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Aesthetic Economies: The Expressive and the Excessive

What is involved in film style – or, to put it another way, what constitutes the aesthetics of the cinematic medium? What are the elements that comprise the stylistic ensemble of any given film, or of film as a medium in general? The basic inventory of stylistic elements in cinema can be uncontroversially listed: properties of the image (*mise en scène*, here including the pictorial elements of camera framing and production design); properties of the soundtrack; acting performance; and editing. More difficult is the task of deciding on the aesthetic *economy* of these elements in relation to each other, and to their narrative and thematic contexts; as well as in relation to their intended or actual effect on the cinema spectator. Aesthetic economy, a concept overlooked in much film studies, is the central subject of this chapter.

If we look at the history of aesthetic analysis of cinema since the 1950s, two broad, influential schools can be discerned, each of which posits its own preferred economy of how films work: the classical and the post-structural, which I call, respectively, the *expressive* and the *excessive*.

Style and subject

The academic study of cinema, in its relatively brief history, has been marked by a seismic changeover between a classical aesthetics, on one hand, and the various modernist and postmodernist movements that have followed and contested it, on the other – in particular, the intellectual movement that can loosely be described as poststructuralism. In public commentary and reflection on cinema, one can date this changeover fairly precisely around the mid-1960s, once the various ‘new cinema’ movements around the globe had spread the modernist innovations wrought by the Nouvelle Vague in France and post neorealist filmmakers

in Italy such as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Michelangelo Antonioni during the early years of the decade.

Although the description of exactly what classical cinema might once have been, or still is today, is the subject of ongoing debate (see Britton, 2009; Hansen, 1999), there is little doubt that a classical aesthetics looks for and favours films that can be construed as organic, coherent, meaningful, controlled art. (I make no distinction here between so-called art cinema and commercial/entertainment cinema – both are, or can be, cinematic art.) And world cinema has no shortage of films that can be profitably approached in this classical way, from the highly professionalised studio films made in America during the 1940s and 1950s, through to the lush, big-budget, costume drama productions made in Mainland China since the 1980s – indeed, two adaptations of Stefan Zweig's novella *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, directed first in America by Max Ophüls in 1948 and then in China by Xu Jinglei in 2004, could serve as rhetorical markers of this tradition and its endurance.

As a tradition in film criticism and analysis, classicism has many tributaries and diverse practitioners. Without making fine distinctions here, I will simply point to a range of names, beyond those I have already mentioned who are associated with *Movie* or *Positif*: these would include George Wilson, Dudley Andrew, Kathleen Murphy, Peter Lehman and William Luhr, Yvette Bíró, J. P. Telotte, Jacques Lourcelles, Sylvia Lawson, Jean-Loup Bourget, Matt Zoller Seitz and Elise Domenach.

Classical aesthetics rests upon a particular proposition (explicit or implicit) about the ideal economy or interrelationship between the various elements of filmic style – and, even more determiningly, the relation of style to subject or story. (For reasons that will become clear, I prefer using the couplet of style and subject to the more popularly known, but also irreparably abused, form and content.) In essence, according to classicism, style exists to *serve* the subject or story. This is an expressive economy: style expresses subject. As Roland Barthes (who was severely critical of this mode of economy) once put it, where the classical artist proceeds from signified to signifier in order to find the best way to convey an idea, feeling or situation – going from ‘content to form, from idea to text, from passion to expression’ (Barthes, 1974, pp. 173–74) – the analyst proceeds from the signifier back to the signified, tracking the intended or achieved meaning. (Barthes, true to his poststructural mood, drolly added that this makes the artist a god, and the critic a priest deciphering the writing of that god.)

Crucial to this process within the classical system is each film’s creation of its own fictional world, its particular reality (however stylised

or surreal) which acts as a mirror (reassuring or critical) of our own. Dramatic illusion matters not so much for itself (it is not a matter of fooling or hypnotising the spectator into accepting a piece of trickery) as for the *mimetic metaphor* it can offer viewers. (For a theory of this in relation to the general realm of fiction and art, see Paul Ricoeur, 1977.) The fictional world becomes a dramatisation and embodiment of a perspective (the perspective of the storyteller, however we wish to construe that narrative agent – as the individual auteur-director or something more collective or abstract) particular to each film. This symbolic world activates (in the words of Andrew Britton, 2009, p. 323) ‘that possibility which is open to mimesis of constructing critical metaphorical models of reality’.

However, before it can build and deliver a symbolic charge, the fictional world must be, in the first place, a relatively stable, logical, integral, *coherent* construction with its own (largely implicit) laws or rules that maintain its functioning (see Eco, 1985; Perkins, 2005). In the practical business of filmmaking, a great deal of craft and energy goes into this basic business of creating and holding the illusion of a given fictional world, of establishing a sense of time and place.

The central anchor of classical cinema is the creation of a certain kind of filmic character or personage, what is popularly known as the *three-dimensional* type: a fictional being who is consistent and recognisable but evolving in the course of the narrative; a person with a conscious and unconscious psychology, with motivations that frequently must be discerned by an act of interpretation; a character brought into existence by the subtle, intricate work of the performing actor. It is a common sense assumption, held by many in the filmmaking industry – as well a vast majority of spectators – that film (or television), as a medium, is essentially stories about people, their actions and emotions. Like all common sense assumptions, this needs to be challenged and expanded – which is another aim of this book. But there can be no doubt, at the outset, that characterisation is a principal drive, and a major source of pleasure, behind every kind of classically informed or classically derived cinema.

With a world in place, a story in train and characters evolving, the classical film then gets down to its most intricate work – precisely, its moment-to-moment style. What does classical style serve? Above all, a *theme*, or (to be more precise) a thematic structure or pattern. It is facile (although a widespread reflex) to reduce themes in film to banal proverbs, truisms or messages (like ‘war is hell’ or ‘overcome your fear to become yourself’) – something that bad films tend to do, as well. But

theme – what Legrand calls *semanticity* – is what gives symbolic depth and weight to the basic building-blocks of story, character and fictional world.

I stress the moment-to-moment action of style in cinema because, just as a theme is not a mere statement, style (in the best classical cases) is not a mere coating (comprised of such strategies as a certain colour scheme, a moody score or fast editing) laid over the story. Style is what *articulates*, *modulates* and *develops* a thematic structure/pattern. And a theme – precisely as a living, mobile structure rather than an inert, reducible token or template – is more like a question (I think of it as the driving *semantic question* of a work) than a statement, thus creating a structure of multi-layered contrasts, comparisons and ongoing considerations that get weighed up in the course of a film. Hence the centrality, within classical aesthetics, of the devices of motif and rhyme – those patterning tropes which shape the articulation, modulation and development of a thematic structure. Correspondingly, within this aesthetic model, the elaboration of a method of *interpretation* is equally crucial: the uncovering, collecting, comparing, contrasting and building up of these tropes into a gradual, accumulative and finally overall reading.

The uncovering of thematic meaning in a film is sometimes mistaken (particularly by those either new or hostile to it) as a superficial trawling operation devoted to spotting symbols – stark icons with rather fixed, sedimented meanings (a dove means freedom, gun equals phallus). Indeed, the notion that the classical film can be arbitrarily drilled into, and that the selected elements are then affixed with prefabricated meaning-tags, is central to David Bordwell's largely disapproving account of the procedure of thematic reading in *Making Meaning* (1989). To counter this view, I offer a sketch of how the interpretation of a full, classical work can proceed.

Door to door

David Cronenberg's *A History of Violence* (2005) shows that, instead of taking recourse to pasted-on symbolism to signal its theme, a classically structured work more often cannily systematises into a meaningful pattern what are ordinary, everyday gestures and actions: walking, eating, driving, and so on. In fact, one way of gauging a director's skill and inventiveness is to see how they are able to illuminate such usually taken-for-granted activities. This notion is central to Japanese scholar Shigehiko Hasumi's remarkable body of critical analysis (discussed in Chapter 7) as well as Perkins' assumption that classical directors work within the

verisimilitude of their given fictional worlds, rather than breaking this verisimilitude in order to impose or heavily underline the significance of a situation. It also underlies Masson's assertion that the challenge for any inventive filmmaker is – via the twin processes of motivation (in the strict sense of creating narrative motifs) and thematisation – to bring 'renewal and change' to the 'familiar and the unoriginal' elements in that 'heavy residue of pure material existence' which constitutes the 'phenomenal world' (Masson, 1992, p. 168). Even where these particular critics do not necessarily make a great display of using the term *mise en scène*, it is clear that what they most value and closely inspect – gestures, settings, physical actions, and the peculiarly cinematic rendering of these elements – falls under the rubric of the term.

A History of Violence could be described, in broad terms, as an investigation – a dramatic essay, in this sense – into *thresholds* in daily, social and domestic life, and their flimsiness: the thin line between civilisation and savagery, between law-and-order and criminality, between the present, clean masquerade that people maintain and their past sins, between an adopted identity and a repressed or discarded one. This way of stating the theme was not something I imposed on the film from the outset; it came to me gradually after I began to notice, during a first viewing, an unobtrusive detail which gently insists: the use of doorways within the staging of many key scenes. Further viewings confirmed the existence of this pattern in the film. A doorway is, of course, a literal threshold, ubiquitous in daily life, and Cronenberg cleverly places it at the centre of every turning point of the film: it is within and around doorways that murders occur, that a wife mistakes her husband for a home-invader, that strangers enter the domestic space, and so on.

Two inaugural structures of this extremely rigorous narrative film can also be mentioned here. It begins with what appears to be an allusion to, and condensation of, the first minutes of John Ford's classic Western *The Searchers* (1955): two men (played by Stephen McHattie and Greg Bryk) exit the door of a cabin-like motel room, the camera tracking backward to (as it were) draw them out (see Gibson, 2005). At the end of this elaborate, extended long take (3 minutes and 45 seconds while the credits appear) in which the two criminals drive a short distance, talk and argue, the younger of them heads back into the motel's main office: here we find a similar trauma to that which drives *The Searchers*, a massacred family – in Ford's case, a white settler family killed by Native Americans.

The scene immediately cues us to a level of the film as a whole that bothered some otherwise admiring critics: so many of its elements seem

like generic quotes taken from movie lore – criminal heavies, happy family around the dinner table, the friendly small-town cop, the quaint main street with its modest businesses, and so on. In truth, the film is an excavation of a certain ‘Americana’ iconography – from the evocation of Ford’s Westerns right down to the echoes of Charles Ives in Howard Shore’s sparsely used musical score – which it links to a widespread social sensibility or ideology: the belief in second chances for the sovereign US individual, the possibility of starting over or being born again... And it is this very conversion – the possibility of it, the fervent belief in it, the implications of it – that the film poses, at the heart of its thematic and stylistic systems, as an agonising semantic question.

The beginning of *A History of Violence* inaugurates two types of narrative *folds* (a concept elaborated by Nicole Brenez, 2007). The first is a large-scale *anamorphosis*, whereby the final scene does not merely reiterate (in terms of motif) or answer the first in a neat rhyme but, in a deeper sense, unfolds its meaning in an ultimate, dramatic way: to the two consecutive doors of a demolished domestic space in the opening scene correspond the two consecutive doors at which the husband (Viggo Mortensen) halts on his way to the family dinner table, where what is staged – with unsettling ambiguity – is the supposed reintroduction or repair of the home, rather than its devastation at the hands of a violent, criminal male.

The second type of fold accomplished is local, in that, via a strong transition-linkage, the film establishes at its outset a meaningful alternation of and comparison between two narrative threads or worlds that seem, initially, unconnected: from the murder of a little girl at the motel we pass to the scream of another girl, in her bed, awakening from a nightmare. This creates a thematic structure with several levels: not only are we being asked to superimpose the girls and begin a comparison of two worlds, but the hint that the first scene might have been a gruesome dream imagined within the domestic sphere sets up a central theme of identity disturbance in the story. As the anti-hero’s gangster brother (William Hurt) later asks him: when he dreams, is he his old self or his new self?

Something characteristic of Cronenberg as an auteur, working in the tradition of Luis Buñuel, can be noted here: the way in which, without overtly violating the rules or conventions of surface verisimilitude, he is able to insinuate the surrealist dimension of a dream world, in which aspects of the story come to represent unconscious phantasms and drives belonging to the social and cultural context as much as to individual characters.

Classical riffs

Even within the brief, preliminary sketch I have offered, the analysis of *A History of Violence* offers an example of a closed, finite reading – finite in the sense that it promises to capture all of the meaningful elements in the work and exhaustively interrelate them within a framework of artistic system, order and coherence. The degree of *openness* in a thematic structure has, however, long been a point of debate among critics, even those who broadly accept the precepts of verisimilitude, narrative coherence, and so on. Here I will note some of these productive differences or variations – riffs on classicism.

Those critics working within the tenets of a classical economy who diligently follow the tracks of a film's own unfolding see their task of interpretation as intuiting and explicating where the film takes us, and what balance of thematic propositions it ultimately leaves us with; Barthes noted (again disapprovingly) that, in the classical narrative text, 'semic space' (i.e., thematic meaning) is 'always glued to hermeneutic space' (i.e., narrative unfolding) where 'the point is always to locate in the perspective of the classic text a profound or final truth (the profound is what is discovered *at the end*)' (Barthes, 1974, pp. 171–72). For classically minded critics, such effects of profundity would, by definition, constitute the force of emotional *epiphany* afforded by the great movies (*Letter from an Unknown Woman*, in either of its versions, provides a canonical example in its final minutes – as does, indeed, *A History of Violence*) – or great literature of the kind analysed in the 1950s by Vladimir Nabokov (2002) in his discussion of the artistic structure of epiphany in Marcel Proust.

In the recent re-evaluations that have occurred, around the globe, concerning the enormous contribution of André Bazin to film theory and criticism, a somewhat different way of considering this issue has emerged. Hervé Joubert-Laurencin suggests that we abandon the received wisdom that analysis 'unpacks' a film – opening and unfolding out a hitherto closed object. The film as a work of art is – and remains – open and alive, in his view, full of 'the power and expectation of revitalization at every new screening' (Joubert-Laurencin, 2011, p. 201). Any decent act of criticism, however persuasive or seemingly systematic, offers only a provisional closure of it, a making-sense of it according to some particular perspective. Then our future viewings, our revisititation of the film – if we are attune to its richness and strangeness – re-opens our process of understanding and appreciating it, perhaps from a quite different angle (the times move on, we change and perspectives shift). This model or

metaphor helps to explain why we can watch our favourite films over and over again – rather than feeling that we have exhausted them once and for all.

The maverick critic Raymond Durgnat – an individualist rather than someone relatable to a specific school, although he wrote for a bewildering number of publications and managed to carry on an implicit dialogue with all of them – took a dissenting, expanded view of this matter of closed or open reading. In his surrealist-inspired understanding of what he termed *semantic complexity* (1982), a film's thematic structure is 'not a statement to be decoded but a jungle gym for thoughts to swing on' (Durgnat, 1987, p. 266). Or, as he put it on another occasion, 'The Grand Design is less One Theme Illustrated by This Story than This Story Opening on to Various Ideas'. He broke down the idea of a unitary or coherent thematic structure into four, overlapping structures:

- (I) a mosaic (i.e., a configuration of interwoven configurations, some uncompleted but strongly implied); (II) a chameleon (changing contexts pick out different patterns); (III) a Rorschach test (to review the film is to review its audiences); and (IV) a palimpsest. (Durgnat, 1984a, p. 314)

Where the mosaic is still, approximately, a classical pattern, the figure of the palimpsest anticipates poststructural approaches – making Durgnat a particularly significant, border-crossing seeker of a synthesis between modes of critical analysis.

Paths to poststructuralism

In the history of film criticism, the classical aesthetic finds one of its principal and most influential statements in Perkins' *Film as Film*, but it can be traced back much earlier in the century, at least to Louis Delluc circa 1920. According to André S. Labarthe (as we shall later see), it was Delluc who first differentiated, in order to then relate within a particular aesthetic economy, the subject of a film from its 'rendering' (Labarthe, 1967, p. 66). The poststructuralist movement took as its mission the violent overturning of this classical economy of style to subject – as well as the 'sovereign', commanding consciousness or agency imputed to the artist/auteur as envisaged by Romanticism. But no intellectual movement emerges, fully blown, from nowhere; several paths to poststructuralism within the history of film criticism can be observed.

First, a word on poststructuralism's immediate predecessor: structuralism, which in its 'cine-structuralist' incarnation generated much attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but has left little in the way of lasting legacy in the field. Cine-structuralism – which represented the first incursion of a 'scientific' method in cinema studies, or at least aspirationally so – was characterised by, on one flank, attempts at defining a narratology of cinema with its structures and codes of storytelling; and, on another, semantic flank, applying Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology of cultural fields to (mainly popular) cinema. Film narratology was informed by Barthes' early writings (particularly his 1966 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives', in Barthes, 1977), and later by the more ludic and permutational possibilities suggested by the work of A. J. Greimas (1987), whose famous 'semiotic square' was designed to generate semantic values across characters or positions in a narrative.

Structuralist film narratology, however, effectively repressed questions of style and stylistics. In many narratological analyses of the period, it is as if, in one sphere of a film, there are actants, narrative moves, informational cues, proairetic and hermeneutic codes (these terms derive essentially from Barthes' celebrated 1970 book *S/Z* [1974]); and then, in another, completely unrelated sphere, there is the work of the camera, editing, sound and so on. Style does not even get to tell the story, let alone communicate a theme, in this discombobulated set-up.

But this thaw quickly began to unfreeze. One historic marker of the move to poststructuralism is the work of Jean-André Fieschi (1942–2009), an influential critic who straddled *Cahiers du cinéma* (writing probably the first Lacanian critiques of films) in the early 1960s, and the burgeoning area of university-based semiological studies (teaching alongside Noël Burch) in the mid to late 1960s. Fieschi, in one of his major entries for Richard Roud's *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* (published in 1980 but composed, largely, in the first half of the 1970s), heralded F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) – 'with this film the modern cinema was born' – by brandishing a decisive gesture of economic rearrangement: '*Nosferatu* marks the advent of a total cinema in which the plastic, rhythmic and narrative elements are no longer graded in importance, but in strict interdependence upon each other' (Fieschi, 1980, p. 710). This signals, therefore, an approach which aims not to abolish 'stories about people', but to relativise narrative within the entire set of formal and stylistic possibilities in cinema.

Doing and being

If, within the history of British film criticism since the early 1960s, *Movie* magazine stood for classicism while the journal *Screen* in the 1970s spearheaded several variants of poststructuralism, then *Monogram* (also operating from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s), under the chief editorship of Thomas Elsaesser, sought to occupy a mid-way position that is worth briefly revisiting here – for similar tensions between competing methodologies were being played out in many countries at the time. (For a more comprehensive account of the historical journey of the idea of *mise en scène* through British film criticism from 1946 to 1978, see Gibbs, 2014.) Two instances of a piece of criticism addressing and in a sense *rewriting* another, prior piece – which is one of the ways in which the history of film criticism as a practice evolves – can be considered in this light.

In a 1973 issue of *Monogram*, Mark Le Fanu took *Movie* writers Robin Wood and Michael Walker to task for their (in his opinion) overly classical analysis of Claude Chabrol's films of the Nouvelle Vague period and beyond; Walker (1975) subsequently offered a vigorous reply. (The debate between these critics over Chabrol has been taken up again by Jacob Leigh, 2013.) To read the films according to a solely expressive economy – as reflecting the moral dilemmas of the characters, the universal truths of life, the reality of contemporary France, and so on – would, according to Le Fanu, be to overlook or even repress the possibility of a film style that:

[...] function[s] as a *mode of irony*, an artistic form aware of its own ideology [...] In *Le Boucher* [1968] any emphasis on the 'psychology' of the characters is misleading for it encourages us to ignore the aspects of the film most remarkable: namely its repeated insistence on its own fictions, a series of clues about itself asking to be considered. There is everywhere an overt symbolism, puzzling and ironical, as it seems to dare us by its very obviousness to offer an 'interpretation' [...] We are witnessing a movement away from the sign meaning something to a situation where the sign refers only to other signs, other fictions [...] [Chabrol] is directing his attack on the tyranny of the *signifié* [signified], that fixity of meaning and sense. (qtd in Walker, 1975, p. 48)

Monogram did not give up expressive accounts of films, especially those in a classical mode; rather, it sought to open the discussion of such work out to other sorts of cultural contexts (such as genre and ideology) and intellectual currents (see Bordwell, 2005b). It explicitly tried to maintain,

on the one hand, a respectful appreciation of filmmaking craft and artistry and, on the other hand, the kind of liberation of criticism for which much poststructuralist rhetoric militated. The editorial of the first issue stated that its writers were not 'persuaded that a particular political commitment will necessarily dispose of, or resolve, certain fundamental aesthetic problems [...] concerning evaluation and meaning, we will take a film on its own terms and respect its particular frame of reference' (Elsaesser, 1971, p. ii).

However, another *Monogram* piece, a now canonical 1972 text by Elsaesser on cinematic melodrama, found itself in turn rewritten in 1978 by Sam Rohdie, editor of *Screen* in its most radical period. (Rohdie had, in 1972, penned a swinging denunciation of Perkins' *Film as Film* and *Movie* magazine as the embodiment of conservative tendencies in film analysis.) Rohdie cites the following vivid passage – itself an interesting conjunction of expressive analysis and another, still-tentative ‘cultural studies’ method attempting to move beyond it – from Elsaesser’s evocation of a scene in Douglas Sirk’s *Written on the Wind* (1957) and its ‘visual metaphors’:

[A] yellow sports-car drawing up the gravelled driveway to stop in front of a pair of shining white Doric columns outside the Hadley mansion is not only a powerful piece of American iconography, especially when taken in a plunging high-angle shot, but the contrary associations of imperial splendour and vulgar materials (polished chrome-plate and stucco plaster) create a tension of correspondences and dissimilarities in the same image, which perfectly crystallises the decadent affluence and melancholic energy that give the film its uncanny fascination. (Elsaesser, 1987, p. 53)

Rohdie’s move, when citing this passage six years later, was to re-orient its emphasis: for him, such a filmic moment ‘does not represent a function of *doing* or *communication* [...] but rather a function of *being*’ (Rohdie, 1978, p. 20, emphasis mine). Thus, films do not *do* things (such as tell stories and build fictional worlds) or *communicate* meanings (themes, moral reflections, etc.); rather, they *exist* as surfaces or objects (not homogenous but heterogeneous), as dynamic actions in themselves, and as commentaries on previous films within a given cultural context. The formal, stylistic elements of light, shape, colour and movement now matter more *for themselves* than for whatever content or subject they help to represent or convey – and interpretation (or reading) must, accordingly, shift its attention to these surfaces, and their history as

cultural signs or figures, rather than the supposedly hidden depths of a work. One could not find a more perfect, shorthand unpacking of the famous semiotic triad of signifier/signified/sign: in Rohdie's account, the film has become a pure signifier, a sign only of itself (or of other signs), not of some reality or realm outside itself.

A huge beast

In 1973, ex-*Cahiers* critic Jacques Rivette described 'the cinema I'm after' in the following terms:

[...] films which impose themselves on the spectator through a sort of domination of visual and sound 'events', and which require the screen, a big screen, to be effective [...] films in which, in very different ways, this fact of a narrative spectacle comes into play [...] These are films that impose themselves visually through their monumentality [...] What I mean is that there is a weight to what is on screen, and which is there on screen as a statue might be, or a building, or a huge beast. And this weight is perhaps what Barthes would call the weight of the signifier... (Rivette, 1977a, p. 49)

Rivette's reference to Barthes and his influence is apposite. Poststructuralist thought, taking its cue from Barthes' 1971 essay 'From Work to Text' (1977), made a division between a film as a *work* (conforming to the precepts of classical aesthetics) and a film as a *text* – although this distinction is meant to imply, in Barthes, less two different *kinds* of artworks (objects that can be designated as exactly either classical or modern) than two different *ways* of *reading* or using virtually any artwork.

The Text can be approached, experienced in relation to the sign. The work closes on a signified. [...] The generation of the perpetual signifier [...] in the field of the text [...] is realised not according to an organic process of maturation or a hermeneutic course of deepening investigation, but, rather, according to a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations. The logic regulating the Text is not comprehensive [...] but metonymic; the activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy [...] the work – in the best of cases – is *moderately* symbolic; the Text is *radically* symbolic: *a work conceived, perceived and received in its integrally symbolic nature is a text.* (Barthes, 1977, pp. 158–59)

The sense which Barthes here gives to the term *symbolic* is very different to that which informs Ricoeur's notion (adopted for film criticism by Britton) of symbolic or metaphoric fictional worlds. Barthes stresses what he considers the *containment* of meaning (and of the interpretative act) as constitutive of the classical ethos. In classicism, meaning rides along the clear tracks laid down for it by the central elements of the fictional world: stable, three-dimensional characters, a coherent plot and a systematically ordered thematic development. Classicists, of course, would not see this as something lamentable, or as an error of method; Perkins, for example, speaks (like Douglas Pye, 2010) of grasping the 'structure of understandings the film has built' (Perkins, 1990, p. 59).

In Barthes' vision of the Text, however, meanings proliferate, free-associating from the confines of the work and beyond it; he provided a model of such analysis – textual analysis, as it came to be known – in *S/Z* (1974). Textual analysis offered, in its heyday and beyond, a freer mode of interpretation (and a more creative mode of writing, less tied to academic protocols) than that elaborated by classical aesthetics.

Where the text is (in Barthes' term) *polysemic*, the classical work offers a kind of policing of meaning – or, to pick a less inflammatory metaphor, an orchestration of it. Where the film-work tries to present itself (as much as it possibly can) as a homogenous, seamless, unified artistic object, the film-text declares its inherently heterogeneous, polyphonic, splintered character. Where the classical work is contained and unostentatious, aiming to stay in control of its elements, the modern or postmodern work is exhibitionistic and performative, a work 'in pieces' that flaunts its shifts in texture, tone, mood, topic, direction, address, courting waywardness, unruliness and excess. (On the theory of excess in cinema, see Kristin Thompson, 1999a.) Thus, if classicism is the school of the expressive, poststructuralism is the school of the *excessive*.

Historically, poststructural film analysis is associated with, in France, Raymond Bellour, Jacques Aumont, Marie-Claire Ropars (1936–2007), magazines including *Ça/Cinéma* and *Hors Cadre*, and the critical career (as brief as it is brilliant) of the video artist Thierry Kuntzel (1948–2007); in America, the first eight years of *Camera Obscura*; in Britain, *Screen* during the 1970s (especially Wollen, Willemen, Claire Johnston [1940–1987], Laura Mulvey, Colin MacCabe, Stephen Heath, Steve Neale); in Spain with Santos Zunzunegui. All over the world, journals (some short-lived) appear amidst the thousand, blooming flowers of the poststructuralist moment, or appear later under its lingering influence: *Cine-Tracts* in Canada, *The Australian Journal of Screen Theory*, *Skrien* in the Netherlands, *Filmkritik* and *Montage AV* in Germany, *Framework* in the UK, *Filmcritica*

in Italy... Today, there are many who work, in various ways, with the legacy of this era, particularly via the enduring deconstructionist philosophy of Jacques Derrida, or Gilles Deleuze's work on cinema (1986 and 1989): Dai Jinhua, David Rodowick, Mary Ann Doane, Akira Mizuta Lippit, Patricia Pisters, Tom Gunning, Bérénice Reynaud, D.A. Miller, Tom Conley, Laleen Jayamanne, Bill Krohn and Carlos Losilla rank among them.

Just as a classical approach draws up for itself a certain list of preferred Masters – Max Ophüls, Jean Renoir, Kenji Mizoguchi, Otto Preminger – poststructural critique responds to a quite different *taste* in cinema. Forms of comedy, often ‘underground’ in nature, including burlesque, grotesque, camp and queer, from Red Grooms to John Waters and Gregg Araki; the delirious avant-garde works of Carmelo Bene, Manuel De Landa, Kenneth Anger and Stephen Dwoskin, pitched at a maximum intensity of stylisation from start to end; the décor/costume-mad ‘bent’ melodramas of Ulrike Ottinger, Werner Schroeter or the Kuchar brothers; the (variously) neo-Baroque, neo-Mannerist, decidedly trippy films of Raúl Ruiz, Alejandro Jodorowsky and Andrzej Zulawski – all these have come to constitute, in a deliberately ragged way, a counter-tradition that sets out to bridge certain, disreputable forms of pop culture production (such as the contemporary ‘trash comedy’) with the many outposts of experimental cinema.

In the annals of criticism and its legendary, polemical wars of sensibility, the taste for excess is best summed up by Michel Chion in 1985, disdainfully comparing what *Positif* magazine valued in the films of John Boorman – ‘talent, rhythm, vitality [...] meaning, content, eloquence’ (how wholesome and boring!) – with what *Cahiers du cinéma* (Chion’s home at the time, before he defected to *Positif* in the 1990s) prized above all: ‘creation as rupture, excess, risk, disequilibrium, error, dynamism’ (Chion, 1985, p. xiii). This declaration shows well the comradely link forged between the innovations of the various New Waves of cinema around the world in the 1960s and the poststructuralism erected in its wake.

To film a conversation

Let us sketch, as for *A History of Violence*, how a clearly excessive film calls forth an analysis in this same spirit. *Vivre sa vie* (1962) is, like many works by Jean-Luc Godard, a virtual manifesto of modernist anti-coherence – sometimes teasing in its elusiveness, sometimes outrageous in its provocations against viewers and critics alike. Even in this more

seemingly minimalist and controlled film (which borrows its mood and look from an amalgam of canonical greats: Bresson, Antonioni, Carl Dreyer, Roberto Rossellini), Godard holds true to the impulsiveness that has characterised much of his career: it is a collage (the favoured art-derived term used to describe his work in the 1960s) full of digressions, cameos, joke insertions, various blunt interventions on the director's part (such as violent jump-cut editing to match the firing of a machine gun) and, especially, quotations of all kinds (anecdotes and parables told, passages from books recited, films watched) – indeed, much of the plot seems like a pastiche from the B movies to which it is dedicated.

The story of *Vivre sa vie* sometimes stops dead for tableaux that function either as cool demonstrations (a documentary-like montage of the workaday life of a prostitute, a café discourse from language philosopher Brice Parain) or comedic turns (a crook incongruously launches into a stand-up routine, mimicking how a child blows up a balloon). The film is a paradoxical object: although explicitly divided into twelve tableaux and following a complex, novelistic trail in its depiction of the decline and fall of a desperate woman, Nana Klein (Anna Karina), much of the film refuses to add up to anything conventionally satisfying or meaningful in terms of character, theme or fictional world. In fact, V. F. Perkins wrote a lengthy essay in the late 1960s in which he tried, but failed, to come to grips with the film within his own classical critical system; he can only conclude, despite the quality of isolated moments:

In suggesting these interpretations, I am conscious of choosing the least unlikely connections rather than of elucidating meanings developed convincingly in the film's structure [...] Perhaps the basic fault is Godard's unwillingness to allow the movie the *degree of anonymity* that a fully coherent work assumes [...] The context is severely limiting. (Perkins, 1969, p. 39)

Aesthetic anonymity is, to look at it from a different angle, the last thing on Godard's modernist mind. For a poststructural critic, one path into the analysis of *Vivre sa vie* would be through a detail of Godard's unique working process: he commissioned from composer Michel Legrand a theme and eleven variations ('because that's the way the film is constructed', as Legrand [qtd in Brown, 1994, p. 189] recalls the director's brief) but, in the final edit and mix, characteristically opted to use only three, constantly repeated fragments from one of the variations. The film as a whole can also be considered as a suite of truncated variations that are missing their dominant theme, the key or core from which

they are derived. As Perkins discovered, it is hard to pinpoint what this film is centrally *about*, as it raises and drops so many subjects: prostitution (as sociological reality and existential metaphor), non-communication in the modern world, language and thought, existence and essence, the world as outward appearance or inner mental process, and so on.

But what if we refuse the facile, once-fashionable recourse to declaring that the film is thus about everything that passed through Godard's mind during filming, or that it is a documentary/diary of Paris in 1962 – while still wishing to analyse its modernism? A filmic collage, yes; but is there anything to be *made* of this collage, beyond the brute fact of its dazzling heterogeneity of textures, moods and elements?

Perkins inadvertently stumbled upon one of the central formal or stylistic principles underlying this collage when he mused that it seems to offer 'a string of suggestions as to how one *might* film a conversation' (Perkins, 1969, p. 33) (Figure 2.1). Put differently and more pointedly, Godard's film explores *a question of how to represent* – not in completely universal or general terms (how to film the world, how to tell a story?), but in terms of specific items of representation that become, in a complex, non-literary sense, the subjects of the film. (This approach



Figure 2.1 *Vivre sa vie* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1962)

was centrally seized upon by a later, post-poststructuralist methodology emerging in Europe: the figural analysis of film; see Martin, 2012a.) One can sense what *Vivre sa vie* is addressing (or questioning) only by looking and listening to it closely, moment by moment and shot by shot. Each new shot seems to ask, from the camera-position of Godard: how am I to frame or *regard* (in the double sense of that word) what I am seeing before me, what position am I to take up in relation to it?

The film begins, during its credit sequence, with three views of Nana/Karina, almost completely in the dark: left profile, right profile, head-on. The shots evoke at least three social practices of image-making: police mug-shots of criminals (Nana will indeed be later interrogated by police); portraiture in art (Godard noted at the time that painterly tableaux are frequently portraits); and the test shots that are routinely made on a film set to test lights and make-up, as well as to try out key poses of the actors. All of these image-practices are forms of documentation or *description*: they seek to nail down the subject-as-object, and posit another subject, out of frame, who is attempting this task of circumscription. So there is already a multiple relation, three parallel (not necessarily intersecting) tracks set up by the film: society tries to fix a woman in her place inside or outside the law; Godard tries to fix Karina (his wife at the time), his muse, on celluloid; the history of art and representation supply icons of Woman.

In the subsequent, nominally more realistic scene, Nana is only ever viewed from the back (Godardian provocation) and speaks, in character, of her desire to become an actress. Immediately this on-screen person is a complex amalgam: at once an actor (Karina); a three-dimensional, psychological individual with needs and wants (Nana); and a figure that is unformed (Masson, 1994, p. 18, notes that the film's first three portrait-shots could imaginably be of three different people), hard to catch (the back view sunders her voice from her lips, the standard guarantee of a film character's reality), without clear identity, selfhood or definition, except in the gazes of others (producers, clients, pimps, spectators, Godard the director). Swiftly in the course of the film, she also becomes a sign (of iconic, movie-made glamour and femininity), as well as a subject for metaphoric speculation, a kind of philosophical emblem: she is repeatedly aligned with one fable or another about the nature and fate of the human being, having or lacking a heart, a soul, free will ...

Where a classical critic such as Perkins finds this all-over-the-place quality, this proliferation of levels on which the character signifies, to be a problem for coherence, the theorist Kaja Silverman and filmmaker Harun Farocki, in their 1998 book *Speaking About Godard*, hail this

constant shifting and lack of definition as the very subject of the film: it ‘accommodates relationships between the most divergent of terms, since it does not predicate those relationships on the basis of identity’ (Silverman and Farocki, 1998, p. 6) – where identity does not mean personal identity, but rather the philosophic notion of exact likeness, being identical, *identicality*. In cinematic terms, they are referring to the non-alignment of Karina, Nana, the unformed female figure, the iconic image and so on: at no point do these various avatars of a character add up to a single, whole, unified creature, and hence Nana never becomes identical with herself – she is always *in excess*.

An analysis of *Vivre sa vie*, then, would seek to retrace the action, movement and shifting contours of the question ‘how to represent this woman?’ as they unfold across the film. In Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s 2004 book *Forms of Being*, militantly poststructural in its orientation (via the school of literary deconstructionism), this philosophic notion of the non-identicality of terms – what Perkins would name and fault as the discrepancy between levels and elements – is raised to the level of an evaluative, aesthetic principle as well as virtually a moral or socio-political injunction (be not identical with yourself!). In their account of films by Godard (*Contempt*, 1963), Terrence Malick (*The Thin Red Line*, 1998) and Pedro Almodóvar (*All About My Mother*, 1999), identicality is assumed to be the structuring principle of an oppressive social norm, and these progressive films as an attack on that principle – just as Jean-François Lyotard assumed when he considered the (to him) over-regulated economy of mainstream narrative film in his 1973 manifesto ‘Acinema’ (1978). This is a questionable assumption in its sweeping generality; but there is no doubt that it suggests a new, productive kind of film analysis that manages to make more of the constituent heterogeneity of the cinematic medium beyond the mere, stark fact of it.

Which side are you on?

The comparison between classical (expressive) and poststructural (excessive) approaches to film style that I have sketched in this chapter is, in one sense, already a part of history – even though I fervently believe that the fundamental differences between their respective economies form the basis of an overall aesthetics of cinema and, especially today, give rise to the ideal of an aesthetic program which would attempt to combine what is best from both ‘schools’.

But, taken as an episode in cultural (and political) history, how are we to assess, in retrospect, the ‘war’ between classicism and poststructuralism in film studies? I offer two points toward such an assessment.

First, something undoubtedly shifted in international film culture during the 1970s. For many in the academic community of film studies, the type of stylistic appreciation represented by *Movie* or *Positif* was exchanged – rather brutally, in some cases – for the type of textual analysis favoured by poststructural methodologies. Involved in this was an understandable drive to legitimise the study of the film, to make it empirical, systematic, even scientific. Thus, merely ‘critical’ endeavour – and the proudly amateur magazine culture often associated with it – was swapped for the academic sphere, with its ‘hard’ theoretical language, peer-reviewed journals and weighty books published by university presses. Reductive caricatures of a past era of naively cinephilic critique, cast aside as merely effusive or impressionistic (witheringly described in one mid-1980s conference as the ‘gee whiz school of film appreciation’, and attributed to nerdy males), reigned supreme as a rhetorical, one-upping manoeuvre for a while.

Film theory has investigated many fruitful, complex areas since that turbulent changeover of paradigms in the 1970s: historical contexts, spectatorship, race and gender, film-and-philosophy, and so on. But it effectively dropped the ball on sensitive, stylistic analysis – of the kind that, at its best, accompanied and elevated the investigations of the 1950s and 1960s. This is part of the reason why there has been something of a heroic comeback for stylistic analysis in many quarters over the past decade or so (see Chapter 3). The semiotic shift in the 1970s to analysing codes and structures (such as point-of-view or shot/reverse shot) did not try to integrate the previous attention to tone, mood, modulation and emotional affect. This is something that is far more possible today, in the light of recent studies of affect, the distribution of information or knowledge in a film, and related issues (see Rutherford, 2011; Pye, 2010).

On the other hand (and this is my second point of historical retrospection), it has to be said today, categorically, that the poststructural revolution in cinema studies – despite successive waves of strong critique, and the fact that it, too, eventually went under the bus of intellectual history with its ever-changing fashions and fads (overtaken, for instance, by a far less text-based, Cultural Studies approach in the 1980s) – was, and continues to be, enormously significant. It exposed a truth that had hitherto, during the reign of classicism in this field, remained

buried: film *is* a heterogeneous art, a signifying form with levels that frequently escape the best controlling hands and make their impression beyond the tidy frameworks of thematic interpretation.

And film is – equally inescapably – a material art. Poststructuralist critique, whatever its own methodological deliriums or excesses, gave those who fully engaged with it a palpable sense of the pervasive formal dimension of cinema, a visceral, felt closeness to the frame-by-frame details and workings of cinematic style. Rivette was right: the screen-spectacle, this medium of display, is a huge beast.

Those (and I was among them) who discovered the writings of Barthes, Derrida and Julia Kristeva at the same time as they encountered the films of Chantal Akerman, Michael Powell/Eméric Pressburger and Sergio Leone were privy to a historically new experience that was at once intellectual and sensual. They experienced the *tangibility* of cuts, colours, gestures, framings, camera movements, sound and music cues in cinema – monumentally (as Rivette put it) and at one remove from the classical protocols of plot and character. Textual analysis offered an initiation into this brute level of filmic materiality. It is little wonder that Andrew Sarris – a critic formed in a decidedly different historical moment of film culture – was so affronted by what he termed these ‘frame by frame heretics’ (a label that delighted many of us at the time) and ‘stilted structuralists’ – neither of whom, in his lofty formulation, could encompass ‘an encyclopaedic awareness of not only the universe of film itself, but the exact position of film in the universe’ (Sarris, 1975, p. 18), which pushes transcendence with a vengeance!

The difference between classicism and poststructuralism, between ‘expressives’ and ‘excessives’ (if I may be allowed to stereotype individuals for a moment), is caught for me in an anecdotal detail I have observed over a 30 year period: where critics of the former persuasion inevitably speak of the *dramatic* (or comedic) values of a film, those of the latter persuasion use a different buzzword to encapsulate their engagement: *textuality*. The word may now seem dry and theoretical – and altogether too literary in its connotation – but, during the finest days of poststructuralism, it was anything but. I shall never forget the excitement of one 1980s cinephile who bounced out of a screening of Federico Fellini’s *And the Ship Sails On* (1983) exclaiming: ‘It’s not a film, it’s a text!’ And what he bore witness to, with this hip shorthand, was his sensation of an overflowingly profuse, material movie, heterogeneous and excessive in the best possible way.

Even critics who are not especially poststructural in their orientation, such as Masson and Petr Král at *Positif*, begin from the position that

the filmic image is, inescapably, dense with detail, an embarrassment of riches that are hard to wrangle into a coherent, artistic form. And notions like heterogeneity, excess, non-alignment or being permanently in process are not so easily wiped away by an assertive recourse to the tenets of a 'plain speaking', classical humanism.

But my chief interest here is film analysis, not philosophical debate – and it is on the aesthetic plane that the poststructural challenge matters. For, once we have managed to grasp the complex structures of thematic meaning, world building and character formation in a film, there are still other things, harder to describe, that 'exceed the grid', that *insist*: certain inexplicable affects, a play of colour, an intensity of rhythm, all those pure (or not so pure), highly material and tangible signifiers that Barthes evoked under the shorthand of the 'grain of the voice' (Barthes, 1977), which remain central to the critical work on film by, for example, Lesley Stern (1995, 2012).

These insistent elements are essential for the investigation that I am undertaking here. The question for film aesthetics today is whether, or how far, it is possible to merge and synthesise the insights of classical and poststructural approaches.

A non-intentional method

At this provisional juncture, I call upon the wise advice of a critic who has moved between starkly different schools, methods and media throughout his career and who, in his recent analyses, successfully bridges old and new methodologies. In his 2002 account of Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), Michel Chion suggests:

[...] there is a great temptation to construct the 'perfect interpretation', which would mean that the film would no longer be any more than a coded message made transparent. The disadvantage of this approach is that it erases everything which brings a work alive and consists of details of texture and particular effects which do not necessarily have anything to do with the main theme.

The right way to work on a film – to avoid too closed an interpretation – seems to me to be to watch it several times with no precise intentions.

As in a police inquiry, one should not set up any hierarchies or look in any particular direction. One should not banish emotions and projections, but rather bring them to light, formulate them and be aware of them, let them float.

In this inquiry there is ultimately neither criminal nor crime. Our goal will simply be to raise a few hypotheses to cast light on the way that a film 'speaks' to us and what it 'speaks' about.

A film is a system, not of meanings, but of signifiers. We must go in search of these signifiers [...] and we can do this only by means of a non-intentional method; for in cinema, that art that fixes rhythms, substances, forms, figures and all kinds of other things onto a single support, the signifier can sit anywhere.

At the same time we must watch the film as though continually rediscovering it; we must retain the traces of our very first impressions, of all that was charming, intriguing or boring at first sight, while also never censoring what we have understood or not understood first time round. (Chion, 2002, pp. 37–38)