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978-0-521-10791-4 - Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture

Paul Coates

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Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture analyzes the contradictions and interaction between high and low art, with particular reference to Hollywood and European cinema. Written in the essayistic, speculative tradition of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, this study also includes analyses of several key films of the 1980s. Tracing the boundaries of such genres as film noir, science fiction and melodrama, it demonstrates how these genres were radically expanded by such filmmakers as Neil Jordan, Chris Marker and Georges Franju. This work also reflects on kitsch, the star system, racial and gender stereotypes and the nature of audience participation. While defining the conditions under which the symbiotic relationship between high and mass culture can be cross-fertilizing, the study stresses their inevitably contradictory characteristics.

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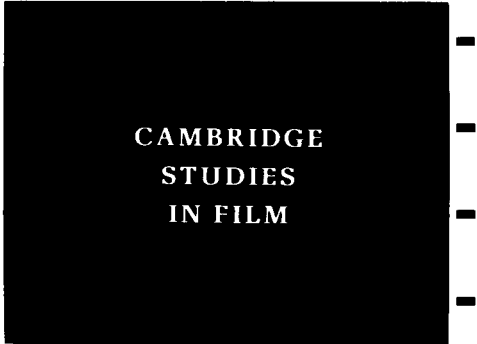
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In dreams begins responsibility.

W. B. Yeats

**We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare.**

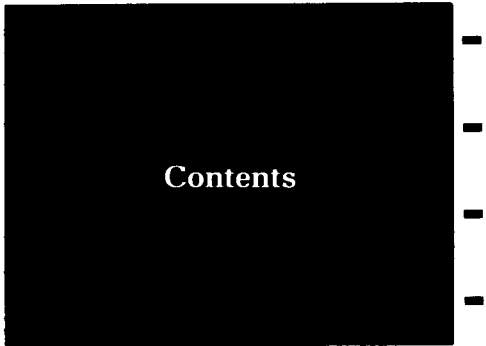
W. B. Yeats

Genuine responsibility only occurs where there is real responding.

Martin Buber

Trash has given us an appetite for art.

Pauline Kael



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Two quotations from Yeats provide epigraphs for this book. One defines dream as the source of responsibility; the other evokes the brutalizing effects of fantasies. They may be aligned with two common modes of discourse concerning cinema. On the one hand, the metaphor of dream has been a constant of writing on film, from its earliest impressionism to the psychoanalytically influenced scientism of Christian Metz or Alexander Kluge's proposal (itself the echo of a thesis of Bazin or Adorno) that cinema has been with us for thousands of years as mental association and only now has assumed the concrete form of a mechanism. But there is also the tradition that sees celluloid as a factory product, unrolling unilaterally over an exploited audience. Genre, an assembly-line article, overrides individual makers and receivers (and then, when genre falters, individual films become genres in themselves, or the constant factor is the recurrent descent to earth of a 'star' who transcends any narrative he or she may traverse). If the work that brutalizes does so through lack of individuality – nobody's child, it could so easily have been aborted – then the recipe for dreams that yield responsibilities is individualization, poetic mediation. At the same time, however, generic formulae fulfil the useful function of counteracting the intensifying hermeticism attendant upon the individualism of modern art. Thus, this book argues a case for works that tune in to the wavelength of an existing genre and then overlay it with different signals: the adoption of genre is an implicit critique of individualism, while the very strength of the individuality of the artist irrigates the desert of the merely generic. (Following the logic whereby all cultures spin their opposites from within themselves, in order to achieve the status of a self-enclosed world, American individualism automatically generates machine-tooled collectivism as its own antidote.) Generic wavelengths deliver a public; reprogramming practises enlightening metacritique of the genre. Form needs matter, and high culture ascends by standing on the shoulders of the low. Where genre is sick, one can be sure that high art is also.

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The essays collected here pair examples of a genre or topos of popular culture with works that dislocate them into dream. If the upshot is in the main a juxtaposition of American genres and European directors, the fault is less in American directors than in the working conditions that devastate their dreams. After all, the films of Welles, Altman and Scorsese are often as liberating as the science fiction (SF) of Marker or Tarkovsky, the *roman policier* of Truffaut or Franju's melodrama. The careers of these three Americans indicate how the deck is stacked against the American director who seeks to enrich fantasy. The extent of the lodes still untapped in apparently defunct, abandoned genres is apparent, for instance, in Truffaut's *Shoot the Pianist*, which exhilarates in its swooping descent into the imaginary of mass culture. Its scarred protagonist Charlie (Charles Aznavour) is a concert pianist who retreats to bistro playing after his wife's suicide. He is, however, no *mise-en-abîme* image of Truffaut himself. Charlie cannot combine high and low: he is either a bistro player or a concert hall lion. Truffaut, on the other hand, can slide playfully in and out of B-movie clichés; to be exclusively one thing or the other would be a nightmare for him.

It may be that in Truffaut's case distance from Hollywood is magical protection against it. The American who assays reworking of Hollywood's schemata may think he is bending it to his will and himself be doing all the bending. Such is the case in Scorsese's *Cape Fear*, a remake of a 1962 thriller, in which an ex-con terrorizes the lawyer who failed to defend him 'zealously', as his oath had required. Scorsese talks of having made a two-tier work, potentially receptive to a double audience, whose thriller surface harbours depths at which Max Cady (Robert De Niro), the ex-con, is a dark angel dispatched to induce his victim's repentance. Cady himself voices this view when he tells the lawyer (Nick Nolte) to look up the biblical book sandwiched between Esther and Psalms. But the narrative as surely invalidates Scorsese's subtheme as it destroys Cady. Placed in Cady's mouth, the theme becomes a mere strand in his characterization as crazy cracker zealot. Since no supernatural curtain is raised, as it is in the first chapter of Job, to reveal the hidden engines of events, we can only assume there is no other dimension. The film may deliver thriller shocks, but the technique is crude, with door slams synchronized to cuts, lighting overblown and a conventionally tingling score that has none of the contrapuntal inventiveness with which rock is used in Scorsese's *Mean Streets*. (Why not employ, say, the Stones' 'Sympathy for the Devil', as the early De Palma might have done?) There is even product placement: Pepto Bismol prominently mixed with whiskey by the private investigator the lawyer hires. The rancid, leering quality of De Niro's ex-con can indeed give one goose bumps, but the plot is concerned more

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with his elimination than with his comprehension. The stray hints of his otherworldliness (a bus passes his car and the car vanishes, enigmas surround his mode of access to the lawyer's house) are coy and opportunistic, degrading the supernatural into a source of momentary frisson. As often, there is no criminal more dangerous than a lower-class autodidact. The irony is that our mechanisms for pushing him down may make him bob back up: his eerie knowledge does not stem from any status as exterminating angel but from the lengthy prison spell during which he learned to read. The threat is that the outsider might discover the things whose knowledge enables us to keep him down – with the lawyer the scapegoat suffering on our behalf. The uncanny unknown is really the working class. But – as in *The Silence of the Lambs* – the real horror is to watch a gifted director immolate himself on the altar of sensational demand and self-delusion.

To pair a genre with its dreamlike dislocation is to create a double exposure. Doubly exposed images are rich in the mysterious rightness and inevitability of an *arbitrary* interpenetration of two worlds. They fuse like Siamese twins – the feelings of the one seeping into the other. The essential rightness of the two worlds' mysterious encounter lies in its revelation of the unity of the two worlds we all inhabit (male and female, rich and poor, dark and light, individual and collective and so on). The double exposure, however, prefigures reconciliation as obscurely as all prophetic speech. The reconciliation this book seeks, meanwhile, is one between the academic and the reviewer, theorist and critic: figures so often polarized so combatively in recent years. A double exposure itself, it brings together two worlds (the two sides of my own personality): with something for everyone, it may well fully please no one. For its gesture is arguably useless without a larger forum; its use may be in pointing to the utopian common space between theorist and critic. Yet such a space is more necessary than utopian: necessary to overcome film culture's division between brutal stampedes for deadlines and hermetic irrelevance on sidelines. All too often the rhythms of industry self-promotion render the critic the film's conduit, as is most signally the case at those events where film culture reveals its identity with barbarism – the festivals. Conspicuous consumption unseats aesthetic response, and lemming-like rushes to judgement generate hysterical phrase making. The theorist, meanwhile, frustratedly espousing marginalized works, seeks consolation in litanies of fetish words and retreats to an academy in which publishing matters more than gaining and persuading readers. Hence, although this book situates itself between the rival claims of theory and criticism, its author does not imagine he has resolved the dilemma. His primary hope is that readers lured by the bait of familiar fantasies may discover that they're not in Kansas anymore, as the colour control

knob – the power of great directors' refigurations of often-hackneyed forms – floods the grey road with yellow (or green ...), introducing them to a magical place. It is Pauline Kael's hope, expressed in another of my epigraphs, that trash can give us an appetite for art.¹

To argue the value of refigured genre, however, is not to advocate the postmodern pastiche that reproduces genre in the form of plastic death-mask, using knowing inverted commas to broadcast superiority to its prototype. It is not to advocate the value of a *Miller's Crossing*. Close consideration of the works that most interest me (*Solaris*, *La Jetée*, *A Short Film about Love*) should indicate that the fruitful use of convention is one that destroys it from within, living on its meat before emerging, transfigured, from the hollowed-out shell. It is not the knowing and external fossilization performed by pastiche, with its ignorance of the emotional resources secreted within genre. These transformations of genre may be likened to the lucid dreams psychologists elicit to dispel traumas. Nightmare victims can be taught to plan before sleep to break the dream's stranglehold by acting differently in the dream or telling themselves as it unfolds that they are only dreaming. Genres, like nightmares, are structures of repetition. The film-makers who interest me dream the dream and yet change it, stripping it of the predictability that is the hallmark of the syndrome.

Since each genre is part of a system whose division of the world loses that world through its apparent conquest (reality's ichor bleeding away in the gaps between its disjecta membra), the project of deepening genre involves reinserting the whole – the world – into the part. It entails a realization that each part is a world. Since this is a paradoxical undertaking, it is hardly surprising that the films that do so often teem with conundrum. Inserting the whole into the part may also be described as an effort to bring back home to the United States the Europe it thinks it has left behind. Were this to be achieved, responsibility would cease to connote the banal and boring, TV movie mediocrity. The sheer pervasiveness of the ideology of irresponsibility can be seen in the way it has seeped into the recent work of Scorsese, causing the complex dialectic of religion and escapism that made *Mean Streets* so compelling to collapse (and so one has the dream that self-deludedly masks its status as dream – the exhilaration of pure stoned fantasy in the bravura of the amazing, dubious *Goodfellas*). But if American film's industrial conditions represent the future towards which inevitable forces impel us, as so many commentators contend, injection of an element known as 'the European' is no more an instant panacea now than it was for Henry James. The difference is simply that the relative independence from conglomerate influence enjoyed by the cultural sphere in Europe permits airholes of freedom that directors utilize with various degrees of success. Just how much can be achieved, how-

ever, is apparent from such series as Reitz's *Heimat* or Kiesłowski's *Decalogue*.

In the context of consideration of part–whole relations, it may be worth dwelling for a moment on the word 'culture' – a term whose slipperiness bestows on it the status of what Freud would have termed a 'primal word', a keyword that conducts social contradictions, a locus of apparent consensus covering confusion. In this case the ambiguity concerns hierarchical, part–whole relations, rather than any binary opposition. For the two senses of the word 'culture' designate, on the one hand, a whole (the anthropological view from without discerns 'a culture') and, on the other, a part ('culture', the part that justifies the whole or persists in antagonism with it, a redeeming antibody the whole treats as a virus and banishes to the museum). It is the word's ability to define a totality that causes the advocates of 'culture' – be they the more traditionalist appointed guardians of canons and the unashamedly 'high' or those who find culture's vitality in popular artefacts and responses – to promote their favoured part as worth more than the whole or as the utopian image of an unrealized or impossible totality (the poet's legislation of the world passes unacknowledged).

The preceding two paragraphs should have indicated the extent to which this book is a multilevelled meditation on part–whole relations. Its method is essayistic. This may appear both paradoxical and provocative. After all, is not the essay the fruit of an exploded, primitively premethodological impressionism? One may wonder, however, to what degree an object – in this case, the work of art – may be comprehended by an observer who lacks the sort of sympathy for it the essay displays. The effort to pluck out the heart of the mystery piquantly pursues a scientism long abandoned by science itself. Among other things, this book argues that it is far more scientific to present one's individual perceptions as such than to elevate them into systems. This is not to advocate individualism and connoisseurship, but to seek to allow the object to speak ventriloquially through one's own words: to enable it, as it were, to speak a foreign language. 'In actuality, the thinker does not think but makes himself the arena of intellectual experience', as Adorno notes in his apologia for the essay.² If totalities – glimpses of a system – are present in this book, they are *mise-en-abîme* images secreted in the corners of its parts. The whole is present only in the miniature image of the DNA spiral: it is a whole that has not been unfolded wholly. It is not obscurantism but tact, respect for the reader, that weaves a figure into the carpet. The vision of totality is momentary and unbidden; the methodical trudge up the mountainside in no way guarantees exhilaration, or even visibility, on reaching the summit.

The essayistic method of this book focuses on details, hopefully sig-

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nificant ones, which can be read as allegories of the whole. The speculations and apparent farfetchedness of the essay recognize the degree to which significant details become so through the ghostly presence within them of that which seems to have been voided from them, the rest of the work, the oeuvre, the career. Such moments totalize the apparent whole of which they are part. They are its negative imprints: even as they reflect it they reshape it, like the glass that both distils and curves the surrounding room in Kieślowski's *Short Film about Love*. To locate significant detail is the critical task. Hence, the difference between works of 'popular' and ones of 'high' culture may well be one between varieties of part-whole relations. In the work of high culture, the part crystallizes themes and stylistic features that radiate from it across the entire work. In the work of popular culture, the part represents a lost possibility, an open door the rest of the work, or the star's career, failed to pass through, for a multiplicity of reasons. These moments do not so much redeem a work as offer the possibility of its redemption. They will be happy accidents that are not then – as in surrealism – employed as the basis for new aesthetic laws, but pass ignored or suffer diffusion in the form of degradation. One may think of Karloff's Frankenstein (who comes into his own belatedly in *The Spirit of the Beehive*), Monroe's persona or that marvellous figure trapped not so much in a computer as in the banal schemata of an investigative reporting thriller – Max Headroom, the appalling legless Beckettian comedian turned into a parrot, a mere Coke front man.

The combinatory calculation of mass culture blinds it to the non-arbitrary nature of the few successful images its turning kaleidoscope yields. Each one of these images is what Benjamin termed a 'revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past'.³ But the critic's role is less violent and desperate than Benjamin contends: he or she does not so much blast something clear of the past as calmly remove it, a stone that has already worked itself loose; the critic underscores its nonidentity with its context. To practise such a form of criticism is to demand, like Pauline Kael, that a movie 'be totally informed by the kind of pleasure we have been taking from bits and pieces of movies'.⁴ Her conclusion is that 'if we've grown up at the movies we know that good work is continuous not with the academic, respectable tradition but with the glimpses of something good in trash'.⁵ The slivers embedded in trash reflect the light of the suns of the great works. And praise of those works should not be stinted, meanwhile, for fear of elitism: the ideal community the great work posits has never existed. The great works are not yet a secure canon; they have not yet come into their own. To use appreciation of 'high' culture as a badge of social belonging is to traduce their truly humanitarian promise. To accuse great

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works of elitism is to swallow the lies of the elite, for when the lights go down they promise a dream that will both unify crowds and whisper secrets to each and every one of their members. Only a profound sense of responsibility could realize so overwhelming a dream.

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