Studying the film text

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The film text and film form

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Defining the film text

What do we mean when we talk about a film? The answers to this apparently straightforward question are not simple, not at all based in common sense, and go to the heart of the complexities of the institutions, the practices, and the viewing of movies.

The terms themselves suggest our uncertainties. Cinema, as Christian Metz (1977/1982: 5–9) suggests, implies the entire institution of filmmaking, film distribution, film exhibition, and film viewing. In England, the cinema usually refers to the place where a film is shown. In the United States, 'movies' replaces 'cinema', and the word 'film' is reserved for serious intent. In Hollywood, the people who make films sometimes call them 'pictures', and once referred to them (some still do) as 'shows'.

Is everyone talking about the same thing? And what is the 'thing'? As we try to untangle a definition of the film text, I will use 'film' instead of 'movie' (reserving my right to be serious) and will try to restrict the term

'cinema' to Metz's definition of the encompassing institution of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. But that will be the easiest part of the untangling process. Film and the cinema are such a regular part of our lives, that defining, differentiating, and analysing them are not only difficult, but also difficult for many people to accept. Indeed, there are some things we would rather were left alone, and the movies are one of them. The preference to think of a film as a kind of self-constructed presence, full of story, characters, and emotion, is strong. A film is there, complete, full, and waiting for our gaze. Why make it more difficult than it appears? Precisely because it appears so simple and because the influence of film on our lives is so great.

Our first response to the question 'What is a film?' might be: 'A film is what we see when we go to the cinema (or the movies) or watch a videocassette or a television broadcast of a film'. A direct enough response, but one that actually responds to different things. Or, more appropriately, different, but closely

related, texts. We can define a text as a coherent, delimited, comprehensible structure of meaning. A text is something that contains a complex of events (images, words, sounds) that are related to each other within a context, which can be a story or narrative. All of the parts of a text cohere, work together towards a common goal of telling us something. In ordinary parlance, a text is also something physical, like a novel or a book of poems. We all know about a textbook. But a painting is also a text. So is a television show, and the entire process of watching television. In fact, any event that makes meaning can be called a text if we can isolate and define its outside boundaries and its internal structure—and our responses to it (for a text to be completed, it must be seen, read, heard by someone). If we think of this in relation to a film, we begin to see how hard it is to define the film text—or texts—which are physical, narrative, economic, and cultural, and which include production, distribution, exhibition, and viewing.

The physical presence of a film constitutes one aspect of film's textuality: the five or six reels of 35mm plastic ribbon containing photographic images that are projected onto the screen in the theatre, or the videocassette we rent from the video store with its hundreds of feet of magnetized plastic coating contained in the cassette. A videocassette shown on a television set is not the same as the theatrical screening of a 35mm print. On the most obvious level, the conditions of its viewing are not the same. The kind of concentration made possible in a darkened cinema where a high-resolution image is projected on the screen is not the same as the bright busy living-room, or the comfort of the bedroom, where a small, low-resolution image is projected from behind onto a cathode ray tube. The image and the ways in which we attend to it are different. The television or videotaped image are not only smaller, but also more square. The sides of the image are lost on most transfers of film to video (almost two-thirds of the image if the original was filmed in anamorphic wide screen and then 'pan and scanned' for videotape). The difference in size, resolution, and response creates a different textual construction for televisual as opposed to theatrical viewing.

We can extend these differences further. In theatrical exhibition the size, proportion, and resolution of the film image are no longer under the control of the filmmakers or the audience. They are controlled by the physical circumstances, resources, and commitment of the exhibitor. For a number of years the size of the screen in any given theatre has been determined by the size of the theatre, not by a standard ratio for recording and projecting the image. While a standard ratio did exist from the early 1930s to the early 1950s, the advent of different widescreen formats, the small shopping-mall theatre, the need to compose the image ultimately to fit on television, makes image size and composition inexact and undependable for any given film. The film text, in its physical, visible sense, is therefore subject to architecture, to theatre management, to the exigencies of broadcast and videotape conventions. Almost every videotape released in the United States comes with two warnings: one from the FBI, warning us about copyright restrictions; the other telling us that 'this film has been formatted to fit your television'. Physical textuality, like so much else in the creation and reception of film, is subject to external forces that make it difficult for us to define it as some essential, unchanging thing.

Ultimately, the physicality of film, even the forms of its projection, are less important than the effect it has when we view it. Watching a film is more than any of its physical parts: it is an event that occurs when the physical thing becomes activated by human perception through some kind of projection or broadcast. As soon as a thinking, feeling person is present—viewing the film—that person's experience is brought to bear on the film's images, sounds, and narrative. The viewer's experience is itself informed by the culture in which he or she lives. A person's beliefs, understandings, and values are all activated within the context of film viewing. That is true for the people who created the film as well. They, too, are a major part of the text. Their beliefs, their understanding of what a film should or should not be, the economic constraints that allow them to say and do only so much in any given film— these become textualized.

Is this any different from our contact with other works of the imagination? The German critic Walter Benjamin, wrote in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' that film is unique among the arts because of the fact that it is not unique. Of all the arts, Benjamin wrote, film is without 'aura', without the singularity of the immediate experience of an artefact uniquely connected with a singular human creative imagination. Film seems to have no origin; it is there, whole and complete, ready for our enjoyment or the enjoyment of anyone else with the price of admission, a monthly cable fee, or money for rental. For Benjamin, film's lack of aura, lack of forbidding

uniqueness, and its ease of access makes it the most social and communal of the arts. Film addresses the world, pierces through the realities of daily life like a surgeon's knife (1936/1969: 233) and, by opening perceptions of the ordinary to the many, holds the possibility of engaging an audience in a social and cultural discourse, a mass engagement of the imagination unlike any other art form. (Benjamin also made it clear that film runs the risk of forging an authoritarian assent to the dominant ideology.)

The textuality of film is therefore different from a novel or a painting. Less personal, but more accessible. Neither unique nor intimate, yet closer to the world most of us live in, engaged in its dailiness, and powerfully in touch with the social. The text without aura becomes the text that resonates across many fields and many consciousnesses. In any film we are witness to a rich and often conflicting structure of imaginative, cultural, economic, and ideological events. Because most films are made for profit, they attempt to speak to the largest number of people, and by so doing have to appeal to what their makers believe are the most common and acceptable beliefs of a potential audience. But audiences often respond in ways the filmmakers don't expect. The result is that the film text often lies at a nexus of expectation and response, of cultural belief and individual resistance. It is available and legible to many interpreters, whose responses are themselves part of its very textuality and form.

The film text and authenticity

Textuality and form include questions about 'authenticity'. Benjamin's concept of the work without aura suggests that film removes authenticity from its text. However, despite Benjamin's argument about the loss of aura, actual people do make films. But given the collaborative and commercial basis of filmmaking—so different from the individual creativity attributed to the traditional arts—the creative authority of the filmic text has been at the core of theoretical and historical debate.

One part of the debate involves the ability to find and identify authoritative texts for early cinema that would enable us to create a reliable history of early film. It is estimated that almost 75 per cent of the films made before and just after the turn of the century no longer exist. Those that do exist, from the early twentieth century up to the teens, are in questionable, often inauthentic forms. For example, Edward S. Porter's *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903) has been regarded as one of the earliest films to intercut different scenes for the sake of narrative complexity.

One of the first films to intercut different scenes— Porter's *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903)

Recently, it was discovered that the print with the inter-cut scenes (we will discuss intercutting and cross-cutting a bit further on) may have been put together years later by distributors. The speculation is that the original version of *The Life of an American Fireman* may have been constructed with less cross-cutting, depending more on a succession of shots, which was the norm of the period (Gaudreault 1990). We do know that Porter's other famous film, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), went out to distributors with a shot that showed one of the train robbers pointing his gun at the camera and firing. The film exhibitor was given the choice whether to put that shot at the beginning or the end of the film. This ability of the distributor and exhibitor to alter a film parallels the contemporary problem we spoke of earlier, in which the size of the theatre or television screen determines the look of the film.

As we move forward in film history, the authenticity of the early film text becomes closely related to the personality of the filmmaker. Eric von Stroheim's *Greed* (1925) was brutally cut by MGM. Stroheim's authority over his production was compromised when Irving Thalberg, head of production at MGM, refused to distribute Stroheim's original ten-hour cut. Thalberg caused *Greed* to be trimmed to two hours and destroyed the rest. Stroheim's film, and his career as director, were all but destroyed as well. Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), perhaps the most infamous example of an inauthentic text, was removed from Welles's control before it was edited. The studio, RKO, reshot portions of it, changed the ending, and—as MGM did with *Greed*—destroyed the deleted footage. In both cases studio policy, personal dissension, and economic determinants conflicted sharply with the artistic endeavours of the filmmaker.

What is the authoritative text of *Greed* or *The Magnificent Ambersons*: the films Stroheim and Welles made, or the films released by their studios? These are egregious examples of a perpetual problem, which is intimately connected to the question of authorship. The assumption of auteur theory, for example, has been that we can identify the text with a person—the director. In doing so, it is argued, we can not only discover the authoritative boundaries that give a personal, textual legitimacy to a film, but authorize our reading of the film as well. But the auteur theory—especially as applied to American film—has been based more on desire than fact. The reality is that the texts of classical American studio cinema were and are only rarely the products of an individual imagination,

and the director's job was primarily to transfer the script to film: to make the shots and to coach the actors. In the end, the producer and studio head had the final say on how the film looked.

Because it is so intensely a public, commercial art, film is authorized—or textualized—from a number of directions. No one person or event determines it. During the studio period, a film emerged from the collective work of a large staff under contract. Today a film is often conceived by a scriptwriter who, with the help of an agent, sells his or her idea to a studio. The agent plays a key role, brokering actors and director. During these initial periods of conception and selling, many decisions about narrative, characterization, and commercial appeal are made. Also during this period intense economic negotiations are carried on in an attempt to sell the film to a studio. The shooting of the film by the director may involve some cinematic experiment, but, more often than not, because of budgetary and scheduling restrictions, standard, conventional storytelling techniques predominate, as they will have during the scriptwriting process.

A film is made for an audience and will survive only as far as an audience finds it acceptable. Therefore, the creation of a film is, in part, a structure of educated guesswork and creative repetition. If audiences responded well to certain structures, stories, and characters in the past, they should be (most filmmakers believe) repeated, with some variation, in the new work. When that work is finished, the audience is put into negotiation with it. (During the studio days that negotiation process was fairly immediate, as studio executives and the filmmakers went to suburban Los Angeles theatres to watch a pre-release screening of their current film, and would then make changes to it, depending upon the audience's response.) The negotiation process includes film reviews, familiarity with and responsiveness to the film's stars, resonance with the narrative content of the film, willingness to accept the inevitable exploitation of sexuality and violence that are the major components of most films.

The textuality of a film therefore becomes part of a resonant field of creation and response. It is a field that radiates from the film or videotape back to its making and forward into the environs of movie theatre or living-room. It confuses the safe categories of authentic and inauthentic versions, and calls upon the entire cultural surround of the viewer and its creators. It is encapsulated within other textual forms: the forms of production that drive the economy of a given culture

which is as responsible for the way a film is made, marketed, and received as is the work of any individual. In short, the ribbon of plastic that holds the images is only a part of a large structure of imagination, economics, politics, and ideology and of individuals and the culture as a whole.

Analysing the film text: the shot and the cut

The diverse critical approaches to the study of film reflect this complexity. But, no matter what the approach, it is now generally accepted that the film text is a plural, complex, simultaneously static and changing event, produced by the filmmakers who put it together and the audience members who view it. It is unified by certain established ways in which shots are made and edited together. These structures are as conventionalized as the stories they create. By examining the internal structure of film narrative, the way images are made and put together in order to tell us stories, we can discover a great deal of information about what films expect of us and we of them.

Analysis of the form of the cinematic text concentrates on the two basic building-blocks of film, the shot and the cut, and on the structure that comes into being when the film is assembled, the combination of shot and cut that is the finished film. The first element, the shot, is the photographic record made when film is exposed to light. The second comes into being when the shot is interrupted, when the camera is shut off, or when one piece of film is cut and then fastened to another piece of film during the editing process. The third element is the completed structure of image and editing that communicates the narrative (or overall shape of the film). It is the initializing constituent of the text as we have defined it: the complex interaction of film and audience, structure, content, context, and culture.

None of these formal elements are simple or uncontested. Controversy over the structure and importance of the shot and the cut, of the shot versus the cut, forms the bedrock of film theory. In the writings of Sergei Eisenstein and André Bazin, especially, and the work of a variety of filmmakers, belief in the priority of one element over the other has determined the way films are made and understood, at least outside of Hollywood.

Sergei Eisenstein was the great Soviet director of films such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *October* (1928), and *Ivan the Terrible* (1943). He theorized that the shot was only the raw material that the filmmaker used to construct the edifice of his film. For Eisenstein, a shot has no meaning until it is put in contention with another shot in a montage structure. Montage—a specific kind of editing—is constructed out of shots that affect one another in particular ways. One shot takes on meaning in relation to the shot that precedes and follows it. Spatial dynamics of the shot's composition, the length of the shot, the rhythm achieved when different shots of varying visual and thematic content are juxtaposed, all contribute to a carefully calculated 'montage of attractions'. For Eisenstein, montage was not merely the filmmaker's most important tool, but the sign of his aesthetic and political control. The shot, by itself, is inert, he believed. Making the shot (and, with the help of his cinematographer Edward Tisse, Eisenstein filmed powerful and dynamic compositions) was only craft. Turning the shot into a temporal structure of rhythmic, conflicting, kinetic montage was the director's art.

For Eisenstein, editing not only created a visual dynamism of conflicting forms, but it had the potential of being a cinematic equivalent of Karl Marx's theory of dialectical materialism. Through the interaction of form and content between shots, by the way one shot determined the meaning of the preceding or following shot, Eisenstein believed he could create a third thing, a dialectical synthesis of idea, emotion, perception, that would, in turn, create an intellectual perception of revolutionary history for the viewer. Montage, in short, was a tool that allowed the filmmaker to address history, as well as art, in a dialectical way.

Eisenstein believed so profoundly in the basic, driving aesthetic and ideological force of montage that he saw it developing in literature and the arts before film. Montage was an aesthetic event waiting to be politicized with the invention of cinema.

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André Bazin was not a filmmaker. A critic and film theorist who was active from the end of the Second World War until his death in 1958, he influenced a generation of directors and is considered to be the father of the French New Wave. Bazin's film aesthetic is directly opposed to Eisenstein's. For Bazin, editing was the destruction of cinematic form, indeed the destruction of the essence of cinema. For him, it is the shot, the unedited gaze of the camera onto the world before its lens, that constitutes cinema's aesthetic core. If Eisenstein's aesthetic was political at its root, Bazin's was religious and founded in the faith that the cinematic image could reveal the world in fact and spirit and confirm the temporal and spatial thereness of the world with the camera's meditative eye.

Editing, according to Bazin, denies that faith, because it cuts off the filmmaker's and the film viewer's opportunity to see into the wholeness and continuity of time and space. Editing is manipulative; it forces us to see what the filmmaker wants us to see. The shot is reverential. Political, too. An uninterrupted shot, preferably in deep focus (an effect of lens and lighting that makes everything in the composition, from the closest object in the frame to the farthest, appear to be equally clear) might create a kind of democracy of perception. The viewer would be free to pick and choose what to look at within the frame, rather than have the filmmaker pick out what he or she considers important by cutting and foregrounding specific faces or objects.

Bazin's cinema is painterly. It depends upon composition, lighting, and the profound revelatory effect of the camera's gaze. The construction of mise-en-scène—the complex articulation of space through composition, light, and movement—is pre-eminent

Does 'the long take reveal the world to the viewer', as Bazin suggests? Wyler's *The Best Years of our Lives* (1946)

in Bazin's theory. In fact, Bazin uses the example of painting to describe the prehistory of cinema, the early and ongoing urge of the imagination to preserve images of the world. In a sense, Eisenstein's is a painterly cinema too, a dynamic kinetic form analogous to Cubism and Russian Constructivism (an art movement contemporary with Eisenstein's filmmaking). The difference is that, for Bazin, the image and its complex construction is primary; so is the spectator's gaze, liberated to roam the image and connect its internal parts. Bazin asks the spectator to look and put the parts of the image together, to achieve understanding through contemplation. For Eisenstein, the viewer must respond to the invisible space that is created by images in conflict. The spectator responds to the dialectic of montage and the revolutionary history it articulates.

Eisenstein's concept of montage dominated film theory and some film practice for a brief period (the French avant-garde movement of the 1920s and the American documentarists of the 1930s) and then waned. Its only appearance in Hollywood cinema was through the work of an editor named Slavko Vorkapich, who created 'montage sequences' for such 1930s films as *San Francisco* (1936) and *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). The Bazinian aesthetic of the long take had a broader history and a powerful influence. Bazin looked to the work of Erich von Stroheim, F. W. Murnau, Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, William Wyler, and the films of the post-war Italian Neo-Realists (Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, especially) as examples of the cinema of the long take. The followers of Bazin, from Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut to Michelangelo Antonioni, Bernardo Bertolucci, the Greek director Theo Angelopoulos, and the British filmmaker Terence Davies (to name only a few), depend upon the complex gaze of the camera rather than editing to construct their mise-en-scène and, from it, their narrative. It can be said, with strong empirical evidence, that any filmmaker who sets out to make a film that is counter to the structure of the dominant Hollywood cinema turns not to Eisenstein, but to the cinema that Bazin applauded and championed, the cinema of the long take, of coherent mise-en-scène.

The concept of mise-en-scène attracted the attention of critics as well. *Cahiers du cinéma* (the French journal Bazin helped found), as well as the British journal *Movie*, along with writers such as V. F. Perkins and Raymond Durgnat, pursued the idea of the shot and its constituent parts as the defining elements of a film. In France, England, and the United States, study of mise-en-scène, hand in hand with the auteur theory, helped to found the field of cinema studies. A focus on mise-en-scène permitted an emphasis upon the elements of film that made it distinct from other narrative forms and was used to explain how images, through composition, camera movement, lighting, focus, and colour, generate narrative event and guide our perception through a film. Mise-en-scène analysis was also a way to connect personality, style, and meaning.

Mise-en-scène and auteur criticism were closely intertwined within the analysis of style, and style was often implicitly defined as the personal expression of mise-en-scène. When V. F. Perkins (1972: 84–5) for example, analyses the use of colour in Nicholas Ray's *Bigger than Life* (1956), or Terry Comito (1971) talks about the vertiginous horizon in Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958); when any number of critics define F. W. Murnau's use of moving camera, Otto Preminger's long takes, or Hitchcock's use of framing to describe his characters' states of mind, they are speaking of the ways in which the imagination of the auteur visualized their world in distinctly cinematic ways. Mise-en-scène criticism served many purposes: it helped concentrate the critical gaze on the formal structures of film; it explored the significance of style in a medium that few had ever considered capable of manifesting style; and it helped to determine a field—cinema studies— by proving that both artistic personality and style could exist in a mass art.

Like auteurism, mise-en-scène criticism was a useful construct, a way of building a critical discourse. Even as it helped define film form and structure, it was something of an evasion, for it tended to repress the realities of the dominant Hollywood cinema, whose forms construct most of the films we see. Because of its place of origin, this form has come to be known as the classical form of Hollywood cinema or, more simply, the continuity style. It is a remarkable form because of its persistence, its invisibility, and because we learn how to read it easily and without any more instruction than seeing the films themselves.

The continuity style

Eisensteinian montage and the long-take–deep-focus aesthetic advocated by Bazin are attention-drawing forms. They foreground cinematic structure and make them part of the narrative movement. They are intrusive in the sense that they make the viewer aware

of the meaning-making apparatus; they ask the viewer to look at the way the world is being observed and constructed cinematically. Despite Bazin's insistence that the long take reveals the world to the viewer, what more often happens is that it reveals the cinematic apparatus and its ways of looking. Montage, of course, is dynamic, intrusive: Eisenstein meant his moviemaking to have a shock effect, to raise the blood pressure and the intellectual temperature. He called it the 'kino fist'. The classical Hollywood style, on the other hand, asks that form be rendered invisible; that the viewer see only the presence of actors in an unfolding story that seems to be existing on its own; that the audience be embraced by that story, identify with it and its participants. Unlike montage and the long take, the continuity style was neither theorized nor analysed (not by the people who developed and used it, at least); its rules were developed intuitively and pragmatically through the early years of filmmaking. The continuity style developed because it worked, and its working was measured by the fact that it allowed filmmakers to make stories that audiences responded to with ease and with desire. They liked what they saw and wanted more. We want more still.

On the level of ideology, the classical Hollywood style is a capitalist version of Eisensteinian montage and a secular version of Bazin's deep-focus, long-take style. (Eisenstein recognized this, and in his essay 'Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today', wrote about how the Hollywood style spoke the ideology of Western capitalism.) It is the form that placates its audience, foregrounds story and characters, satisfies and creates a desire in the audience to see (and pay for) more of the same. It is also a form that is economical to reproduce. Once the basic methodology of shooting and editing a film became institutionalized—quite early in the twentieth century—it was easy to keep doing it that way. Although every studio during the classical period of Hollywood production (roughly between the late 1910s to the early 1950s) performed slight variations on the continuity style, its basics were constant and used by everyone. What this means is, when we talk about the classical style of Hollywood filmmaking, we are talking about more than aesthetics, but about a larger text of economics, politics, ideology, and stories—an economics of narrative. The Hollywood studio system, which was the central manufacturing arm of the continuity style, developed as many other manufacturing institutions did by rationalizing production, creating a division of labour, and discovering methods by means of which all production parts and personnel would be on hand and easily put into place in order to create a product attractive to the greatest number of people.

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Given the fact that the classical style developed prior to the studio system, we can speculate that the structures of narrative may have contributed to the rise of the economies of studio production. In other words, the development of a means to deliver narrative meaning through an economical visual construction created templates for the formation of an industrial mass production of narratives (Burch 1990). Early film consisted of a presentation of shots in series, each one of which showed something happening (as in the Lumière brothers' early film in which a train pulls into the station, or Edison's first efforts in which a shot showed a man sneezing or a couple kissing). Within a few years, during the turn of the century, such shots became edited together in the service of expressing stories. Georges Méliès made primitive narratives of a trip to the moon or a voyage under the sea in which different shots succeeded one another. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* reflects a more complex process in which parts of the narrative that are occurring simultaneously, but in different spatial locations, are placed one after the other (Gaudreault 1983). One site where the process of establishing the continuity style can be observed is the series of films made by D. W. Griffith for the Biograph Company from 1908 to 1913. Griffith made more than 400 short films during that period, and in them we can see the development of what would become the basic principles of continuity: an apparent seamlessness of storytelling; the movement of characters and story that appear to be flowing in an orderly, logical, linear progression, with the camera positioned in just the right place to capture the action without being obtrusive; and, perhaps most important of all, an authority of presentation and expression that elicits precisely the correct emotional response at precisely

the right moment, without showing the means by which the response is elicited.

The key to the continuity style is its self-effacement, its ability to show without showing itself, tell a story and make the storytelling disappear so that the story seems to be telling itself. This legerdemain was not a natural occurrence. The elements that came together to make it possible began as arbitrary, imaginative, and usually intuitive choices. In early cinema there were no rules and no groups that set the standards that would develop into the classical style. The only arbiters were directors like Porter and Griffith who tried things out, and audiences, who responded favourably to the experiments and their refinements.

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There are a few basic formal components that were developed by Griffith and others in the early 1910s that established the classical style. Narrative flow is pieced together out of small fragments of action in such a way that the piecing together goes unnoticed and the action appears continuous. Sequences that occur at the same time but in different places are intercut to create narrative tension. Dialogue sequences are constructed by a series of over-the-shoulder shots from one participant in the dialogue to the other. The gaze of the viewer is linked to the gaze of the main characters through a series of shots that show a character and then show what the character is looking at. The result of these constructions is that narrative proceeds in a straight trajectory through time. Any transitions that break linearity (flashbacks, for example) are carefully prepared for and all narrative threads are sewn together at the end. The spectator is called into the narrative and becomes part of the story's space (cf. Althusser 1977).

Griffith was instrumental in establishing cross- or intercutting as a primary narrative device. The literary equivalent of this device is the simple narrative transition—'meanwhile' or 'in another part of town' or 'later the same day'—and some films borrow these verbal clues through intertitles or voice-over narration. But

implying such transitions visually is more difficult. In early cinema there lurked the continual concern that such things would be misunderstood. Too much cutting would confuse or trouble the viewer. But these fears were rarely realized, and filmmakers as early as Edward Porter found that, as long as they contained some kind of narrative glue, scenes placed side by side would be understood as occurring either simultaneously, earlier, or later than one another. Shots of a woman held captive by a menacing male (or caught in some other dangerous situation) are intercut with shots of an heroic male figure purposively moving in a direction that has been established as that of the menaced woman. The result is quite legible: the man is coming to save the threatened woman. The pattern comes from nineteenth-century stage melodrama, but Griffith was imaginative enough to realize that film could stretch its spatial and temporal boundaries (Fell 1974). His audience was imaginative enough to accept the illusion and substitute the emotional reality (suspenseful expectation that the hero will conquer space and reach the heroine in time) for the formal reality (two sequences actually occurring one after the other on the film strip, each sequence constructed in the studio at different times). The pattern stretches out time and narrows space, providing the viewer with a way to enter the narrative and be affected by it. Gender is clearly marked as the woman—like the viewer—becomes the passive figure, waiting for salvation, and the male the active figure, redeemed by his heroism. (Griffith did reverse the roles in contemporary sequences of *Intolerance* (1916), in which a mother moves to save her imprisoned son awaiting execution.) Even less complicated *manœuvres* than the traversal of large areas of physical and narrative space required thought and practice. Take something as simple as getting a character out of a chair, on her feet, and out of the door. In the Biograph films, Griffith worked through the structuring of this movement until it became invisible.

What was the drive to develop such constructions? For one thing, they allow for a great manipulation of space and narrative rhythm. Much of very early cinema consisted of a kind of proscenium arch shot, the camera located at a point at which an imaginary spectator in an imaginary theatre would best see an overall gaze at the space in which events were taking place. This is a restrictive, monocular perspective, static and inflexible. But why create complex editing only to generate the illusion of a continuous movement? Eisenstein

didn't. He cut into temporal linearity and restructured it. He would return to a shot of a person falling, for example, at a slightly earlier point than when he left it, so that the inevitable action is retarded, time manipulated. In the famous plate-smashing sequence in *Potemkin*, the single act of an enraged sailor is broken into eight separate shots, each less than a second long, which extends the act and emphasizes the fury behind it. Even Griffith wasn't absolute in his own construction of linearity. In films during the Biograph period, and sometimes later, there are occasional sequences of people rising from chairs in which the second shot is earlier in the trajectory of action than the first, and the person appears as if he were getting up twice.

Despite Griffith's 'lapses' in the continuity cutting he helped develop, the development of continuity in the early 1910s continued to privilege an illusion of linearity and of unbroken movement across a series of edits. We can, finally, only speculate on the reasons after the fact. The continuity style developed as a way to present a story in forward progression, not as a way to look at how the story was created. It generated its own economy, in narrative as well as physical production. Filmmakers developed formal methods that made shooting relatively quick and easy: shoot whatever scenes are most economical to shoot at a given time (shoot out of sequence when necessary); cover any given sequence from as many different angles as possible and with multiple takes of each angle to give the producer and editor a lot of material to choose from; edit the material to create linear continuity, cut on movement, keep eyelines matched (maintaining the direction a person is gazing from one shot to the other). Make the story appear to tell itself as inexpensively and quickly as possible.

No more interesting and enduring examples of the continuity style can be found than in the cutting of basic dialogue sequences. Even before dialogue could be recorded on a soundtrack, the following pattern emerged: the dialogue begins with a two-shot of the participants in the scene. The cutting pattern then starts as a series of over-the-shoulder shots from one participant to the other. The pattern may be slightly altered. For example, shots of just one of the participants listening or talking may appear in the course of the sequence. But the main series of shots are over-the-shoulder cuts, back and forth, that conclude with a return to the original two-shot. A simple dialogue has, therefore, to be filmed many different times with numerous takes of the two-shot and the over-the-

shoulder set-ups. It sounds complicated, but the economies are clear. As a normative process, everyone concerned with the making of a film knows how to do it with dispatch. The use of over-the-shoulder shots means that one of the high-priced actors in the sequence does not have to be present all the time. A shot from behind the shoulder of a stand-in can be made to look just like a shot from behind the shoulder of the primary actor. The reverse shots of the over-the-shoulder sequence do not even have to be done in the same place! Cut together, keeping the eyelines matched, two spaces will look the same as one. The process results in many shots—many choices—available for the producer and the film editor to work with in a much less expensive environment than the studio floor. The result is standard patterns of narrative information, comprehensible to everyone from a technician in the studio to a member of the audience in the theatre.

And the process provides a unifying structure. This is its great paradox. The fragments of over-the-shoulder dialogue cutting, or any other part of the continuity style, create unity out of plurality, focus our gaze, suture us into the narrative flow and the space between the glances of the characters. Theories have been set forth that the constant cutting across the gazes of the characters slips us into their narrative space because we are continually asked by the cutting to expect something more. Someone looks, and we are primed to respond, 'What is the character looking at?' And the next shot inevitably tells us, by showing the person (or object) being looked at. This play of intercut gazes creates an irresistible imaginary world that seems to surround us with character and actions. It is as if the viewer becomes part of the text, reading the film and being read into it (Dayan 1992). It is this element of the irresistible, of desire and its satisfaction, that most clearly demonstrates the staying-power of the classical continuity style.

Alfred Hitchcock—to take one example—can create overwhelming emotions simply by cutting between a character looking and what the character is looking at. Early in *Vertigo* (1958), James Stewart's Scottie drives through the streets of San Francisco, following a woman he has been told is obsessed by someone long dead. The sequence is made up by a relatively simple series of shots and reverse shots. We see Scottie in his car driving, we see from his car window, as if from his point of view, Madeleine's car. She arrives at a museum. Scottie looks at her, Hitchcock cuts to a

point-of-view shot of her, looking at a painting, and being looked at by Scottie. She goes into a dark alley. Scottie follows, his gaze pursuing her to a door. As the door opens, and Scottie's gaze penetrates it, the darkness changes to a riot of colourful flowers in a flower shop. Throughout the sequence we see with Scottie, but see (as he does) only a mystery, which, we learn later, is not a mystery but a lie. The woman he follows is not the person he thinks she is: both he and the audience are fooled. The director uses elements of the classical style to manipulate our responses, to place us close to the gaze of the central character, which turns out to be seriously compromised. We identify with an illusion.

And as we identify with it, some of us want to discover how it has been constructed and perpetuated. Some of the most important work in recent film criticism has developed in the process of discovering the working of the classical Hollywood style. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985) is a massively detailed catalogue of the attributes of what its authors call 'an excessively obvious cinema'. Other writers have discovered that beneath or within this obviousness lies a complex form and structure, and a rich interplay between a film and the culture that spawns and nurtures it with its attention. Films speak to us and we respond with the price of admission or the rental of a video. Its articulateness is created through a narrative economy in which narrative, gesture, composition, lighting, and cutting are tightly coded so that we understand the intended meaning immediately.

But immediate comprehension often means simple assenting to the reproduction of gender and racial stereotypes. It is necessary, therefore, to analyse why we assent, to what we assent, and why we keep coming back for more. Theories of subject placement—how the viewer is fashioned by a film into a kind of ideal spectator who desires to see what is shown him or her on the screen—attempt to answer questions of how form creates attention, and attention fashions perception. Critics such as Dana Polan (1986) have investigated the tight links between culture and film, indicating how history and our responses to it make of film an ideological mirror and an engine of affirmation. Others, like Mary Ann Doane (1987), have probed in detail the interplay between the American style and our given ideas of gender; or they have read against the grain to point out how films can question the conventional wisdom if we look carefully and decode them with a knowing eye.

Much has been done and much remains. Attention needs to be paid to the minute particulars of the classical Hollywood style; more needs to be said about the way a gesture with a coffee cup, how a cut between two characters glancing at or away from each other, generate meaning. The economy of style of the classical form may present apparent obviousnesses, but it is in fact a structural shorthand, a code book that keeps critics and viewers attentive and attracted. In its very invisibility lie the structures of desire that make us want to see more and more.

Contesting the Hollywood style

The Hollywood style was and is the dominant style the world over. But there have been periods when some filmmakers consciously worked against its structures, rethinking its structural and semantic codes. These filmmakers favoured long takes (in the Bazinian manner), atemporal or non-linear narratives, and subject-matter that differed from the usual Hollywood stories of violence and melodrama. They called attention to their methods, exploited the possibilities of mise-en-scène, and asked viewers to become aware that form creates content; that stories don't exist without the telling of them.

One great period of such experimentation occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. Spawned by the French New Wave, extending to Italy, England, the United States, and then, in the 1970s, to Germany, the movement produced a body of work, and a series of imaginative filmmakers who, briefly, changed some basic assumptions of cinematic form. The results were a series of films that reconsidered American genre films in a form that stressed the long take and oblique cutting, an avoidance of classical continuity rules, and, in the case of French director Jean-Luc Godard, a cinema that questioned the form and content of the cinematic image itself. Godard and his contemporaries and followers—Alain Resnais in France; Michelangelo Antonioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, the early Bertolucci in Italy; Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the early Wim Wenders in Germany; Glauber Rocha in Brazil; the filmmakers of ICAIC (the Cuban film Institute) (to name only a few)—made films that took their own textuality as one of their subjects. They asked their viewers to think about the images they produced, the stories they told. Their films

questioned whether other images might be used, other stories be told. Many of these filmmakers worked in the tradition of the German playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht, who demanded that a work of art put the spectator in a speculative position, reveal its internal mechanisms, and show how the power of the imagination can work with or against the power of a culture's dominant ideology. Many of their films were passionately political, speaking the inquisitive and corrective voice of the left.

> **The Hollywood style was and is the dominant style the world over. But there have been periods when some filmmakers consciously worked against its structures, rethinking its structural and semantic codes.**

The structural principle of this modernist, reflexive movement was complexity and mediation, a recognition that the film image and its editorial structure are not givens, certainly not natural, but the constructions of convention. And what is made by convention can be questioned and altered. The over-the-shoulder cutting pattern, naturalized in the classical American style, is not necessary; and most of the filmmakers of this movement avoided it, using instead the Bazinian long take, which permitted the image to be interrogated, found false or adequate, but always only a representation. 'This is not a just image,' Godard says. 'It is just an image.'

Yet, no matter how much they used film as medium of exploration, these filmmakers kept referring to their base of American cinema. Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) is a radical meditation on the conventions of past and present tense in film editing, and a remake of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Antonioni, whose *L'avventura* (1960), *La notte* (1961), *L'Éclisse* (1962), *Red Desert* (1964), and *Blow-up* (1966) show an extraordinary commitment to the idea that filmic composition is an architectural form obeying its own rules of narrative logic, keeps playing his work off against the conventions of 1940s American melodrama. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the most Brechtian filmmaker after Godard, and the one director most committed to exploring the

working class, bases his interrogations of form on the 1950s American melodrama of Douglas Sirk. Through these approaches they take the classical style into account, respond to it, and, finally, honour it by recognizing it as their base. For better or for worse, the classical style has survived, and absorbed, all of the responses to it. Everything else stands, finally, in dialectical relationship to it. This static, dynamic, dominant, and absorptive textuality embraces the cultural surround and articulates the complexities of ideology. The film text becomes a rich and a complex event, reticent and boisterous, asking passivity from its viewers while provoking their desire, hiding itself while announcing its power in film after film.

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Written on the Wind

Robin Wood from Robin Wood: Film Studies at Warwick University Vision, 12 (Dec. 1974), 27–36.

One might talk about *Written on the Wind* (1957) in terms of fundamental American myth, the myth of lost innocence and purity: the characters of the film repeatedly look back to their collective childhood. Universal myth, perhaps, but deriving a particular meaning from the Virgin Land that has so rapidly become one of the most technologically advanced countries of the world. The nostalgic yearning for innocence has a markedly pastoral flavour: the characters, among their oil pumps and scarlet sports cars, long to return to 'the river', where they were happy (or think they were). The same myth, in the form of 'Rosebud', animates *Citizen Kane* (1941).

This might prove a useful starting-point for an exploration of more than *Written on the Wind*. One might develop an investigation of the film itself further by considering the genre within which it is situated: the Hollywood melodrama. Melodrama has proved a very difficult word to define (like so many such shifting, complex, dangerous terms— 'tragedy', 'sentimentality', 'classical', 'Romantic', etc.). It implies in this context, I take it, characters divided fairly markedly into 'good' and 'bad'; simplified issues; violent or extreme emotions; a reliance on rhetoric. 'Crude melodrama': the words often go together. One can ask— *Written on the Wind* might well prompt one to ask— whether crudeness is a necessary feature of melodrama. Certainly the forceful projection of violent feelings is, though that is also a feature common to many tragedies. One can see the simplification of issues and the powerful projection of emotion as a matter of cliché or vulgarity; one might also see it, in certain cases, as a reduction of things to essentials, the stripping away of the intricacies of personal psychology (though Sirk's film is not exactly lacking in that quarter) to reveal fundamental human drives in the most intense way possible.

Which set of terms should be applied to *Written on the Wind* can only be argued, I would claim, through close attention to the level of realization, or of style: the level at which the personal artist supervenes, the level at which, for the critic, considerations of national myth and genre must give place to a consideration of personal authorship. Certain elementary features of style belong more to the studio than to Sirk: notably the set design. Connoisseurs of Universal films will, for example, probably find the hallway and staircase somewhat familiar: they will have seen them in *Marnie* (1964), and perhaps in other Universal movies. But the extract we have seen contains striking stylistic features which can't be explained in this way; features that are not just functional, like the staircase, but determine our response and

aspire to the creation of the film's meaning. Certain of these features some might again want to label 'crude', though again they are capable of another description. Douglas Sirk was originally Danish, but settled for a time in Germany and made films there before he went to Hollywood. It can be argued that he inherited something of the tradition of German Expressionism (a tradition that other directors also— Lang, Hitchcock, Murnau—have found readily compatible with the Hollywood melodrama in one form or another), of which the central aim was the projection of emotional states by means of imagery: the use of the colour scarlet in *Written on the Wind* might be seen as having Expressionist derivation. Sirk also admired, and collaborated with, Bertolt Brecht, a writer who seems at first sight very far removed from the Hollywood melodrama. There is no room in the Hollywood genre movie for Brechtian alienation devices: the central aims are obviously incompatible, the tendency of the genre movie being to enclose the spectator in an emotional experience, the function of alienation devices being to detach him by means of interruptions. Alienation effects, one might say, can be sneaked into Hollywood movies only on condition that they cease to alienate (unless we bring to the films prior expectations of being 'alienated'). One can, however, see the extremeness of some of Sirk's effects as the result of a desire to break the audience's absorption in the narrative and force it to conscious awareness. In the drugstore at the start of the extract, there are not just one or two signs saying 'Drugs', they are suspended all over the shop to an extent that *almost* oversteps the bounds of the Hollywood demand for plausibility. How does one see this?—as part of the excesses of Hollywood melodrama?—as the legacy of Expressionism?—as derived from Brechtian alienation? The idea of a society drowning its awareness in alcohol (like the Stack character) or in drugs is central to the film.

Then there is the very loaded, obtrusive shot with the camera tracking out of the drugstore in front of Stack to reveal the boy on the wooden horse in the foreground. One can say many things about that: the decision to do it as a tracking shot instead of cutting to a close-up of the boy—the effect is to stress the connection (both psychological and symbolic) between Stack and the boy by uniting them in the frame, without loss of impact. There is then the question of what the boy signifies; and a device that may at first sight seem crude takes on surprising complexity. First, most obviously, the boy represents the son Stack has just learnt he will probably never have; second, the violent rocking–riding motion carries strong sexual overtones, and in Stack's mind the idea of sterility is clearly not distinct from that of impotence;

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third, the child takes up the recurrent idea of the characters' yearning for lost innocence—and for the unreflecting spontaneity and vitality that went with it—a central theme in the film. The child's expression and actions are very precisely judged: *we* see him as enjoying himself, yet we also see how, to Stack, his smile appears malicious, taunting. The obtrusiveness of the device is perhaps justifiable in terms of density of meaning.

It is impossible to leave this topic without reference to the use of colour. The film is built partly on colour contrasts: the strident scarlet associated with Dorothy Malone against the 'natural' greens and browns of Lauren Bacall. The use of scarlet is a beautiful example of the integration of 'Expressionist' effect within Hollywood's 'psychological realism': the glaring red of Dorothy Malone's phone, toenails, flowers, and car is explainable in psychological

terms as her rebellious assertion of herself in a drab world. The effect is again not simple: the red carries the simple traditional sense of the 'scarlet woman', certainly, but it also expresses vitality and powerful, if perverted, drives; it has positive as well as negative connotations within the world the film creates. I should like to single out two moments where colour is used particularly forcefully and expressively. One is the moment when the camera tracks forward towards Dorothy Malone's car, the whole screen fills with red, and the image dissolves to the *green* car in which Lauren Bacall is arriving for the arranged meeting with her already drunken husband. The use of the colour contrast combines with the technical device of the dissolve to create a complex significance (a significance *felt*, perhaps, rather than consciously apprehended, as we might experience effects in music): it contrasts the two women through the colours with which they are associated; it evokes the idea of

The curved staircase forms an integral part of the mise-en-scène in Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1957)

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simultaneity, suggesting the convergence of forces (which will culminate in the father's death); hence it links Dorothy Malone with her brother, underlining the parallels between them—his alcoholism, her nymphomania, the common cause (or complex of causes, at the centre of which is the Rock Hudson character, the film's apparent 'hero'). The second example is the dance, which employs not only scarlet but a particularly strident colour clash involving Dorothy Malone's cerise negligée. The dance itself is an extraordinary device for suggesting all those things that couldn't be shown on the screen in 1956, and which perhaps gain greater force from the partial suppression: sexual exhibitionism and masturbation (the use of Rock Hudson's photograph as a substitute for his physical presence being crucial to this scene and an indication of themes central to Sirk's cinema).

From the use of colour (and with this photograph still in mind), we might pass to another feature of Sirk's style that has elicited the word 'baroque': the use of mirrors and other glass surfaces. One might argue that this is merely decorative, but not that it is accidental: there are three striking shots involving mirrors. First, at the bar, when the camera swings left to show the characters reflected in the bar mirror. Second, when Robert Stack is brought home. Third, when Dorothy Malone is brought home (the parallel between her and her brother again 'musically' underlined), and, as she

passes, Rock Hudson is shown reflected in the hall mirror, watching her. There is also, related to this, the use of windows: repeatedly, Sirk shows characters as seen through glass. One can see this in various ways: the 'framing' of people who are trapped; the inability of people to help each other, each reduced to a glass surface that can't be penetrated; the unreality of the characters, who, trapped in their own fantasies, have become mere 'reflections' of human beings (Sirk's last film was called *Imitation of Life*, 1959).

Finally, I should talk briefly about what is the most difficult aspect of film to analyse. I suggested earlier an analogy with poetry; I hope to make this clearer rather than more obscure by adding to it the analogy with music. Sirk himself has said that his conscious model for *Written on the Wind* was Bach fugue. He talked about the acting as pared down to clean intersecting lines, like counterpoint. If *Written on the Wind* is a fugue for four voices, the sequence of the father's death is clearly the *stretto*. What I want to indicate is the obvious fact that film, like music, has a fixed duration. Hence the appropriateness to it of musical terms like 'tempo' and 'rhythm'. We still haven't found a way of talking satisfactorily about this 'musical' dimension, the direct effect of the *movement* of film on the senses, except in dangerously impressionistic terms. There is a lot of work to be done.

Citizen Kane

To write about *Citizen Kane* (1941) is to write about the cinema. It is impossible to think about this film without thinking about its place in film history. Most critics, despite Welles's own unhappy relations with Hollywood, have seen him primarily, implicitly within the framework of the American narrative cinema. Pauline Kael talks about the 1930s newspaper picture and builds up the role of Mankiewicz, a hard-core Hollywood scribe if ever there was one. Charles Higham talks of a 'wholly American work', Andrew Sarris of 'the American baroque', and they leave no doubt, I think, that, where the cinema is concerned, for them America = Hollywood. And, from the other side, an enemy

of Hollywood such as Noël Burch puts Welles in relation to Elia Kazan, Robert Aldrich, Joseph Losey, and Arthur Penn, and condemns *Kane* for simply displaying an amplification of traditional narrative codes which it does nothing to subvert.

Against this mainstream trend, of course, we have to set the massive influence of André Bazin. For Bazin, *Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) were crucial moments in the unfolding of the cinema's vocation of realism. Together with the work of Jean Renoir and William Wyler, *Kane* represented a rediscovery of the tradition of realism, lost since the

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silent epoch (Louis Feuillade, Erich von Stroheim, F. W. Murnau). *Kane* looked forward to Italian Neo-Realism and, had Bazin lived longer, his interest would surely have turned to cinéma verité and the new developments in documentary which followed the invention of magnetic tape, lightweight recorder and camera, and the tape join. (Indeed the strain of 'technological messianism' in Bazin's thought must surely have taken him in this direction).

For Bazin, of course, the crucial feature of *Citizen Kane* was its use of deep focus and the sequence shot. Yet one senses all the time, in Bazin's writings on Welles, an uneasy feeling that Welles was far from sharing the spiritual humility and self-effacement, or even the democratic mentality, which marked for Bazin the 'style without style', the abnegation of the artist before a reality whose meaning outruns that of any artefact. It is easy to forget that, on occasion, Bazin talked about the 'sadism' of Welles, of his *rubbery* space, stretched and distended, rebounding like a catapult in the face of the spectator. He compared Welles to El Greco (as well as the Flemish masters of deep focus) and commented on his 'infernal vision' and 'tyrannical objectivity'. But this awareness of Welles the stylist and manipulator did not deflect Bazin from his main point. Fundamentally, his enthusiasm was for the deep-focus cinematography which Welles and Gregg Toland introduced with such virtuosity. It was on this that Welles's place in film history would depend.

Yet a third current has been felt recently, again often more implicit than explicit. Putting together some remarks of Alain Robbe-Grillet, the article by Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier in *Poétique* and that by William van Wert in *Sub-Stance*, we can see how it is possible to place *Kane* as a forerunner of *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), a film which pointed the way towards the breakdown of unilinear narration and a Nietzschean denial of truth. It is in this sense too that we can understand Borges's praise of *Kane* as a 'labyrinth without a centre'. *Kane*'s perspectivism (leading so easily to nihilism), its complex pattern of nesting, overlapping, and conflicting narratives, put it in a particular tendency within the modern movement, which has its origins perhaps in Conrad or Faulkner and its most radical exponents in Pirandello and the further reaches of the French new novel.

And of course, this tendency, whose origins are in literature, has begun to spread into the cinema, especially in France, through the influence of writers—Marguerite Duras, Jean Cayrol, Robbe-Grillet—who have worked on films, even become filmmakers.

The oddest of these three versions of *Kane* is undoubtedly

Bazin's. So flexible, so generous in many respects, Bazin was nevertheless able at times to restrict and concentrate his vision to an amazing degree. Obviously he felt the influence of Expressionism (which he hated) on *Kane*, but he simply discounted it—or tried to justify it by pointing to the exaggeration and tension in the character of Kane, a kind of psychological realism, similar to the way in which he defended the expressionist style of a film about concentration camps. (In the same vein, Christian Metz remarks how the formal flamboyance of *Kane*, the film, parallels the flamboyant personality of Kane, the man.) In general, however, Bazin simply hurried on to his favourite theme—the importance of deep focus and the sequence shot.

The key concepts here for Bazin were those of spatial and temporal homogeneity and dramatic unity. It is almost as if the theatrical scene was the model for Bazin's theory of the cinema. Of course, he believed that filmed theatre should respect the scene and the stage. Beyond that, it seems he believed in a *theatrum mundi*, which it was the calling of the cinema to capture and record—there is a sense in which all cinema was for him filmed theatre, only in Neo-Realism, for instance, the world was a stage, the players were living their lives, and the dramatist, who gave meaning to the action, was God himself. No wonder then that, for him, the artist, in Annette Michelson's phrase, was 'artist as witness' and the whole of reality the offering of an 'Ultimate Spectacle'. Indeed, Bazin writes that in Italy daily life was a perpetual *commedia dell'arte* and describes the architecture of Italian towns and cities as being like a theatre set.

Bazin always laid great stress on the theatricality of Orson Welles. He saw Welles as a man of the theatre and talked about the sequence shot as a device for maintaining the primacy of the actor. 'An actor's performance loses its meaning, is drained of its dramatic blood like a severed limb, if it ceases to be kept in living, sensory contact with the other characters, and the setting. Moreover, as it lasts, the scene charges itself like a battery . . .'.

Basically Bazin justifies the sequence shot and deep focus for three reasons: it maintains the dramatic unity of a scene, it permits objects to have a residual being beyond the pure instrumentality demanded of them by the plot, and it allows the spectator a certain freedom of choice following the action. In *Kane* it was the first which was uppermost. The second was important to Bazin—he talks about the door-handle of Susan Alexander's bedroom, in the sequence after the suicide attempt, and goes on to describe the cold feel of copper, the copper or indented enamel of a door-handle,

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yet we must feel that this is his own projection, reverie almost (in the Bachelardian sense), which has little relevance to *Kane*. As for the third reason, Bazin recognizes that Welles directs the spectator's attention through lighting and movement as imperiously as any editor at times, but he remains aware of the potential ambiguity of the sequence shot and, of course, links this to the ambiguous portrayal of Kane's character.

Yet, with the advantage of hindsight, we can see that Bazin's love of the sequence shot has been strangely betrayed by the filmmakers who have subsequently used it. Who do we think of? Andy Warhol, Michael Snow, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Marie Straub, Miklós Jancsó. There are links of course—Straub reveres Bazin's hero, Bresson; Godard was deeply marked by Roberto Rossellini—but clearly the sequence shot has been used for purposes quite different from those which Bazin foresaw. Some of these filmmakers have stressed the autonomy of the camera and its own movement, rather than the primacy of the actors or the drama (Jancsó, Snow), others have used the sense of duration to de-realize the imaginary world of the film (Godard), others have been interested in duration as a formal feature in itself (Warhol). Straub, probably the closest to Bazin in his insistence on authenticity, on a refusal of guidance for the spectator's eye, has none the less put his Bazinian style to purposes very different from those Bazin himself could have envisaged.

It is worth noting that most of the sequence shots in *Citizen Kane* are, in fact, used in the framing story rather than the flashbacks, in the scenes in which Thompson talks to each of the interior narrators. The average length of a shot in *Citizen Kane* is not particularly long because of the number of short shots that exist both in the newsreel sequence and in the numerous montage sequences which Welles uses, mostly as transitions. The decision to use sequence shots in the framing story is clearly a decision not to use classical field reverse-field cutting, and thus to de-emphasize the role of Thompson, the narratee. Thompson only appears as a shadowy figure with his back to the camera. It is hard to separate decisions on length of shot and editing from decisions on narrative structure. By shooting Thompson in this way Welles precludes any spectator identification with the character who, from the point of view of information and focalization, is the spectator's representative in the film.

In the last analysis, what concerned Bazin was dramaturgy (even if, as with the Neo-Realists, he could speak of a 'dramaturgy of everyday life'), and he tended to assume the need for characters and a continuous narrative line. He

simply thought that psychological truth and dramatic configurations would reveal themselves more fully if there was a minimum of artistic intervention. He remained hostile throughout to experimental film (for him Stroheim was the great experimentalist and Welles, of course, can easily be perceived as an avatar of Stroheim) and thought of theatre and the novel as the models with which cinema should be compared. There too he tended to have conventional tastes—he aligns himself with Sartre's condemnation of Mauriac, but seems also to accept without question Sartre's positive tastes—Dos Passos, Faulkner, Hemingway—and clearly was not interested in the literary revolution inaugurated by Gertrude Stein and James Joyce.

Yet the example of contemporary filmmakers has shown that the long take and the sequence shot tend to undermine the primacy of the dramaturgy: duration becomes a stylistic feature in itself and, far from suppressing the filmmaking process, the sequence shot tends to foreground it. At most, the sequence shot can be associated with a Brechtian type of dramaturgy, based on tableaux. In fact this tendency can be seen even in *Citizen Kane*, where it is disguised by the movement in and out of the framing story and the complex character of the transition. Bazin thought that the principal function of the cut should be that of ellipsis, but, within the kind of rhythm built up by a series of long sequence shots, the cut automatically takes on a role as caesura rather than ellipsis alone.

Truffaut, always fundamentally a conservative critic—as he has shown himself to be a conservative filmmaker—has said that 'if *Citizen Kane* has aged, it is in its experimental aspects'. It seems to me that it is precisely the opposite which is true. All Welles's 'tricks', as they are often contemptuously called—the lightning mixes, the stills which come to life, the complex montages, the elasticity of perspective, the protracted dissolves, the low-angle camera movements, etc.—are what still gives the film any interest. Nobody, after all, has ever made high claims for its 'novelistic' content, its portrayal of Kane's psychology, its depiction of American society and politics in the first half of the twentieth century, its anatomy of love or power or wealth. Or, at any rate, there is no need to take such claims very seriously. It seems quite disproportionate for Noël Burch to submit them to his acute dissection and attack, as he himself seems to half-acknowledge.

Indeed, the 'pro-Hollywood' defence of *Kane* is quite pathetic in its lack of ambition (*Kane* after all, is widely held to be the greatest film ever made). Pauline Kael begins with hyperbole 'the one American talking picture that seems as

Citizen Kane **continued**

fresh now as the day it opened', but soon descends to dub *Kane*, in a famous phrase, 'a shallow work, a *shallow* masterpiece'. The shallowness does not worry her, however, because it is what makes *Kane* 'such an American triumph', and then we discover its triumph lies in 'the way it gets its laughs and makes its points'. Basically, she assimilates *Kane* to the tradition of the well-made Broadway play, translated into the 1930s comedy film, with all its astringency and sense of pace and fun. Other critics do not really claim much more: Charles Higham talks of a 'masterpiece', but also 'epic journalism'; once again, we get the insistence on the 'American' quality of Welles and *Kane*, ironic in the light of the original intention to call the film *The American*. Energy, grandeur, and emptiness.

The truth is that the 'content' of *Citizen Kane* cannot be taken too seriously. Yet it had an enormous impact—largely because of its virtuosity, its variety of formal devices and technical innovations and inventions. In themselves, of course, these are purely ornamental, and the dominant aesthetic of our age is one that rejects the concept of ornament—the ruling aesthetic of our day is one of expressionism or functionalism or symbolism or formalism, seen as a complex process of problem-solving rather than wit or decoration. Welles is usually described in terms of baroque or expressionism, sometimes the Gothic, but this

seems to reflect the ponderousness of his themes. His interest in formal devices and technical ingenuity puts him closer to mannerism, to a conscious appreciation of virtuosity and the desire to astonish.

It is this 'mannerist' aspect of Welles which still lives—not the dramatic unity which deep focus and the long take make possible, but the long take and deep focus as formal features in themselves. Similarly, it is not the theme of time, youth, memory, age, etc. which is of any interest, but the devices used to organize time within the film. Many of these point the way towards a quite different kind of use— contemporary filmmakers' variations on the long take, Robbe-Grillet's variations on the freeze frame–still. *Kane* remains an important film historically, not within the terms it set itself, or those within which it has been mainly seen by critics, but because, by a kind of retroactive causality, it is now possible to read there an entirely different film, one which Welles probably never intended. *Citizen Kane*, we can now say, was a milestone along the road which led, not to a reinvigoration of Hollywood, or a novelistic complication of narrative, or the unfolding of the realistic essence of film, but towards the expansion and elaboration of a formal poetic which would transform our concept of cinema entirely, towards film as a text which is a play with meaning rather than a vehicle for it.