

INTERPRETING THE MOVING IMAGE

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Introduction

This volume is a collection of some of my critical analyses of selected films and videoworks – what I call moving images.¹ Written between 1971 and 1990, most of these essays (though not all) are of the nature of what is often called “close readings.” This is not a label that I endorse, since I do not think that film is a language, and hence I do not believe that films are read (closely or otherwise).² Thus, I prefer to say that these articles are close *analyses* of individual films (where “close” is meant to signal an attention to detail).

My inclination to approach films in this way undoubtedly reflects the concerns that attended my entry into the field of film studies. And though I no longer believe all of the things that predisposed me toward close analysis back then, perhaps the best way to begin to introduce these essays is to remind readers of some of the prejudices that influenced me, and people like me, when I started studying film professionally.

That began in 1970 when I enrolled in the Cinema Studies Department at New York University. The NYU department was, at that time, in the process of having its Ph.D. program accredited. The NYU program was one of the first of its kind in the United States – an academic department of film history and theory, without a practical filmmaking wing. Thus it was a time when anxieties about the legitimacy of film studies loomed large. One felt the pressure to demonstrate that film studies was a full-fledged academic discipline.

Close analysis of film seemed like an obvious way to go in that context. Why? Perhaps – first and foremost – because it accorded with a popular model of literary analysis, especially as practiced by those tutored in the New Criticism. Consequently, if one were in the business of inventing a new discipline, one straightforward strategy was to imitate a going concern like literary studies.

Moreover, I suspect that some of us also thought that close analysis might provide an oblique vindication of film studies. For, if films (or, at

least *some* films) were such that they could sustain close analysis, then it appeared fair to suppose that they possessed aesthetic value. That is, close analysis would show that films were capable of rewarding the type of interpretive activity that was one of the acknowledged sources of value in the accepted sorority of the arts (that is to say: the arts with their own academic departments).

Close analysis also struck many of us at the time as more rigorous than other alternatives. Compared to the global style of sociologizing, as exemplified, for instance, by McLuhanism, close analysis was grounded in the data. It was neither impressionistic nor vague. It paid attention to detail, and, in that sense, it had the virtue of appearing empirical. And that, too, appealed to our academic super-ego.

Close analysis was also reinforced by the standard practice of film pedagogy – the one class/one film format. If one spent so much of one's class time watching a film, it seemed natural to devote at least as much time analyzing that experience. Rather than using the film to talk about something else, it appeared clear that we should address in depth our experience of the films themselves. This was something that rarely occurred in film criticism as we knew it. But, at the same time, it also presented itself as one of the leading reasons that we needed a field of film studies – to look closely at what was at the heart of film-going (the experience of the individual work) but which, at the same time, was usually passed over in other, nonspecialized discourses about film.

Undeniably, there was also an aesthetic prejudice behind the disposition toward close analysis. Its basic unit was the individual work, conceived of as the discrete object of film experience. The other arts all possessed masterpieces, and, with respect to those other practices, their title to the status of arthood appeared to reside in the fact that these masterworks served as the loci of experiences of great value. This was confirmed by the fact that these works could support close analyses that revealed the presence of sophisticated structures and themes (and interrelations thereof) which, in turn, provided the basis for complex and rich aesthetic experiences on the part of discerning spectators. Importing these biases into film studies, close analysis appeared to justify the film experience itself, thereby legitimatizing the academic field of film studies by way of legitimatizing its subject matter.

Of course, close analysis was not the only critical strategy for legitimatizing film studies in the late sixties and early seventies. Auteurism was another option, and perhaps a better known one.³ Auteurism claimed value for film – especially American film – by trumpeting a

certain romantic myth of the film director. The film director was an artist possessed of a unique, personal vision.

Against studio odds, the auteurs were able to express that vision, despite the putatively impersonalizing forces of the film industry. Auteurs were able to seize individuality from the jaws of anonymity. They defeated the system by projecting their own concerns, often evident in the recurring motifs in their oeuvres. Value in the auteurist scenario was located in the triumph of the human spirit.

Film studies, on this view, was the documentation of the victories of the auteurs over industrial adversity. And this implied that the legitimacy of film studies rested upon the mission of recording and acknowledging the trials and breakthroughs of embattled cinematic geniuses.

Though I learnt a great deal from auteurist critics, I was always skeptical of their underlying assumptions. Never convinced that the auteurs were typically at war with their corporate employers, I did not buy, for example, the idea that Hawks's achievement rested upon his expression of a vision that was antithetical to Hollywood. Weren't Hawks's pre-occupations quite congenial, or, at least, compatible with Hollywood's?

That is, I suspected the very myth upon which auteurism seemed founded. And, as well, I also wondered whether the auteurist's automatic attribution of authorship to the director wasn't often dubiously axiomatic rather than empirically motivated.

Furthermore, I was influenced enough by New Criticism that I worried that auteurism was a form of biographism, if not misplaced hero worship. What difference did it make that a filmmaker expressed a personal vision? Surely it was the sophistication of that vision as it was complexly articulated that mattered. Mere possession of a personal vision (or tick) did not seem valuable to me *a priori*. That was to mistake the dancer for the dance. And surely it was the dance that we cared about. Or so I thought.

Moreover, at the level of practical criticism, auteurism seemed routinely to evince certain shortcomings. On the one hand, auteurist critics appeared prone to confuse mannerisms for expressions of personal vision, so that unimaginative repetitions of certain devices—as in some of the later films of Lang—came to be prized as hypostatizations of the filmmaker's vision. This, in turn, frequently had the untoward consequence that the more schematic (“phoned-in”) works of master filmmakers came to be valued over their more canonical accomplishments.

Furthermore, in a related vein, auteurist critics seemed remiss when it came to distinguishing between features of films attributable to the

influence of genre versus directorial choice, and they often misconstrued genre données as personal statements.

On the other hand, auteurism, as it was generally practiced, tended also to favor thematic criticism. Of course, there was no reason why, in principle, auteurism had to be thematic criticism, but that is how it generally worked out. Hawks, for instance, was tagged with the ethos of professionalism through a summary of his recurring narrative motifs, and scant attention was paid to his visual style. And this seemed to me, at least, a failure to come to terms with much of our experience of his films.

Needless to say, close analysis and auteurism were not mutually exclusive options. Some critics, like Fred Camper, promised to marry auteurism and close analysis. However, even in the most felicitous of cases, I remained suspicious of auteurism because of my own fundamental commitments to the value of the artwork over the value of the artist. Auteurism struck me as too invested in the cult of the genius personality. For some, auteurism might have provided an avenue for legitimatizing film studies, but not one that was readily open to someone like me and many of my fellow students at NYU.

However, even among those of us who were attracted to close analysis, there were differences of opinion. Some, claiming the authority of phenomenology, opted for what was briefly called descriptive criticism.⁴ This, as I remember it, was an exercise in describing films as closely as possible—especially in terms of their visual and aural articulations—in an effort to remain as true to the moment-to-moment experience of film (bracketed phenomenologically) as one could be in the medium of script. Moreover, this approach appeared to correspond to critical techniques in the fore in adjacent artforms—like dance, painting, sculpture, and theater—and thus participated in the general modernist animus against interpretation that flourished in the sixties and early seventies in New York.⁵

But, though I benefitted by being exposed to the demanding precision of descriptive criticism, I found it difficult to subscribe to its rationale. Whereas descriptive criticism made a certain amount of sense with respect to writing about dance and theater—before the advent of inexpensive video recording—since those arts are transitory and required documentation for posterity, I saw little point to it with respect to film, where the object was publicly available over generations. I could also agree that some works of art—particularly avant-garde films of the period (e.g., structural films)—were designed to be seen and heard,

rather than to be (thematically, semantically, or allegorically) interpreted, but I did not see how this supported a methodology appropriate to *all* films. Indeed, I even thought that identifying the point of a film as being reductively concerned with the experience (itself!) of seeing and hearing was a form of interpretation. This is not to say that I see no distinction between describing a film and interpreting it. Rather, I was never convinced that the primary goal of close analysis was always description.

Maybe descriptive criticism performed a certain pedagogical role in inspiring students to pay attention to cinematic phenomena. It forced students to look carefully at what they often heretofore had ignored or neglected. Descriptive criticism was a formalist adventure in seeing afresh. And in that regard, descriptive criticism was salutary.

But for me, it seemed that was only part of the job. One not only had to get students to see what was there. One had to encourage them to ask why what we got them to see was there. Otherwise, what point was there to improving their perceptual skills?

This bias, of course, predisposed me toward interpretation, which I understand to be, at root, a matter of explanation – a matter of answering the question of why a work has the parts it has and/or of saying why the parts it has are related in the ways they are. Thus, close analysis was and continues to be for me primarily an affair of interpretation.

By means of this brief narrative, I have tried to indicate how I came to place such emphasis on the task of film interpretation. Given various existing choices on offer – such as McLuhanism, auteurism, and descriptive criticism⁶ – it seemed to me when I began my career in cinema studies that the close interpretation of films was the royal road of film inquiry. This is not an argument in favor of film interpretation. It is merely an attempt to give a causal account of how I got into the interpretation business. Perhaps I once thought that an argument for the primacy of film interpretation could be cobbled together out of considerations like those just cited. But I no longer do.

I now think that there are many roads for film inquiry and that there is no reason to argue for the primacy of any of them – just as there is probably no longer any reason to debate the legitimacy of film studies. But that is not to deny that there is still a point to film interpretation. Film interpretation, as represented in this book, may not be the overriding concern of film studies – that for which all other forms of film inquiry (theory, historical poetics, industrial history, and so on) exist. But it continues to have a justifiable function. And perhaps the best way

to substantiate that claim is to talk a bit about what film interpretation is – or, at least, about what I think it to be.

As I noted earlier, interpretation for me is a form of explanation. Interpreting a feature of a film is to offer an account of why that feature is present in the film. To interpret a film is a matter of explaining the presence of its features and the interrelationships thereof (or, at least, of explaining a substantial number of the pertinent features and interrelationships in the film in question). These features may be formal, expressive, and/or representational, and their interrelationships may be explained thematically in terms of what might be broadly called “meaning,” or in terms of their putative effects.⁷

On some views of interpretation, it must address what is nonobvious. And, though this may typically be the case, I see no reason to require it as a necessary condition of interpretation. A putative interpretation is still interpretation if it explains why a feature is present in a work, even if the presence of that feature is obvious. To note the function of the way in which African-Americans are depicted in Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* is interpretive, even if the racist message is baldly apparent.

My view of film interpretation is close to what David Bordwell calls “explicatory criticism”; however, it is not quite the same thing, since he describes explicatory criticism as an activity that regards the ascription of implicit meanings to film as the principal goal of criticism.⁸ I, on the other hand, do not regard the derivation of implicit meanings as either the whole or even the principal aim of interpretation.⁹ My view of explication – or, rather, of explanatory close analysis – is wider. Though it includes the explication of meaning (in the broadest sense of the term), it is a more commodious concept, countenancing all sorts of explanations, including also functional and causal ones, under the rubric of *interpretation*.

This is not to say that Bordwell is mistaken in alleging that interpretation as explication, as currently practiced, is primarily concerned with implicit meanings. But if one thinks that what I practice is interpretation as explication, then it should be understood that I, at least, do not regard this as a commitment that restricts my attention to the discovery of implicit meanings. Again, for me, interpretation is the explanation of the presence of a feature or a set of features in a film, whether such explanation is (broadly semantic or) thematic, or functional or even causal (in terms, for example, of emotional effects).

This view of interpretation is on display throughout this volume. By way of a brief preview: “The Cabinet of Dr. Kracauer” tries to account

for the actual significance of the framing story in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. In “*Entr’acte*, Paris and Dada,” I try to explain the imagery of the race that concludes Clair’s film. “*The Gold Rush*” addresses the interrelation of Chaplin’s ensemble of techniques, just as the two essays on *The General* address Keaton’s ensemble of techniques. “For God and Country” hypothesizes the way in which I think that sequence in Eisenstein’s *October* is designed to work. “Land, Pabst and Sound” plumbs the alternative motivations behind the contrasting styles of *M* and *Kameradschaft*, while “Notes on Dreyer’s *Vampyr*” speculates on the function of difficulty in that film.

In “*King Kong*: Ape and Essence,” I try to answer the question of why the imagery on Skull Island rhymes with the imagery of Kong’s rampage in Manhattan. “Becky Sharp Takes Over” deals with the rationale for the use of emphatic artifice in Mamoulian’s *Becky Sharp*. “Interpreting *Citizen Kane*” advances an explanation of that film’s explicitly contradictory thematics. “The Moral Ecology of Melodrama” considers the function of what I call the family plot in Sirk’s *Magnificent Obsession*. “Welles and Kafka” attempts to disclose the point of Welles’s disjunctive editing in *The Trial*, while “*Nothing but a Man* and *The Cool World*” contrasts the stylistic alternatives present in those two films with an eye to explaining the political goals they aspire to implement.

Many of the essays in this volume are devoted to close analyses of specific avant-garde works. These articles include: “Mind, Medium and Metaphor in Harry Smith’s *Heaven and Earth Magic*,” “Identity and Difference: From Ritual Symbolism to Condensation in Anger’s *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*,” “*Text of Light*,” “Joan Jonas: Making the Image Visible,” “Introduction to *Journeys from Berlin/1971*,” and “Amy Taubin’s Bag.” Inasmuch as these works are avant-garde, they are designedly nonobvious and, therefore, they call out for interpretation on the part of virtually every viewer. My essays with regard to these films attempt to pick out some of their most salient features and to explain how they work in concert. These explications represent an effort of appreciation on my part, in the first instance, and they are meant to guide or to enable the appreciation of these films by others, in the second instance.

So far I have wavered somewhat amorphously in the direction of my view of interpretation, and I have tried to indicate how it is in evidence in many of the essays in this volume. But earlier, I promised something more – to establish that interpreting films has a point, even if it is not the *summum bonum* of film inquiry. What is that point?

In fact, I have already alluded to it in my remarks on avant-garde film. Film interpretation is a form of film appreciation, in the first instance, and then a guide to others about the ways in which they too can come to appreciate the value (and, in some cases, the disvalue) of the films in question. If appreciation is a matter of contemplating the organization (or disorganization) of features of works, or of works as a whole, then interpretation is a primary medium of film appreciation. That is one of the points of interpretation and, in fact, the predominating point of interpretation in this volume.

This is not to say that aesthetic appreciation is the only point of interpretation. Ideology critique may be another. It is only to say that appreciation is a leading point of interpretation – one that grounds the activity – and that it is perhaps the major purpose that motivates me in the essays in this volume.¹⁰

By speaking of aesthetic appreciation, I open the door to being charged with formalism. However, I think that charge would be misguided for at least two reasons. First, I have claimed that appreciation is only *one* aim of interpretation. I question whether anyone could deny that, and, furthermore, whether anyone would deny that it is even among the major goals of interpretation. However, I have not precluded that there are other purposes, including political ones. And even though appreciation is generally my aim in the close analyses in this volume, a number of these essays do engage political interpretation.

Second, I am not a formalist, if by that one has in mind an interpreter who restricts her attention either (1) to only formal devices, or (2) to features that are said to be exclusively internal to the work. Clearly, throughout these essays I am concerned with representational and expressive as well as formal features, and, in addition, in endeavoring to explain why these features are present in the works in question, I frequently advert to contextual factors, including not only film and art historical ones, but ones pertaining to politics and broader cultural factors as well. I do conceive of interpretation as explanation. But I am not a narrow aesthetic autonomist about where I am willing to look for the ingredients of those interpretations.¹¹

In *Interpreting Films*, Janet Staiger criticizes people like Jonathan Culler for portraying interpretive competence as an idealization that is at variance with what historically situated audiences do.¹² If this is meant to suggest that our interpretations of films should model the actual interpretive activities of film viewers, then Staiger's conception of interpretation is radically different from my own. I should not be taken

in this volume to be presenting accounts of what I conjecture actual, historically situated viewers thought about while watching the films in question. If these essays document anything, it is my own considered assessment – upon reflection and reviewing – of how these films work.

At points, I may speculate about how a device moves viewers. But my account of why the device is designed that way and about how it achieves its postulated purpose should rarely be taken as a claim about the way in which the audience actually conceptualized the relevant feature or features of the film in question. The interpretations are my own hypotheses. They are not meant to stand in as reports of the surmises of the average audience member (whoever that might be).

Moreover, this, I would argue, is the way in which we standardly understand interpretations – in film and the other arts. Interpreters do not write interpretations in order to tell other people – the historical viewers – what they already think. If that were what interpreters did, the rest of us would not have any interest in reading them. We already know what we think. Why would we look to someone else to find that out? Primarily, we read interpretations in order to gain *new* insights concerning the way films work.

We applaud certain interpreters (our academic stars) for their brilliance, because they point out and explain features of films that we had failed to notice or to understand. This would make no sense if interpreters were typically persons who reported on what we already have in mind. Interpreters with respect to the standards of achievement that typically govern our existing critical practices attempt to cast work in a new light, rather than merely to recycle received wisdom.

Interpretation is not reducible to reception studies, even if reception studies, suitably deployed, can enhance interpretation. This is not to disparage reception studies, but only to plead that they not be conflated with interpretation. Conceptually, interpretation and reception studies are logically distinct activities.

Of course, in drawing this distinction, I do not mean to imply that interpreters have no relation whatsoever with audiences. I do not think that my interpretations reconstruct anyone's actual experience while viewing a film. But they may inform other people's experience subsequent to their consideration of my interpretations. That is, I hope that readers will test my interpretations in their encounters with the films I discuss, where this testing involves not only ascertaining whether my conjectures are objectively plausible attributions – given the work and its historical context – but also seeing whether it enhances their apprecia-

tive activity (their contemplation, comprehension, and understanding of the film and its features).¹³

For me, an interpreter is not an archivist of audience responses but a co-creator of appreciation (along with the filmmakers and their intended viewers). And that is the sentiment that underwrites my close analyses of individual films throughout this volume.

I have noted that my view is more like what David Bordwell has called interpretation as explication than other options. Like interpretation as explication, my approach (let us call it “interpretation as explanation”) contrasts with another current view of interpretation – what Bordwell labels symptomatic interpretation.¹⁴ I make this correlation because I think that my practice of interpretation, like interpretation as explication, tends to be holistic or organic or functional. I interpret features of films, for the most part, in light of their relation to hypotheses about the *unity* of the works in question. In this, I do not imagine that my interpretations account for every detail of the films I discuss (I am talking about *relative* unity, not totalized unity), nor do I claim that there may not be other (compatible) interpretations of the works I examine. But I do operate with a presumption that the films I examine are relatively unified, whereas symptomatic criticism, I think, presupposes that works are necessarily, essentially disunified – rent with contradictions, often ideological contradictions, that are submerged in the work, but that can be detected “against the grain.”

I have no doubt that some films are contradictory in this way. I have no principled argument against symptomatic interpretation. However, given the popularity of symptomatic interpretation nowadays, some readers may be tempted to think that symptomatic interpretation renders obsolete the holistic approach that people like me embrace. How can exegetes continue to operate with the presumption of unity after a brush with the metaphysics of disunity? Shouldn't we all be symptomatic interpreters all of the time?

Symptomatic interpretation, it seems to me, has its origin in Claude Lévi-Strauss's discussion of myth.¹⁵ For Lévi-Strauss, the function of myth was to display the contradictions of a culture. This view of myth, then, was appropriated for art by theoreticians like Pierre Machery¹⁶ and Louis Althusser.¹⁷ They proposed that the function of artworks was to exhibit the contradictions within a society.

In a way, the initial move to symptomatic interpretation was aesthetically conservative. Artworks were still conceptualized as objects of contemplation, though what was contemplated was not the unity of the

work, but its disunity—the way in which the work symptomatically revealed the often repressed contradictions of the culture. Art, on this view, still maintained a privileged cultural position. Like an oracle, it spoke the truth, even if the artist him- or herself did not understand what was being said. The artwork displayed cultural contradictions for audiences—or at least critics—to track.

In this respect, art is still conceptualized as performing a positive service to the commonweal. This approach still regards art as a source of beneficial social value. Art discloses important social contradictions—often more by way of what the work unsuccessfully attempts strenuously to exclude than by what it underlines. These exclusions are thought of as *structuring absences*. They are symptoms. Interpreting artworks involves isolating these structuring absences—these symptoms of unsuccessfully coordinated purposes—and explaining their social significance.

Symptomatic criticism found its way into film studies through the influence of such seminal articles as “John Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln*” by the editors of *Cahiers du Cinema*.¹⁸ However, whereas symptomatic criticism originally seems to have cast art in a favorable light, in film studies, symptomatic criticism primarily empowered a hermeneutics of suspicion. Whereas Althusser placed art outside ideology, symptomatic critics in cinema studies regarded film as an instrument of ideology, including not only capitalist ideology, but sexism as well. Neither art nor film was privileged any longer. The function of each was presumed to be inherently ideological, dedicated to occluding pernicious contradictions from view. Symptomatic criticism, in turn, was a tool for unmasking these machinations.

Given the stridently political posture of film studies over the past two decades, symptomatic interpretation as a species of ideological criticism became the leading tendency. In this context, the presupposition that films were disunified assumed the status of a dominant heuristic. To demur from that assumption was taken to be either ontologically misguided or politically reactionary or, more likely, both. Symptomatic criticism, in other words, came to command priority over other forms of interpretation, both in terms of the construction of films as cultural objects, and in terms of critical/political practice.

In this regard, holistic interpretation can appear to be a throwback, both metaphysically and morally. Thus, for me to present a volume of essays explicitly committed to holistic interpretation at this late date will probably strike many film scholars as irretrievably retrograde. What, it

might be asked, can possibly justify an endorsement of holistic interpretation in the wake of symptomatic criticism?

Perhaps I can begin to answer that question by pointing out that holistic interpretation and symptomatic interpretation are not necessarily incompatible rivals. The reason for this, quite simply, is that even symptomatic criticism requires some measure of holistic interpretation. The symptomatic critic is not concerned simply with what is absent from a film or an artwork. For any given work, so much is absent. Simply to catalogue what is absent from a work would be virtually interminable as well as pointless and boring to boot. Reference to New Zealand is absent from *Spartacus*, but so what? The symptomatic critic is not interested in any old absence, but in *structuring absences*.

Yet how does one go about identifying structuring absences? Obviously by determining the overall direction or tendency (generally thematic) of a film in order to detect the countervailing tendencies that the work aspires to mask. But that, of course, involves holistic interpretation, and the assumption of some relative unity in the work. In order to interpret against the grain, one needs to find the grain in the first place. And holistic interpretation is indispensable to this end. Thus, symptomatic interpretation cannot be thought to undermine the prospects of holistic interpretation entirely, since holistic interpretation – to an important degree – is material to the practice of symptomatic interpretation. A taste for symptomatic interpretation does not banish the need for holistic interpretation. Actually, it requires a measure of holistic interpretation.

Moreover, this is a result that should have been expected. As H. G. Gadamer has argued persuasively, all interpretation is holistic in the sense that it strives to establish reflective equilibrium in the movement from part to whole and back again.¹⁹ To interpret a feature or a fragment of a work invokes hypotheses about the whole (or, at least, larger segments of the work) at the same time that a conception of larger complexes is built up from the interpretations of fragments. As George Wilson puts it, we must develop a “reiterated sense of the holistic character of all interpretive work.”²⁰ In this respect, holistic interpretation is conceptually prior to other sorts of interpretation. A proclivity for symptomatic interpretation does not preclude holistic interpretation, for the simple reason that symptomatic interpretation itself cannot do altogether without holistic interpretation.

Though I claim that holistic interpretation is, in a certain sense, logically prior to symptomatic interpretation, it is also the case that I do not think it precludes symptomatic interpretation across the board.