr contends.

The extraordinary effect of the image is in part due to the fact that Chaplin's look is aimed at the 'seeing' flower seller. Because this look is not answered, Chaplin's gaze is forcefully re-directed to the viewer, who must bear its burden alone and formulate a 'sufficient' empathetic response with no assistance from the look's intended recipient. We must amplify and possibly correct her seeing while acknowledging, to some degree, our own helplessness to make a difference, whatever we may understand. When Rothman writes that the Tramp *is* Chaplin in this shot, and that this acknowledgement declares an end to the fiction of separation, it seems potentially to erect a *new* barrier. Robert Warshow, in his early 1950s essay on *Limelight*, confesses to being made uncomfortable by the immoderateness of Chaplin's supplication to the viewer that we must love *him* (Warshow 1970: 223). He suggests that there are many episodes in the Tramp's career where his plight became a screen for an unseemly display of surrogate begging, or *commanding*.

I would prefer to regard Chaplin as simultaneously knowing and not knowing where he stands in relation to the Tramp at the end of *City Lights*. Why could he not be unsure what his look is finally releasing *and* hiding *and* in need of? I recall two anecdotes about Chaplin's childhood included in John McCabe's biography of the actor. It may be the case that both anecdotes are apocryphal, but maybe all the more emotionally laden for that reason. In the first, Chaplin's mother visited him in the workhouse where he was temporarily confined. The child was ashamed to greet her because he was filthy, lice-ridden and his head was shaved. As he avoided her dreaded appraisal (after all, what child can understand the real meaning of an enforced separation from a parent?), she took his face in her hands and said, 'With all thy dirt, I love thee still' (McCabe 1978: 11). The second anecdote involves Chaplin's last meeting with his father, when he had successfully entertained, at his father's request, his barroom cronies with a comic song. His father pressed a coin in his hand in appreciation before bidding his son farewell. He also embraced him 'for the first and only time' (McCabe 1978: 17). To what extent does the *City Lights* scene and its final shot draw on such memories or memory-fictions, driving Chaplin back to a place where he still does not know how to protect himself, nor how to appear, nor what he is seeking in the way of love or recompense? The Tramp may allow Chaplin to find something of himself, something of inestimable consequence, which cannot be declared in his own person, or comprehended by that person. If that is the case, Chaplin declaring himself directly will only get in the way (our way, but his as well).

Many of my students offer chastening reminders that even the pain of the final image (which so many commentators confidently insist is the heart of it) can escape notice. I have been told on many classroom occasions that Chaplin's expression is

shyly joyful, and that the joy is obvious. If he sheds tears as well, it is because he knows that the flower girl loves him, and that he has earned, beyond question, his happy ending. Part of what separates us from everything that lies before us (on-screen and off) is our determination to see what we want to see, what we are ready to see, what we have made up our minds to see. An image of a face can be ambiguous and profoundly unsettling, but what is there to prevent any viewer from simplifying or conventionalising it for his or her own purposes? An exposure, however truthful, cannot guarantee what will be recognised, taken in, remembered.

Although Rothman's description is considerably more detailed than Walter Kerr's or James Agee's, he still does not account for everything that I see in the shot (and, rightly or wrongly, remember of it). The rose, for example, does not strike me as being 'between the Tramp's teeth'. It is very close to being there, but this closeness measures the gap between a plucky comic gesture and an ominously defenceless one. I see no hint of the Tramp being struck by the humour of the moment at any level. The laugh, like his 'beaming', if beaming there is, is tinged with apprehension, panic. It is the laugh we sound when we are pressed so tight in our feelings that some noise must escape, to cover the awful strain and embarrassment. Then again, his pleasure at her restored sight is beyond question. His fingers, which partially obscure his imprisoning smile, seem inclined to continue their upward journey so that his whole face might be covered and removed from view. The Tramp's gaze seems to be moving back, receding somehow in the required appearance of reaching out to *her*. The flower is a gift that is itself being turned, imaginatively, into a possible barrier to further exposure, an available hiding place, yet too small and fragile for the task. There is also a suggestion of the Tramp trying to put on a brave face – one that shows him capable of *choosing* this particular fate – but not quite succeeding. As Julian Barnes phrases it in his novel, *Arthur and George*, 'the best way to be resigned to your fate is to want it' (Barnes 2006: 190).

If the Tramp brings to light, with all of his power, the face of the child who will add no further insupportable demands to his mother's load, that is to say, a face of gladness – for in some sense, he is glad – at receiving this flower and nothing beyond it, he may be permitted to slip away. He extends the look's duration for as long as he dares, for fear that it will be his last, but he is already in full retreat. The premature fade to black is a self-imposed temporal restriction: of course this man-child cannot look his fill, any more than he can dine to his heart's content at his next scavenged meal.

Even if I am for the moment sure that these realisations are in play for me, I am not – any more than the Tramp is – done with looking. Perhaps in the presence of a genuine 'exposure', when everything inside an actor seems to be out in the open at once, the barrier that must remain, thankfully, is inexhaustibility. To be most fully revealed is to restore some sense of the necessary limits of knowing. As we look at Chaplin's face with the freshly sighted flower seller, always sharing her sense of the 'first time' hazards of this scrutiny, everything that becomes clear to us feels like an expression of what remains hidden. The hiddenness is the actor's obligatory pact with

emotional survival. The strongest acting light shines in the midst of concealment; the inexorable need to conceal is the most authentic trigger for whatever happens to be released.

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6

SILENCE AND STASIS

William Rothman

> Life is a train of moods like a string of beads; and as we pass through them they prove to be many colored lenses, which paint the world their own hue, and each shows us only what lies in its own focus.
>
> (Ralph Waldo Emerson 1987: 280)

In a paper presented at a colloquium occasioned by the publication of *The World Viewed* in French translation in 1999, Stanley Cavell observed that thinking about film had an effect on his 'ambitions for philosophical prose' and thus left 'permanent marks' on his writing. In particular, it taught him, as he put it, 'the necessity to become evocative in capturing the moods of faces and motions and settings, in their double existence as transient and as permanent'. At a key moment in the racetrack sequence in Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946, US), we have a close view of Alicia, the Ingrid Bergman character. I would be at a loss to find words capable of describing this vision in a way that would enable readers – especially readers (granted, they would probably have to be visitors from another planet) who have never had the pleasure of seeing Ingrid Bergman on screen – to conjure in their 'mind's eye' Bergman's face in this frame. A detailed anatomical description would not do the trick, for what shines through in Bergman's face, I want to say, is an 'inner' quality, a quality of innerness, that fuses with an expression of the particular mood that, within the world of the film, colours Alicia's thoughts and feelings at this moment.

In writing about this moment from *Notorious*, placing this frame enlargement on the page would free me from having to describe this face, or the way it is framed, in order to evoke the mood it expresses, or the mood that mood has the power to cast over viewers. Nonetheless, frame enlargements, however evocative, do not in and of themselves complete the task of *capturing* such moods. To accomplish this, the writer has to find words to say, for example, what the mood is that this face is expressing at

FIGURE 6.1 'a quality of innerness, that fuses with an expression of the particular mood.' *Notorious*, 1946

this moment, what the thoughts and feelings are, or may be, that are at once colouring her mood and being coloured by it.

'Every art, every worthwhile human enterprise, has its poetry', Cavell writes, 'ways of doing things that perfect the possibilities of the enterprise itself, make it the one it is' (Cavell 2005c: 96). Film is a worthwhile human enterprise that achieves its particular poetry, in his view, when it achieves the perception of what he calls the 'poetry of the ordinary' – the perception that 'every motion and station, in particular every human posture and gesture, however glancing, has its poetry, or you may say its lucidity' (Cavell 2005c: 96). The poetry of film is open to us all to perceive; we cannot fail to perceive it unless we fail to 'trace the implications', as he puts it (with a nod to Henry James), of the moods of faces and motions and settings by which films express themselves. Writing about film is a worthwhile human enterprise as well. The enterprise whose possibilities Cavell's writings about film aspire to perfect – an enterprise internal to philosophy, as he understands and practises it – is that of perceiving the poetry of film and tracing its implications.

In *Hitchcock – The Murderous Gaze*, my first book, my stated goal was to achieve an understanding of Hitchcock's authorship and at the same time to investigate, philosophically, the *conditions* of film authorship. In pursuit of that goal, I performed extended 'readings', as I called them, of five characteristic Hitchcock films, following them, as I put it, 'moment by moment, as they unfold from beginning to end', putting into words 'the thinking inscribed in their successions of frames' (Rothman 1982: 1). Cavell refers to the necessity, in writing about a film, of evoking its 'moods of faces and motions and settings'. I refer to putting into words 'the thinking

inscribed in its succession of frames'. As this suggests, in writing about films we have different 'ways of doing things'. Cavell's books about film have a small handful of frame enlargements. *The Murderous Gaze* has over six hundred. In part to distinguish the kind of approach my work exemplifies from Cavell's, Andrew Klevan characterises my writing as 'camera aware', pointing out how much of my experience of films

> is about experiencing the camera, rather than seeing the screen as simply a window through which we view the fictional world. The camera does so much more than 'record … the pro-filmic event': it has a 'presence', like a character, and although it sometimes allies itself with a character, it has its own character. It is often a vehicle of authorial intervention and commentary (sometimes 'intrusive').
>
> *(Klevan, unpublished)*

And yet, for all the differences in our ways of doing things, Cavell and I are engaged in a common enterprise: the enterprise of perceiving the poetry of film and tracing its implications. For if it is by their moods of faces and motions and settings that films express themselves, as we both believe, a film's 'moods' and its 'thoughts' cannot be separated. Nor can the film's faces and motions and settings be separated from the ways the camera frames them.

In the racetrack sequence from *Notorious*, for example, the camera consistently frames its subjects from distances and angles that endow their postures and gestures with their full power of expression. If Bergman and Cary Grant were to play Alicia and Devlin on stage and behaved exactly the way they do in the film sequence, the moods their postures and gestures express so lucidly in the film would be altogether missed by the audience. Indeed, Hitchcock cunningly designs the sequence so that it makes precisely the same point. It makes us aware that Alicia and Devlin know that the jealous Sebastian (Claude Rains), the leader of a Nazi gang on whom she has been enlisted to spy because they had once had an affair, may well be watching them through his field glasses. It is clear to us that they are deliberately behaving in such a way that anyone watching them, like a theatre audience, from a distant and fixed position, would fail to perceive the unmistakable signs of their intimacy that the camera reveals to us. Such an audience would have no clue that Alicia and Devlin are locked in a perverse pattern they are unable, or unwilling, to break, that they love each other but are avoiding acknowledging their love.

In addition, the sequence incorporates a number of framings and shot changes that serve both to enhance the expressiveness of the characters' postures and gestures and to articulate the dramatic and psychological progression of the sequence within the context of the film as a whole. Hitchcock designs the sequence so that it at once presents the action lucidly and traces its implications. For example, as Alicia is dutifully reporting to Devlin, as per her assignment, the impressions she gleaned from her dinner with Sebastian and his fellow Nazis, Hitchcock frames their conversation in a frontal two shot that underscores their sense that they are in a public space and have

to appear to be just two acquaintances who happen to have run into each other and are simply chatting. But when Alicia says, 'You can add Sebastian's name to my list of playmates', the camera registers, and expresses, this jump in the intimacy and intensity of their conversation by cutting to a pair of shots that are closer and more intimate, but which also isolate Devlin and Alicia in separate frames. First, a shot of Devlin, in which he says 'Pretty fast work.' Then a countershot of Alicia, who says, 'That's what you wanted, isn't it?' With these provocative words, she reveals to him, for the first time, her private understanding of his behaviour in an earlier scene. Her revelation of how she really thinks, albeit offered in a mode of attack, constitutes a significant development within a closed, repetitive pattern that seemed to allow for no new developments. This revelation will turn out to be an important moment within *Notorious* as a whole, but its full significance will reveal itself to us only retroactively. It initiates a series of revelations by both parties, each a response to the preceding one – a series that is not completed until the end of the film, when Devlin finally reveals to Alicia not only that he loves her, but that he has loved her from the beginning.

As if to underscore both that this moment is meaningful and that its meaning as yet remains unknown (indeed, unknowable) to us, Hitchcock composes this shot of Alicia in such a way that we experience it as spatially disorientating. As Alicia begins to speak, she turns her head screen left. But because she performs this gesture before we have a chance to grasp how this new camera angle relates, spatially, to the ones that preceded it, we literally cannot tell whether Alicia is turning her head toward Devlin, or away from him. The following close-up of Devlin, framed in profile, compounds our disorientation. Does the fact that we are viewing him from this angle mean that he has turned away from Alicia as she, perhaps, has turned away from him? Are we, perhaps, viewing him from her point of view? Or is it only the camera that has changed position?

If Alicia and Devlin were characters in a stage play, these expressive effects would not be possible. On stage, an actress either does or does not turn away from an actor. The actor either does or does not turn his profile to the actress. And if he should turn his profile to the audience, it is he who performs this gesture; the audience's position remains fixed. Again, it is not merely that such ambiguities need the camera to *capture* them; without the camera, they cannot *be*. Classical movies regularly employ a panoply of expressive postures and gestures – including, but not limited to, turning away from the camera, almost facing the camera, looking 'through' the camera, meeting the camera's gaze – that in this way can only have reality (it is not merely that they can only be captured) within the world of a film. If writing is to capture a film's moods of faces and motions and settings, such postures and gestures have to be evoked, for they colour our experience of entire sequences, indeed, entire films.

In writing *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed: A Philosophical Perspective on Film*, Marian Keane and I aspired to follow *The World Viewed*'s thinking from first page to last. In doing so, we could quote that book's words, letting them create their own moods. We could also paraphrase Cavell's sentences, preserving their evocative power while incorporating them into sentences of our own. Our writing could slip freely back and forth between direct quotation and paraphrase, and between invoking

FIGURE 6.2 'we literally cannot tell whether Alicia is turning her head toward Devlin, or away from him.' *Notorious*, 1946

FIGURE 6.3 'Does the fact that we are viewing him from this angle mean that he has turned away from Alicia as she, perhaps, has turned away from him?' *Notorious*, 1946

Cavell's voice and speaking in our own. By this means, we could, at least in principle, follow Cavell's thinking without losing the thread of our own thoughts.

In writing *The Murderous Gaze*, I aspired to follow, in a comparable way, the thinking of each Hitchcock film the book addressed. Of course, I could neither quote nor paraphrase passages from the films. To be sure, I could quote the words of characters, but not their voices, and in films the poetry – the lucidity – of speech resides in the way just this person, framed just this way, speaks just these words in just this tone of voice at just this moment in just this situation in just this setting. Nor could I quote the ways shots are composed or lit, or the camera's own gestures, which are performed in silence. For writing to capture the moods that are the medium of a film's thoughts, it is, indeed, necessary to evoke those moods – whether by prose alone (Cavell's way of doing things) or by prose complemented by frame enlargements (my own).

Prose does not express itself by faces and motions and settings, of course, but by words, or, we might say, by the voice or voices readers hear – or speak – 'in their heads' when they read those words. There is always a barrier separating words on a page, even when complemented by frame enlargements, from the film itself. When performing a sequence reading in the classroom, the barrier seems lower between one's words and the film. At any moment, one can press the 'pause' button. Then, as I observed in the preface to *The 'I' of the Camera*, one can 'speak about what is on the screen (and what is significantly absent) at each moment, what it reveals, what motivates it, and how it affects our experience' (Rothman 2004: xxi–xxii). One can 'speak about what every viewer sees and also about what we come to see only when we attend to each moment with this kind and degree of attention'. In the classroom, in other words, there is no need to become evocative to capture a film's moods of faces and motions and settings. We can speak about those moods even as they are still lingering and colouring our perception and our thoughts.

If I were in the classroom performing a reading of the racetrack sequence, for example, I might well pause the film, letting the mood sink in and perhaps move us to take thought, the moment Hitchcock cuts to the breathtakingly beautiful close-up of Alicia we have already considered. Wounded by Devlin's saying, 'You almost had me believing in that little miracle of yours. … Lucky for both of us I didn't. It wouldn't have been pretty if I'd believed in you', she is pretending to be looking through her field glasses.

Phenomenologically, a film is a moving picture, not a succession of still frames. Every shot has a temporal as well as a spatial dimension. When a film is paused, its motions are stilled, its temporal dimension stripped away. The film stops being a film and turns into a still photograph. And our experience of the film turns into a memory, as it was fated to become in any case. At least that memory is a fresh one, like the memory of a dream the moment we awaken from it. And all it takes to turn the frozen frame back into a film is hitting 'play', which enables us to return to the film exactly where we left off. Once a frame enlargement, always a frame enlargement, though, when it is printed on a page.

FIGURE 6.4 'Turning a film moment into a frame enlargement … makes no difference, visually, when the film is already stopped in its tracks.' *Notorious*, 1946

In writing about a film, frame enlargements can be entered into evidence in support of a variety of claims. In *The Murderous Gaze*, I claim, for example, that there are a number of recurring motifs – I think of them as signatures – that appear at significant moments in virtually every Hitchcock film. These include colours (green, red, white, black); objects (lamps, birds); visual signs (what I call Hitchcock's '//// sign'); symbolically charged framings (what I call 'tunnel shots', but also what I call 'profile shots', of which the disorientating shot of Devlin, framed in profile, is an instance) (Rothman 1982). Frame enlargements can serve both to make clear to the reader what I mean by the term 'tunnel shot', for example, and to back up my claim that they regularly occur in Hitchcock's work.

And frame enlargements can be used, as I have said, to evoke some film moments – but by no means all. The frame enlargement of Alicia holding the field glasses to her face would not be able to evoke this particular moment if it were not for the fact that up to this point in the shot her face is motionless, as is the camera. Visually, this is a moment of stasis. Turning a film moment into a frame enlargement (or a freeze frame, for that matter) makes no difference, visually, when the film is already stopped in its tracks. Still photographs, like paintings, cannot but be static, of course. But a few still photographs convey the sense of time itself standing still, as this frame enlargement must if it is to evoke this moment of stasis within the film.

When a film is paused, its voices are also silenced. This is an effect that writing cannot duplicate. Frame enlargements on a page do not silence a film in the same way; the film is already silenced. In the classroom, pausing *Notorious* at this moment would have the effect of silencing Devlin's voice. That effect might well reinforce my

sense that Alicia does not wish for Devlin to finish this sentence, which she fears may wound her deeply; if she could make time stand still, she would. But she cannot. The camera remains on Alicia, still framing her closely, as Devlin completes his thought. ' … If I'd figured. … ' Alicia begins slowly lowering her field glasses, or letting them drop of their own weight. ' … She'd never be able to go through with it – she's been made over by love.'

The mesmerisingly slow lowering of the field glasses gradually unblocks Alicia's eyes from the camera's view, revealing them to be already downcast, turned inward, presumably to avoid meeting Devlin's gaze, and to keep him from seeing the tears – and the fire – welling up in them. If I were to pause the film here, however, the frame projected on the screen would no longer have the power to evoke the mood of the moment. Nor would a frame enlargement on the page have such power. Alicia's mood, or succession of moods, is expressed by the movement within the frame, not just by her face.

Like the earlier spatially disorientating shots of Alicia and Devlin, this close-up now has an expressive impact impossible to achieve on stage. If a stage actress were to hold a pair of field glasses to her face, the expression in her eyes would not be *hidden* from the audience, as it is at the beginning of this shot; nor would it be *revealed* to the audience when the glasses are lowered. Eyes do not reveal their intimate expression to those who view them from a distance. At this moment there seems an attunement, not a complicity, between Bergman, behaving as if she were Alicia, and the camera that is a presence in the actress's world, but an absence in the character's world. It just seems to happen that when Alicia holds the field glasses to her face to hide her eyes from Devlin's, this woman's eyes – that is, Bergman's eyes – are hidden from us as well, as it just seems to happen that as the glasses lower, her eyes become unveiled from our view, as well as Devlin's. That these things do happen, however, colours our experience of the shot and, indeed, the sequence – and the film – as a whole.

The focus of this close-up so far has been Alicia's silent reaction to Devlin's cruel words, which wound her, I take it, as he means them to do. But there is something they pointedly leave unsaid. His 'she's been made over by love', for all its bitter sarcasm, belies his assertion that he had never believed in her. His implication is that he had never loved her. But then how *could* she have been made over *by love*? What Devlin is saying to Alicia without saying it – what his silence is saying – is that he now knows for certain that she is unworthy of love, but that he had once loved her. This leaves open the possibility, of course, that this 'knowledge' has not stopped him from loving her, that Devlin is silently revealing what his words are denying. In any case, the motion of the field glasses continues the whole time he is speaking the hateful words that nonetheless reveal that he had once loved her.

Within this close framing, now devoid of motion, Alicia finally breaks her silence to speak the words 'If you only once *said* that you loved me'. I hear this less as an accusation than as a poignant expression of a wish – the wish that the past could be changed. Alicia has heard in Devlin's hurtful words an acknowledgement – he had never admitted this before – that he once had been in love with her. If only he had admitted this earlier, she is saying without saying it, she would have acted differently,

and they would have been happy all this time. Heard this way, her words are also acknowledging something she had never admitted before: that her actions were no less responsible than his for leading them to the present desperate situation. At the same time, she is mindful, as never before, that the clock cannot be turned back, the past cannot be altered, the happy times they could have enjoyed together are forever lost.

Just as she is about to speak the words 'If you'd only once said that you loved me', Alicia turns her face slightly screen left. This time, her turning does not disorientate us. She is turning toward Devlin, not away from him. She would be speaking these words directly to him were her eyes not still lowered, turned inward. I see her at this moment as suspended at the border between fantasy and reality, imagining she is speaking to a man who might, despite everything, still be moved to declare that he loves her, that he believes in her, even as she knows – or thinks she knows – that the man who is really in her presence is not the Devlin of her dreams. And yet, in the end, the 'real' Devlin will turn out to become, or always to have been, her dream man.

Visually, this is another moment of stasis whose mood a frame enlargement is capable of evoking. In writing about this moment, this frame enlargement frees me from the need to try to capture its mood with my prose alone. That is just as well, because I would again be at a loss to find words capable of empowering readers to conjure this moment of the film in their 'mind's eye'. But that does not mean that this moment leaves me at a loss for words. I find myself moved me to say, for example, that when within this framing Alicia whispers longingly, and without visibly

FIGURE 6.5 'this frame enlargement frees me from the need to try to capture its mood with my prose alone.' *Notorious*, 1946

moving her lips, 'Oh, Dev … ', she now seems to be speaking entirely from *within* her fantasy, speaking *only* to the man of her dreams, not to the man in her presence who has just wounded her yet again and is poised, perhaps, to strike a fatal blow by saying that he no longer loves her.

I discern in Bergman's face both sadness and excitement. These are moods I am prepared to attribute to Alicia on the basis of what I see – what I believe anyone might see – in Bergman's expression at this moment. Why is she sad? Because she cannot change the past, cannot turn back the clock. Why excited? Because she is looking forward to, almost as much as she is dreading, what might come next. But sadness at the time that has irretrievably been lost, and excitement compounded of anticipation and dread of what might come next, are not in the same way simply visible in this woman's face. How could they be? They have to do with the way, for Alicia at this moment, the present is haunted by what might have been but never was, and by what might never come to be, both of which have no tangible reality and thus are out of reach (are they not?) of the camera.

In nonetheless attributing to Alicia sadness at the time that has been lost, and excitement compounded of anticipation and dread of what might come next, I am advancing an interpretation, one might say an explanation, not a description – a way of making sense of, a way of tracing the implications of, what I believe I *can* perceive in this woman's face at this moment of the film. Virtually all the claims I have been making for the last several pages attribute particular thoughts, feelings and intentions to Alicia and Devlin, and particular motivations to Hitchcock for choosing to frame them the ways he does. These are assertions of the same kind: they are interpretations, explanations of what I would otherwise find inexplicable. On what grounds do I base such assertions? They can be based only on my perception, my experience of the film. But to perceive Alicia's sadness *as* sadness at the time that has been lost, and her excitement *as* compounded of anticipation and dread of what may come next, I have to be in a particular mood – a mood that this moment of the film has the power to cast over me, given the mood I am already in after all the moments that have come before it.

Only when sound falls silent do we become aware of the reality of silence, and only when motions have run their course do we become aware of the reality of stillness, as if when motion ceases time itself is suspended, the way it is for Scottie at the end of *Vertigo*, for whom no change is possible, no release, no dawning of a new day, no future. Or, rather, past, present and future have become one to Scottie. The future has become as closed for him, as immutable, as the past. Alicia, at this moment, is not at the same place as Scottie. Like him, she finds herself suspended. But she is not beyond suspense, the way he is. She has not yet lost all hope for the future, as he has. She believes, now, that Devlin once loved her. Her reaction to his words confirms that, despite everything, she has not stopped loving him. I take Alicia to be feeling at this moment that all her hopes for the future are staked on what Devlin now goes on to say and do. Blind to the future, as we are in our own lives, she finds herself as if at the edge of a precipice, not knowing whether the next moment will save her, or plunge her into a bottomless abyss, an eternity of falling. Hitchcock liked

to distinguish between surprise (when a time bomb goes off that neither we nor the characters knew to be there) and suspense (when we know, but the characters do not, that there is a bomb set to go off any moment). Alicia knows, as we do, that what Devlin is about to say or do might detonate a 'bomb', figuratively speaking. But she is as powerless as we are to keep this from happening. For Alicia, as well as for us, this is suspense, Hitchcock style.

The first time I viewed *Notorious*, I did not know, any more than Alicia knows, that Devlin will fail to rise to this occasion, but will finally stop being 'a fat-headed guy filled with pain', as he will memorably describe himself when he at last finds the courage to declare his love – but not until it is almost too late. What I did know, that Alicia does not, is that she is a denizen of the world of a film, not the 'real' world. Knowing this, I knew that what the film was going to reveal to me in its own good time – whether Devlin was ever going to stop denying his love for Alicia – was an outcome that had already been decided. Every moment of *Notorious* is transient. It is also permanent. Every time *Notorious* is projected, the outcome is never different. And the moments of the film that lead inexorably to this outcome live on in my memory, 'strand over strand' (as Cavell puts it in *The World Viewed*) with other memories of my life.

In the 1956 *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Alfred Hitchcock, US), Louis Bernard observes, before he is murdered, that 'in the Muslim religion, there are no accidents'. There are no accidents in the world projected on the movie screen, either. No matter how meticulously Hitchcock storyboarded his films, he could not control everything that happened in the act of filming – the precise speed with which Ingrid Bergman lowered her field glasses, for example. But once these contingencies, these accidents of filming, are captured on film, they are no longer contingencies. In this sense we can say that in the world on film, nothing is contingent. Nothing is possible that is not necessary. All that happens cannot but happen. The future is as fixed, as immutable, as the past. Gilles Deleuze had to go through the most extreme conceptual contortions – so, too, he believed, did filmmakers – to arrive at the concept of the 'time image'. And yet 'time images' are simply what films are. As Cavell argues in *The World Viewed*, the screen does not *have* a frame; it *is* a frame. And the projected world is the world as a whole. Hence what is within the frame has the same kind and degree of reality as what is outside the frame – except for what lies on the other side of the screen, so to speak: our world, from which the projected world is separated, spatially, by a barrier it is not possible to cross. But a barrier that *cannot* be crossed – the speed of light, say – is not a real barrier, not really a barrier, at all. And what is true for film's spatial dimension is no less true for its temporal dimension. Films express themselves in the ever-shifting moods of faces and motions and settings the camera captures. But the screen onto which the projector casts these transient images, the unmoving ground that makes film capable of exhibiting the world at all, remains fixed. Like sand in an hourglass, a film runs through the projector in one direction only, one reel emptying as the other fills. And yet, within the projected world, past, present and future have the same kind, and degree, of reality. The world on film exists in time. Yet it is also timeless.

Like every moment of every film, this moment of *Notorious* has a double temporal existence. But this moment is special – I am not saying it is unique by being special this way – in that it precisely marks Alicia's own awakening to the fact or condition – we might call this the human condition – that every moment of her own experience is both transient and permanent. She can see, now, that her own past actions and her failures to act, her own words and silences, as surely as Devlin's, have left permanent marks. Now she can trace their implications, discern necessity in the way her past has led her to this place – a place where she finds herself at once wishing for a future in which she might be saved, and at the same time wishing for time to stand still. What Alicia does not see at this moment, however, is that it is not only impossible for her to undo her past actions, it was never possible for her to have acted any differently. She does not see that in her world there are no accidents, that nothing that is not real is possible. Our lives are woven of contingencies, but hers is scripted. I was not fated to write these words, or you to read them. But everything Alicia does, she is fated to do. Our pasts could have been different, although if they had been different, we would now be different. Our futures, unlike hers, have yet to be written, and we do not have to let others write them for us.

We can say that what Alicia does not see is that this moment, like every moment of her life, has been scripted. We can also say that what she does not see is that there is a camera filming her – a camera that is always there, a camera that knows the script, because it is, in a sense, that script's author. We can say, in other words, that the place where Alicia now finds herself is precisely the border that separates her world, the projected world, from our world, the one existing world. And, it seems to me, unless we say these things, we cannot write about this moment of *Notorious* in a way that fully traces its implications.

In the classroom, as I have said, there is no need to become evocative to capture a film's moods of faces and motions and settings. We can trace the implications of those moods even as those moods are still colouring our thoughts. In writing about a film, that is not possible. The closest one can come is to incorporate a frame enlargement that invites the reader to pause for a moment, to suspend his or her reading to contemplate this still image. A frame enlargement can at best evoke a moment of a film, not enable a reader to experience it. Yet in that moment of contemplation, the author's voice – or, rather, the reader's 'inner voice', speaking the words the author has written (when they're printed on the page, can they be said to be the author's own words?) falls silent. Or, perhaps, that voice has already achieved its own silence, has said all that words can say about this moment of the film, so that the reader is already in the mood for the contemplation invited by the frame enlargement, which comes as if in response to a silent call. When reading resumes, the reader's 'inner voice' breaks its silence.

In the classroom, one can freeze the frame in order to speak about what those in the room have just viewed, about the mood the image on the screen, in its stillness and silence, helps keep alive. One can also pause the film in order to remain silent, allowing the film moment to resonate, perhaps to father a new thought. In any truly artful sequence reading performed in the classroom, one speaks only when the film's silence

calls for breaking one's own silence. When the silence speaks in its own voice, the art is in listening. In writing about a film, it is necessary to evoke its moods of faces and motions and settings in order to say anything about them, or even to let them pass in silence. The film's silence, too, has to be evoked. Contemplating such facts in *The 'I' of the Camera*, I concluded, in words I still find thought-provoking, that 'every artful sequence reading is a study in the limits of what can be said. What the *possibility* of such mastery reveals is that the limits of language and the limits of film coincide. That is, there is a boundary between them'. When a moment of a film achieves lucidity, it is possible (with exceptions that prove the rule) to put into words the mood the film is wordlessly expressing, as it is possible (again, with exceptions that prove the rule) to paraphrase a poem, to find words of one's own that say what the words of the poem are saying. A paraphrase of a poem is not the poem; what it leaves out is what only the poem can say, not only by its words but by its silences.

In *The 'I' of the Camera*, I wrote, in a similar vein, that films

> speak to us in an intimate language of indirectness and silence. To speak seriously about a film, we must speak about that silence, its motivations and depths; we must speak about that to which the silence gives voice; we must give voice to that silence; we must let that silence speak for itself.

There may seem to be a conflict between the imperatives of giving voice to silence and letting the silence speak for itself. When we put into words what a film consigns to silence, is the film's silence not missed? The point, though, is that it is not one's words, but rather the silence they achieve when they reach the limits of what words can say – a silence within which the film's own silence can be heard echoing – that gives voice to that which the film consigns to silence.

The border that separates language from film is also where the two touch. It is when it reaches this border that film achieves its poetry. And it is at this border that writing about film achieves its own poetry, for that is where the poetry of film is to be found. For writing about film to reach this boundary, the poetry of film – the perception that every human posture and gesture, however glancing, has its lucidity – must artfully be evoked by the writing itself, by its own voices and silences. Such writing perceives film – a medium limited to surfaces, to the outer, the visible – as also a medium of mysterious depths, of the inner, the invisible. The 'inner voice' that 'speaks' the words on the page expresses, and casts, moods of its own – moods that colour the reader's perception, hence contemplation, of the frame enlargements, which in turn colours the way the reader gives 'inner voice' to the words on the page. The moods the writing expresses, and casts, are themselves coloured by the moods of faces and motions and settings it evokes. When those moods resonate with the film's moods, writing about film achieves its own poetry.

'The human body is the best picture of the human soul', Wittgenstein writes. Then what gives us so much as the *idea* that other minds, if they exist at all, are separated from us by an unbridgeable barrier? 'Wittgenstein's ambition', I wrote in *The 'I' of the Camera*, was to

> overcome skepticism by an acknowledgment of the everyday, effecting a fundamental transformation of the central tradition of Western thought. Film participates in this enterprise by demonstrating that the 'barrier' of the movie screen – like the boundary between invisible and visible, inner and outer, subjective and objective, female and male, imaginary and real, silence and speech – is not really a barrier at all, however natural it may be to envision it as one, and by wondering what this 'barrier' then is.

It is a recurring theme of my writing that many great and influential films, *Notorious* among them, meditate on the barrier-that-is-no-real-barrier of the movie screen, and that they envision themselves as possessing the power to pass back and forth across this border. Is this not a mysterious power that a film's moods of faces and motions and settings possess? Is it any wonder, then, that writing like mine, which envisions itself as passing back and forth between giving voice to films and finding my own voice in saying what I have to say about them, is especially drawn to such works?

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7

FOUR AGAINST THE HOUSE

Richard Combs

In her introduction to *For Keeps*, the compendium with which she wrapped up her work as a film critic, Pauline Kael concludes: 'I'm frequently asked why I don't write my memoirs. I think I have' (Kael 1994: iv). It's a fair way of measuring the flow of life through work, ten collected volumes of reviews and radio broadcasts, plus her much-contested sally into Orson Welles scholarship with 'Raising Kane' (1971): a forty-year relationship with as much heated ebb and flow as life elsewhere.

Not that biography in orthodox senses is missing. As part of her complaint against *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971, US), Kael testifies: 'I grew up in San Francisco, and one of the soundest pieces of folk wisdom my mother gave me was "If you're ever in trouble, don't go to the cops"' (Kael 1973: 385). And then there are the occasions when autobiography has a generalised gloss. In her famous discursive essay, 'Trash, Art, and the Movies', she says, 'The movies we respond to, even in childhood, don't have the same values as the official culture supported at school and in the middle-class home' (Kael 1970: 102).

In drawing on their own biography then, critics often construct a real or hypothetical audience, as a source or a validation for their reading of films, as part of the armoury they bring to bear in assessing the art and business of movie-making. With Kael, this sense can swing from almost paranoid alienation to sentimental bonding within the lonely crowd. Raymond Durgnat is fond of referring to '*amis inconnus*', usually meaning those audience members most perceptive of and receptive to a film-maker, but it is applicable to the critic as well.

Less self-referential, perhaps, is Manny Farber, as Robert Walsh defines him in his preface to the expanded edition of *Negative Space*: 'Though he can seem "opinionated", "intensely personal", "eccentric" – all the things he's blurbed to be – strictly speaking, the first person is virtually absent from his prose' (Farber 1998: xi; although see the section on Manny Farber and Note 1). Farber, however, can also draw on that sensed audience, especially when he has a case to make against them in his

article, 'Blame the Audience': 'The reason movies are bad lies in this audience's failure to appreciate, much less fight for, films like the unspectacular, unpolished "B"' (Farber 2009: 424).

Not all the critics included in this chapter dip into their own histories to the same extent or in the same way. But they all do sufficiently to say that they carry with them as a structure where they came from, where they are, and whom they are addressing. This is an aesthetic strategy, or a theory of sorts, and it comes with their territory, which is a broad one. They are film commentators who work across the borders that are sometimes set up – though they're hard to enforce – between the roles of film critic and film reviewer. They are not academics or film theorists, although three of the four have taught at university level, Durgnat is no stranger to film theory (and should probably be counted as *also* an academic), and Farber interweaves film with art history. More than a territory, this is a 'home' they have established for their existence in the cinema, a home that is on the borders where they can't be clearly placed. It is also a home that is played against: the film industry, received opinion, any institutional bulwark – the house.

In a lonely place: Pauline Kael and Manny Farber

The first person is omnipresent in Pauline Kael, though it can take on the guise of other 'persons'. There's the all-encompassing first-person plural, as in, 'We generally become interested in movies because we *enjoy* them and what we enjoy them for has little to do with what we think of as art' (Kael 1970: 102). Then there's the second person (implicitly plural) which can be similarly inclusive, although there may be a small shade of difference here: 'you' does not always imply as close a generality as 'we'; it's as if a part of this audience is being held slightly at arm's length. There's the way the hunting party in *La Règle du jeu* (Jean Renoir, 1939, France) goes after any game – 'Who cares what you shoot?' (Kael 1968: 341) – or the thought that may occur to an audience (member) leaving *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (Robert Altman, 1982, US): 'When you come out, you may be saying to yourself, "If Robert Altman can do that with a piece of sausage … "' (Kael 1986: 414).

The communal experience of the movies is not just a major part of their pleasure, as opposed to fuddy-duddy schoolteachers' ideas of art, it's a way of working out and exploring their meaning. And not all audiences, or audience responses, are deserving of respect. In the introduction to *For Keeps*, Kael talks about how valuable she found readers' responses to her *New Yorker* articles: 'Hyper-intelligent, they were maddeningly eager to catch me out … It was true conviviality – a variation of the extreme discussions about the arts that I'd had with friends in high school and college' (Kael 1994: ii). Not everything was collegial in those early days, however. Her 1961 review of *West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins & Robert Wise, 1961, US), originally broadcast on Berkeley's KPFA radio, mocked reviewers who invoked the 'brotherhood of man' as its theme: 'Sometimes, when I read film critics, I think I can do without brothers' (Kael 1965:148).

In his article, 'The Pearls of Pauline', Alan Vanneman characterises her early reviewing tactics this way: 'When she was done beating on the published critics, Pauline went after the poor schmucks unwise enough to express an aesthetic opinion in her presence'; and later: 'She was constantly inventing "friends" who would make stupid remarks, so that she could score off them and make herself look good'. Contrariwise, in 'Trash, Art, and the Movies', Kael includes among the communal treasures of her moviegoing Angela Lansbury singing 'Little Yellow Bird' in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Albert Lewin, 1945, US): 'I don't think I've ever had a friend who didn't also treasure that girl and that song' (Kael 1970: 103).

Opening and closing herself to the views of friends, reviewers and others was not, however, just Kael's way of positioning herself in the world of opinion. It was an essential dynamic in the way she understood films, how her writing always tried to establish a free flow between the world on screen and that beyond it. In her ideal films, the frame itself disappears: 'Renoir's camera reveals the actors as if they were there naturally or inadvertently – not arranged for a shot but found by the camera on the streets, in the shop, on the banks of the Seine': *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (Jean Renoir, 1932, France) (Kael 1968:142); or early Bertolucci, from a review of *The Conformist* (1970, Italy/France/West Germany): 'his films just seem to flow, as if the life he photographs had not been set up for the camera but were all there and he were moving in and out of it at will' (Kael 1973: 270).

FIGURE 7.1 'a free flow between the world on screen and that beyond it … "Renoir's camera reveals the actors as if they were there naturally or inadvertently".' *Boudu Saved From Drowning*, 1932

The most curious, and revealing, instance of this is her review of Jean-Luc Godard's *Masculin-féminin* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1966, France/Sweden), in which her analysis of the subject on-screen ('The theme is the fresh beauty of youth amidst the flimsiness of pop culture and pop politics') is completely permeable to her observations/assumptions about the soullessness of the younger generation. She doesn't even have to leave the cinema to connect them: 'But even in the ladies' lounge right after the movie, there were the girls, so pretty they hardly seemed real, standing in a reverie at the mirror, toying with their shiny hair' (Kael 1968: 127, 130).

This movie criticism by osmosis from personal/sociological observation works as well for films she doesn't like, as when her review of *8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963, Italy/France) begins with her being entertained by 'a handsome, narcissistic actor' with stories about his love affairs: 'I'm afraid that Guido's [Marcello Mastroianni] notion of an "idea" isn't much more highly developed than my silly actor friend's' (Kael 1965: 261–62).

Given this unimpeded flow between life and art, it's not surprising that the film-maker Kael is best known for championing – the one who seems most to exemplify this kind of flow – is Robert Altman. 'Altman has already accustomed us to actors who don't look as if they're acting … Now he dissolves the frame, so that we feel the continuity between what's on the screen and life off-camera'; 'During this movie, we begin to realize that all that the people are is what we see. Nothing is held back from us, nothing is hidden'; 'There are no real dénouements, but there are no loose ends, either: Altman doesn't need to wrap it all up, because the people here are too busy being alive to be locked in place' (Kael 1976: 446–52). This *New Yorker* review of *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975, US) caused a stir not just for what it said but because Kael breached professional etiquette by publishing it before the film was completed. But perhaps the breach and the incompleteness were what enabled the critic to enter into it so fully as life ongoing.

In other pieces, however, Kael can only value Altman in similar terms by ignoring much of what the films contain. She praises the movement and observational felicities of *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, but she despises the film's basis in a theatrical piece about a group of small-town Texan women coming together – with shocking revelations in tow – for the twentieth anniversary of their James Dean fan club. It is through those revelations, however, that Altman finds access to what might interest him most in the material, to a level of metaphor, to character transformations, to a kind of dreamtime expressed in the use of a mirrored double set for the two time periods. Crucial to this is the sex change of one of the characters, a highly dramatic 'reversal' which Kael ignores so that she can concentrate on the film's realistic/atmospheric qualities, its ability to 'transport you' with its 'airy and lyrical' cinematography (Kael 1986: 415–16).

Kael's best piece on Altman is probably her review of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971, US) because the recreation of a period setting means there's no easy flow between life and art. Here it has to be worked for; the 'lifelikeness' is the achievement of a good deal of art. This isn't

> a slice-of-life method, it's a peculiarly personal one – delicate, elliptical … Lives are picked up and let go, and the sense of how little we know about them becomes part of the texture … One doesn't quite know what to think of an American movie that doesn't pretend to give more than a partial view of events.
>
> *(Kael 1973: 278–80)*

A theme of 'incompleteness is all' even throws an interesting light back on 'Trash, Art, and the Movies', still probably Kael's most famous essay, which never actually manages to define either trash or art, but only laments, rather hyperbolically, that between the enjoyable trashiness of American movies and the stuffy artiness of European films, the only things left to enjoy are bits – the good bits of bad movies. Or it may be that even good movies can only be appreciated, handled, in 'bits'. Is it something intrinsic to language, that it must deal with the visual flow of movies in fragments, or is this just intrinsic to Kael's rather jabbing prose style? With Manny Farber, it becomes a more self-conscious tactic: an emphasis on the solitariness, the obdurateness, of words; and with Raymond Durgnat, the 'handling' of words – those quotation marks become vital – is part of the art of criticism.

Kael's aesthetic strategy, the drive of her writing, is always towards such breaking down, burrowing into a work to locate the elements of recognition and satisfaction. And discovery – this breaking-down process also expresses a wish to get at something behind or beyond the movies. Could it be a nostalgia for the real?

> One's moviegoing tastes and habits change – I still like in movies what I always liked but now, for example, I really want documentaries … I am desperate to know something, desperate for facts, for information, for faces of non-actors and for knowledge of how people live.
>
> *(Kael 1970: 128)*

There's another impact here on Kael's writing method, on how 'incompleteness is all' might or might not work within her chosen (or given) reviewing formats. The pieces for which she is best known are the article-length reviews she wrote for *The New Yorker*, from a bold debut with her 21 October 1967 championing of *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967, US) to her retirement in 1991. But the length of these pieces often does them no favours.

Kael's argument usually swings between observations of the movie immediately before her (often quite sharp on details of style, despite the Renoir 'non-camera' theory) and personal/sociological asides (on the *Masculin-féminin* generation, for example). The two strands will then weave, with variations, through the review in approximate support of each other. But when the weave runs out before the review is over, the latter may just turn into a pile-up of notes on individual performances: the review of *Shampoo* (Hal Ashby, 1975, US) becomes so enthusiastic in this respect that it seems unwilling to let the film go. Most weirdly apt is a review of Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983, US), which loops round to its opening point ('about a man who's

on the verge of disappearing and finally he does') at the end, as if the review were imitating the Zelig phenomenon (Kael 1985: 23).

Her method might best be described through her punctuation. The comma brings out the worst in Kael because it facilitates the stacking-up of points, or the way she casually summons up the mood in which she saw *Zelig* as a critical comment: 'I admired the delicate care with which it was made, I kept smiling happily, and I laughed out loud once, at something so silly I wasn't sure why it got to me' (Kael 1985: 24). The semi-colon, on the other hand, gives her arguments the neatness and compactness of a couplet form: for instance, laying out the 'life-and-death contrasts' in the visual scheme of *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972, US) (Kael 1973: 421), or describing in a sentence Thackeray's novel *Barry Lyndon*: 'It was about the adventures of an Irish knave who used British hypocrisy for leverage; unscrupulous, he was blessed and cursed with too lively an imagination' (Kael 1980: 102). It's a compactness most evident too in her pre-*New Yorker* pieces: programme notes for a 1962 UCLA screening of *La Règle du jeu* and her *New Republic* pieces on *Masculin-féminin* and *Bande à part* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1964, France; all presented in her 1968 *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* volume).

Perhaps, as a sensibility attuned to the scattered, the piecemeal, the incomplete – which is a way of reaching through film to the real – Kael finds her true subject as much in Godard as in Altman. Or, even more remarkably, in the subject of an unusual *New Yorker* piece that turns a review of *The Killer Elite* (Sam Peckinpah, 1975, US) into 'Notes on the Nihilist Poetry of Sam Peckinpah'. This brings us to one of those personal confessions which also amounts to a startling aesthetic, in which Peckinpah's 'total, physical elation in his work … makes me feel closer to him than I do to any other director except Jean Renoir'. Strange bedfellows, until one sees how for Kael the theme of betrayal in Peckinpah's films is another way of abolishing the camera, how in this way he expressed the theme of his life in Hollywood: 'it goes beyond personal filmmaking into private filmmaking' (Kael 1980: 115, 112).

Could any critical position – or call it a critical ethos – be further from Pauline Kael's than Manny Farber's? If we think of Kael's friends who all treasure the 'Little Yellow Bird' song in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – which makes them sound rather like the Disciples of James Dean whose various dramas Kael scorned in *Come Back to the 5 & Dime* – then their antithesis might be the ideal Farber viewer 'who likes a bit of male truth in films', those films knocked out by a treasured coterie of 'underground directors' who 'have been saving the American male on the screen for three decades without receiving the slightest credit from critics and prize committees. The hard, exact defining of male action, completely lacking in acting fat, is a common item *only* in underground films' (Farber 2009: 492).

Yet we might trace Kael and Farber to the same place, a psychic place as solid as a cinema and as indefinable as a mood: it manifests as a self-dramatising defiance, a readiness to engage in a lonely battle, to search out the authentic amidst the unworthy and corrupt. Pauline Kael's credo comes with a Holden Caulfield-ish angst (bolstered by that overplayed fear of schoolteachers' ideas of art):

> When we feel defeated, when we imagine we could now perhaps settle for home and what it represents, that home no longer exists. But there are movie houses … Where could we better stoke the fires of our masochism than at rotten movies in gaudy seedy picture palaces in cities that run together … Movies are our cheap and easy expression, the sullen art of displaced persons. Because we feel low we sink in the boredom, relax in the irresponsibility.
>
> *(Kael 1970: 87)*

Farber works the mood through a tough-guy romanticism:

> The hard-bitten action film finds its natural home in caves: the murky, congested theaters looking like glorified tattoo parlours on the outside and located near bus terminals in big cities. These theaters roll action films in what, at first, seems like a nightmarish atmosphere of shabby transience, prints that seem overgrown with jungle moss, sound tracks infected with hiccups. The spectator watches two or three action films go by, and leaves feeling as though he were a pirate discharged from a giant sponge.
>
> *(Farber 2009:489)*

Farber can be as confessional as Kael, and he occasionally breaks first-person cover.[1] In a piece on 'Times Square Audiences' in *The Nation*, he takes issue with a certain Mr Markfield, writing in the *New Leader* – 'a classic case of what happens when a critic turns sociologist' – who has apparently painted these audiences as a 'desperate crew – perverts, adolescent hoodlums, chronic unemployeds, and far-gone neurotics'. Not so, huffs Farber: 'As a steady customer in male-audience houses, I've never seen anything odd or outstanding in the clientele' (Farber 2009: 440–41). This is also an area where art flows into life for Farber, since the 'smart audience' that in the 1930s 'waited around each week for the next Hawks, Preston Sturges, or Ford film' – an 'underground audience' that has now 'oozed away' – seems to resemble the characters in the 'favourite scene' of action man William Wellman: 'a group of hard-visaged ball bearings standing around' (Farber 2009: 490, 496).

Farber often sounds as nostalgic for the real as Pauline Kael. In fact, all four of these critics harbour that nostalgia in one form or another; it's one reason why their prose doesn't stop at being nostalgic for reality but attempts – by their own lights and their individual vision of the 'real' – to recreate it. This is one critical issue where they attempt to hold the line 'against the house', and it may be why their prose also shares a liking for a fragmentary, vivid descriptiveness, as if boring in after a kernel of truth. Farber's characteristic prose style – dense, paradoxical, at times baffling descriptive clusters – aims at giving us a hard-hammered verbal equivalent of visual/dramatic forms. But it's a personal truthfulness that is inclined to wish upon itself a more general truth, an absolute realism, as in the above 'caves' passage, whose revelling-in-the-lower-depths pictorialism is also meant to be representative of the style and content of the films playing there.

Farber's underground film-makers are only 'underground' by the same kind of descriptive association. He lays out his pantheon at the beginning of his 1957 essay, 'Underground Films': 'such soldier-cowboy-gangster directors as Raoul Walsh, Howard Hawks, William Wellman, William Keighley, the early, pre-*Stagecoach* John Ford, Anthony Mann' (Farber 2009: 486). Of these, only Mann established himself with certified Poverty Row product. Keighley was a Warner Bros house director (or hack) who made many films with James Cagney – they just weren't as prestigious as Wellman's *Public Enemy* (1931, US) or Walsh's *White Heat* (1949, US). And Howard Hawks? Beginning in silent cinema as a producer as well as a director, he was, as has been commented, 'a Hollywood insider'; brother-in-law, for a while, to Irving Thalberg, 'he gathered actors and directors into his informal Moraga Drive motorcycle club. He entertained on a lavish scale. He hosted croquet tournaments' (Hillier and Wollen 1996: 4)

The same 1957 essay contains this neat and graphic description of the favoured Farber terrain: 'At heart, the best action films are slicing journeys into the lower depths of American life: dregs, outcasts, lonely hard wanderers caught in a buzzsaw of niggardly, intricate, devious movement' (Farber 2009: 490). Also characteristic is the disjuncture between the first part of that sentence and the second, where what starts out as an invocation of a sort of truth-to-life ends in something between an expressionist and an abstract description of action. That the documentary sense was important to Farber is evident in the essay, 'Between Two Words', virtually his own credo: 'Actually, the difference between the documentary and the story film in the final esthetic evaluation is unimportant. There is not a good documentary without a story, and there is not a good story film without what is called the documentary technique' (Farber 2009: 86).

Which means that the 'life' Farber would find depicted in actual documentaries basks in the same lower-depths atmosphere he valued in fiction, as in this 1952 description of 'a titleless documentary of street life in Spanish Harlem',[2] shot with a hidden 16mm camera by James Agee among others: 'the adults look like badly repaired Humpty Dumpties who have lived a thousand years in some subway rest room … a somber study of the American figure, from childhood to old age, growing stiffer, uglier, and lonelier with the passage of years' (Farber 2009: 382–83). And when Farber's attention shifts to a different sort of underground film in the late 60s, the North American experimental cinema, we find this description of Michael Snow's structuralist room epic, *Wavelength* (1967, Canada/US): 'a straightforward document of a room in which a dozen businesses have lived and gone bankrupt' (Farber 2009: 642).

Crossing to the other side of the disjuncture, Farber admires his underground directors for working something like documentary, or true-to-life, interest into subjects that are anything but, as in: 'With material that is hopelessly worn out and childish (*Only Angels Have Wings* [Howard Hawks, 1939, US]), the underground director becomes beautifully graphic and modestly human in his flexible detailing' (Farber 2009: 491). But if this sounds like a realist justification, it can slip into a more transcendentally artistic plea for these film-makers, as in: 'In each case, the director is

taking a great chance with clichés and forcing them into a hard natural shape', or, 'the cliché effect is worked credibly inward until it creates a haunting note' (Farber 2009: 493–94).

It's no wonder then that Howard Hawks becomes the Farber exemplar, one who is as adept at the hard, perhaps documentary detailing – 'the Hawks film is as good on the mellifluous grace of the impudent American hard rock as can be found in any art work' – as he is at the sharp inside moves: 'It is as though the film has a life of its own that goes on beneath the story action' (Farber 2009: 491, 495). The grace described here brings us to other, slightly anomalous but frequent Farber terms of praise, like 'modest entry and soft-shoe approach' (Farber 2009: 489) and, generally, 'vaudevillian'.

Raoul Walsh could be Hawks' co-exemplar, except that one senses that where Farber is more admiring of Hawks' sleekness – 'bravado posturings with body, lucid Cubistic composing with natty lapels and hat brims' (Farber 2009: 653) – he is fonder of Walsh for his greater detail about people ('a good director of homeliness, innocence, vulnerability … a dedicated-to-folk cousin of Renoir's *Toni*' [1935, France]), about particularities of setting ('Walsh is always angling out of a familiar movie situation by doubling and tripling the environments'), and for his 'homely congestion and bitter dailiness' (Farber 2009: 700–1). This is something really like realism: 'Raoul Walsh's films are melancholy masterpieces of flexibility and detailing inside a lower-middle-class locale' (Farber 2009: 487).

Perhaps there's another anomaly here that Farber, intent on 'a bit of male truth', doesn't get to express about Walsh but which Andrew Sarris has: 'Only the most virile director can effectively project a feminine vulnerability in his characters' (Sarris 1968: 121). But then Farber's soft-shoe descriptions, his conjurations of 'eye-flicking action … arms, elbows, legs, mouths, the tension profile line', already suggest an activity more like dance than the 'barnstorming, driving, bulldogging' he insists on (Farber 2009: 492, 490).

But density of description – the attempt to capture how a film comes off the screen in exhaustingly shunted together or airily unravelling phrases – is Farber's truth more than analytical close-reading. This is the fragmentary method, working around-and-under a subject – a literary equivalent of cross-hatching in art – which all these critics exhibit to a degree. With Farber, the method is often supported by particular art-historical reference, as in his description of Marco Bellocchio's *China Is Near* (1967, Italy): 'this prize film is … composed in a puzzling staccato manner, creating an ambiguous feeling of high modern skill in Renaissance-style scene sculpting' (Farber 2009: 603).

Farber's own painting was a lifelong career alongside criticism, and his word-jamming can be seen as a complement to the Abstract-Expressionist theory of 'push-pull' for using colour to create movement and perspective on a two-dimensional plane.[3] But this textural effect can also become a different kind of contradiction: *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946, US) is both 'far and away the least sentimental, most human, of recent films' and 'a horse-drawn truckload of liberal schmaltz' (Farber 2009: 299, 489). And there is constant shift, rebalancing, crossing-over in Farber's

longer 'position articles'. The George Stevens derided as one of 'the water buffaloes of film art' in 'Underground Films' is saved in 'Hard-Sell Cinema' (also 1957) for achieving, with *Giant* (1956, US), 'a hundred minor thrills of coloring, tone, texture, time, sunlight and architecture' (Farber 2009: 491, 478).[4]

But the principles of push-pull – or the tug of larger art-historical movements – allow Farber to come, by the end of his writing career, to happier conclusions than most critics reach. 'The lay of the land, in the Seventies film, is that there are two types of structure being practiced: dispersal and shallow-boxed space' (his last article, 'Kitchen Without Kitsch', with Patricia Patterson; Farber 2009: 762). Or to put it another way, is *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (Jacques Rivette, 1974, France) Cézanne, while *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975, Belgium/France) is Vermeer? Akerman's heroine, 'locked within her three-room flat existence, fits the conditions of a structural film to a T or a D'. This is 'complete documentary integrity within a self-contained frame' (Farber 2009: 768–69). But is it also another kind of soft-shoe, or is *Jeanne Dielman* – think 'homely congestion and bitter dailiness' – the last Raoul Walsh film?

The seductions of the subjunctive, the perils of punctuation: David Thomson and Raymond Durgnat

> For I am quite certain that the essence of the movies (as business, entertainment, art, show, spectacle, or outrage) once consisted of being gathered in some vast, ornate dark, packed with a thousand or so strangers sitting before and beneath a wall that seemed like the side of a great ship suddenly encountered on a foggy sea, where faces might appear twenty or thirty feet high … There was a real movie palace nearby, not just fabulous, but ecstatic – the Granada, Tooting (those two words are still more emblematic of the sublime and the ridiculous than anything I know). The Granada must have been a 2,000-seater. Its carpets grew denser and deeper. And its lobby included huge open spaces, staircases, side chapels, grottoes, and patios that were, I suppose, all akin to the Alhambra.
>
> (Thomson 2006: 128, 131)

This is no cave or seedy picture palace – though presumably in time it could have become either, or a multiplex (or the bingo hall it in fact is). And in David Thomson's account, the nostalgia for reality includes this nostalgia for movie places and fantasies during the golden age of his first, adult-accompanied moviegoing. But for all these critics, the 'place' they actually occupy is always going to be some intermediary ground between the real world and the cinema, a metaphorical place – it's the home where they do their work – and these descriptions will be an amalgam of real remembered venues and how they construe the function and meaning of the movies.

Thomson's description has a clarity and innocence compared to the sourness that Kael and Farber see as endemic to the movie experience – the clarity of a plain documentary and the innocence of a child's first encounter with the movie dream. But the dream is where Thomson begins to go to work. He worries about this

condition the movies inculcate: 'Going into the dark, after centuries of progress in which mankind has staggered toward artificial light, smacks of delicious perversity'; more than that, what the advent of universal education promised the world's children may have been sidetracked by the movies, 'which allowed them the alternative of dreaming' (Thomson 2006: 25, 57). Adults, meanwhile, may have been sidetracked from the real possibilities of life and love: 'We are, therefore, less inclined to fix upon the means of choice in love and marriage than yield to the parade of dreams … we may be inclined to give up on the old real life because of the infinite glories of the fantasies, the dreams' (Thomson 2006: 235).

This is no small peril Thomson believes he is describing, as if his nostalgia for the real had become a rage. Although he declares he wants to avoid 'sinking to words like "damage"', the word is all over his most recent collection of individual reviews, *'Have You Seen … ?'*. And this is linked to a single unargued assumption about moviegoing: that it involves the viewer – 'the voyeur, the peeping tom, the dreamer' – in complete identification with the people on screen, 'because if you are going to imagine you are James Dean or Loretta Young, then your own identity needs to be put away, set aside, to make room for the dream' (Thomson 2006: 86, 170).

Thomson is even prepared to trace this crude psychology of moviegoing back to source, as it were, with a description of the earliest movie show, by the Lumière brothers, in 1895: 'as that first Parisian audience saw images of a family eating lunch on the grass, they sighed with pleasure, or rapture … They wanted to be there in the sunlight, at the picnic. They felt one with the family. They wanted to tickle the baby' (Thomson 2006: 52–53). But histories of early cinema have suggested that what audiences found fascinating in this spectacle was simply the way it captured movement, and not just of the human actors but of 'the rustling leaves in the background of *Le Déjeuner de bébé*' (1895) (Elsaesser 1994: 65).[5]

These audiences were observers – scientists, of a sort – of a new way of seeing the world, and there is no way of knowing how they would have felt about joining the family on screen or tickling their baby. They were also cynical enough to take everything they were shown as some kind of fairground trick, not a frightening real-life event (Thomson also repeats the myth about over-credulous audiences fleeing from images of an advancing train), or even what we think of as documentary.[6] These questions of film history go to the root of Thomson's critical enterprise, and they do something even more curious. They signal what has been a revolution – if that's not too large (David Thomson-esque?) a word – in how this most prolific of film critics defines his subject.

Before *A Biographical Dictionary of the Cinema* (later *Film*) began that prodigious growth in 1970, there was *Movie Man* in 1967, even more impressively ambitious, in a much smaller space and in an entirely different direction. It could be the work of a different writer. It's hard to see how the mellifluous phrasing of Thomson's description of the 'more mannered' darkness in *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974, US) – 'Its wearers begin to stroke it and admire its sheen' – could have evolved from the following passage in *Movie Man*: 'in the movies the enacting accuracy of

meaningfulness in an image attaches itself to the spectator's consciousness' (Thomson 2008: 328; 1967: 36).

The programme for the movies set out in *Movie Man* is a far cry from Thomson's current fears of what they are doing to us in the dark. 'Movie man is the unit in a society that has so assimilated the methods and effects of moving film that they are determining his understanding of the present and his discovery of the future.' This is a society in which everything would be accessible to the objective record of film, and not with any Orwellian sense of threat because 'the most totalitarian governments are also those least visually manifested and nothing is more likely to disperse the unequal authority of leadership than a perpetual observation of it' (Thomson 1967: 11, 186).

Was it in reaction away from the theoretical all-inclusiveness of this vision that Thomson launched into the factual comprehensiveness that began with the *Biographical Dictionary*? Or are the two mirror images of each other? There has certainly been a reversal of the framework in which the studies are set: Thomson no longer asserts a visual society but a verbal one to contain the dangers of the visual. It's there in everything from his conclusion to a review of John Huston's *Moby Dick* (1956, US) – 'it holds up, enjoyable and very likely to send you to your proper place: the book' (Thomson 2008: 562) – to his novels (*Suspects*, *Silver Light*) which have sought a fuller life for movie characters than the screen.

Not surprisingly, even Thomson's recent film writing has begun to read a little like fables of his own invention, charmingly so in the case of some pieces in *'Have You Seen … ?'*, which wrap together review, production history and location report. The best include *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and a mock-good ol' boy/folksy conjuring of how *Open Range* (Kevin Costner, 2003, US) came together under Costner: 'there is an undeflected sincerity in Kevin's eyes and a nutty taste for integrity in his parables' (Thomson 2008: 626). There's a similarly graceful conjuring of modern urban setting, subject, actress and character for *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski, 1965, UK). Though the charm of voice allows for a lot of slippage generally through movie legend, anecdote and gossip – all passing for fact.

When he traded the theorising earnestness of *Movie Man* for this easy-reading smoothness, Thomson did more than find a voice, he began shaping up a writing project beyond the movies. By the time of his all-in-one economic and artistic history of Hollywood, *The Whole Equation*, one significant rhetorical feature had emerged in his style: the jussive subjunctive (from the Latin verb 'to order'). This creates a constant purr of adjurations – Grant that … , Let me add … , Remember that … – as if what's being said is a counter-seduction to the blandishments of the screen.

Thomson, it seems, wants out of the movies – and in a way perhaps always has. The very quantity of his work, the enchanting ease of the prose which conjures every bauble of the screen before our eyes and then dismisses it with a magician's snap of the fingers, increasingly looks like an attempt to write himself to the end of the movies. The film-makers he most admires have already got there: in Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960, Italy/France), 'A hole has formed in "story" so that life's formless

air may seep in' (Thomson 1994: 20). But what has kept his enterprise going in spite of this are the dangerous seductions – actors and actresses, in other words, rather than directors. They have inspired his best writing, whether a description of James Cagney – 'Like a sprite or goblin he seemed to be in touch with an occult source of vitality' – or an evocation of Shelley Duvall's character in Altman's *3 Women* (1977, US): 'as unstable and grating as a marble on a hard floor, rolling this way and that' (Thomson 1994: 104, 11).

In the forty-plus years since *Movie Man*, the concept of the 'visual society' has taken Thomson from the theory of the ur-movie to the fears of damage in an anti-movie man. However, a few auteurs – this can happen in a mirror reversal – slip through effortlessly: principally, Jean Renoir and Howard Hawks. In their different ways, both efface the camera: the 'sole discipline' of Renoir's camera is to go 'where events take him' (allow that Pauline Kael has an interest here); and 'no Hollywood films are more divergent than Hawks's, seeming to blend with documentary' (Thomson 1967: 145, 158). Which takes us back to life again, and strangely suggests that what most defines the visual society, or alternatively a world that has moved beyond it, is that the camera doesn't need to be 'there'.

Thomson has explained his impatience with film, his efforts to recreate it in prose: 'That urge I have to extend the stories of films is in some part a longing for them to join with life and be worthy of it' (Thomson 1999: 285). He wouldn't be the first critic to have reached such a point of exhaustion – a sense of having seen the exhaustion of the expressive powers of the medium. Another critic has put it this way: 'The film's apparent breakdown, just as it reaches for its climactic double affirmation, is significant in this respect, though it may equally be caused or compounded by the hazards of film-making, or the hazards of world cinema as Tower of Babel.' This is Raymond Durgnat, writing about Nagisa Oshima's *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* (1968, Japan) in *Sexual Alienation in the Cinema* (1972: 309).

But Thomson has been carried here more by his sense of the expressive power of his own medium; having yoked his words for so long to images, he now wants them to fly to those ineffable places images cannot reach. For Durgnat, such concern for his prose would probably be worse than indulgent – he is, notoriously, a writer happy to push words around freely in order to give the fullest sense of images – it would be alienating, a symptom of the alienation he is both trying to define and overcome. There is more than a two-way relationship between words and images in Durgnat's writing. It might be described as three-way: words and images only have a relationship in terms of the world characters inhabit, and this is infinitely divisible between real worlds and subjective worlds, social worlds and interior worlds. It's in exploring these that film touches the real dangers of breakdown.

Other diagnoses include (also about *Shinjuku Thief*): 'Nudity in the sense of being purely, nakedly oneself, is impossible. The marks of society, of experience, of miscarried new life, are always there. Two's a crowd'; and about *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966, Sweden): 'The film concerns that modern, civilized ideal of an understanding togetherness. It indicts it for its schizophrenic assumption that communication can be a rational co-existence of two philanthropic, integrated egos … Together they

[Liv Ullmann, Bibi Andersson] discover a fuller reality, conscious of equivocation, its injuries unrepaired' (Durgnat 1972: 308, 142–43). And for solace, if not repair: 'such problems return us with a new understanding to the films of Alain Resnais, representative of an older radical generation, and their common theme of love alienated and divided in the face of deep racial, cultural and political splits' (Durgnat 1972: 301).

Durgnat has been called one of the most accomplished of sociological film critics,[7] and the subject of his writing is as much the world in which films are exhibited and viewed as the worlds on screen. The above quotations are all from *Sexual Alienation in the Cinema*, probably Durgnat's least quoted work, perhaps because it is his most radical, the one where the cine-sociologist goes into apocalyptic mode.

> It would be absurd to idealize the tribe or the city-state or any of its totalitarian or mystical surrogates. Yet an affirmative sense of community would seem to be the natural state of man, containing no doubt the original sin of individualism, but not shattered by it into so many anomic fragments that loneliness is a psychic plague, a mental scourge of pandemic proportions – as suggested by the number of beds occupied by mental patients.
>
> *(Durgnat 1972: 26)*

The title of the chapter this comes from is 'Man Without Tribe', and that's a theme often returned to – the heroine of *The Pumpkin Eater* (Jack Clayton, 1964, UK) needs a sexual counterpart 'who, like her, can experience a family as a tribe' (Durgnat 1972: 106) – as is the term 'oceanic feeling' or 'an oceanic nostalgia', surprising in an author as suspicious of Freudian theory as he is of auteur theory. Then there is Durgnat's extensive treatment of *La Règle du jeu* (camera activity included) in his book on Jean Renoir: 'The model for human relationships is not the largely theoretical generosity of saints, nor the exclusivistic hoarding of economic man, but the potlatch of the tribe, a steady exchange maintained' (Durgnat 1975: 211).

In one of the earliest – and probably the most-quoted – of his collections, *Films and Feelings* (1967a), Durgnat is already working with these themes, and developing them through a kind of *gestalt* criticism of how film might percolate all areas of an audience's experience. 'One's favourite films are one's unlived lives, one's hopes, fears, libido. They constitute a magic mirror, their shadowy forms are woven from one's shadow selves, one's limbo loves.' At a time when criticism was gearing itself sternly to consider 'film as film', insisting on its strictly visual qualities, Durgnat was counter-insistent: 'People go to movies to look not "at", but "through" the pictures, at the faces and events … in most films the image is merely a transparency, and sometimes is as irrelevant to the basically theatrical idiom as the grooves on a phonograph record are to the music' (Durgnat 1967a: 135, 138).

He is also prepared to see a film's meanings as being as much performer-given as director-given – stars touch 'some nexus of half-acknowledged memories, hopes, hesitations, fears' in an audience – and in fact, 'awareness of the film as a work of art, and of the director behind it, is already the result of "alienation", of intellectual

abstraction, of *inattention*' (Durgnat 1967a: 137, 135). Durgnat's objections to auteurist approaches are best encapsulated – or extensively explained – in a *Film Comment* article, 'Hawks Isn't Good Enough' (July/August, 1977). In his own director studies (Renoir, Hitchcock, King Vidor), auteurist themes are attacked two ways: either broken down into the network of details through which directors might really imprint themselves, or spread across a wide map (cultural sociology, cognitive psychology) which unite them at the same time with their own tribe of fellow directors/auteurs.

Probably his most extreme foray in this area was his last published work, a single film study, *A Long Hard Look at 'Psycho'* (2009), because it makes such a feature of what has always been perceived as one of his weaknesses – wayward punctuation. 'I can't proofread', he has defended himself on the comma issue; and of his free use of quotation marks: 'this was the result of an unhappy early compromise between my academic bent and journalistic constraints. Quotation marks were meant to imply, "I know this is a loose use of the word, but it has sense"' (see Rosenbaum 1973).[8]

It can often seem that there is more heavy shunting than shifts of meaning between the flying marks: '*Psycho* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1960, US] upfronts not "chains of causality" but "the web of uncertainty". The drama is not set out in "clear alternatives"; with "the right thing" versus "the wrong thing", and "the wrong thing" leading to a "consequence"'(Durgnat 2009: 68). One fascinating result of this, however, is that it effaces not the camera but the film itself, as a discrete entity with themes, a unified story and dramatically neat characters, and renders them all as speculative issues being juggled whenever the film is projected before any audience (and the individual members thereof).

The method is ideal for holding in suspension – or creating another push-pull between – all the imponderables of character and behaviour. Through its microscopic examination of scenes, of moments in scenes, it even reinvents the auteur: 'But what shapes Hitchcock's style here is not a structure inherent in the narrative, but the description of details specific to this particular event – right down to the kinetics of curtain hooks (or the tuft of Marion's hair splayed against the tiles as her dazed head slides down)' (Durgnat 2009: 125).

And then there's *Popeye* (Robert Altman, 1980, US), which Durgnat celebrates for its confusion of live action with cartoon characters, not putting them alongside each other but melding them into one weirdly plastic life form. It's a new kind of 'imbrication' – one of his favourite terms for that mixture of forms he had admired in the surrealism of Luis Buñuel and Georges Franju. '*Popeye* sketches a story to paint a world. Its details are its core. It stretches its soul across its skin … All fantasy involves realistic elements, and all realism involves ideas and connections which are visually as unrealisable as hypotheses and fantasies' (Durgnat 1982). In the course of this, he cites Manny Farber: 'Briefly, Farber proposed looking at movies for the richness of their concrete details of the world, for the kind of physical-experiential weave through which painters work'.[9]

If we were to ask where is Durgnat's 'home' in this, where is his tribe, the answer would have to be given in similar fantastico-realistic terms. His sociology of the movie experience involves a large, call it 'oceanic', sense of an audience: 'Meaning

FIGURE 7.2 'microscopic examination of scenes … "the kinetics of curtain hooks".' *Psycho,* 1960

exists, not in the text, but in the mind of the spectator. In that sense, it's "only subjective", but insofar as it's *shared* between spectators, and therefore *consensual*, it's an objective social fact' (Durgnat 2009: 23). This could also take in what sound like more specific audiences: the 'upper working-class family halls' which he found quietly appreciative of Franju's *Eyes Without a Face* (1959, France/Italy), and the 'working-class London audience' who responded to the 'illiberal egoism' of a sally in the sex war in *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (Paul Mazursky, 1969, US) with applause (Durgnat 1967b: 84; 1972: 86).

On the other hand, Durgnat territory might be mapped between his aside in *A Mirror for England* about the Boulting Brothers' film *The Guinea Pig* (Roy Boulting, 1948, UK), featuring 'a bright scholarship lad (Richard Attenborough) from Walthamstow, a lower-middle-class district where he might quite possibly have sat in the desk next to mine' (Durgnat 1970: 33–34), and a corner of England a little further southeast in Kent. This would have been the locus of two works uncompleted at Durgnat's death: a monograph on David Lean's adaptation of *Great Expectations* (1946, UK) and a long-gestating work on that great imbricator of forms, Michael Powell.

Between them, these would constitute a fairly inclusive definition of Durgnat's 'home', the critical ground on which he operated, being by turn sociologically objective and, more generally, subjectively, English. But in another sense, his work can only exemplify the terms of this essay by contradicting them. If 'four against the house' defines a professional stance, then Durgnat is most likely to see such professionalism as schizophrenia. His ideal would be an integration of all our houses.

Notes

1 In his introduction to *Farber on Film*, the editor, Robert Polito, says of Farber: 'His film criticism is personal, even autobiographical, though of a deflected sort that edges into allegory and fever-dream' (Farber 2009: xxxiii).

2 In *Negative Space*, this 'titleless documentary' has the title *In the Street*, which is also the title of the piece in which it appears; the opening sentences of the review in the two volumes are also different.
3 Push-pull was the theory of the German-born painter and teacher, Hans Hofman, a leading figure of the post-war Abstract-Expressionist movement in New York. He is fictionalised as Hermann Hochmann in John Updike's novel *Seek My Face*, where he theorises: 'Depth is created by a recession of apparent objects toward a vanishing point, as in Renaissance perspective, but in absolute denial of this doctrine by the creation of surface forces in the sense of *push and pull*' (Updike 2003: 46).
4 Farber's 1957 essay, 'Underground Films', has been used here to define his critical position rather than the more famous 1962 'White Elephant Art Vs. Termite Art' because the earlier piece seems the more cogent and interesting. It is often assumed that the 'white elephants' are the same as the 'water buffaloes' cited here (George Stevens, Billy Wilder, etc.). But the 'white elephants' are a different animal: Tony Richardson, François Truffaut, Michelangelo Antonioni. Along with much else in his criticism, Farber's targets are always moving – which is no bad thing.
5 The essay 'Let There Be Lumière' by Dai Vaughan, reproduced in this invaluable collection on early cinema, reports that it was Georges Méliès, soon to explore the opposite route from the Lumières of cinema fantasy, who was particularly struck by the 'rustling leaves' at the Lumière show.
6 See Tom Gunning's essay, '"Primitive" Cinema: A Frame-Up? Or the Trick's On Us' in Elsaesser 1994.
7 Jonathan Rosenbaum reasonably claims this in an article in *Film Comment* (Rosenbaum 1973: 65–69).
8 In the above article, while praising Durgnat's writing, Rosenbaum refers to 'a dense thicket of uncertainly placed commas and quotation marks'. Durgnat defends his punctuation in a series of 'footnotes' published along with this article.
9 This is the argument most famously put forward by Susan Sontag in *Against Interpretation* for criticism which supplies 'a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art'. Manny Farber's criticism is among those she singles out for revealing 'the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it'. She also claims Raoul Walsh and Howard Hawks are among those Hollywood veterans who display a 'liberating anti-symbolic quality' (Sontag 1978). Durgnat's writing could certainly be seen as part of this tendency, valuable for its physical-experiental detail; but in an interesting article in the 'Festschrift for Durgnat' published in the online film journal, *Senses of Cinema*, Rob White has argued that Durgnat could also be seen as doing the opposite, working inwards, with a sense of 'quiet, charged withdrawal', 'keeping thoughts back not tossing them away' (White 2002).

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(Note: Pauline Kael's reviews have been referenced to the collections in which they originally appeared; her omnibus volume, *For Keeps*, contains only a small proportion of these. Manny Farber's reviews have all been referenced to the 2009 *Farber on Film*, which contains all his film writing.)

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8

BEING SEIZED

Charles Warren

Start with some lines of T.S. Eliot:

> A woman drew her long black hair out tight
> And fiddled whisper music on those strings
> And bats with baby faces in the violet light
> Whistled, and beat their wings
> And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
> And upside down in air were towers
> Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
> And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells
>
> *(Eliot 1952: 48)*

The great literary critic R.P. Blackmur quotes and remarks on this material from *The Waste Land*:

> The exegetes tell us, and it is true, that we are in the Chapel Perilous and the Perilous Cemetery is no doubt near at hand, and it may be as one of the exegetes says that we hear something like the voice of John the Baptist in the last line. But for myself, I muse and merge and ache and find myself feeling with the very senses of my thought greetings and cries from all the senses there are.
>
> *(Blackmur 1967: 57)*

'The very senses of my thought' – earlier in the essay where these words appear, Blackmur had quoted Paul Valéry on thought: 'Whenever you think do you not feel you are disarranging something?' (meaning this positively) and also A.E. Housman:

> But men at whiles are sober
> And think by fits and starts,
> And if they think, they fasten
> Their hands upon their hearts.
>
> *(Blackmur 1967: 39)*

What is at issue is being seized to the depths of one's being by a passage of poetry – by the material of art and by the achievement of art, in a certain place, a certain instance. Then one acknowledges, one realises, that it is indeed some kind of 'thought', or some part of thought – 'the very senses of my thought' – that notices, that attunes itself to, the 'greetings and cries from all the senses there are'. There is a responsiveness in thought – call it the 'senses of thought' – that *is* thought, but not the distanced or abstract aspect of thought. Blackmur's senses in general, somewhere below the 'senses of thought', seem at one with Eliot's senses, the senses of the lines. Blackmur's 'senses of thought' bring this to consciousness and impel him to write. 'I muse and merge and ache'. It is the ache of labour before birth, the ache of crucifixion into new life – a creative ache, after being struck.

The thought of the critic, stirred by the art, and the thought of the art itself, is a new kind of thought, thought, for one thing, with a certain involvement of the senses unlike what is usually supposed of thought. The thought is a new thing on each occasion – each occasion of art and each occasion of critical encounter. One feels oneself caught, or caught up, in a process of 'disarranging'. One is in 'fits and starts', with involvement of the heart.

There are no ready words for the thought, or for saying what kind of thought it is. One can only testify, a martyr (witness) to the thought, letting the ache and musing become creative. In the very thought, consciously held, there is something unknowable, and that is its interest, its power – that it rebukes the world's full and formed ways of understanding, which are limited. 'What, should we get rid of our ignorance, of the very substance of our lives, merely in order to understand one another?' Blackmur famously remarked in another essay, while finding, as usual, many words, much eloquence, to talk about what was important to him (Blackmur 1952: 428). Our ignorance is *of* something. This something is important, and ought not to be betrayed – eclipsed or destroyed – by a science of understanding that we can agree on.

William Pritchard, another fine literary critic, brings together Blackmur's sentence on ignorance and his comment on reading the passage from *The Waste Land*, in an essay celebrating Blackmur's performative quality, his disposition to 'sing', in response to the performative and the singing that he found in the literature before him. Blackmur said:

> What is permanent is what is always fresh, and it can be fresh only in performance – that is, in reading and seeing and hearing what is actually in it at this place and this time … *Perform* is a word of which we forget the singular beauty. Its meaning is: to furnish forth, to complete, to finish, in a sense which is influenced by the ideas clustered in the word *form*.
>
> *(Blackmur 1949: 188)*

Pritchard comments, 'to know it afresh Blackmur found that he had, ever more increasingly, to sing' (Pritchard 2003: 85). The work's performance and singing are not just testified to, but actually first *known*, first fully realised for the critic, in the

process of his own performance and singing. Conceivably, we who read the critic get caught up in this, ourselves performing and singing and thus knowing anew. And again, some kind of thought is at issue. Blackmur speaks of consciousness:

> Poetry is one of the things we do to our ignorance; criticism makes us conscious of what we have done, and sometimes makes us conscious of what can be done next, or done again … the critic brings to consciousness the means of performance.
>
> *(Blackmur 1949: 187–88)*

'In a sense,' says Pritchard, 'we are always asking that the critic just for a moment do the poem one better and school the urgency of our own response, "the gesture of our own uncreated selves" of which Blackmur speaks' (Pritchard 2003: 95). The critic 'does the work one better' – 'just for a moment' – in answering its performance and its certain specific art-consciousness and art-thought with a performance and consciousness and thought that is a step away, a degree different, and yet is not consciousness and thought as usually understood. It is 'merged with' and 'aching over' what starts it into being.

Then there is the matter of concepts, or conceptual thinking. Blackmur is a philosophical critic. Over and over he begins with being stirred by a passage of literature or by a work or a body of work, and goes the distance to think out what language is that it takes this form, and where language comes from and why it matters, and what it is to read, and who we are that we read. Blackmur is the 'ontological critic' desired by John Crowe Ransom in *The New Criticism*, the quintessential close reader and more-than-close-reader. Blackmur does his work by developing fragile, complex, important concepts such as 'behavior':

> What poetry does to behavior is to give it some sort of order. … What behavior does in this relation to order is to give the sense, the pressure toward incarnation, of reality greater than can be apprehended. Poetry is something we do to the actual experience of this relation between behavior and order; it is something we do to these partial incarnations.
>
> *(Blackmur 1952: 192)*

> Poetry is as near as words can get us to our behavior: near enough so that the words sing, for it is when words sing that they give that absolute moving attention that is beyond their prose powers. It is behavior, getting into our words, that sings.
>
> *(Blackmur 1952: 422)*

> Movement of words in pattern turns the shudder of recognition into a blush and the blush into vertigo. Vertigo is one of the conditions in which we recognize our behavior.
>
> *(Blackmur 1952: 425)*

The more one reads Blackmur, as he reads poetry and other literature extensively, the nearer one comes to what he means by 'behavior' – yet it will never come fully clear. It is the most concrete and immediate of things – human life, after all – but it can be only approached, not grasped. Poetry pushes Blackmur to name and talk about 'behavior'. Poetry arrests us and points to 'behavior' – we acknowledge it as life better seen or sensed than ever, and yet still not seen or sensed in an utterly clear and settled way. There is vertigo about the apprehension of it. 'Behavior' is inherently important. Seeing it, even approximately, we realise that we need to see it. Being able to make some approach to it seems to justify poetry, and the critical reading of poetry.

Coleridge felt compelled to distinguish 'fancy' and 'imagination'. Bernard Berenson, writing about painting and sculpture, wanted to distinguish the 'illustrative' from the 'decorative', meaning by the latter what is most artistically realised, radical and transforming. T.S. Eliot, functioning as a critic, wanted to formulate 'objective correlative', to outline an historic 'dissociation of sensibility', and to re-define 'wit'. André Bazin, stunned by the cinema of his time, wanted to talk about an 'aesthetic of reality'. Stanley Cavell, meditating on the first great films that he knew, has wanted to posit a genre, 'the comedy of remarriage', and to re-define 'conversation' and the idea of a 'best self' as film uniquely realises these. Art pushes the critic to formulate concepts, in order better to apprehend the art and also to apprehend something larger than the art, or outside the art, which the art indicates. Even what may seem a purely artistic concept, Berenson's, of the 'decorative', coupled with his testimony on particular works, shows us our general, existential need for the thoroughly transformed and transforming, as opposed to predictable 'illustration' of a fixed idea – a need larger than that for art.

Blackmur said of critical concepts, 'the use should be consciously provisional, speculative, and dramatic' (Blackmur 1952: 373). Elsewhere Blackmur quotes W.B. Yeats on the 'dramatic': 'It is only when the intellect has wrought the whole of life to drama, to crisis, that we may live for contemplation, and yet keep our intensity' (Blackmur 1952: 108). This comes close to the idea of thought in Valéry and Housman – disarranging, fits and starts, a stirring of the heart. The critical concept emerges in 'crisis', and plays into performance. Pritchard's phrase 'school the urgency of our own response' puts together 'school' and 'urgency' and thus comes close to Yeats: 'live for contemplation, and yet keep our intensity'.

This present essay wants to call attention to, and make a plea for, a way of reading film that goes back to Blackmur's being seized to his depths by a passage of poetry and thereby stirred to think, the thought being important and also being unimaginable without, and indissoluble from, the being deeply seized. Commonly the critic is seized (as we will see in the following pages) by what is, so to speak, difficult to seize, something hidden or secret in the work, of which the critic offers to convince us with skills of testimony – evocation, provisional concepts, sallies of reasoning. There is no formula for this. The procedure is best understood by looking at critics who practise it.

Why do we read criticism, after all? Of course, to discover insight into works of art. Also, we meet with concepts that we want to keep thinking about, even to argue

with – 'objective correlative', the 'fancy' and 'imagination' contrast, the 'male gaze'. But perhaps more than anything, we read criticism to feel put in touch with a community of those who confront and think about art. It is the person looking, listening, and thinking and finding words, who matters – more so than the insights and concepts as such. We read Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* not to be convinced of his point that the unities of time, place and action, and the purity of comic and tragic modes, do not finally matter, that they do not contribute to a sense of reality – the argument is easily relayed and by now easily accepted. We read Johnson to meet a deeply intelligent man struggling to sort his thoughts about, and to find words for, the experience of sitting in the theatre and attending to what occurs on the stage. Meeting the critic confirms us and gives life to our own interest in art. We are part of a world, a critical world, and it calls on us, calls us to activity of mind, as does art itself.

André Bazin begins his important essay on Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951, France):

> If *The Diary of a Country Priest* impresses us as a masterpiece, and this with an almost physical impact, if it moves the critic and the uncritical alike, it is primarily because of its power to stir the emotions, rather than the intelligence, at their highest level of sensitivity.
>
> *(Bazin 1967: 125)*

In the original French, he speaks of stirring 'the heart', like Housman talking about genuine thought. Bazin sets out to write on this film because he is deeply moved by it, 'almost physically', and because, as he goes on to say, the film's manner of art is challenging to think about, its artistic principles 'paradoxical' and 'complex', unprecedented really in the sound film. Bazin asks his reader to acknowledge, as the public seems to have done, that the film is powerful and moving. Bazin declares that he himself is moved, and such a declaration, coming from a critic whom we take seriously, can send us back to a film more open, readier to be moved than perhaps we were in the first place. In any case, Bazin's address to this film's paradoxical and challenging artistic principles is to be understood as an address to what is so moving. We are asked to let ourselves feel something and to become involved in feeling and in adventurous thought that are not to be disentangled one from the other.

For some pages Bazin talks about the film's acting style, the delivery of lines in a monotone, and what confronts us in the film's faces:

> The cast is not being asked to act out a text, not even to live it out, just to speak it … What we are asked to look for on their faces is not for some fleeting reflection of the words but for an uninterrupted condition of soul, the outward revelation of an interior destiny. [The French here does not say 'soul', *âme*, but 'a permanence of being', *une permanence d'être*; but Bazin does soon and repeatedly say 'soul'.]
>
> *(Bazin 1967: 133)*

'This so-called badly acted film' gives us the feeling of 'imperious necessity' in the faces (my translation; Hugh Gray's translation speaks, fairly enough, of 'a gallery of portraits whose expressions could not be other than they were').

> In this respect the most characteristic of all is Chantal in the confessional. Dressed in black, withdrawn into the shadows, Nicole Ladmiral allows us only a glimpse of a mask, half lit, half in shadow, like a seal stamped on wax, all blurred at the edges.
>
> *(Bazin 1967: 133)*

Bresson, like Dreyer, is concerned with 'the countenance as flesh', which if it is not involved in role-playing, can be the visible mark of the soul – 'It is then that the countenance takes on the dignity of a sign' (Bazin 1967: 133). 'Sign' – a loaded word, especially in French, here opened to a new meaning by Dreyer and Bresson and Bazin.

Bazin makes claim upon claim, with pointed reference to detail – the face of Chantal in the confessional – in a sort of intensifying ecstasy: contemplation of the film with dawning thought after thought about how this strange film works and what it gives us. We are invited to see the film again in our mind's eye, the vision of it formed by the stimulation of Bazin's thoughts, and his thoughts confirmed by the

FIGURE 8.1 'Dressed in black, withdrawn into the shadows, Nicole Ladmiral allows us only a glimpse of a mask, half lit, half in shadow, like a seal stamped on wax, all blurred at the edges.' *Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951

vision we half form, half remember, the power of it to touch the heart, and the paradox of it, asking for thought.

The 'interior destiny' Bazin speaks of is a matter of each character's struggle 'either against the influence of grace, to continue so', or to respond and accept. 'There is no development of character … what we see is rather a concentration of suffering, the recurrent spasms of childbirth or of a snake sloughing off its skin.' The film 'in consequence lies outside the usual dramatic categories'. Events accumulate and compound like the episodes of a medieval Passion Play (Bazin 1967: 134–35). Bazin asks us to enter into his sense of the film, of how it proceeds – no development of character but a struggle with grace, something outside the psychological; an accumulating and compounding of episodes, not what we expect of drama, but like a medieval play.

Bazin goes on to talk a bit about what he calls the 'two kinds of reality' in the film – a topic he had explored earlier in the essay with regard to *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (Robert Bresson, 1945, France). We have 'the countenance of the actor', and we have 'the written reality', this text that is spoken without coming to life in performance. The text is treated 'as a cold, hard fact, a reality, to be accepted as it stands', as the countenances are to be accepted as they stand. The two realities, text and countenances, 'cannot fit or grow together or become one'. 'The ontological conflict between two orders of events, occurring simultaneously, when confronted on screen reveals their single common measure – the soul' (Bazin 1967: 136–37). We meet two realities, each pressing for attention, that will not be resolved into each other, and so point us toward, or induce us to posit, the unseen and more primary reality: the soul.

Over the course of a few pages Bazin has constructed a view of the film, a sense of the film, out of a series of speculative adventurings as to the film's aesthetics – the countenance without role playing, the unique way in which events accumulate, the marshalling of two incompatible realities to point to a third – an experiment unprecedented in the sound film (and, of course, looking forward to the work of Chantal Akerman and others deeply affected by Bresson). Now Bazin is ready for his fullest example, the scene where the priest presses the countess in the local chateau to give up obsession with her dead son, which leads her to cast his medallion portrait into the fire:

> It is unlikely that there exist anywhere in the whole of French cinema, perhaps even in all French literature, many moments of a more intense beauty than in the medallion scene between the curé and the countess. Its beauty does not derive from the acting nor from the psychological and dramatic values of the dialogue, nor indeed from its intrinsic meaning. The true dialogue that punctuates the struggle between the inspired priest and a soul in despair is, of its very nature, ineffable. The decisive clashes of their spiritual fencing-match escape us. Their words announce, or prepare the way for, the fiery touch of grace. There is nothing here then of the flow of words that usually goes with a conversion, while the overpowering severity of the dialogue, its rising tension

> and its final calm leave us with the conviction that we have been the privileged witnesses of a supernatural storm. The words themselves are so much dead weight, the echo of a silence that is the true dialogue between these two souls; a hint at their secret.
>
> *(Bazin 1967: 137)*

Bazin begins with an attestation of beauty, just as he began the entire essay with an attestation of emotional power. *What* is this beauty we feel? We can come at it only with some idea, which is a recognition, of a dialogue of souls. The thoughts of Bazin's previous pages – thoughts on countenance as a sign, on words as objects, on a disjunction of realities – have prepared us to see what is here. And evocation of the medallion scene in turn clinches the thoughts. What is happening in the scene is, in Blackmur's terms, something of which we are ignorant, something we can begin to grasp, through art, but never grasp fully. Bresson, his film with its daring way of proceeding, 'does something to' our ignorance. Bazin's writing does something to it.

Catholic theology has its account of 'soul' and 'grace' (though the account is not simple, but is an evolving one we get from many writers, in many voices, over a long period). Bresson's film has found soul, grace and a dialogue of souls in a new sense. What confronts us on the screen directs us to a 'secret', a reality in human existence

FIGURE 8.2 'a supernatural storm'. *Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951

and in interaction between people that only film discovers, or half-discovers. Bazin enters into the process with his words, such as 'secret'.

Does Bazin give the scene in enough detail? How ought specific examples to function in criticism of film? The literary critic can quote even an entire lyric poem, giving us the work as fully as we can get it anywhere. With the epic poem, the novel, the play, even the short story, the whole work cannot be quoted. The critic must find words to fill in, to evoke the whole, to give a sense of how the quotation fits in, or of what it disrupts. The critic of art can reproduce images – very helpful, but these are not the work. A musical score, which a critical discussion can reproduce (in part), is far from being the actual music, as any composer will readily say – and for some music, much great jazz or Indian improvisational music, there is no score. The critic of still photography is in almost as good a position as the critic of lyric poetry, but cannot give us the artist's handmade print, with everything there is to relish there. All this is to say, the critic of film is given the same challenge as virtually all critics are given when it comes to specific examples: to find sufficient words for it, to find what to say and how much to say. As Stanley Cavell likes to remind us, description of a moment, a passage, in film cannot be given *completely*. One could go on talking virtually without end to enumerate what is there – part of which is the surround, the before and after that make the moment what it is. The challenge is to make the example, as written, be evocative and telling. Bazin's paragraph on the medallion scene is electrifying because of the preparation made for it in a series of abstract ideas about the film. There is a hunger created in us for the critic to open up, or open out, on a scene that especially moves him in relation to the thinking he has been doing about how this innovative film works.

Everything coming to earth or fully coming to life in the example of the medallion scene seems to spark and inspire Bazin for the high flight of speculative thinking in the remaining pages of his essay.

> Is *Le Journal* just a silent film with spoken titles? The spoken word, as we have seen, does not enter into the image as a realistic component.
>
> …
>
> If Bresson 'returns' to the silent film it is certainly not, despite the abundance of close-ups, because he wants to tie in again with theatrical expressionism … on the contrary, it is in order to rediscover the dignity of the human countenance as understood by Stroheim and Dreyer … Nostalgia for a silence that would be the benign procreator of a visual symbolism unduly confuses the so-called primacy of the image with the true vocation of the cinema – which is the primacy of the object … The history of the cinema before and after 1928 is an unbroken continuity. It is the story of the relations between expressionism and realism. Sound was to destroy expressionism for a time before adopting it in its turn. On the other hand, it became an immediate part of the development of realism.
>
> *(Bazin 1967: 138–39)*

Le Journal, separating words and image, is like silent film, but only a certain *kind* of silent film, that concerned not with the expressiveness of its images and of their

ordering – Bazin uses the word 'montage' – but with the primacy of the object. Bazin names *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922, Germany), *Greed* (Erich von Stroheim, 1924, US) and *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928, France). Relatively speaking, we are asked, isn't there a 'primacy of the object' felt in this work? Continuing and intensifying his series of ideas, which are shocks, Bazin asks us to think back, to look again, to re-think. He goes on to say that sound cinema in many cases – he mentions Renoir – extends this realistic concern of silent cinema, making a seamless history with it.

Bazin is, of course, constantly wanting in his essays to talk about reality and realism. One must read him widely to see what he means. Like Blackmur's 'behavior', or Bazin's own 'dialogue of souls', his concepts of reality and realism are terribly important but fragile and far from simple. Bazin was moved and excited by the innovative cinema of his time – Italian Neorealism, Bresson, Welles, late Chaplin, the revival of 1930s Renoir as if it were new work, and much else – and this stimulating array drove Bazin to think, over and over, about reality, of which we may be said to be ignorant for all our familiarity with it, and which film was coming to terms with in many and varied ways. De Sica, Welles, the Chaplin of *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947, US) and *Limelight* (1951, US), Bresson, surely are not pointing to the same reality, but all this work made Bazin feel awakened to reality, with a primacy of the object, the world, the person (and the hidden in the person), prevailing over any use of images for symbolic or expressive purposes. There is no theory of film here, as a fixed idea about how film can work; rather, the engaged critic is made by various films and kinds of film to feel led toward something he wants to call reality.

Bresson, strangely, does not accord with the sound film that makes a seamless bond with the more realist silent film, allowing that, simply, to talk. Bresson separates sound and image, creating a disconcerting parallelism, for the sake of pointing us to the soul and the drama of souls. '[This] parallelism … continues the Bressonian dialectic between abstraction and reality thanks to which we are concerned with a single reality – that of human souls' (Bazin 1967: 139). 'Soul', like 'reality', is a concept used 'dramatically', 'in crisis' (Blackmur 1952: 108) in Bazin, here in the Bresson essay and later in pieces on Rossellini's films with Ingrid Bergman and on early Fellini. The concept helps Bazin to give voice to what he sees and senses in certain films. What he sees and senses, evoked and provisionally, dramatically, named, amounts to his critical thought. In a late essay on *Notte di Cabiria* (Federico Fellini, 1957, Italy/France) he suggests dropping the word 'soul', if we will just focus on a 'depth of being' in people on film, 'the level on which what Jean-Paul Sartre calls the "basic project" obtains, the level of ontology' (Bazin 1971: 85).

After the speculation on film history and the concerns of film, Bazin is ready for a final thought, a final gesture, a final bit of performance, if one likes, to get the reader to re-see or to re-remember and to re-think *Diary of a Country Priest* and indeed film itself, the possibilities for film. Bazin speaks of the images taking on more emotional power toward the end of the film, not due to inherent qualities of the images nor to the editing; there is simply an accumulation and accretion, with, continually,

'differences of aesthetic potential' set up between image and words, 'the tension of which becomes unbearable'. Bresson prods us to acknowledge and to be able to feel this tension and this growing emotional power. At the end, 'there is nothing more that the image has to communicate except by disappearing. The spectator has been led, step by step, towards that night of the senses the only expression of which is a light on a blank screen.' With 'the disappearance of the image and its replacement simply by the text',

> we are experimenting with an irrefutable aesthetic, with a sublime achievement of pure cinema. Just as the blank page of Mallarmé and the silence of Rimbaud is language at the highest state, the screen, free of images and handed back to literature, is the triumph of cinematographic realism.
>
> *(Bazin 1967: 140–41)*

The paradox of Bresson: giving way completely to the text is a gesture of 'pure cinema', indeed of 'cinematic realism', an abdication for a purpose that only film, this film, can achieve. We are brought to a 'night of the senses' so that we might see something.

One cannot focus to the last degree on Bazin's language, reading him in translation. But reading Bazin in translation, and reading him widely, is an entirely worthwhile thing to do. Reading him widely, one understands better his conceptual thinking – on realism, on the soul as film reveals it, on 'love' as brought to bear in some filmmakers' work. And reading many essays, one gets all the more strongly the impression one essay gives, of a critic moved by films and stimulated to think, wanting to find each film's artistic principles, its way of proceeding, and thus what it is and what it has to convey. In a provisional, dramatic crisis of encounter, the critic finds words and finds the way of the film – and what is found affects for the critic an ongoing and developing understanding of the film medium and its history. If in English we are at a little remove from Bazin's *language*, there is a sense of his *style* that does come fully through to us. Blackmur says in one place, 'style is the quality of the act of perception but it is mere play and cannot move us much unless married in rhythm to the urgency of the thing perceived' (Blackmur 1952: 424). We feel in Bazin a rhythm of noticing and thinking that does indeed seem married to the urgency of the thing perceived. We may, if we will, let this rhythm get to us and open our intelligence and give us courage.

Another, very different voice, this one finding words in English to speak about the all but ineffable. 'Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker', by the poet Susan Howe, weaves together, or places together, like mosaic fragments, a number of concerns of hers as she looks at films and thinks about history. There is the impulsion for Howe to mourn her recently lost husband, a man 'marked', as she puts it, by his service in World War II – as the protagonist of Marker's *La Jetée* (1962, France) is said to be marked by an image from childhood, as Chris Marker seems to announce himself as being marked by something, in his choice of name (not the one he was born with) marked in being the marker or remarker of facts, of our common

experience. Howe meditates on the experienced violence of history and with it the sense of loss – and the desperation to recover what is lost – that drives Vertov's *Three Songs about Lenin* (1934, Soviet Union), Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962, Soviet Union) and *Mirror* (1975, Soviet Union), and Marker's *La Jetée* and *Sans Soleil* (1982, France). She thinks about film's inevitable fictionalising and its inevitable, nevertheless, documentation – thinks, as does Bazin, about the ghostly status of the image, where what is wanted, or feared, is there but not there. And Howe feels strong accesses of identification of herself as a poet – and she is a major experimental poet – with the filming and editing of the filmmakers she takes up, especially Marker. The identification comes in Howe's similar, as she sees it, sense of history and loss, and in her sense of words, her own medium, as themselves being ghostly like film images – gestures of documentation, recovery, creation, where what is not there is, after all, not there. Words and film reach out without being able to grasp and hold and in this there is a violence – of desire, gesture, remaking, disappointment – kin to the violence, surely infected by that, of the common experience of history. Reading through Howe's essay, one feels that the weaving and fragmentation, the moving from topic to topic and back again, the form the sentences take, sometimes broken, the obsession with certain words – such as 'marked' – all is necessary to put across the understanding of this mourner and historian and lover of film, as of writing.

'Sorting Facts' must be read through beginning to end and experienced on other levels than the rational – as with a poem – in order to receive fully what it is Howe has to say, to come into touch fully with what is driving her to think and write. Nevertheless, we can see in a localisable way in Howe the disposition to be seized by film in its concreteness, and from this to want to think and to testify to what has so taken her, to bring us into contact with it, which means into contact with her thought about it. A few pages into the essay, after talking about her husband and World War II, and about Vertov and his theories and the issue of being creative with facts, Howe turns to the openings of *Sans Soleil* and *La Jetée*:

> **V**
>
> *Night trains air raids fall out shelters*
>
> – Sandor Krasna, 1982
>
> *Sans Soleil* opens with an idyllic pastoral sequence. Three children are walking along a peaceful country road in Iceland. The camera's knowing eye plucked them out of place and bygone time shortly before a volcano buried their village under ash. Through the medium of film, we watch them passing through the past again. A woman's voiceover tells us the film's editor surrounded or sheltered this particular sequence with black leader. She speaks from inside the black until the next sequence of shots, when the jet plane sinks into the hold of a destroyer or aircraft carrier.
>
> Bearer of lethal invisible material
>
> only an event or nonevent lowering along the scopic field of light or flight in a world flooded with facts.

> *La Jetée*, composed almost completely of photo stills, begins abruptly with a violent out-of-field-movement-sound-image, the roar of revving and hovering jet engines. Sometimes I think I hear sirens, until the whine or scream of aviation doubles and dissolves into cathedral music …
>
> *(Howe 1996: 301)*

In this opening scene on the airport jetty just before World War III, a boy is present who may be the film's protagonist, witnessing his own assassination as an adult time traveller from the future. The woman is there with whom the grown man has been having an affair, and she turns to face maybe the boy, maybe the man just before the moment of his death, and certainly the camera and us.

> Glancing our way her expression is hard to determine. Her pensive gaze is wary tender innocent dangerous. She may be remembering beckoning staring apprehending responding reflecting or deflecting his look.
>
> The uncertainty of appearance in a phrase universe.
>
> *(Howe 1996: 304)*

The Roman numeral 'V' to mark section five of Howe's essay suggests 'victory' and Churchill's famous hand sign, and also German city-destroying winged bombs. Howe quotes the voiceover from *Sans Soleil*'s opening – 'Night trains air raids fall out shelters'. She hears it breathless without commas, and writing it so allows nouns to become verbs, mustering the world's activity, its violence: night *trains* us, the very air *raids* upon us, fall out *shelters* us – bitter notion – as the film's editor has 'sheltered' the image of the children with black leader. These words come in the sequence just *after* the prologue image of the children, where 'Sandor Krasna', the film's fictional cinematographer and memoirist, a stand-in for Marker, is said to look at dozing Japanese commuters on a ferry and to have memories and fears of war. The words mark the film for Howe, and indeed all the films she takes up.

The image of the children is one of vulnerability – later in the film, we learn about the volcanic destruction – and the children connect to Tarkovsky's Ivan, destroyed by war at the age of twelve, to the children in newsreel footage in *Mirror* who are bombed in the Spanish Civil War, and to the picture Howe eventually gives of herself as a child watching movies and newsreels and hearing reports from a distance during World War II, where her father was away fighting – as we all hear reports from a distance always with images, with words. 'The camera's knowing eye plucked them out of place and bygone time' – the 'knowing' camera is as if prophetic of violence, and, having 'plucked them out', was itself violent in its creative and commemorative gesture. 'Bygone' in 'bygone time' admits sentiment, even sentimentality, over the past, and also suggests 'bygones', things we would rather forget. Howe points to the image of the children and with the adjective 'bygone' gives her feeling, and the film's, about it. The woman's voiceover 'speaks from inside' the black leader surrounding the image, and this pairing of words with darkness – Bazin's 'night of the senses' – makes of the moment a figure for the

whole issue of the ghostliness that keeps coming back in Howe's take on film and on words.

The jet plane and aircraft carrier prompt a space in the text, a tense loss of words, then the fragment 'Bearer of lethal invisible material'. One is too troubled to make a complete sentence, to do more than merely name. 'Lethal invisible material' is the weapon of war always to be feared – also the content of film images. On film the world, 'material', is visible but 'invisible', present but not present, gets to us – 'lethal' – even though it is not there (in *The World Viewed* Stanley Cavell says that the world on film is present to us, but that we are not present to it). Another space in the text, more one of taking thought than of blanching, and 'only an event or nonevent lowering along the scopic field of light or flight in a world flooded with facts'. 'Event or nonevent', the mattering or not, the extraordinary or the ordinary, the there but not there – one wants to hedge a bit, protecting oneself – the children, the warplane. 'Lowering' like an ominous cloud on the horizon, or 'lowering' as the plane is lowered into the ship's hold, as reality is lowered out of our view. 'The scopic field of light or flight' – the scopic field of light, of film, which plucks things out, or the scopic field of flight, of the attack plane. Perhaps, also, the view of those who flee in war, or who flee in any film image, away from us and toward us, and our view, we who look at film, into film, through film and beyond.

Then, with a space for thought, the connection is made to the ominous beginning of *La Jetée* – 'revving and hovering jet engines' – and the ambiguous and fascinating woman's face as she looks at us – 'wary tender innocent dangerous', possibly 'remembering beckoning staring apprehending … ', the absence of commas allowing a merging of the adjectives, the approaches to the image, breathless, hurried, almost desperate, or, depending on how we read, slow, trance-like, one notion wholly becoming another – face and image arresting, 'apprehending' us, but hard to read and be sure about, like all that is on film. Throughout the essay Howe returns to the mother and mother-like in what we see in film – enthralling, desired, uncertain, fearful. The woman in this image concentrates the film experience for us. But she is a viewer also, viewing and discombobulating *us*, we want to say, though we know she is *not* viewing us. And she relates to the time-travelling man as viewer to film image, calling the man, Howe notes, her 'ghost'. 'Ghost', newly and complexly defined, becomes a concept for Howe in this writing.

In the big central section of the essay, Howe turns to Tarkovsky's fictional / autobiographical *Mirror* and its use of documentary footage from the Spanish Civil War, World War II, atomic bomb tests and other crises of modern history – 'they telescope together, binding his memory-time of youth to the actual geopolitical chain of violence, seemingly everywhere during the second half of the twentieth century' (Howe 1996: 318). Howe does all she can to describe, evoke and testify to her having merged in feeling, senses and thought with this material. It is the core of what she takes all these films to be about. At one point we see a little girl on a city street in Spain, looking at the camera, apparently frightened by the warning sound of a bombing raid – and perhaps frightened by the camera. She looks up, as if seeing what Tarkovsky cuts to, the sight of men hanging from Soviet stratospheric balloons:

> A man without wings swings slantingly into view through free space mute sky
>
> 1 2 3 4 5 6 seconds of silent soundtrack before liturgical music through fade-in to a certain point then tapering emitting wave notes risen from years of other powers. Balancing and hovering he is swinging in a basket as if reentrance is easy. Swings in again coming home so it's a picture projected through time subtler than poems or a letter because he is working on it. Found footage shown at slower speed here is power. A tremendous stratosphere spinnaker so weightless after the weighty Spanish evacuation sequence hovers preparing for lift-off well he needs no map to return if fiction angel astronaut returning to home base as if he merely floated out of sight for fun as if reentrance is possible and surely there are to be anchorage mooring helpers waiting. Star boat USSR
>
> *(Howe 1996: 322)*

The reader works, with no guiding – which would perhaps be numbing – commas in the text, and succumbs to the trance of a succession of facts, facts recreated by Tarkovsky, by Howe. The vulnerable is transfigured into the redemptive, the poor soldier into an angel – 'fiction angel' – for the poor child. 'It's a picture projected through time' – a film document, creatively seen, for the little girl, for Howe, for us – 'weightless after the weighty evacuation sequence'. It is 'subtler than poems or a letter because he is working on it' – 'subtler', more pervasive, even insidious, because fine, 'because he is working on it', the man there before us, reaching out to us, as it were, not invisible like the poet or letter writer. Slowing the speed of the footage is

FIGURE 8.3 'She may be remembering beckoning staring apprehending responding reflecting or deflecting his look.' *La Jetée,* 1962

'power', so it is Tarkovsky at work, as Howe is at work, as well as the man we see is at work. The 'power' goes back to the first sentence and the 'wave notes risen from years of other powers' – Tarkovsky imposes sound, showing his power, and thus connects to the powers of history. The 'liturgical music' preceding the 'wave notes' connects to the 'cathedral music' Howe noted in the opening of *La Jetée*, the music that the 'whine or scream of aviation' is made to 'double or dissolve' into. Liturgical or cathedral music is man's sublime counterstatement to facts of history, or is God's, or fate's, statement of the larger perspective, or power, behind history. Tarkovsky and Marker show their powers in merging themselves with 'other powers' – so does Howe. Just before the material on *Mirror*'s documentary sequences, Howe had cited Bazin from 'Theater and Cinema': 'There are no wings to the screen' (Bazin's '*coulisses*', the French theatre technical term, translates beautifully for Howe's purposes to the English technical term 'wings'). In film one supposes a world beyond what we see on the screen. The screen is not a conventional playing space with wings where we know the drama ends. There is an ineluctable realism to film. And yet Tarkovsky, and Howe, can give wings to the poor soldier, have him answer need and desire – the process all the more touching because we cannot escape the reality, knowing, seeing, that the man cannot have wings.

Near the end of the essay Howe returns to the image of the Icelandic children – as *Sans Soleil* does at the end – and describes it again, putting even more of herself into it, showing, really, how it has underlain all her concern, all she has written, as it has for Marker, or 'Sandor Krasna':

> The image we see is of what she says he shot or saw. It doesn't matter who is the author. The image is one of the loveliest I ever remember seeing on film. I can't say why it is so haunting, only that silence has something to do with it. Three children are moving in color but there isn't any soundtrack now. They are blonde and the sun lights their hair from behind. Wind blowing their hair is all. The woman's hair in *La Jetée* is blown by the wind. Two of the children here are definitely girls, the other could be a boy, I'm not sure. The tallest, in the center, gives a shy, quick, furtive look towards the cameraman. All three are moving forward hand in hand, and they seem to be laughing. They could be playing a game, or they could be leading the tall one along to show her something. It's not clear who is leading who following. Just as it's not clear in *La Jetée* if the woman's smile is welcoming or warning. Silence and green fields that resemble ones I remember in Ireland. Salt air of the sea. A lyric fragment cut away. Simply peace and no evidence. They are spirits.
>
> *(Howe 1996: 338)*

'No evidence' – no flood, as yet, of facts. Of the children, 'wind blowing their hair is all'. 'Is all' – all the stirring there is here of motion or threat, or 'all' in the sense of the transcendent that saves and shelters. The woman's hair in *La Jetée* is also

windblown – threatened, transformed. Marker's epigraph for the English-language version of *Sans Soleil*, as Howe notes elsewhere, is from Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*:

> Because I know that time is always time
> And place is always and only place

Limitation, realism, at the start of this poem that struggles to find the spirit, along the way transforming mere sensuality – fact in a sense – into transcendent lyricism:

> Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown …
>
> *(Eliot 1952: 63)*

The woman drawing her long black hair out tight, of *The Waste Land*, is perhaps recuperated here. More and more *Ash-Wednesday*, if not *The Waste Land*, seems a subtext for Howe's essay, and for both *La Jetée* and *Sans Soleil*. Seeking the spirit out of facts. Twentieth-century poetry struggling to do what film struggles to do, and what Howe's criticism, or Bazin's, or Blackmur's, struggles to do.

Howe is able to grasp, or grasp at, or render, Marker's 'lyric fragment' of the children because of mergence, here as in so much of her essay, with personal remembrance – 'green fields that resemble ones I remember in Ireland. Salt air of the sea.' The fragment is 'cut' – terse word after all the assonance and sibilance – 'cut' by the film editor and by Howe even as they cherish the life there, and cut by history – the children's world will be buried in ash. 'They are spirits' – essential life, inspiring, but out of reach like all the ghosts that are film images.

This paragraph is a remarkable instance of what Blackmur asked for with his injunction to the critic to *perform* – 'to furnish forth, to complete, to finish', though, of course, Blackmur acknowledged that one never gets all the way there, as Howe acknowledges too: 'I'm not sure', 'It's not clear', 'Just as it's not clear … '. Moved, one walks out onto the high wire. 'It doesn't matter who is the author', says Howe of the footage of the children – Marker, 'Krasna', some anonymous cameraman – surely Howe herself has become the author as much as anyone. One feels that she could give the account yet again, and it would come even more into its own, which is her own.

Blackmur says that in criticism, 'you get the radical imperfection of the intellect striking on the radical imperfection of the imagination' (Blackmur 1967: 78) – the intellect *and* imagination of the critic, after all, striking on the intellect and imagination of the art. The striking yields fire – heat and light. Criticism is science of its own kind (as Tarkovsky says in *Sculpting in Time* that film is science, an essential way of knowing), and is communication, a bringing into community. Criticism achieves what other kinds of science cannot achieve. And yet critics acknowledge imperfection – words are imperfect, as film images are imperfect, however eloquent. Critics might well give their accounts again, and others might well take them up.

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9

MEMORIES THAT DON'T SEEM MINE

Lesley Stern

This bitter earth

During the day Stan kills sheep. At night he counts sheep. During the day he works – in a meat factory or slaughterhouse; at night he rests, but cannot sleep. 'I'm working myself into my own hell,' he says. His sense of being alive, his sense of existing, seems to be leaking away. He is a dejected individual. A man without passion.

Passion (Jean-Luc Godard, 1982, France/Switzerland). Remember Godard's film. Gestures of work, gestures of love. Work and love.

After work one day, Stan and his wife dance, slowly, in the living room, to Dinah Washington singing 'This Bitter Earth'. Stan is passive, reluctant, unresponsive to his wife's desire. The last shot of the film is of sheep going to their slaughter and once again 'This Bitter Earth' plays on the soundtrack, running its full length. The song says the earth is bitter and that, after all, it may not be so bitter. Why? What indications are there, as sheep go to the slaughter, that this bitter earth might be redeemed? This is the question this essay explores.

How to write the coming into consciousness of film?

How to write about *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett, 1977, US)? It is a fiction that feels like a documentary, a document of a place and time that feels like a poem, a film that is intriguing to watch but whose narrative intrigue is decidedly tenuous. It is a film ghosted by the strains of Paul Robeson singing 'The House I Live In' – a house at once alien and familiar, evoking both the nation and the domestic, history and the 'now', the past accrued in moments and years and epochs that heap up like snow, and the past as time passing before our eyes, time that ticks by or floats and settles as we watch, like dust.

The cinema is the house I live in, an imaginary house with real affects and effects, a place that both houses and provokes memories. Over a few years – while watching

Killer of Sheep, brooding, dodging the memories it provoked, memories that flew like bullets out of the screen, lodging and festering slowly in my flesh – while watching and brooding I was also, for other reasons, reading slowly and in bits and pieces, Siegfried Kracauer. What emerged from that reading and watching and brooding process is not an expository piece, not an 'application' of theory, but more like a meditation, a ficto-critical improvisation in which Charles Burnett and Siegfried Kracauer, phrases and images, circle and stalk one another.[1]

Cinema both houses and provokes memories. The house of cinema groans under the weight of memories: memories of cinema itself (a vast chaotic archive of images, marshalled and coerced into the long line of narrative films and then sorted, taxonomised, labelled); and personal memories, diegetically mobilised, attached to individuals. Weighted down by the compulsion to memorialise, paint portraits, tell stories, the cinema mostly gives short shrift to history, although it often returns to us subjective memories we did not know we had lost. Jumbled, tamped down just below the threshold of consciousness these memories are unaccountably sparked and whirred into affective life by the resonant charge of seemingly random screen images.

And occasionally memories are returned to us that are not our own. Startling unfamiliar images open onto the past, unfolding histories alien on the whole to cinema, and arriving in strange ways, seldom announced as history lessons.

Killer of Sheep initially returned to me sensations. And via those sensations – through an affective rather than discursive or polemical register – memories I would rather not entertain. But it also mobilised memories that have never been mine, memories that build the house Paul Robeson sings of: memories of a place where now I live, a place that calls itself America.

Resonance and dissonance: it was as though a match was lit and in that moment a detonation, then a long slow burn.

The world of the film – South Central Los Angeles in the late 1970s – is not a world familiar to me. I grew up on a farm in Africa, my parents were white colonial farmers in a country then called Rhodesia (now – in fact since independence in 1980 – called Zimbabwe). I left Rhodesia in 1972 and have lived in the USA since 2000.

The cinema is the house I live in. But like lots of other people I also leave this house to go to work to earn a crust, and sometimes hang out in the everyday doing nothing much, being visited by all sorts of experiential states like delight and astonishment and boredom and free floating anxiety. The world of work oozes into the house of cinema and cinematic sensations seep out through the screen into other worlds, like blood leaking from raw meat into the brown wrapping paper in which it is all trussed up. Unhousing happens. Two worlds (at least) collide in this writing on *Killer of Sheep*: a neighbourhood in downtown Los Angeles in the late 1970s, and a farm in Southern Africa twenty or so years earlier. Two distinct worlds: different locations, different histories. *Killer of Sheep* came to me as a visitation. It opened up like a fan, scenes of beauty, falling open, one after another. Cascading hieroglyphs.

Recognisable but not familiar. Something familiar, however, visited me. Submerged memories erupting into consciousness. I knew that these memories were

subjective and idiosyncratic, their occurrence motivated aesthetically and surreally rather than logically or even comparatively (not through some comparative relation between the two locations). Yet some connection persisted. This essay is a way of pursuing those connections, tuning in to resonance but simultaneously trying to resist an automatic mapping of one location on the other. Listening to dissonance.

'How to film the "coming into consciousness"?' asks Serge Daney (Daney 2002: 40). For me the problem is how to *write* the coming into consciousness of film. More generally it is to find a way of transcribing in words how movies move, how they move us (viewers) through the sensations, how they move slowly, over time, changing as they enter into writing. More specifically, here and now, it is how to attend to the way *Killer of Sheep* moves, how realisations arise out of the images and how, in the process of writing, somatic apprehensions come into consciousness like fragments of a dream, rising, whirling, caught in ideational clinches for a moment only to be tugged apart and set adrift again. But there is a danger in this process, a danger of 'trapping' the film which I take as object of scrutiny, criticism, evocation. To deploy the 'I' as a trope, to write the personal into the cinematic, is of course to fictionalise. The fictional register, we know, betrays; but it can also yield new perspectives and knowledges. More dangerous and banal is the aggrandising of a personal story (subjective trauma, say, cast in the language of universal ethics) or ontological pontification (a story which narrates a grand theory of cinematic desire) or quotidian fetishisation (all truth is in, and only in, the details) so that the object of criticism disappears under a blanket of snow. Done in by a snow job.

To return to Serge Daney – I left something out of the quotation, a one-word sentence. He actually wrote, 'Politics. How to film the "coming into consciousness"?' Watching, brooding, reading, on the one hand, and on the other writing itself, has brought (is bringing) into consciousness this ellipsis, interlacing these two incommensurate worlds. Not big P politics. More like political quotidianeity, which might be another way of designating political affect, or of saying that the political domain sometimes comes into consciousness via affective channelling, or that movies and memories, in so far as they are potentially materialisations of history, may occupy a continuous critical space.

How do you prise memory away from the safekeeping of an individual psyche? And how might public history be invested with the affective charge of memory? In exploring these questions *Killer of Sheep* is my provocation and inspiration. What follows is an experiment, a thinking through memories and images, a small critical improvisation.

An area which borders on the world of daily life

> *I remember mostly the smell, a sensation of sickness, a montage of almost still images cut together fast. The smell and the sounds: Mooing, shuffling, squealing, a gun shot, muffled. The smell and the sounds and the feel. The silky curls of the great bull Hero as we rubbed his forehead, and the feel of the rough tongue of the calves, sucking on our childish hands. We thought it was affection they were expressing. Their tongues were big, rough and furry. Our hands were small.*

> *The muffled gun shot. A montage of almost still images cut together fast, each image trying to escape from the one before, all the images trying to escape linearity and depiction.*

Charles Burnett's 1977 film, *Killer of Sheep*, was shot on location in the Watts area of South Central Los Angeles, though the place is never named. The cast is made up mainly though not exclusively of non-actors, the crew was small (this was his MFA film at UCLA) and the kids who perform in the film also helped out with sound recording. The cast is almost entirely African American, and so is the intricate, dense and eclectic music track (the cost of the music rights is one of the reasons that the film could not be released for so long). Burnett himself operated the camera.

Stan (Henry Gayle Sanders) is the protagonist of this mosaic-like fiction (it was scripted, rehearsed, acted) that unfolds in a contingent and improvised manner, like a documentary. Although the diegesis centres on the domestic life of Stan and his wife (Kaycee Moore) and two children, this domestic life extends into the public space of the neighbourhood – the streets, railway yards, alleys, meat factory, deserted dusty lots. In twenty-nine narratively discrete episodes daily life in Watts unfolds with a grim sensuousness, but it is a grimness punctuated by moments of sardonic humour, exhilaration, unexpected gags, extreme tristesse and tenderness. Stan is one of the few characters who has a job. Children and adults alike seem mainly dedicated to killing time. But they kill time creatively, improvising, using what is to hand: throwing stones, jumping across rooftops, stealing TVs, playing with dolls, buying a used motor for $15, cashing cheques at the liquor store, fixing cars, sitting in a burnt out car drinking beer, eating cornflakes, gambling, hanging out the washing, throwing handfuls of dirt on the washing, drinking coffee, trying to retrieve debts when skint, lending money when flush, tangling with hoods in search of someone who 'won't blush at murder', going to the races in a car that breaks down, threatening a belligerent husband with a gun while the children watch, being chased by dogs, tangling with a gang of girls, mending the kitchen floor, slow dancing in the living room, playing dominoes.

Near the beginning of the film there is a scene of children playing in a deserted lot where workmen have been tearing down houses – typically they improvise with what they find there, throw stones at one another, build and destroy things amidst the rubble, play with a spinning top. On the sound track Paul Robeson sings 'The House I Live In'. The narrator of the song tells of children's faces he sees in a playground; they are of all races and religions and, for him, this is America. Robeson's sardonic tone, in juxtaposition with the images, introduces an ironic bitterness. It also connects this locality in its very physicality and materiality with a larger world, with America, with an African American history.

The house Stan lives in is the social milieu that extends beyond his own physical house to the neighbourhood and to the nation. It is the house we all, in America, live in. History is housed here, and sometimes unhoused, materialising in fragments, in refuse that blows around on the streets, in the detritus of ruins. *Killer of Sheep* is extraordinarily attentive to surface phenomena, left-over and discarded things, quotidian gestures, the street, the local, random occurrences and transient details. Film has

the ability to render physical reality visible, to engage the senses, to affect us in such a way that we see things we have never seen before, things overlooked, repressed, out-of-sight, or just too horrific, in day-to-day existence. If film has the capacity to materialise ideas and to vitalise ordinary things, it does so in *Killer of Sheep* through an historical sensibility grounded in the practice of the rag-picker. Burnett's camera is a rag-picker with an affinity for quotidian things, for a kind of historical imagination 'which borders on the world of daily life' (Kracauer 1969: 211).

We do not often, in mainstream American cinema, see the house Stan lives in. When Robeson asks, 'What is America to me?' the answer lies in the exclusions as well as the visible face of democracy. We hear history in *Killer of Sheep*, through music, through the sounding of things. Much African American music (which has permeated the sounds we hear every day) is a legacy of slavery, originating in the South and travelling with migrating freed slaves. 'Blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives', says Baraka (Baraka 1963: 17).

Sound, as much as camera and performance, serves to delineate this borderland where history and daily life rub shoulders: the melancholic sound of wailing trains, motor engines chuggering into life or dying, dogs yapping, children's voices screeching and hollering and crying, mothers scolding, the jingle of the ice-cream van, the clanking of a chain-link fence, whistling, the clatter of sharp steel implements in the slaughter house and the tinkle of the goat's bell. And music too, music is often issuing out of the images, diegetically motivated, such as when Stan's little girl is playing with her doll and singing along to Earth Wind and Fire's 'Reasons' (a big hit at the time) on the record player (and her mother is touching up her make up while cooking, using the pot lid as a mirror). But more typically the music is extra-diegetic, used to link and juxtapose images, to create moodiness ranging from the ecstatic to the mournful and melancholic to the earthy, from the blues of the thirties and forties through to rock'n'roll and the symphonic score of William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony* (1930). The integration of sound and image, the cutting, the rhythms, the memories. The film itself, not through a history lesson, but through its very practices of materialisation, gives a texture to the specific location of the film and extends its borders from the world of daily life into a realm of history, of African American History (James 1998).[2]

Buried as if under a layer of snow

> *The smell from the slaughter yard drifted through the farm like dust. Wherever you turned, whatever you did, daily life, quotidian non-sequiturs were clothed in the dusty smell of blood. And now it seeps out of the screen, fills my living room in San Diego.*

Kids create a war zone in a vacant lot near the railway yard, they build barricades and shields out of the detritus of abandoned and demolished buildings, they throw dust and stones and rocks at one another, at the train, at a metal container. They laugh, some get hurt and cry. As they run and fight and tumble the camera is caught in a whirl of bodies and dust.

The title of the film might suggest this as the story of a man: a man who kills sheep. However, although it is true that Stan is the main protagonist this is not a portrait film. The contiguity of the slaughter house and the neighbourhood, Stan's workplace and the house he lives in, collapses work time and leisure time for most of the characters. Time, rather than adhering to a narrative logic, seems to rise to the surface and to settle, along with dust, all over the place, to stroke, like the gaze of the camera, all kinds of quotidian objects. Or to bristle, vibrate, shake up the measured sequencing of ennui, tedium, listlessness, hopelessness. The dust of time drifts and dodges between the different episodes, itself immaterial but giving rise to material resonances – whirlwind skirmishes in which children's games echo adult acts of random violence, and gestures of love echo gestures of work.

> And if my life is like the dust
> Oh, that hides the glow of a rose
> What good am I
> Heaven only knows

Killer of Sheep is a film of dust, not snow.

'In a photograph a person's history is buried as if under a layer of snow' (Kracauer 1995: 51), but films have an affinity, evidently denied to photography, for the 'flow of life' (Kracauer 1997: 71). As the dust blows the camera moves into the flurries and blurs and pauses to observe what happens in the background, at work, in the alleys, how things and people move.

Though it depicts a dejected individual, *Killer of Sheep* does not cover him in snow, nor does it excavate a reason for happiness buried deep within. Through charting his anomie through a series of movements and relations, concretised through things and people, it aims to move, in Shklovsky's formulation, to 'recover the sensation of life', to work against the automatism of perception (Shklovsky 1988: 20).

Memories that don't seem mine

> *At the very thought of the butcher's shop, nausea sweeps through her body, as the stench of raw meat permeates the air, she goes limp at the wrists and the knees, her body rendered a bag of sawdust. She sees herself a rag doll split open, spilt out onto the floor there to absorb blood dripping from the carcasses suspended in the air.*

A decade before *Killer of Sheep* was made Watts was burning, and the historical memory is inscribed in the pauses, the spacing between speech, the jokes, the suggestion of southern folk tales, in the rhythms of the blues and ragtime and rock'n'roll. Memories of the great migration of the forties north and westwards from a rural south are filtered through the present circumscription of space and time. The characters are caught between remembering and forgetting.

The historian and the filmmaker share a project. Burnett's way of doing history is more akin to the working of memory, in which the historian's self-effacement allows

'flashes illumining the night' producing for the reader or viewer something like 'historical sensation' (Kracauer 1969: 101).[3] Burnett is dealing in memories and also using film to trigger involuntary memories in the viewer. Memory images only have significance for those who experience them, but when the subjective enters the realm of the public a collision occurs and something can happen that opens up a gap between memory and recognition.

Stan mentions a 'back home' near the beginning of the film, and characters use phrases and speech idioms associated with the South, such as 'Ma Dear' and 'drylongso'. Stan's wife speaks of

> 'Memories that don't seem mine, like half-eaten cake and rabbit skins stretched on backyard fences. My grandmother, mother dear, mot dear, mot dear, dragging her shadow across the porch. Standing bare-headed under the sun, cleaning red catfish with white rum.'

Burnett weaves the past (the history of migration) into the quotidian life of South Central. 'Why is it raining?' his daughter asks, to which he replies with an old Southern saying, 'It's the Devil beating his wife', and they both smile, sharing a surprising moment of intimacy.

In *Killer of Sheep* Burnett is documenting (fictionally) a moment and a community that is caught up in the dust drift of history, a moment that is passing even as it is being conjured into cinematic existence. He says that before the troubles there was a centre, but with the erasure of a community centre came a reconfiguring of space, and so an erasure of memory. 'Without history you are nothing. Memory is like coming on an island, something to catch up on and hang onto' (Hozic 1994: 475). This conjuring into existence is not merely a slice of life that can be fitted into an orthodox linear history. The very form of the film, its mosaic-like structure, its patterning of rhythms, provokes a different kind of remembering.

The film is an idiosyncratic form of historical restoration, focusing on the usually unobserved aspects of this part of Los Angeles. The structuring of music, images, sound, the rhythm of editing: all this works on a sensory level, materialising memories, buried memories in the mainstream American psyche.

When a child strikes a match

> *There was a man, called the butcher's boy, who delivered meat to neighbouring farms, riding around on dusty dirt tracks on a heavy bicycle in the sun with a huge pannier on the front loaded with brown paper parcels seeping blood. Every new moon he would abandon his bike and walk around the countryside, raving, a madman.*

The world of *Killer of Sheep* is dense with objects. Not dense in the sense of crammed, the screen is not filled with things, but the things that are rendered visible are also rendered tactile, they are played with, lifted, carried, brandished, caressed, thrown. And they are also invested with motility: the capacity to move. Many of

these things or shots of things carry a surprisingly strong affective charge. They don't simply point backwards or forwards to something that will happen in the narrative but in their thingness each one 'stands out as an image iridescent with multiple meanings' (Kracauer 1997: 70).

Things and people are connected through a gestural contingency; they elicit a curiosity about how situations – rather than plots – will evolve, how gestures will expand. Quotidian gestures are enacted in an improvisational register, and this is predominantly the modality that structures the tenuous intrigue, that serves as the motor that moves the film through a temporal regime, and that moves the viewer to react and reflect. Although these gestural vignettes lead nowhere, their performative affect derives precisely from the force of improvisation. Improvisation (with its wit, its ingenuity, its propensity for surprise) is registered both on a gestural level (the relations between things and people) and as a performative thematic. The improvisations of daily life, the interactions with things serve to materialise social relations.

Work and leisure. Gestures of work, gestures of love. Work and love.

> But when a child strikes the matchhead *to see* what happens – just for the fun of it – he enjoys the movement itself, the changing colors, the light flashing at the height of the blaze, the death of the tiny piece of wood, the hissing of the tiny flame. He enjoys these sterile differences leading nowhere.
>
> *(Lyotard 1986: 350–51)*[4]

Jean François Lyotard gives us this description in his essay 'Acinema', where he contrasts this dissipative and 'useless' expenditure of energy, this nihilism of movement, to 'productive' movement, to movement subsumed by economy. 'If you use the match to light the gas that heats the water for the coffee which keeps you alert on your way to work', it is a movement belonging to the circuit of capital (Lyotard 1986: 350).

As a killer of sheep Stan is inserted into the circuit of capital. The children, on the other hand, are like Lyotard's children: they light matches for fun, to see what will happen. Lyotard's example is strikingly apposite to *Killer of Sheep*. His essay is an elaboration of movement in the cinema, delineating the extremities: movement and stasis, abstraction and representation. Cinema, on the whole, strives to avoid the extremes, to absorb aberrant dissipative movements, to ensure that for every expenditure there is a return. This incessant organising that is cinematography works too through exclusion – the exclusion of intensities that are not productive, that don't lead anywhere in narrative terms. 'In letting itself be drawn toward these antipodes the cinema insensibly ceases to be an ordering force; it produces true, that is, vain, simulacrums, blissful intensities, instead of productive/consumable objects' (Lyotard 1986: 350).

Think of some things and the gestures in which they unfold. A little girl hangs out the washing; a man holds a teacup to his cheek; boys scramble out from under a house and throw handfuls of dirt at the clean white washing; a man strips the skin off

a sheep's carcass; two men carry a heavy motor down stairs. How do these gestures expand, how do these things mutate?

The little boys who scramble out from under the house and sneak up on the girl are playing, they throw the dirt to see what happens, it is a gesture that expands. And disappears: energy dissipated. Though before it disappears there is an exchange, one gesture is converted into another, the act of throwing is converted into the motility of a facial expression. Handfuls of dirt spray out, filling the world with dust, which then settles on the clean white washing, congeals into muddy stains. The effect of the conversion is registered in the transformation of exuberant throwing (they are improvising with the stuff of daily living, the earth underfoot) into the sad sad face of the little girl, a sadness in which bitterness encroaches.

A man holds a teacup: Stan, during his leisure time, away from the meat factory, is working on the kitchen floor. He takes a break to have a cup of coffee with his friend. As they talk of this and that Stan lays his cheek against the teacup. 'What does this remind you of when you hold it next to your cheek? … Doesn't it remind you of when you're making love?' The look on his face, how emotions pass refiguring his features, as he imagines. The way he says, 'How warm her forehead gets sometimes'. The tactility materialises so you, watching, can feel the warmth and imagine, so memories unfold erotically with the gesture. Then the mood is deflected, the gesture deflated, as Bracy (Charles Bracy) laughs hilariously: 'I don't go for women who've got malaria'.

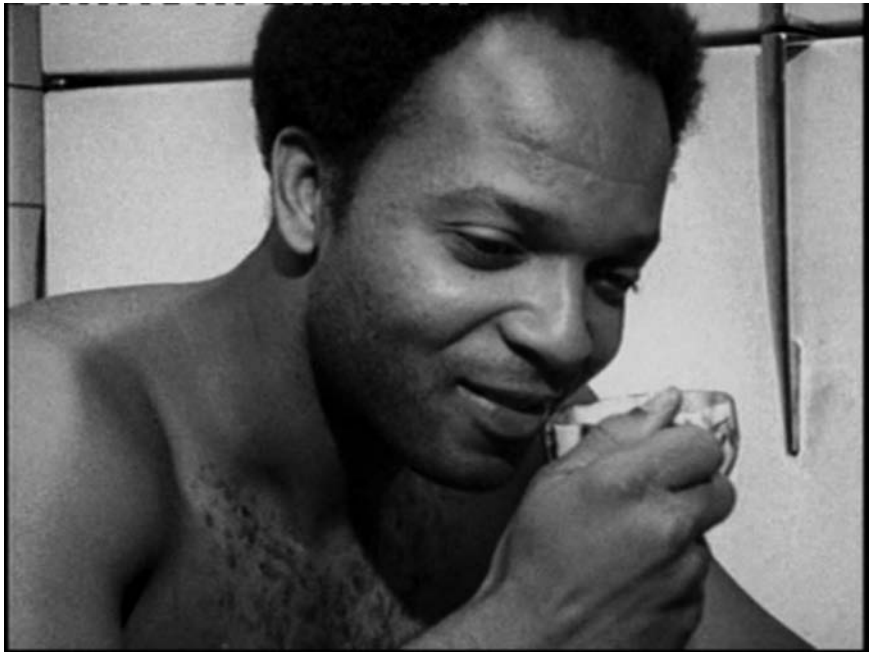

FIGURE 9.1 'Stan lays his cheek against the teacup … The tactility materialises so you, watching, can feel the warmth and imagine, so memories unfold erotically with the gesture.' *Killer of Sheep*, 1977

In both these instances there are blissful (non-productive) intensities that exceed the narrative economy, there is an intrigue about how gestures will unfold, but the distinction between vain simulacra and consumable objects is not so clear cut. Nor is the line which separates childish from adult gestures, children from adults and work from play. The little boys may be playing, but the girl is not, she is working (the hooks on which she hangs the wet clothes echo the hooks from which the sheep are hung) and she is going to have to begin all over again. Their improvisation produces more repetitive labour for her. Stan's work life so dominates his sense of existence that he often can't stop working, his wife watches bitterly as he crouches on the kitchen floor, laying linoleum as the evening grows long.

How do you interrupt the tyranny of the assembly line, the economy of a more formulaic Hollywood narrative, a triumphalist history of progress? In *Passion* you stutter, you go on strike, you move when you should be holding your breath. In *Killer of Sheep* you throw a spanner in the works, you deflect the tedium of the habitual by quotidian improvisation, by throwing dust or using a stone as a hammer or a pot lid as a mirror or a teacup to materialise memory. Later, when Stan slow dances dejectedly with his wife to 'This Bitter Life' and is drained of all sensation, emptied out of passion, we remember his memory of making love, a memory materialised in a gesture, transmitted to us cinematically, a gesture that moves. And as the film unfolds we begin to realise and absorb the exchanges that take place between the slaughter house and the domestic house, the exchange of gestures, the interruptions and deflections.

FIGURE 9.2 'slow dances … drained of all sensation, emptied out of passion'. *Killer of Sheep*, 1977

And what of the man who strips the skin off a sheep's carcass? What of the two men who carry a heavy motor down stairs? How do these gestures expand, how do these things mutate? The motor and the sheep are privileged things, they serve as hieroglyphic constellations, imagistic nodes that attract energy, that ignite and burn through the film, leaving an imprint of the past.

I've got the blues, gonna pack my things and go

> *When I touch meat in the kitchen it is smooth, prepared, almost ready to cook. It looks sleek, like a cat, like you could stroke it and it might start to purr. But when I put one hand on the piece of flank and start to cut with a knife in the other hand, the meat suddenly feels furry and begins to smell.*

Resistentialism is a mock philosophy posited on the axiom that 'Things are against us' (Jennings 1963). The motor in *Killer of Sheep* surely takes its place amongst the iconic resistentialist objects of cinema: 'malicious escalators, the unruly Murphy beds, and the mad automobiles in silent comedy to the cruiser Potemkin, the oil derrick in *Louisiana Story*, and the dilapidated kitchen in *Umberto D*' (Kracauer 1997: 45).

Despite the earlier doom-laden question: 'What do you want with another raggedy-ass car for?' Stan and his friend Gene (Eugene Cherry) set off in a truck, with his little girl, to buy a used motor so they can resuscitate an immobile car. They pull up and park on the street and we have a shot of Stan, partly obscured by his daughter in the foreground, counting money. He smoothes the notes, orders them worriedly, puts some back in his shirt pocket, the rest in his pants pocket. The two men climb the outside wooden steps of a building and enter an apartment in the midst of a domestic altercation, centring on a man who has been beaten up and is lying in a blanket on the floor, his head covered in bandages. The camera passes over people and objects in the room, and then the motor is revealed – somewhat theatrically, via a documentarian flourish. The camera, at ground level, pulls back from the bandaged head of the guy on the floor to the motor, sitting on newspaper, on the floor next to him. The motor is huge, much bigger than his head. Negotiations proceed (while the woman puts cream on her legs, her spiffy husband scrutinises himself in a small mirror and worries about losing his hair, insults are exchanged, outside Stan's daughter plays with a little girl from the apartment) and eventually a deal is struck for fifteen dollars and a shirt for collateral.

The two men pick up the motor and the camera moves with them, awkwardly, out of the door. Thus begins the immense ordeal of transporting the motor down the stairs, out into the street, onto the back of the truck. Each shot conveys the effort, the labour, the strain, the parts of human bodies and parts of the machine joined in struggle and in a continuity as though the machine and bodies inhabit the same universe of thingy solidity and resistance. It takes forever. Each time they put the motor down, pause, regather energy, heave it up again, you feel the weight, your body strains. You wonder: will it ever end, will they reach a destination or will they be defeated by the obdurate weight of the motor, its sheer inertness?

But they do reach their destination. Finally it sits on the edge of the truck. Gene has hurt his hand and they decide to leave the motor where it is: 'It will stay,' he says. It sits there, a materialisation of massivity, as though it will never move again.

The truck is parked on a slope, the camera is positioned on the street behind the truck, looking up. The little girl looks out of the back window, her face made up like a clown, watching the motor, watching us. They start up the truck, it slips back on the incline. The motor teeters. And then it comes crashing towards us, out of the truck, onto the road. Just like that, as light as a feather, like a snow flake blown in the wind. But in that moment of treacherous lightness resides all the heaviness of the world of incalcitrant things. 'Busted now, it aint no good.' So they give up, dejectedly get back in the truck and drive away. A reverse shot, from the little girl's point of view, registers the truck pulling away from the motor. It gets smaller and smaller as Scott Joplin's ragtime 'Solace' fills the image.

The money and the shirt and the motor: all gone. The affective charge of the sequence is out of proportion to the intrigue, the energy expended is useless, dissipative. Yet the desolation of the shot as it pulls away is poetic, rendered so through the play of scale (things within the frame and the shots themselves), stasis and movement, sounds, as the sounds of labour are replaced by music. The ragtime, at once suggesting a syncopated drive and melancholic lyricism, is suggestive of other worlds and times – saloons and dance halls, Texarcana and Chicago in the 1880s and

FIGURE 9.3 'parts of human bodies and parts of the machine joined in struggle and in a continuity as though the machine and bodies inhabit the same universe of thingy solidity and resistance.' *Killer of Sheep*, 1977

90s, silent comedy. The improvisational spirit of ragtime retroactively infuses the entire motor sequence. There is a sense of loss, but also of something closer to Lyotard's 'blissful intensities': the pleasure to be derived in watching the match burn. Moving the motor is work, labour, but also inflected by the spirit of play, of syncopation, or at least by the impulse to interrupt the flow of the assembly line, to throw a spanner in the works, to see how the gesture unfolds.

Perhaps we think it has unfolded, that the episode has been finalised. But no, it unfolds – that is to say, transforms – in the transition to the next episode. As the screen fades to black so the ragtime fades out. And then, on a breath-taking cut, a screech, a cacophony of jubilant shrieks and hollers as children leap above us across open space, from one rooftop to another.

The motor-moving falls between the world of capitalist exchange, of work, the economy of expenditure and exchange and return, and the world of non-productive labour, labour expended in leisure time, labour expended in order to produce (despite the lack of 'work' as income) the pleasures of leisure. In the juxtaposition of the motor and the rooftop sequence a complication occurs: the world of work bleeds into the world of leisure, and the adult world and the world of children are superimposed abrasively rather than sentimentally. The exhilaration of the leaping bodies, intensified by the cutting in on the sound track of Fay Adams singing 'Shake a Hand' (which topped the Rhythm and Blues charts for ten weeks in 1953), is tempered by the stone-throwing game which ensues, in which one boy is hurt and cries, clutching his wrist in pain, scrunching up his skinny body. This segues into a scene in which two small children watch as their mother threatens their father with a gun. Lyotard, of course, is not concerned with a sentimental opposition between adults and children (or work and play), but nevertheless he poses an opposition that while useful and vivid is also a heuristic conceit. *Killer of Sheep*, we might say, runs with the conceit but unfolds it, folds it back in on itself, produces rhymes and moments of dissonance, explosions and slow burns.

In the blissful intensity of bodies leaping above us (even as we involuntarily crane our necks we feel propelled through space), swept up by the expansive throatiness of Fay Adams' voice, we forget how the film opens, with a brutal command to a young boy from his father: 'Be a Man!'; and we forget the falsetto words of Phil Collins in 'Reasons': *Child is born with a heart of gold/The way of the world makes his heart grow cold oh yeh*. Then, the memories seep back into consciousness. Rather than identifying the oppositions (thematically) or poles (of cinematic form) *Killer of Sheep* proffers hieroglyphic notes as the pulsating points in a mosaic.

As a hieroglyph, the motor resonates within the film. Walter Jacobs sings about the mean old world in which he finds himself, finds himself blue, and so, he says, he's going to pack his things and leave. But the inhabitants of *Killer of Sheep* are going nowhere. There are many allusions in the film to the great migration, to a prior mobility of African Americans which is contrasted to the paralysis of the present, the failure of all systems of transport that might connect the inhabitants to a wider world – bikes, trains, cars. The broken and dilapidated and dying cars and motors, the

disposable bicycles, all serve to circumscribe the neighbourhood, to close down opportunities, to put the lid on things as on a pressure cooker.

Yet that pressure can be punctured, dissipated, and desolation can provide a pretext for improvising new scenarios. The motor episode is echoed later, in the sardonic humour of the failed trip to the races. The car gets a flat, everyone gets out and looks at it, the mood is one of resignation and futility. But then the despondency is galvanised, flipped into a moment of hilarity and exhilaration, in Bracy's riff:

> I told you to keep a spare but you're a square. I'm out here singing the blues, got my money on a horse that cannot lose, and you're on a flat. You are a square. Now how are we going to this there.

Although they don't get to the races it's still an outing, they improvise, move on. The motor, iridescent with multiple meanings, is a hieroglyph in the sense of connecting everyday life to history. And so are the sheep.

Sheep that cast deep shadows on the ordinary process of living

> *Long ago I was married to a vegetarian. He didn't mind meat, though, as a thing. He would buy it and cut it up and clean the knives and cutting boards and prepare the meat and put it in the oven. While my back was turned. Once he cut himself, screamed, I turned and when I saw what I saw, fainted, fell in a heap across the table squashing and smearing the meat. Other people who lived in the house took him to the emergency room. He came home with stitches and bandages, the wound hidden. He was nonchalant, tossing jokes around the kitchen, just as he tossed knives, flipped jokes about his cutting edge cuisine. I could only feel the fat cold stickiness of the blood, I could feel it as a deep shame, seeping out of the brown paper, staining the kitchen like a memory.*

The cinema is not exclusively human.

The abattoir episodes combine documentary scrutiny (they were filmed in an actual abattoir in LA) with an often lyrical rendering. There is no dialogue, ambient factory noise and music structure the sound track, and images and sound are combined to produce both horror and elegiac moodiness.

It is hard to watch these episodes. There are a lot, they pile up like snow, I hide my head under the avalanche. I do not have the stomach for it. The sheep, the men, the gestures that connect them: phenomena overwhelm consciousness. Subjective memories of the slaughter yard on the farm are superimposed on the screen images. I feel like I am going to pass out.

The things Stan interacts with in the slaughter house episodes are animal-things, half alive and half dead, or perhaps we should say alive for half the time and dead for the other half. He is a human-thing. The abattoir is also a factory, the sheep are killed and then assembled, like the parts of a motor, into consumable items, corpses turned into meat. Here the gestural regime is routinised, there is less room for improvisation than in the street, say, movement is subsumed by economy. But the movement of

the film, the way these elements are orchestrated, the way sensory affect and somatic knowledge are generated, is different. A gap opens up between the profilmic event and the cinematic articulation.

The cinema does not simply show but has the capacity to add something: 'it insists on rendering visible what is commonly drowned in agitation' and keeps us from shutting our eyes to 'the blind drive of things' (Kracauer 1997: 8). Franju's slaughter-house film, *Le Sang Des Bêtes* (1949, France), 'casts deep shadows on the ordinary process of living' (Kracauer 1997: 308) and manifests a 'dread of the abyss that is everyday life' (Kracauer 1997: 310).

I feel like I am going to pass out. But as I slowly, over rather a long time, acclimatise to the images I realise that they are more like interludes (six) than episodes, and that what matters is the transitions. They are akin to acoustic verses, dreamscapes through which sensations and ideas rise to the surface, come into consciousness.

1: occurs immediately after the teacup scene in the kitchen which ends on a close-up of Bracy's hand holding a wrist watch. Time: killing time, killing sheep. A moment before the cut music begins and continues through the interlude. A montage of fragments: water, hosing, steam, helmeted men carrying trays to catch the carcass drips, pushing wheelbarrows of innards, washing hands. Swish pans. Stan, in medium long shot, takes off and hangs up his apron, puts on his helmet and exits. Slowly the door closes. Cut. On the visual cut (to a series of long shots of the exterior of the meat factory) the music also cuts out, to be replaced by the sound of children's voices singing 'Nick nack paddy whack give a dog a bone'. The music in the factory is from William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony*, beginning with a magisterial adagio it soon riffs on New Orleans jazz and swing.

2: is ushered in by a long shot of a group of boys sitting on a wall, facing us, throwing stones. On the soundtrack Robeson asks 'What is America to me?' Cut image, cut music: into close ups of hooks, spikes, hands lifting and hanging, drying and polishing. A whirring sound, the clanking of metal. Hands sharpening knives. Goat heads crowding into the foreground. Music fades in – piano music – elegiac, and Robeson singing 'Going Home', a hymn about preparing for death. Sheep enter the frame, following the goats, as sheep are supposed to do. These are the Judas goats, used to lead the sheep to their slaughter. The verse ends, the piano music fades out and there is a cut to the exterior of Stan's house, a car pulls up, two spivvy hoods get out and bound up to the door, shouting out to Stan, 'Can you come out and play, man?'

3: is short, a single piercing note, between two melodic structures. A close up on a woman's hands lifting and caressing a pair of children's shoes. And then in a medium long shot she cradles the shoes and speaks: 'cleaning red catfish with white rum' accompanied softly by Dvořák. The camera holds for a fraction on the empty silent room, an empty window looking out onto nothing. The music continues over sheep massed, jostling, back lit. They look back at us. Cut to a

long shot of kids, some with bikes, jostling on a hillside alley. After the cut the music fades out, street sounds returning.

4: Three kids are riding on one bike, crash, leap to their feet without a pause and run. Over the yapping dogs and other street sounds, as the camera moves with the running kids, over the blurring we hear a shout: 'Keep running!' The air bristles with danger and fun and velocity. Cut into a shot of blurred bodies moving: carcasses hanging upside down, swinging. A sensation of being suspended, swinging, emptied out. Street sounds continue over the sheep, the sound of running feet dominating, merging into the sounds of the slaughter house: voices, clanking, shovels scraping, hosing. Walter Jacobs' voice sings 'This is a mean old world' over men skinning the carcasses, stripping the wool off in a single move, tying the hooves with chains. They hang there, on hooks, the carcasses, their empty woolly skins falling away beneath them, like ghostly reflections, cruel mimetic parodies of sheepness. The corpse and its skin, two things, joined in space by a hoof. Sheep heads impaled on a spike, human hands stripping the flesh, cleaning to the bone. Cut to live sheep baaing in an exterior yard, jostling into the camera, stampeding. The screen fills with dust. Through the dust: barbed wire strung across the back fence over which we hear a child's voice counting. Cut to kids doing head stands, and counting, on Stan's porch. He comes home from work, knocks them down off-handedly as he passes. An ice-cream cart tinkles, off-screen, in the neighbourhood.

5: is brief, almost silent, except for the tinkle of a bell. The sad sad face of the little girl hanging out washing dissolves into a blurred furry image. The camera reframes and focuses, the furriness comes into view as a goat that looks out of the frame, seems to look at us. Cut to a stationary car in the street, some guys working on it, kids playing close by on a bike with an American flag.

6: The final interlude is also the film's finale. There is a dissolve – from a young woman gesturing over her flat stomach, a curved caress of her hand, tracing through the air the shape of a rounded pregnant belly, an anticipatory gesture – to the abattoir, to the back of Stan's head as he goes about his work. The music of 'This Bitter Life' is faded in over the pregnant gesture and continues through the sheep episode. Hanging bodies twitch, hooves swing, blood drips, the camera moves, blurring woolliness and human faces. Sheep come towards us, crowded, cramming the frame. Stan uses his shirt to shoo them on, into a pen. Cut to black and then as the cast list comes up Dinah Washington muses about this bitter life which, after all, might not be so bitter.

Most commentaries on the film view the sheep as allegorical. But no, I think not. The sheep oscillate between being living creatures and dead inert things and this is what the horror is. It is not just that it is a dehumanising job but that Stan takes on, through his work-a-day gestures, through contagion almost, this sense of inertia, of being between a thing and a living being. It is then about a correlative affinity. The existential angst of Stan is not simply *caused* by his job, but the sheep are a

materialisation of his anomie as a somatic experience. Stan has the sensation of not existing, he feels his sense of existence leaking away.

This sensation is also evoked by Coetzee in the final pages of *Disgraced*:

> Something happens in this room, something unmentionable: here the soul is yanked out of the body; briefly it hangs about in the air, twisting and contorting; then it is sucked away and is gone. It will be beyond him [the dog], this room that is not a room but a hole where one leaks out of existence.
>
> *(Coetzee 1999: 219)*

The sheep in *Killer of Sheep* are not themselves subjectivised, despite the air of intense melancholy that suffuses these interludes. We are asked to bear witness to the work of killing, of transforming living flesh into a consumer product, and this is hard to stomach. But it is work. The mood of poetic melancholy that attaches to both the sheep and to the killer of sheep is pivotal in the articulation of the sheep as something other than an anthropomorphic projection, and as signifying something other than a subjective emotional state.

Burnett riffs on melancholy, like a blues player, less to characterise an individual or an animal or a thing than to chart out the contours of that area which borders on the world of daily life. Emptied of sensation and desire the melancholy subject or dejected individual 'is likely to lose himself in the incidental configurations of his environment, absorbing them with a disinterested intensity' (Kracauer 1997: 17). This identification with the world of things opens up the possibility of melancholy as a prerequisite for perceptual awakening. Waiting and killing (time, sheep) privilege the episodic, a structure through which the affective charge can be transferred to the viewer: waiting for connections to be made and improvisations to unfold new perceptions.

I could not look at first, all I could apprehend was the horror. But as I got to watch more I began to hear and see the sheep interludes as a refrain, a recurring motif intricately structured into a larger composition. The horror is not big H horror, just as the political is not big P political; rather it is a materialisation of that 'dread of the abyss that is everyday life'. *Killer of Sheep* renders visible the harshness of daily living for some people that the mainstream white cinema normally never reveals. The work of killing sheep is located as work, as one activity among many others, leisure time included, that describes this community. The slaughter house is located within the community, is contiguous with the railway yard where the children play and improvise games with the debris they find there. Counting, keeping time, killing time, improvising on a simple structure.

The motor and the sheep: hieroglyphs, pulsating points in a work of pointillism or a mosaic.

The house I live in

> *The chopping block in the back yard, an axe slicing through the air, feathers floating, lambs' wool tossed on the ground like a worn coat, bloody, dusty, covered in flies. Images are piled on top of*

> *one another and she is buried as if under a layer of snow. She experiences herself leaking out of existence, she feels like the butcher's boy draining away, into a black hole. Her eyes close against the spinning barrage.*

The cinema is the house I live in, an imaginary house with real affects and effects, a place that both houses and provokes memories.

> The transparent continuum that clings to the real takes its form, the bandages that preserve for us the mummy of reality, its still living corpse, its eternal presentness: that which allows us to see and protects us from what is seen: *The screen*.
>
> *(Daney 2002: 34)*

Now, through the dusty landscape of south central LA, she looks back at that child. That child who now is not me. Memories emerge in writing but as they do so they take on a fictional form and do not seem mine. I still experience the sensations of that child; when I see the sheep being killed I can't look, I feel on the verge of passing out. But I also look back on that child and see her playing in the dust, lighting matches, passing out while the work gets done. Someone on the farm had to do the work of killing animals. It wasn't the father, the colonial farmer himself, nor was it the child. The child's identification with the butcher's boy is surely false, just as she would have only 'sensed' the blood leaking from raw meat into the brown paper wrapping in which it is all trussed up; she would not have 'thought' about it in relation to a more generalised violence palpable in colonial daily life, a sensation always in the air like dust. Nor would she have apprehended it as an image, one that perhaps allows fragments to be refigured, a crystallisation of the social world into a mosaic-like history. A bloody hieroglyph that links South Central LA and colonial Rhodesia.

Film can be described, so Kracauer thought, as an 'anteroom' (along with photography and history) because it does not 'hover above' the phenomenal world but remains within the orbit of everyday lived experience. Rather than conveying ultimate truths like philosophy or the traditional arts, films share their inherently provisional character with the material they record, explore and penetrate. '[T]hey help us to think through things, not above them' (Kracauer 1969: 192).

In responding to the rubric of this book, in thinking about the language and style of film criticism, I have chosen to pursue the challenge posed for me by *Killer of Sheep*: how to think through things via attention to the affective force of the film, how to chart the coming into consciousness of ideas and images provoked by the film, and how to register some of the ways movies move, sensations and ideas changing as they enter into writing.

This bitter life may not be so bitter after all

Life in Watts in the mid seventies, as depicted in *Killer of Sheep*, is undoubtedly bitter but the life of the neighbourhood is redeemed by the film itself, by the way the film

grasps the forces of history through cinematic spatialisation, through the evocation of place as a spatialisation of time.

Burnett grapples with the recalcitrant motor that is history, but where Stan and Gene have to drive away and leave their broken burden on the pavement, Burnett fashions a mosaic. To paraphrase Brecht, a photo of a meat factory cannot describe capitalism or the 'meatiness' of daily life. But film, with its affinity for the flow of life, its ability to render the quotidian improvisations, its capacity for materialisation, can perhaps touch us in unpredictable ways, allow us to see and hear anew.

Notes

1 The pretext to write about this film initially came in the form of an invitation from Monash University to participate in the 'Provisional Insight: Siegfried Kracauer in the 21st Century' Colloquium, 2008. Thanks to Deane Williams and Tara Forrest. Thanks also to Andrew Klevan and Alex Clayton for encouraging me to recast the paper and for pressing me to think about the intersection of writing, reading and the visual field.
2 James adopts a rather sanctimonious attitude towards what he sees as the politically anaemic humanist realism of the film, but the film is redeemed, for him, by the music, and his article charts the musical resonances with considerable insight.
3 Kracauer attributes the notion of 'historical sensation' to Isaiah Berlin.
4 Thanks to Adrian Martin for reminding me of this article.

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10

LA CAMÉRA-STYLO

Notes on video criticism and cinephilia

Christian Keathley

In his 1975 essay 'The Unattainable Text' – written immediately in advance of the video revolution that enabled cinephiles everywhere to possess film libraries of their own – Raymond Bellour speculated about that day in the future when people could own movies in the same way that they own books and records. Considering the implications of such ownership of movies for cinema scholarship, Bellour wrote, '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 the dispossession of the object' (Bellour 2000: 21).

That future Bellour imagined has been with us for more than three decades, and while much attention has been given to the changes that the existence of home video has had on film style,[1] there has only recently been a consideration of the ways that ownership and re-viewability of movies is changing – or has the potential to change – film criticism. In *Death 24x a Second*, Laura Mulvey describes how movies on DVD – which offer features like freeze frame, scan, slow motion, as well as random access of scenes and infinite replayability – 'have opened up new ways of seeing old movies' (Mulvey 2006: 8), ways that Bellour in 1975 could not have imagined. A key issue for Mulvey in this development is the concept of 'delay', which for her refers both to 'slowing down the flow of the film' and to 'the delay in time during which some detail has lain dormant, as it were, waiting to be noticed' (Mulvey 2006: 8). She explains:

> In film theory and criticism, delay is the essential process behind textual analysis. The flow of a scene is halted and extracted from the wider flow of narrative development; the scene is broken down into shots and selected frames and further subject to delay, to repetition and return. In the course of this process, hitherto unexpected meanings can be found hidden in the sequence, as

> it were, deferred to the point of time in the future when the critic's desire may unearth them. With the spread of digital technologies, this kind of fragmentation of film has become easier to put into practice. In this context, textual analysis ceases to be a restricted academic practice and returns, perhaps, to its origins as a work of cinephilia, of love of the cinema.
>
> *(Mulvey 2006: 144)*

Mulvey's optimism about this new way of consuming movies and what it affords is clear: 'New ways of consuming old movies on electronic and digital technologies,' she wrote, 'should bring about a "reinvention" of textual analysis and a new wave of cinephilia' (160). But has the 'reinvention' Mulvey anticipates actually occurred? Well, yes and no. Or rather, a change is underway. While much current film criticism, both academic and mainstream, looks and reads like such writing always has, some is starting to look – and sound – very different. This essay is something of a progress report on how the language and style of film criticism are being changed in an era whose multi-media capabilities have expanded exponentially beyond what they were a generation ago.

Thanks to another technology – the internet – film criticism in most quarters has been revitalised in the past decade or so. Due to the economic demands of print publication and the concomitant rising cost of subscriptions, many print journals have moved on-line, a shift that has enabled them not only to survive, but to thrive. Mainstays like *Film Quarterly*, *Cineaste*, *Framework* and *Screen* now exist partly or exclusively through their websites or on-line through academic subscription services. In addition, a variety of new academic journals have emerged on-line, such as *Scope*, from the University of Nottingham.

Further, the distinction between scholarly and non-scholarly cinephile writing has become less steadfast than it had been in recent decades. A quick look back reminds us that, in the 1960s and 70s, we could distinguish between three broad kinds of critics and their readership: there were newspapers critics whose job was to speak to the broadest possible audience; at the other end of the spectrum were specialised academic journals; but in between were publications like *Film Comment*, *Sight and Sound*, *American Film* and *Take One*, which catered to the middle range of non-academic cinephiles, and inevitably drew readers from each of the other two domains. But in the 1980s, those magazines struggled and many, like *American Film* and *Take One*, folded. In the early 1980s, *Premiere* emerged as a magazine geared less for cinephiles than for mainstream movie fans, but even it could not survive in print form. The rich middle ground between academic writing and mainstream movie reviewing narrowed to very little.

But the internet has helped revive and broaden writing about film in this terrain. Through internet blogs, like the one maintained by Girish Shambu, both scholars and non-specialist cinephiles – all of whom have near equal access to cinema's history, thanks to DVD availability – can easily communicate and share their interests and passions, often in quite sophisticated discussions of film history, criticism and aesthetics. For example, in early 2010, Girish's blog featured a post alerting readers to

the online availability of a collection of film reviews that film director Tim Hunter (*River's Edge* [1986, US]) had written as undergraduate film critic for Harvard University's newspaper, the *Crimson*, in the mid-to-late 1960s. This post led to a lively online exchange about a number of topics: the relationship between Hunter's aesthetic at that time, as based on his reviews, and his later development as a filmmaker and a director of important television programmes, such as *Mad Men*; Hunter's response to certain key films of the period (e.g., *The Graduate*) in contrast to their general critical reception; and the repositioning of Hunter as one of the handful of America's critics-turned-filmmakers of his generation (along with the likes of Peter Bogdanovich and Paul Schrader).

Between these 'unofficial' cinephile blogs and 'official' on-line journals are publications like *Senses of Cinema* and *Rouge*, which are not strictly speaking academic, but that speak to academic as well as non-academic cinephiles, further bridging these two poles of critical discourse. Because much on-line film criticism takes for granted that its readership includes the non-academic film specialist as well as the academic, it is less jargon-ridden than in years past, while still maintaining a high degree of critical sophistication. Inevitably, the writing style and concerns of non-academics seem to be informing the discourse of scholars every bit as much as the reverse. For example, bloggers are deeply invested in the history of cinema, description of film style and aesthetic evaluation, and their concerns are influencing academic discourse. After several decades of scholarly writing that was wary of making assertions about aesthetic value, or that privileged theories over the individual films used for purposes of illustration, this renewed interest in close analysis in the service of evaluation is most refreshing, harkening back to the early days of cinephile criticism and early academic scholarship in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The emergence of DVD technology, the expansion of the internet and the emergence of a number of sophisticated cinephile bloggers has coincided with a revival in academic circles of the kind of 'expressive' criticism devoted to close reading and evaluation.[2] This kind of scholarship fits Mulvey's description, quoted above: 'textual analysis ceases to be a restricted academic practice and returns, perhaps, to its origins as a work of cinephilia, of love of the cinema'.

But along with DVD ownership, which facilitates close study of films, another key component in the re-emergence of close analysis that Mulvey describes is that the internet enables easier and cheaper incorporation of high-quality film stills and even short clips into critical writing – a capability that has furthered the careful and detailed critical analysis Mulvey describes. Instead of a reader relying on her own memory of a film under discussion – or on the accurate description and interpretation of the author – she can see for herself just how the scene looks, sounds, plays. Of course, the use of film stills in print publication was always possible, but it was also extremely costly, and subject to the availability of film prints. But the easy incorporation of stills and clips into analytical essays places new demands on film critics. The existence of an object (or part of it) alongside commentary on it now places film critics in a position that their literary and art historical counterparts have long lived with: the need to accurately describe and persuasively interpret an object that is equally and as immediately available to the reader as it is to the critic.

But while the availability of movies on DVD has radically extended our ability to study old films, and while the internet offers more outlets for publication of film criticism, the form that criticism takes – its rhetorical and presentational modes – is largely unchanged. Criticism is rendered primarily in the explanatory mode, offering interpretation, analysis, explication; the films function as objects of study that the guiding critical language will illuminate. In this respect, the 'reinvention' Mulvey imagines seems slight.

But elsewhere, it is quite profound. If we want to examine the changes to film criticism brought about by DVD availability, we must consider more fully the intersection of cinema, DVDs and other digital technologies – not just the internet, but also a variety of accessible and affordable software programs that enable sophisticated image and sound manipulation, such as iMovie and Final Cut Express. For beyond simply having access to movies on DVD, the full range of digital video technologies enables film scholars to *write* using the very materials that constitute their object of study: moving images and sounds. To paraphrase Jean-Luc Godard, film scholars can now answer images not only with words, but also with other images. The possibility of multi-media presentation of film criticism on the internet and elsewhere demands a mode of 'writing' that supplements analysis and explanation with a more expressive, poetical discourse. Godard's own monumental video essay, *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1997–98, France), works precisely this ground. Indeed, as this work makes clear, while multi-media technologies provoke a new way of thinking about film, they also offer a new way of conducting and presenting film research. What that kind of critical 'writing' – still in the process of being invented – looks and sounds like marks a dramatic broadening in our understanding of what constitutes the meaning of such terms as criticism and scholarship, supplementing them with features that resemble art production.

In many ways, these technological advances and the opportunities they offer – as well as the overlap of the traditionally discrete realms of criticism and production – return us to the moment described over fifty years ago by Alexandre Astruc in his manifesto, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-stylo*'. 'The cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression,' Astruc wrote, 'a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary novel or essay. That is why I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen)' (Astruc 1968: 13). This declaration stimulated a new generation of filmmakers – notably, those of the French New Wave – to an unprecedented level of creative work, expanding not only on cinema's already established analogy with the novel, but also exploring Astruc's other possibility – the essay. But now, over fifty years later, due to developments in digital technology, film scholars also find themselves in a position to respond to Astruc's call – using new technologies to invent new audio-visual critical forms.

Here is where the reinvention Mulvey anticipates is beginning to occur, and the continuum of critical work thus produced ranges from the analytical and explanatory to the more poetical and expressive. The internet supports this practice, for while it

not only allows traditional print-style journals to survive, maintaining the language and style with which scholars are familiar, its multi-media presentational capabilities also dramatically expand the possibilities for what could constitute film criticism. While the possibility of multi-media composition of critical work is relevant to every discipline, its creation is especially relevant for scholars whose very object of study consists of moving images and sounds.

The most common form of multi-media film criticism at present is the video essay – short critical essays on a given film or filmmaker, typically read in voice-over by the author and supplemented with carefully chosen and organised film clips. The film historian Tag Gallagher, for example, has produced video essays on Max Ophüls's *Madame de …* (1953, France/Italy) and another on Roberto Rossellini's *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* (1966, France), both available on the Criterion Collection releases of those films. In many respects, this work resembles the commentary track available on most DVDs, but there are some crucial differences. Here, the critic offers his commentary not over the whole of the film, but over a much shorter, carefully selected arrangement of clips; second, rather than simply lowering the audio track and having the critic's voice in its place, the essayist can carefully modulate both image and soundtrack to coordinate with his remarks; third, in contrast to the flowing, digressive monologues on many DVD commentary tracks, the critic's thoughts here are focused around select themes.

At present, cinephile bloggers seem to be the most routine producers of such work. The British scholar Catherine Grant (of Film Studies for Free), Kevin B. Lee (of Shooting Down Pictures) and Jim Emerson (of The Chicago *Sun-Times*) have produced video essays, but perhaps this form's most regular and accomplished practitioner is Matt Zoller Seitz (formerly of The House Next Door), who has composed several multi-part video essays for the Museum of the Moving Image's online magazine *Moving Image Source*, including 'The Substance of Style', a five-part video that exhaustively charts the various influences – cinematic, literary and otherwise – on the films of Wes Anderson.[3] In one respect, Seitz's essays function traditionally, with a thesis supported by examples, read in voice-over by the author. In the video, this 'written' component (indeed, it can be read as a stand-alone essay) is supplemented by a rich audio-visual mix, which is composed of a variety of clips taken from films by the director in question, routinely placed in juxtaposition to the influences under consideration. The arrangement and careful timing of multiple clips in the same frame, a key compositional strategy in the video essay on Wes Anderson, illuminate these influences most effectively. For while describing the similarities between a shot from *The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959, France) and one from *Bottle Rocket* (Wes Anderson, 1996, US) as a way to demonstrate Truffaut's influence on Anderson might be reasonably convincing if well written, viewing clips from the two films simultaneously makes the critical insight about influence much more persuasive.

Nevertheless, as fine as the work by the above-named video essayists is, these works are still very much language based. Or more correctly, we could say that each of the works remains comfortably within the explanatory mode, and it is language in

that mode (spoken and written) that guides it. Images and sounds – even when carefully and creatively manipulated in support of an argument – are subordinated to explanatory language. As Adrian Martin has noted in an on-line essay, tellingly titled 'A Voice Too Much':

> It is instructive to compare both DVD audio commentaries and video essays [like the ones described above] to what Jean-Luc Godard does in his massive *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. In fact, Godard has complained in an interview that he hates it when the voice – the law of the written/spoken text – dominates in a filmic 'essay': there is a lot of vocalising in Godard, but it is always displaced, decentred, at war with all the other elements of the work. It is not a voice which legislates or pontificates, which closes down meaning.
>
> *(Martin 2010)*

It is not just language that is at issue here, but the explanatory mode itself. As Adrian Martin notes, Godard's video uses language (both spoken and written), but it is one component among many, and these components are not unified into any explanatory discourse. Explanation vies with poetics in a collage of images and sounds, words and music, sometimes gaining the upper hand, sometimes losing it.

Against video essays offered in this explanatory mode, we can contrast works composed in a poetical register. These videos resist a commitment to the explanatory mode, allowing it to surface only intermittently, and they employ language sparingly, and even then as only one, unprivileged component. One example is Paul Malcolm's 'Notes Toward a Project on *Citizen Kane*',[4] an eight-minute video consisting of a montage of footage from Orson Welles' film (1941, US) that has been digitally manipulated in a variety of ways – through slow motion, freeze frames, multiple exposures and so forth. The images are carefully selected: Malcolm focuses especially on images of the young Charles playing in the snow outside his boyhood home, the smashing snow globe, the dark coldness of Xanadu, and at the video's mid-point, an aging Kane smashing Susan's bedroom. The piece reproduces little of the film's original sound – only three short lines of dialogue (Mrs Kane saying, 'I'll sign those papers now, Mr. Thatcher'; the young Charlie throwing snowballs and shouting, 'The Union forever!'; and Kane's 'Rosebud') and the diegetic noise of Kane smashing up Susan's bedroom at Xanadu – opting instead for a hypnotic, melancholy musical score by the Icelandic band Sigur Rós. In addition, Malcom lays over these images titles that alternate between his own lines of commentary and quotations from Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958), a lyrical meditation on the emotional power of the homes in which we live and are raised.

The subject of the video – the psychological effects of Kane's loss of his childhood home – is cued by the video's first title ('The house we were born in … is an embodiment of dreams … without it, man would be a dispersed being'), but this theme becomes clear only after an accumulation of images. Further, Sigur Rós's song lyrics are in 'Vonlenska', a non-literal language without fixed syntax, one focusing exclusively on the sounds of language – an apt choice given the video's (and the

film's) idealising of an imaginary, pre-symbolic world of plenitude and maternal union ('The Union forever') that is lost with young Charlie's removal from his home ('I'll sign those papers now, Mr. Thatcher'). But in Malcolm's work, the withholding, subordination or elimination of the explanatory register means we are asked first to experience the arrangement of images and sounds before we understand them. The video does not simply 'explicate' its theme, it seeks to perform it as well, to compose images and sounds in such a way that the emotional elements of haunted longing that mark Kane's character are felt as well as illuminated. Like much conceptual art, which possesses a critical component that requires deciphering, Malcolm's work invites an interpretation as much as it performs one. For example, in the images below, we see first an image that is taken from *Citizen Kane*'s boarding house scene, in which Charlie's mother transfers guardianship of her son to Mr. Thatcher; but Malcolm treats the image so that the cabin window through which we see Charlie playing happily in the snow is removed from its wall, abstracting and further intensifying the boy's (and our) experience of his separation from home. In the second image, Malcolm works a neat pun on the word 'dispersed': as the snow globe smashes and its contents are dispersed across the screen, so Charles Foster Kane becomes, especially in death, a dispersed figure, locatable in parts only through the inevitably incomplete accounts of others. The video effectively engages with the poetic potential of working with images and sounds, without totally abandoning the knowledge effect that we associate with the essay form.

FIGURE 10.1 'the cabin window … is removed from its wall, abstracting and further intensifying the boy's (and our) experience of his separation from home.' *Notes Toward a Project on Citizen Kane*

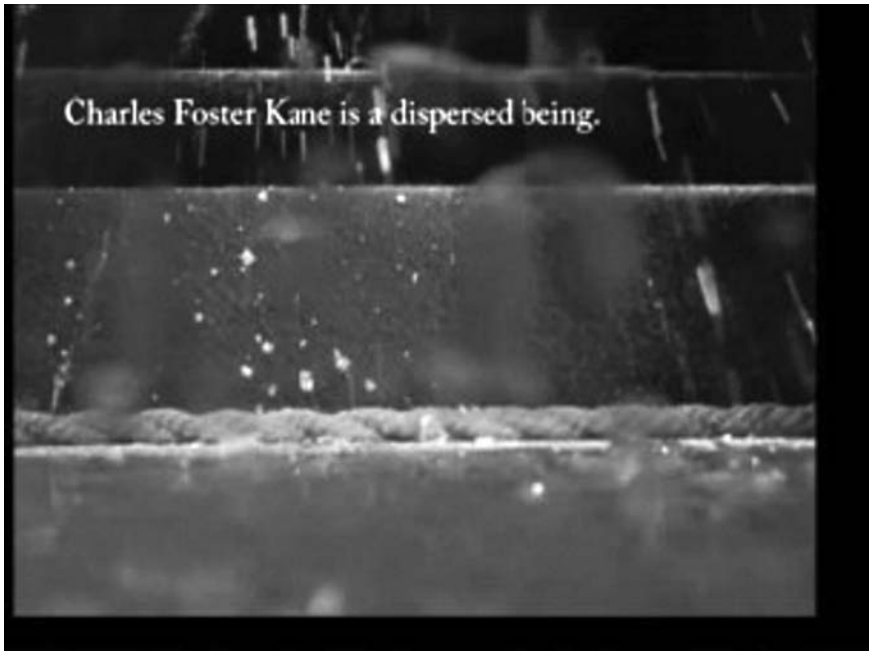

FIGURE 10.2 'as the snow globe smashes and its contents are dispersed across the screen, so Charles Foster Kane becomes, especially in death, a dispersed figure.' *Notes Toward a Project on Citizen Kane*

With these various examples, we can see two ends of a continuum. The video essays by Tag Gallagher and Matt Zoller Seitz are dominated by language, offering critical works that are understandable, but that ultimately do not fully engage with multi-media technologies and the rich audio-visual possibilities they offer to explore alternatives to the explanatory. Malcolm's work, by contrast, engages primarily with the poetical mode, subordinating language (written or spoken) and the explanatory to an accompanying role, and exploiting multi-media presentation to its fullest – but it risks an opacity that means potentially going unrecognised as criticism. There are clear advantages and drawbacks to each approach. Regardless of their position on this continuum, all the video essays described above testify to Victor Burgin's assertion that, beyond DVD technology, 'The subsequent arrival of digital video editing on "entry level" computers exponentially expanded the range of possibilities for dismantling and reconfiguring the once inviolable objects offered by narrative cinema' (Burgin 2004: 8). Indeed, it is this extraordinary combination – a simultaneous faithfulness to the object of study and an imaginative use of it – that marks the best video essays. Burgin has emphasised the way new technologies enable a creative critical use of films: 'control of a film by means of a VCR [or better still, a computer with a DVD player and a software editing program] allows such symptomatic freedoms as the *repetition* of a favorite sequence, or *fixation* upon an obsessional image' (Burgin 2004: 8) – precisely the kind of 'delay' Mulvey identified, but put to

especially imaginative use in the building of an expressive/critical composition. While all the works described above engage in some way with the *desire* of the critic/creator, those video essays born of some fixation on a favourite image or moment place that desire at the forefront, alongside and equal to – but not above – the film under consideration.[5] Burgin himself has produced such work, one that appropriately subordinates the explanatory register and is instead rendered primarily in a poetical mode. His *Listen to Britain* – originally a 2001 gallery installation piece based on a 1942 short (see below), but available on the Criterion DVD of *A Canterbury Tale* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1944, UK) – is a seven-minute video loop whose anchor is a single shot from Powell and Pressburger's film. Burgin describes in more detail the shot that inspired the work:

> A young woman in a light summer dress climbs a path onto the Downs above Canterbury. Emerging from a stand of trees she is suddenly confronted with a view of the cathedral. The screen frames her face in close-up as she seems to hear ancient sounds on the wind: jingling harnesses, pipes and lutes. She turns her head swiftly left and right, as if looking for the source of the sounds – which abruptly stop as the close-up cuts to a long shot of her alone and small in the bright expanse of grassland.
>
> *(Burgin 2004: 19–20)*

His fixation on this 'sequence-image' (his term) prompted him to want to make something with it. The piece he makes pulls into relief a tangle of related themes from the film, but it does so through a process of careful poetical arrangement rather than through direct explication. Understanding the richness of this work requires a careful description of Burgin's video and some background on the film's plot.

A Canterbury Tale follows three modern day 'pilgrims', each of whom is travelling to Canterbury: Sgt. Bob Johnson, an easygoing American soldier; Peter Gibbs, an English sergeant; and Alison Smith, a London recruit in the Women's Land Army. The trio meet and get stuck on their journey a short train stop away from Canterbury in the village of Chillingbourne, where they become involved in the mystery of the 'Glue Man', a figure who cloaks himself in the darkness of the blackout, sneaks up on unsuspecting young women, and pours glue in their hair. Though set in the then-present, the film begins with a brief prologue that shows Chaucer's pilgrims traversing the meadow above Chillingbourne that affords them a view of the cathedral. The shift from Chaucerian past to WWII present is effected by a match cut from a shot of a falcon soaring to a warplane flying overhead. It is to this same meadow – midway through the film, in the very moment that inspires Burgin's video – that Alison climbs, and at one point in her walk she pauses, perplexed, hearing in her mind the horses, laughter and happy music of Chaucer's pilgrims. Then, she hears a voice speak: 'Glorious, isn't it?' Alison turns and looks, but sees no one. 'Is anybody there?' she calls out. Then a man stands up – Mr. Colpeper, Chillingbourne's village squire – 'It's a real voice you heard. You're not dreaming.' Soon, the two are reclined in the tall grass of the meadow, engaged in conversation.

Burgin's short video is divided into four parts. The first part begins with the close-up shot of Alison listening, watching. This shot is followed by a present day black-and-white photograph of the woods surrounding the meadow, across which the camera pans, left to right. Following this, we see a series of colour video shots of the meadow, also taken in present day – tall grass, poppies, Queen Anne's Lace blowing in the gentle breeze. The first two images are unaccompanied by any sound, but the video shots are backed by the soundtrack music that is heard in the film as Alison crosses the meadow.

The second part consists of a series of titles – white text on a black background – accompanied by operatic singing. The titles read: 'American servicemen/in the village/cannot find/local girls/who will go out with them/At night/the Glue Man/emerges from shadows/pours glue on a girl's hair/then disappears'. The third section returns to the shot of Alison, then the black-and-white photo, and another colour video shot, over which we hear dialogue from the scene on the Downs between her and Colpeper. The final section again starts with the close-up of Alison followed by the black-and-white photo; then we again get a series of titles that cursorily describe the action of Burgin's selected scene: 'Landscape/Girl crosses frame walking uphill/Dissolve to view downhill/Long-shot Girl walking towards camera/Dissolve to woods Girl approaching camera/Girl stops Looks out of frame/Cut view of distant cathedral/cut Close-up of girl listening all around her'. This written description calls to mind Bazin's point about the dynamic between presence and absence in cinema – here, the text stands in for the film's absent sequence, which is present still, but only

FIGURE 10.3 'Alison listening, watching'. *Listen to Britain*, 2001/*A Canterbury Tale*, 1944

FIGURE 10.4 'a present day black-and-white photograph of the woods'. *Listen to Britain*, 2001

in Burgin's memory. The text also reminds us of the inevitable challenge critics face when attempting to describe in writing a cinematic sequence, especially one charged with such affect for a particular viewer. Burgin's reduction of description to the bare-bones of script language perhaps suggests that the attempt to do any more would result in a cascade of words that would nevertheless fail to capture what is for him the emotional power of the sequence.

Burgin's attachment to this individual sequence-image, one in which a woman feels the force of time across history, the events of the past alive in the present, prompts through 'imaginative association' the production in turn of another work that addresses a similar experience of time. Powell and Pressburger's film emphasises the importance of the past, and the changes wrought by passing time, first of all in the prologue with the Canterbury pilgrims, in which a voice-over intones, '600 years have passed. What would they see, Dan Chaucer and his goodly company today?' But this theme finds expression also in the figure of Colpeper, the steward of Chillingbourne's past, offering free lectures and slide presentations on the area's history to the soldiers billeted there. The offices of his Colpeper Institute are marked with a plaque featuring a quotation from another literary figure of England's past, Dryden: 'Not heaven itself upon the past has power/But what has been has been and I have had my hour'.

This moment of Alison on Chilman's Downs calls up the past in two ways: first in her sensing and hearing the presence of the Canterbury pilgrims; and second, in her

recollection of her former fiancé, the time they spent there, and the happiness they thought was ahead for them in spending their lives together. For Burgin, the past is called up in his own experience of being at the place where this scene was filmed:

> When, in 2001, I returned to England after thirteen years in the United States, I was invited to make a new video work to be shown at an arts center in Bristol. The Britain to which I returned after 'September 11' felt itself under siege for the first time in sixty years. Traveling to Bristol by train from London, looking out at some of the most pleasant countryside in England, I recalled *Listen to Britain*, a twenty-minute black-and-white short by Humphrey Jennings, produced by the Crown Film Unit in 1942, when the British Isles seemed imminently at risk of invasion, and that begins with a similarly pastoral scene. My recollection of this short film in turn led me to think of a short sequence from [*A Canterbury Tale*], … which again exiles war beyond the frame of an essentially rural idyll.[6]

Prompted by these memories, Burgin produces a work that highlights the way that cinema functions as an especially potent intermediary with history, a technology and an art capable of making the traces of the past felt powerfully in the present, in much the same way that Alison feels the force of the past on her visit to the Downs. This force is in cinema's DNA, for as André Bazin articulated it, film's power comes not just from what is seen, but from our understanding that what we see on screen is a trace of what once was present, but is now absent. The here-and-now and the there-and-then are held in dynamic tension as we see and feel the past before us in the present.[7] Burgin's use of the black-and-white still photo and the high quality video in the first section of his piece extends the link between those two media – one older, one newer – and the movies.

The role of film as a record and protector of cultural tradition is also cued in Burgin's title, which it borrows from Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAllister's masterwork of poetical documentary, *Listen to Britain* (1942, UK), a film that, like *A Canterbury Tale*, begins with scenes of ordinary rural life coexisting with the war-planes that fly overhead. In a beautifully dense montage, *Listen to Britain* celebrates (without dependence on a guiding narration) the honour and dignity with which, during the worst years of the war, the British both nourished and gained enrichment from the full range of their cultural treasures and activities – the classical concert, the vaudeville house, the big band dance. With their valuing of English culture and history, all three of these films – the Powell/Pressburger, the Jennings/McAllister and the Burgin – call to mind the anecdote that someone once suggested to Winston Churchill that the government cut budgets to arts and cultural programmes as a wartime sacrifice. The PM responded incredulously, 'What do you think we're fighting for?'

Just as Alison is a visitor ready to hear the sounds of the pilgrims on Chilman's Downs, Burgin is a viewer ready to feel the presence of the past erupt with special force in the midst of a film. As Mulvey describes it, in such encounters,

> The time of the film's original moment of registration can suddenly burst through its narrative time. … The now-ness of story time gives way to the then-ness of the time when the movie was made and its images take on social, cultural or historical significance, reaching out into its surrounding world.
>
> *(Mulvey 2006: 30–31)*

Burgin's descriptive texts, which appear in the second and fourth sections of his video, highlight this tension between the film narrative in the present, and the sudden bursting forth of an image-sequence that insists on itself as a record of the past. The first text describes the oddest, most surreal thread of the film's storyline – the mystery of the Glue Man – while the text in the fourth section describes the sequence of shots that is the moment of eruption for Burgin, as Alison listens and looks around her. Juxtaposing the two doesn't so much set one against the other as show their interdependence, for each relies on the other for its force: without the power of the documentary image, film's realism would be compromised; without the structuring narrative that seeks to contain it, the image of the past could not burst forth with such excessive effectiveness.

With Burgin's video, the chance is even greater than with Malcolm's that the work will not be understood as criticism, partly due to its intended site of presentation: the museum gallery. Here again, as with much conceptual art, the work has a critical component, but it is not explicitly articulated; instead, it is performed. With this move, Burgin's work appears as an audio-visual version of the cinephilia-inspired criticism produced in the 1950s by the young critics at *Cahiers du Cinéma*. As Paul Willemen has explained,

> If you read the early *Cahiers* stuff that Truffaut and Godard were writing, you see that they were responding to films. … What they were writing at that time was a highly impressionistic account; in T. S. Eliot's terms, an 'evocative equivalent' of moments which, to them, were privileged moments of the film. These are moments which, when encountered in a film, spark something which then produces the energy and the desire to write.
>
> *(Willemen 1994: 235)*

Indeed, it is the manifest engagement with a cinephilic experience that marks Malcolm's and especially Burgin's work. While there is surely no question about Gallagher's or Seitz's love of cinema, their video essays keep that emotion in reserve (as does most film scholarship), while Malcolm's and especially Burgin's display it openly as the source of their 'desire to write'.

In a 2005 essay, Annette Kuhn explored the applicability of psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's notion of 'transitional phenomena' to a consideration of the aesthetic experience afforded by the cinema. In childhood, the most common transitional objects (e.g., a cherished stuffed animal or a favourite blanket) function powerfully as developmental figures. 'Importantly', Kuhn explains, 'transitional objects are precisely material objects, *things*: they have a physical existence, but at the same time they are

pressed into the service of an inner reality' (Kuhn 2005: 401). Though associated primarily with childhood development, the operation of transitional phenomena continues to function into adulthood. 'These [phenomena] are associated by Winnicott with culture in general, … including creative enjoyment of, or participation in, art and religion' (Kuhn 2005: 402). Given the often cited similarities between cinephilia and religion, the movie theatre and the church, it is no surprise that Kuhn should conclude, 'Cinema can be, or be like, transitional phenomena. This is the secret of cinephilia' (Kuhn 2005: 414). Burgin's *Listen to Britain* seems a work precisely of such engagement. In his video, the images explicitly reference the external reality that is Powell and Pressburger's film, but they also reference the 'inner reality' that Burgin has put them in service of – his own personal experience of a moment from the film, his associations to other films, and to the actual place where the film was set and shot. Burgin takes *A Canterbury Tale* and makes something with it – something that both respects and transforms its source of inspiration.

With new technologies of film viewing and digital manipulation, the cinephilic impulse is revitalised and the 'desire to write' is both facilitated and transformed. As Mulvey explains, 'The cinema combines, perhaps more perfectly than any other medium, two human fascinations: one with the boundary between life and death and the other with the mechanical animation of the inanimate, particularly the human, figure' (Mulvey 2006: 11). Digital technologies intensify this experience, producing as a result the two kinds of spectator that emerged from delayed cinema: the 'pensive' spectator, who is 'engaged with reflection on the visibility of time in the cinema'; and the 'possessive' spectator, one who is, in the psychoanalytic sense, 'more fetishistically absorbed by the human body' (Mulvey 2006: 11). As Burgin's work shows, technologies of multi-media production enable the intermingling and uniting of these two sensibilities through a new kind of 'critical writing', one in which 'film material [is] literally detached from its original site to become part of the creative material' of another work (Burgin 2004: 29), while still serving a critical function, one referring back to the primary work and illuminating something about it in the manner of conventional criticism. 'When broken down in this way', Mulvey writes, 'a movie's apparently horizontal structure mutates, so that symmetry or pattern can be detached from the narrative whole or a privileged moment can suddenly take on the heightened quality of a tableau' (Mulvey 2006: 28). The focus on and isolation of an individual moment, the delay in the film's flow, acts as a '"conduit", in Kracauer's phrase, that then flows into multiple channels from personal memory to textual analysis to historical research, opening up the past for a specifically cinematic excavation' (Mulvey 2006: 26).

Explaining his treatment of this 'sequence-image', Burgin references the alternatives identified long ago by Roland Barthes. In the concluding essay of his *Mythologies* collection, Barthes described 'two equally extreme' critical methods:

> Either posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize; or conversely, to posit a reality which is *ultimately* impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case, poeticize. … We constantly drift between the object and its

> demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified.
>
> *(Barthes 1972: 158–59)*

Film studies has long been almost wholly dominated by the former critical method, one in which the critic produces, through the explanatory mode, some knowledge about the film at hand. But the incorporation of images into the explanatory text – especially moving images and sounds – demands an acknowledgement that such images, themselves quite mysterious and poetic, do not always willingly subordinate themselves to the critical language that would seek to control them. But if the goal is still the production of some knowledge, the challenge for the 'digital film critic' is to situate herself somewhere in the middle of these alternatives, borrowing the explanatory authority of one and the poetical power of the other. At this moment, the question of how to successfully produce film criticism and scholarship in a multimedia form is one that film scholars should take seriously and engage with actively. Such engagement also implies the creation of pedagogical environments to support such work – both in teaching and in research – and peer reviewed venues of publication that would offer professional validation. What the video essays described above highlight so vividly is that digital technologies that enable the combination of images, sounds and written text invite us not just to move critical discussion into a new presentational context, but to re-imagine the very relationship between a cinematic object of study and critical commentary about it.

Notes

1 To take just one example, see Eidsvik (1999).
2 See, for example, Gibbs and Pye (2005); Gibbs (2002); Klevan (2005); Thomas (2001); and Orpen (2003).
3 Available at: www.movingimagesource.us/articles/the-substance-of-style-pt-1-20090330 (accessed 23 August 2010).
4 Available at: www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring08_NotesTowardsAProject.html (accessed 23 August 2010).
5 I have written about the long tradition in film criticism of precisely this kind of fetishistic attachment to isolated moments in films (see Keathley 2006). For more examples of conceptual art about the cinematic experience, see Guldemond (1999) and Ferguson (1996).
6 These artist's notes are included in the booklet for the Criterion release of *A Canterbury Tale*.
7 The preferred translation of Bazin is the volume of *What is Cinema?* published in 2009 by caboose (www.caboosebooks.net/). For a thorough discussion of Bazin's ideas, see Andrew (2010).

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