

subjects and methodologies.<sup>62</sup> Film also proved highly assimilable to the existing schedule of teaching novels and plays: a film or two per week, lectures and discussions interpreting the film, assigned papers to probe further. These concrete historical factors led film studies to follow the interpretive path, constructing implicit or symptomatic meanings along lines already laid down in other humanistic disciplines.

Such historical forces cast doubt on any hypothesis that interpretation is merely an assortment of diverse practices. Throughout its history, interpretation has been a social activity, a process of thinking, writing, and speaking within institutions governed by norms. Biblical interpretation was overseen by Jewish and Christian communities. Philology developed largely out of a pressure to reconcile academic and religious approaches to Scripture. Psychoanalytical interpretation was conducted within the confines of a movement characterized by a firm hierarchical structure of master, disciples, and excommunicants. Studies in art history, literature, and allied fields are conducted according to protocols of academic inquiry. Interpreters may celebrate the unique insights of particular interpretations (the “humanistic” move) or gain comfort from the way practice appears to confirm theory (the “scientific” approach). Yet both attitudes usually ignore the extent to which social factors shape not only the interpretive outcome but the very notion of what shall count as an illuminating essay or a powerful theoretical demonstration. The institution sets the goals. The next chapter suggests some ways in which it does so, and what the consequences are for making films mean.

## 2

# Routines and Practices

Interpret and receive reward!

—*The Aggadab*

The concept of convention implies that a social group—broadly speaking, an institution—has an interest in defining common goals and regulating members’ actions accordingly. As a convention-bound activity, making films mean can be treated as an institutional process. I will consider film criticism, like criticism of other arts or media in this century, to be carried on within three “macroinstitutions”: journalism, essayistic writing, and academic scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Each one has its own characteristic “subinstitutions,” both formal and informal. Table 1 gives a simplified outline.

A sociological study is beyond my abilities, but it should be clear that each of the factors noted has, at one time or another, shaped the development of film criticism. For instance, formal institutions such as Columbia University in the 1940s or the British Film Institute (BFI) since the 1960s have served to initiate or disseminate important critical ideas. Circles of collaborators, such as those around *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Screen*, and *Jump Cut*, have sustained interpretive projects. “Invisible colleges” have also played a large role: here friends, students, and acquaintances are linked in a circuit that need not respect geographical, theoretical, or methodological boundaries. Particularly in the academic sphere, however, utter strangers may belong to the same “school” by virtue of sharing a critical theory or method. The concept of a “school” usefully indicates that certain implicit or symptomatic meanings are valuable, vivid, or visible only to certain interpreters.

The different degrees of coherence one finds among subinstitutions should remind us that a macroinstitution may house groups pursuing significantly different interests. The medieval Christian church was riven by disputes between the schools of the monks and those of the

Table 1. Interpretive Institutions

	Publishing format	Formal institutions	Informal institutions
Journalistic criticism	Newspapers and popular weeklies (e.g., <i>New York Times</i> , <i>Village Voice</i> )  Television and radio programs	Employment by periodical  Professional associations (e.g., New York Film Critics' Circle)	Invisible colleges (network of acquaintances, mentors, disciples, etc.)
Essayistic criticism	Specialized or intellectual monthlies or quarterlies (e.g., <i>Cahiers du cinéma</i> , <i>Artforum</i> , <i>Partisan Review</i> )	Employment by periodical  Galleries, museums, etc.  Colleges or universities	Circles and salons around periodical  Invisible colleges
Academic criticism	Scholarly journals (e.g., <i>Cinema Journal</i> )	Colleges or universities  Centers and government agencies  Academic associations (e.g., Society for Cinema Studies)  Conferences and conventions	Invisible colleges  "Schools" (groups of practitioners of a particular theory or method; e.g., auteur criticism, feminist criticism)

friars. A more self-consciously "democratic" institution, such as modern literary criticism, assumes that the intrinsic complexity of the material under study and the impossibility of definitively assigning meaning to it permit a wide range of interpretations. Moreover, since "schools" compete in producing interpretations, what binds them into one institution are not rigid and explicit rules but rather tacit, pragmatic principles. (If the rules were explicit, somebody would be sure to found a new school based on violating them.) Critics who differ in theory or method remain consanguine by virtue of the concrete routines they employ.

### Interpretation, Inc.

Film criticism was born from reviewing, and the earliest prototypes of the "film critic" were journalists charged with discussing, on a daily or weekly basis, the current output of the film industry. The reviewer might be a professional journalist or a freelancing intellectual like Louis Delluc, Riccioto Canudo, Siegfried Kracauer, Otis Ferguson, James Agee, Parker Tyler, or Graham Greene. During the 1910s and 1920s, there also appeared film journals addressed to a cinephiliac public and publishing belletristic essays. After the Second World War, most significant new schools of theory and interpretation emerged from such coterie journals: *L'Écran français*, *La Revue du cinéma*, *Raccords*, *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Positif*, and *Cinéthique* in France; *Sequence*, *Sight and Sound*, and *Movie* in England; *Film Quarterly*, *Film Culture*, *Cahiers du cinéma in English*, and *Artforum* in America. Before 1970 or so, despite the importance of the education department of the British Film Institute in London during the late 1960s, most trends in film interpretation began outside the academy.

Soon, however, as film courses began to appear in upper-level school curricula, there emerged professional associations of film educators such as the Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT) in England and the Society for Cinema Studies (SCS) in the United States. During the 1970s, educational and academic journals like the *British Screen* (published by SEFT) and the *American Cinema Journal* (published by SCS) and *The Journal of the University Film Association* came to focus more and more on theory and criticism. In 1973 the Arno Press launched a series of reprints of American Ph.D. dissertations in cinema, and when that series lapsed, the UMI Research Press continued the project, thus assuring a steady flow of scholarly monographs. At about the same time, American university presses took more interest in cinema, not least because a film book promised to sell more copies than the ordinary academic title. Now the author of a film book was apt to be an academic, whose professional career required publications bearing a scholarly imprimatur. In sum, the academicization of film publishing created an expanding institutional base for interpretive criticism.

As long as film criticism was tied to mass journalism, interpretation in the sense in which I am using the term could not flourish. Newspapers and popular magazines were impatient with exegeses. But in

the pages of journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma* or *Movie* or *Film Culture*, the critic could play the role of interpreter. By and large the writing models were two: the reflective belletristic essay (cultivated chiefly in French journals) and the "close reading" (as in the work of the *Movie* group). And just as literary reviews like *La Nouvelle revue française*, *The Criterion*, *Scrutiny*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *Partisan Review* played host to essays by academics and provoked the growth of new schools of criticism within the academy, so film journals at once selectively imitated academic discourse and influenced the emergence of academic schools of interpretation.

That emergence was fostered by many material conditions, such as the expansion of academic publishing after the Second World War, the growth in size and prestige enjoyed by universities in western Europe and North America, and the wider accessibility of media technology, such as 16mm film projection in the 1950s, Steenbeck editing tables in the 1960s, and videocassettes in the 1970s. More specifically, certain aspects of the academic institution pushed film criticism toward concentrating upon interpretation. As I suggested at the end of the last chapter, university film studies arose within departments of literature, drama, and art history—disciplines already committed to explication and commentary. Over the same period, there also emerged a canon that could serve as a reference point for academic discourse.<sup>2</sup> The growing availability of 16mm prints of classic films, distributed by the Museum of Modern Art and such private firms as Audio-Brandon, made classroom study more feasible. Textbooks teaching interpretive techniques began to appear, one of the most successful being frankly titled *How to Read a Film*.<sup>3</sup> The film professor, constrained by course budgets and screening time, soon settled into the pattern of teaching one or two films per week. Once the single film became the unit of study, interpretation became the most convenient activity. With luck, the professor could try out some ideas in class meetings, get student reaction, and go on to make the single film the focus of a critical essay of his or her own. Like New Criticism, academic film criticism has proven easily assimilable to the university's demand for teachable techniques, professional specialization, and rapid publication output.<sup>4</sup>

Any institution, Mary Douglas reminds us, must create a stable context for the beliefs of its members. It must ground those beliefs in nature and reason; it must provide solid categories; it must generate a selective public memory; and it must guide its members toward

routine analogies.<sup>5</sup> The historical situation of Anglo-American New Criticism provided such a context for film interpretation. To say as much is to do more than trace an obvious doctrinal affiliation, for in an important way New Criticism was not simply one "approach" to criticism. As a theory, it defined literature as neither scientific nor philosophical discourse, effectively creating a specialized domain of professional knowledge. Historically, New Criticism reconstituted the field of literary study and virtually created the academic institution of criticism as we know it. Whatever school, trend, or movement to which a critic pledges allegiance, the practice of interpreting a text proceeds along lines laid down by New Criticism.<sup>6</sup>

Several recent studies have traced how this practice works.<sup>7</sup> For the academic working in the shadow of New Criticism, as for the film analyst, the object of study is a text or group of texts possessing veiled meanings. In these meanings lies the significance of the work or works. The interpretation aims to be novel and to exhibit the critic's mastery of the skills of attentive, usually "close" examination.<sup>8</sup> To interpret a work is to produce a "reading" that justifies the work's interest for us now as well as vindicates the critic's overall claims about it. The best evidence that everyone, from myth critics to deconstructionists, accepts these premises as natural and reasonable is that virtually no one argues with them. They have become the foundation for literary criticism as such.<sup>9</sup> These assumptions shape the arrangement of specialties in the field, the nature of departments, the patterns of academic conferences, the sorts of books and journals that are published, the way people find jobs and get grants and promotions. All proportions kept, the same premises and institutional forces are at work in academic film criticism.

Every institution writes its own history, and here too academic film criticism models itself on its literary counterpart. Overlooking the extent to which New Criticism has become, simply, criticism, literary studies constructs a history of "approaches"—more or less elaborated theoretical doctrines about what texts may mean and how one may talk about them. The currently dominant version runs this way: First there was New Criticism (in the narrow sense), followed by myth criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, reader-response criticism, deconstruction, postmodernist criticism, and so on. Every approach is assumed to create a "school," a community within the critical institution, possessing its own journals, specialized conferences, and social networks.

On the whole, the scheme is well adapted to ongoing institutional activities. A book or conference can be assembled around a single text "approached" from different angles, or critical papers can be brought together that apply the same approach to different texts. Either alternative displays the richness of literature and of literary criticism. If you believe the diversity of approaches to be salutary, you will tend to see the history of criticism as the devising of various, equally useful tools for jimmying open texts. Or you may take a partisan stance, declaring pluralism an act of intellectual evasion and asserting the superiority of one approach. This position will make you either hark back to a golden age or look forward to an era of permanent possibility (fueled by what are usually called "recent developments"). Whether you take the pluralist or partisan position, you will likely forget important things which do not fit into the reigning historical scheme—the way in which Russian Formalist criticism sought to integrate criticism with literary history, or the arguments flung at the New Critics by the Chicago Neo-Aristotelians, or the important contributions of Continental stylistics before the Second World War. Like military history, literary history is mostly written by winners. As Douglas puts it, any institution makes its members "forget experiences incompatible with its righteous image."<sup>10</sup> At several points in this book, we shall trace a comparable process at work in film interpretation, whereby the institution constructs a usable past for its members out of a tidy, selective chronicle of "approaches."

The legitimation of an institution, Douglas also suggests, requires the use of analogy.<sup>11</sup> At the level of literary schools, this is easy to see: the "intrinsic" critic compares the poem to an organism, the myth critic treats it as a piece of folklore, the Freudian likens it to a patient's recounted dream. But the more basic analogies are not often recognized. Literary interpretation seldom acknowledges the degree to which it models itself, as my thumbnail history in Chapter 1 has shown, upon mythological and scriptural exegesis. It is in many ways a secular version of biblical criticism.<sup>12</sup> In similar fashion, film interpretation freely confesses borrowing from this or that literary approach, but it ignores the extent to which its premises derive from the fundamental analogies laid down in postwar literary criticism.

An institution must stabilize its members' belief day in and day out, and this is accomplished less through sworn adherence to an abstract body of doctrine than by more concrete factors. The interpreter's exemplar<sup>13</sup> is a canonical study—an essay or book which influentially

crystallizes an approach or argumentative strategy. In literary criticism, works such as Ian Watt's essay "The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*" or Jacques Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" or Barthes's *S/Z* are exemplars. Other exemplars will reappear throughout the pages that follow: Kracauer on German film, Bazin on Renoir and Welles, Wood on Hitchcock, Wollen on the auteur theory, the *Cahiers* editors on *Young Mr. Lincoln*, and Mulvey on gendered representation. The exemplary essay is frequently anthologized, widely taught, and constantly cited. If an exemplary book goes out of print, it leads an underground life, jealously guarded in faculty offices and photocopied by eager graduate students. The exemplar instantiates "what the field is about": if it is progressive, it shapes future work; if it has been superseded, it still must be acknowledged, attacked, quarreled with. Essayistic and academic critics write in the shadow of exemplars.

Most critics do not produce exemplars. They practice what we can call "ordinary criticism." Like T. S. Kuhn's "normal science," this is the ongoing program of a group of researchers using approved problem/solution routines to expand and fill out the realm of the known.<sup>14</sup> Ordinary criticism is not brainless drudgery. In science, good puzzle-solving requires the ability to spot relevant resemblances between a new problem and the paradigmatic case given by scientific training. Similarly, the watchword of ordinary criticism is analogy, often called "application." Within film studies, explicating the Western by means of a Lévi-Straussian dialectic of nature and culture or assimilating Douglas Sirk's films to a version of Brecht's "distancing" effect exemplifies how analogies drawn from other fields can be successful in the terms defined by the institution. A powerful semantic field, such as that of reflexivity, can generate a wide range of analogies (looking equals filming, mirrors equal framing, and so on) that can be endlessly projected onto films. The more recalcitrant the film, the greater the triumph when it is subsumed to a familiar interpretive scheme. Whatever the critic's school or approach, the protocols of interpretive activity are reaffirmed when a new case is accounted for, and the interpreter's membership in the community of researchers is reconfirmed by a display of interpretive ingenuity.

Exemplars and routine procedures are transmitted through education. New Criticism won its victory through being eminently teachable, and here again we find academic film studies shaped by its literary analogue.<sup>15</sup> The American or British film critic is likely to have had a literary education. In secondary school, he learned that disclosing

implicit meanings was the central activity in understanding literature. College education reinforced and refined interpretive skills. "Reading English" at a British university often involved learning to imitate Richards, Empson, and Leavis. During the 1950s an American freshman encountered this passage:

The student will do well in reading any story to ask himself such questions as the following:

1. What are the characters like?
2. Are they "real"?
3. What do they want?
4. Why do they do what they do?
5. Do their actions logically follow from their natures?
6. What do their actions tell about their characters?
7. How are the individual pieces of action—the special incidents—related to each other?
8. How are the characters related to each other?
9. What is the theme?
10. How are the characters and incidents related to the theme?<sup>16</sup>

Even without such explicit instruction, students could gradually master interpretive skills by writing critical papers and adjusting their efforts to the standards of reading laid down by teachers and textbooks.<sup>17</sup> As Barry Barnes points out, institutional training relies heavily on ostensive definition and exposure to nonverbal, even inexplicable behaviors.<sup>18</sup> In literary studies, the student learns tacit routines. Whatever critical "schools" the student encounters, she or he acquires an underlying logic of critical practice. Historically it has proven no great difficulty to transfer such interpretive skills to cinema. Today, tens of thousands of high school and undergraduate students are learning "how to read a film" from textbooks, lectures, and writing assignments.

The workaday, highly structured nature of all these activities, both essayistic and academic, makes it tempting to recall John Crowe Ransom's description of literary study as "Criticism, Inc."<sup>19</sup> Interpretation has become a going concern to be maintained at all costs. Consequently, shifts in ruling film theories do not profoundly alter the logic of interpretive practice. Most critics are "practical critics," which is to say "pragmatic critics." This should not surprise us: scientists neglect theories that may be true but leave the community little to do, and they may pursue implications of theories that they do not consciously embrace.<sup>20</sup> In film interpretation, as in other domains, theory is rarely

constructed for its own sake. Theoretical doctrines are instantiated in exemplars, and they are then absorbed and revised in ways that sustain ordinary criticism. As a result, various schools of criticism, each with its own interests and purposes, can arrive at fresh critical interpretations but cannot reject the basic mental or rhetorical processes that produce them. Barnes points out that any conceptual judgment

can only be made if *other* concepts are assumed to have a routine usage which others will continue to follow, and which can accordingly be taken for granted as a stable feature when the judgment is made. There is no way of judging the pragmatic value of continuing to use "goose" as a term denoting a species, if in the meantime usage of the term "species" is developing rapidly and unpredictably. Hence goals and interests, considered in the context of an over-all, coherent, verbal culture, must, for the most part, act upon judgments so that concepts are applied in the expected way, the predicted way, the way that is called "routine."<sup>21</sup>

As we shall see, even the most putatively radical theories of film leave the conventions of film interpretation untouched. The construction of implicit or symptomatic meanings is a routine institutional activity, a body of ongoing craft practices that draws upon abstract doctrines in an ad hoc, utilitarian, and "opportunistic" fashion.

My use of the last adjective is not meant to impugn practitioners' motives. The argument so far, and much of that to come, might lead the reader to think that individuals participate in these routines cynically. Far from it: most consider it a worthwhile, even noble endeavor. They are probably not motivated solely by external rewards such as promotions and salary raises. Many critics are in the business largely to achieve what two sociologists of science call "credibility"—a position of recognized expertise that is continually renewed through the redeployment of accumulated resources (money, grants, facilities, publications).<sup>22</sup> The desire for credibility may in turn be based on a host of individual desires (ambition, service to a purpose, conviction that the truth should be spread). The interpretive institution can accommodate them all.

You may retort that emphasizing routine procedures overlooks the discontinuities riddling the history of film studies. Is not the shift from explicatory criticism to symptomatic cultural analysis proof of a sharp division in the critical institution? I shall argue in the rest of this book that it is not; here I can only propose that the shifts in critical theory

follow a pattern familiar in the sciences. A fresh approach (authorship, or semiotic-structuralist analysis) attracts young workers to a field. They wager their time and energy that the new trend will pay off. At first there is a wide tolerance of exploratory work, seen in brief, informal, and horizon-setting essays (often simply called "notes" on this or that). Although this work will appear loose, eclectic, and superficial by later standards, it is arresting not only because of its promise but because of its hortatory, often uncompromising rhetoric. Then, as the contours of the school emerge more clearly, normal criticism sets in. Many scholars, along with new generations of students, flock to the field and set about refining, revising, and applying the core ideas. Now essays are narrowly focused, packed with details and distinctions, perhaps also dotted with footnotes. Now entire books are devoted to what first-phase theory handled in four paragraphs. There is no longer a need for grand rhetorical gestures; basic assumptions can be taken for granted. Auteurs exist. Genres reflect culture. Texts seek to repress contradictions. If the institution routinizes everyday critical work, it also shapes the production of even those striking novelties that appear at the moment, or in official histories, to be revolutionary changes.

Here, however, film studies diverges from the natural sciences, for in the second phase of development of explicatory and symptomatic criticism there is a slackening of constraints on what will count as acceptable argument within the paradigm. Instead we find a continuing process of spreading, overlapping, and recasting of concepts, a diffuse "application" that appropriates whatever can be made compatible, however forcibly, with the production of proper interpretations. Theoretical claims are renegotiated for the sake of practical criticism, even if the revisions in the claims are never acknowledged.<sup>23</sup>

Such processes of assimilation bring criticism into contact with other institutions, most proximately filmmaking itself. Perhaps the first academic film critic was Eisenstein. In his classes at the Soviet All-Union State Institute of Cinematography and in his voluminous writings he "read" films (sometimes his own), scanning them for implicit meanings—how the staging of Clyde's murder of Roberta in *An American Tragedy* symbolizes his tragic fate; or how the arrangement of Madame Vauquer's table reflects a social hierarchy; or how conventional color symbolism is reversed in *Alexander Nevsky*, in which the sturdy Russians are clothed in black while the Teutonic knights wear white, the color of "cruelty, oppression, and death."<sup>24</sup> He also

comes near to constructing symptomatic meanings when he comments on the disparity between subject matter and treatment in Chaplin's *Modern Times*, and when he interprets Griffith's parallel montage as revealing a dualistic bourgeois world view.<sup>25</sup> In later years, less intellectual filmmakers learned how to make movies that squared with critics' interpretive categories. Would the director of *Stranger than Paradise* claim to be fascinated by the problem of communication if he had not gone to film school and encountered discourse about Antonioni, Ray, Rivette, Pasolini, Sirk, and others?<sup>26</sup> All of the critical trends I shall survey in the next two chapters, from the *politique des auteurs* to feminism, have in one way or another "fed back" into filmmaking, so that, at various points, this book will consider how canonized cues and meanings find their way into films as well, there to be discovered by critics using the same interpretive frameworks that the filmmakers originally borrowed from them.

### The Logic of Discovery, or, Problem-Solving

Ordinary criticism, like Kuhn's "normal science," can be considered a process of puzzle-solving. This is especially evident in the oldest interpretive traditions, such as *midrash*, which concentrates on biblical "problem points" to be explicated.<sup>27</sup> Christian interpreters were required to reconcile disparities between church doctrine and the words of Scripture. The Freudian psychoanalyst has the problem of constructing the latent dream-thoughts by linking free associations with material in the manifest dream.<sup>28</sup> As rational agents, interpreters seek out strategies for correctly performing the tasks set by their institutions. Thus my study of the logic of critical interpretation can fruitfully ground itself in the cognitive psychology of problem-solving.

Put generally, the goal which the institution of criticism sets the film interpreter is this: Produce a novel and persuasive interpretation of one or more appropriate films. This goal will shape the mental set, the assumptions, and the expectations with which the critic approaches the task. More specifically, four problems confront the critic:

1. How is the critic to make the chosen film a proper specimen for critical interpretation? Few critics analyze trailers, home movies, or industrial documentaries; when they do so, they must construct arguments for their significance. Let us call this the problem of *appropriateness*.

2. How is the critic to adjust her critical concepts and methods to specific features of the film? Does the film “fit the approach”? How will aspects of the film, not at first interpretable in an acceptable way, be rendered interpretable? Call this the problem of *recalcitrant data*.

3. How is the critic to give the interpretation sufficient *novelty*? The institution discourages critics from replicating one another’s readings (although students may be permitted to do so as a learning exercise). The interpreter is expected either to (a) initiate a new critical theory or method; (b) revise or refine an existing theory or method; (c) “apply” an existing theory or method to a fresh instance; or (d) if the film is familiar, point out significant aspects which previous commentators have ignored or minimized.

4. How is the critic to make the interpretation sufficiently persuasive? Although all three other problems have rhetorical dimensions, this is preeminently rhetorical in nature. Call it the problem of *plausibility*.

These problems are even more daunting than they might appear. What cognitive psychologists call “well-defined” or “definite” problems specify an initial problem state, a desired goal state, and a theoretically determined method for linking the two. A chess problem affords a good instance. The diagram of the position presents the initial state, the instruction provides the goal state (“Mate in two moves”), and the method for arriving at a solution consists of following the rules of chess. But the four interpretive problems I have just reviewed are indefinite. The critic must establish the initial state (by picking a film or an approach). The desired goal state is vague: the institution does not specify exactly *how* the interpretation should be novel or persuasive. And there is no theoretically determined means of linking the problem state to the goal state, since there are, strictly speaking, no rules for film interpretation. Yet interpreters solve such indefinite problems daily. What enables them to do it?

Without entering into the intricacies of what has been one of the most exciting areas of debate in contemporary cognitive psychology, we can say this: Interpreters, like most everyday problem-solvers, construct a problem in keeping with the norms of the institution they inhabit.<sup>29</sup> They go on to employ pragmatic strategies that allow them to produce appropriate critical inferences.<sup>30</sup> These strategies consist of some general inductive propensities and principles and some strategies

specific to the domain of interpretation. Let me sketch out how these might work in a single act of interpretation.

I decide, for whatever reason, to produce an interpretation of a film. I must construct my own initial problem state. This can be done in only two ways. I might notice the *compatibilities* that the film affords with respect to concepts currently in circulation in criticism. I might, for instance, find that it illustrates or confirms other critics’ accounts of analogous films. I could then frame the hypothesis that my film exemplifies general properties which are already accepted as relevant within the interpretive institution. Alternatively, I might attune myself to *anomalies*. Within the film, perhaps a scene or bit of behavior does not initially seem to fit with others; or perhaps previous critical interpretations have ignored or overlooked something I can pick out; or perhaps the film as a whole does not square with some current conception of genre or style or mode.<sup>31</sup> I can then hypothesize that the film will somehow justify its difference by virtue of certain other properties that are institutionally acceptable (for example, internal plot logic, thematic coherence, or ideological aspects). The anomaly strategy faces the *recalcitrant-data* problem (4) straight on, while the compatibility approach will encounter it sooner or later; but either approach gives the critic a more or less definite initial problem state from which to build an interpretive solution.

Constructing the interpretation involves the fundamental cognitive process of hypothesis-testing; for example, if this scene means such and such, then wouldn’t this item in the scene take on a symbolic function? At any point I may confront the recalcitrant-data problem. To solve it, I can call on a range of empirical knowledge—other films that may be compared to the target film, critical writings that may function as exemplars for my interpretation, more abstract conceptions of genre or mode or narrative structure, still more abstract theoretical doctrines (feminism, psychoanalysis), and themes or semantic fields (active/passive, powerful/powerless) that have saliency for the audience which I am addressing.

In drawing on these data, I also make use of various sorts of skills. For instance, if I am to compare the film with another in the same genre, I will need to employ the basic cognitive capacity to draw analogies. I also approach the film with skills of a more specialized sort. I have been trained to look for *significance*—that is, I assume that any film worth interpreting has something consequential to “say.” I further assume that what the film says is not “literally” on the surface

but is instead meaning of an implicit or symptomatic kind; that is, I look for *interpretability*. I have also learned to look for *unity*, not simply of surface features (such as the plot) but also of occulted meanings. Even if my critical approach valorizes disunity and symptomatic meanings, I can grasp such qualities only if I am attuned to noticing unity. As an interpreter I also pick out *patterns*—repetitions, variations, inversions—which can be invested with significance. And I should be skilled at selecting *salient passages*—the “key portions” that most clearly or vividly instantiate the meanings I ascribe to the film. A domain-specific assumption, for example, is that beginnings and endings are salient segments for interpretation. By using such skills, I can make stubborn data meaningful. I can posit that such data function implicitly or symptomatically, and I can show how they participate in unified patterns or how they operate at privileged moments.

All these are interpretive skills which the institution has passed on to me, chiefly through ostension and imitation. They are not, of course, specific to film criticism. They derive from twentieth-century criticism generally, and especially literary interpretation—which is probably why most film critics have literary training, and why students of literature can so quickly learn to produce acceptable interpretations of films.<sup>32</sup>

In the course of my explorations of the film’s “problem space,” I will shape my thinking so as to maximize the possibilities of attaining appropriate degrees of novelty and plausibility. Thus, if previous critics have ignored a scene I think significant, I can chastise them (mildly or severely), highlight that passage, and connect it to other aspects of the film, thus creating grounds for a novel interpretation. If I can seek out continuity between my interpretive enterprise and values or ideas held by my presumed audience, I will be closer to a persuasive interpretation (a solution to problem 4). In sum, even if my problem is indefinite, I can formulate an initial state, generate hypotheses from it, tap pertinent empirical knowledge, and mobilize domain-specific skills in order to mount a novel and convincing interpretation.

A psychological explanation of how all this works would require a book in itself, but a summary might run as follows. Critical logic is predominantly inductive because it is probabilistic. Interpreters work with pragmatic reasoning strategies that “characterize relations over general classes of object kinds, event relationships, and problem goals.”<sup>33</sup> These lie between the ultragenerality of deductive logic and

the comparatively atomistic features of this or that content domain.<sup>34</sup> Such reasoning procedures are not rules in the strict sense; they are rather probabilities arranged in default hierarchies, in which expectations hold good only if not disconfirmed by data.<sup>35</sup> As with any inductive system, the perceiver is “set” for data that confirm rather than falsify the initial hypothesis.<sup>36</sup> (Hence critics’ assiduity in seeking out evidence for an interpretive claim and their reluctance to find evidence that would disconfirm it.) Analogy-making is central here: the critic compares the film to others, likens his or her analytical process to that of other critics, and models the final form of the argument upon prototypes supplied by the institution. By finding a pertinent analogy, the critic can move closer to solving the interpretive problems posed by recalcitrant data.<sup>37</sup> Since the problem-solving process works with stored memory schemata, the interpreter must draw upon prototypical cases (for example, a key film or exemplary critical essay), template schemata (for example, an anatomy of narrative structure or stylistic options), and procedural schemata (for example, knowledge of how to segment a film or assign significance or unity).<sup>38</sup> And since interpretation is generally unconstrained by rules of formal demonstration, its inductive processes frequently rely upon “quick and dirty” corner-cutting rules of thumb, such as the *vividness* heuristic, which makes the most concrete and unusual data most salient.<sup>39</sup> In all, the skills of critical interpretation derive from general human inferential abilities.

I have sought to keep the social nature of interpretation at the forefront of even so “individual” a process as problem-solving because the two aspects are inseparable. The psychological account, indispensable as it is, provides only the “hollow forms” of critical reasoning. My construal of this or that film is a product of my problem-solving skills applied to a task largely defined by forces lying outside my personal history, according to norms of thought and writing established long before I came on the scene. “No account of inductive logic, or of an individual agent as an inductive learning machine, suffices to identify the ‘best’ way of applying a specific concept.”<sup>40</sup> The critical institution—journalistic reviewing, essayistic writing, or academic criticism—defines the grounds and bounds of interpretive activity, the direction of analogical thinking, the proper goals, the permissible solutions, and the authority that can validate the interpretations produced by ordinary criticism.



### The Logic of Justification, or, Rhetoric

"In what way," writes one literary theorist, "is a critic, producing interpretations, different from a reader, who, in reading a text, is under no obligation to explain it or comment upon it, does not have to make clear what is important and significant about it, and generally satisfies himself with a modest, unassuming comprehension, for his own use and in his own measure?"<sup>41</sup> My answers so far should be evident. A critic, unlike the common "reader," acts according to conventions laid down by an interpretive institution, and she employs skills of problem-solving in order to arrive at an interpretation. One more stage of the critic's activity remains to be sketched in: the mounting of interpretive arguments.

For the practicing critic, it is not enough to discover—that is, construct—implicit or symptomatic meanings; one must justify them by means of public discourse. All the problems set by the institution have a rhetorical dimension, the demand for a persuasive interpretation being the most obvious instance. It is, moreover, chiefly through rhetoric that critics learn inferential processes and encounter exemplars, analogies, and schemata. Rhetoric also constructs a critical persona and an implied audience.

Through all these channels critical rhetoric helps maintain institutional coherence. Ordinary criticism, making its tacit appeals to deeply held beliefs about the problem-solving procedures proper to criticism, gives its practitioners and audiences the communal satisfaction of a church ceremony or a parade. Disputes among interpretive "approaches" renew the institution's group dynamics; heterodox interpretations remain interpretations, and as their conclusions become less shocking, a new rhetoric of recantation, conciliation, and assimilation will absorb their insights. The abstract tenets of "theory" or "method" and the evolving and differing schools of criticism become superstructural phenomena. Interpretive rhetoric, as a vehicle of the reasoning process characteristic of interpretation, forms the permanent basis of public critical activity.

Rhetoric, classically conceived, is concerned only with persuasion, not truth. More modern adherents argue (rhetorically) that in our age we cannot so easily consign the establishment of truth to the exact sciences, and that the process of arriving at consensual agreement is at least a worthwhile, and possibly the only, path to such truth as is allotted to humankind.<sup>42</sup> Since my own view lies closer to the first

conception, I shall treat critical rhetoric as an instrument for rendering the conclusions of critical reasoning attractive to the interpreter's audience. This is not to say that rhetorical conditions and conventions do not also inform the very process of critical reasoning, such as when the interpreter keeps an eye peeled for what can be profitably written up. But such cases are covered by what I have taken to be the prior demands of novelty and plausibility. Rhetoric, for my purposes here, is primarily the domain of language, the structure and style of critical discourse.

Film interpretation can be analyzed into distinct processes characteristic of all rhetorical activity: *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*. As a way of introducing these ancient categories and their constituents, and as a means of illustrating how a critical rhetoric works, I will draw my examples from a mode of writing that will play almost no role in the rest of this book but which bulks large in the discourse around cinema. This mode is that of the journalistic reviewing of current films.

The conventionality of film reviewing has long been apparent, and many aspects of it are nicely laid bare in Matt Groening's accompanying cartoon. All I aim to show here is that several aspects of this conventionality constitute an institutional rhetoric. Reviewing is part of the mass media, and it functions as an offshoot of the film industry's advertising: reviews publicize the film and sustain the habit of movie-going. As a piece of journalism, the review operates in the discursive category of "news"; as a branch of advertising, it draws on material from the film industry's discourses; as a type of criticism, it draws on certain linguistic and conceptual forms, especially those involving description and evaluation. And as rhetoric, it clearly utilizes traditional strategies and tactics.

What the ancients called *inventio*, or the devising of substantive arguments, includes three particular sorts of proofs. *Ethical* proofs appeal to the virtues of the speaker. In film reviewing, ethical proofs serve to create an attractive role that will warrant the critic's opinions. The reviewer may present himself or herself as a solicitous consumer guide, advising the reader or viewer of the best and worst on offer (for example, Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, two nationally televised reviewers). Or the reviewer's ethos may be that of the passionate advocate for the bizarre or overlooked film (for example, J. Hoberman of *The Village Voice*). The reviewer may present the image of the vulgar but righteous film fan (Pauline Kael) or the cultural pundit

LIFE IN HELL

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# HOW TO BE A CLEVER FILM CRITIC

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with stringent standards (John Simon). Minimally, the reviewer must play the role of either the well-informed expert or the committed amateur, each of which offers an idealized surrogate for the reader. In any event, the attractive aspects of the reviewer's ethos act as warrant for his or her judgments.

*Pathetic* proofs rely on emotional appeals to the audience. Eager to present the film as "news," the reviewer will play up the qualities that he assumes will strike his audience: A film centering on recent headlines or contemporary problems; a high-priced purchase of an original

source; an old star's return to the screen or a new star's blazing debut—all these qualities and others may arouse interest. In addition, the reviewer will frame his or her descriptions and judgments so as to arouse emotions, sympathetically bringing out emotional qualities of the film or dramatically demonstrating the film's shoddiness, absurdity, or pretensions.

Classical rhetoric called arguments directed to the nature of the case itself "logical" or "artistic" proofs. For the sake of simplicity, we can divide logical proofs into *examples* and *enthymemes*. Examples are inductive or pseudoinductive arguments which back up a claim. The film reviewer may select a passage of the film (either through verbal description or, on television reviewing shows, by running an excerpt supplied by the producers) and claim that this sample is typical of the whole. Similarly, if the reviewer judges a performance to be bad, the claim can be supported by a contrasting example of a good performance from another film. In film reviewing, such evidence tends not to be organized as a coherent body of knowledge; it functions in the mode of connoisseurship, in that the reviewer's taste and experience guide him or her intuitively to the proper examples.

Enthymemes are deductive or pseudoductive arguments. In film reviewing, the canonical enthymeme runs this way:

- A good film has property *p*.
- This film has (or lacks) property *p*.
- This is a good (or bad) film.

There are only a few properties that can fill the *p* slot: important subject matter, realistic treatment of the subject, a logical story line, spectacle, intriguing characters, a valid message, and novelty within sameness (for example, revamped remakes, significant sequels).

Within the realm of the enthymeme, Aristotle singles out *topoi* as particular stereotyped arguments that the audience will grant without question. Some reviewers' *topoi* take the form of evaluative maxims: "If you spend the money, put it on the screen." "We ought to care about the characters." "Good acting looks natural." "Some films are only entertainment, but others offer food for thought." Of course, like all rhetors, reviewers may appeal, on different occasions, to logically contradictory examples, enthymemes, or *topoi*.

*Inventio*, or the crafting of critical arguments, then, relies on rhetoric-centered (ethical) appeals, audience-centered (emotional) appeals, and case-centered (logical or pseudological) appeals. *Dispositio* consists of

arranging these arguments into an appealing order. The film review is built out of four components: a condensed plot synopsis, with particular emphasis on big moments but with no revelation of the ending; a body of background information about the film (its genre, its source, its director or stars, anecdotes about production or reception); a set of abbreviated arguments; and a summary judgment (good/bad, nice try/pretentious disaster, one to four stars, a scale of one to ten) or a recommendation (thumbs up/thumbs down, see it/don't). The reviewer can arrange these components in any order, but the most common structure seems to be this: Open with a summary judgment; synopsise the plot; then supply a string of condensed arguments about the acting, story logic, sets, spectacle, or other case-centered points; lace it all with background information; and cap the review by reiterating the judgment. The organizational options are in fact so few that it is hard for the reviewer to create a distinct identity on this basis.

Much more promising is the third realm of rhetoric, that of *elocutio*, or style. While the academic critic's style often verges on the anonymous, the great reviewers—Baudelaire, Shaw, Virgil Thomson—endure chiefly through it. Style is what encourages the reviewer to use time-honored gimmicks, such as writing the review in the form of a letter, or recounting the film in the argot of a character. Along with a skill in argument and a range of knowledge, style is the film reviewer's chief means of constructing a persona—amateur or expert, elitist or democratic—and a personality—sardonic (Rex Reed), commonsensically wry (Siskel and Ebert), waspish (Simon), tempestuous (Kael), and so on. For the daily newspaper audience, the writer can cultivate a brisk, telegraphic style,<sup>43</sup> but for a weekly publication, one must display greater verbal dexterity, since here the review is read more for its intrinsic interest as a piece of language. The reviewer must swing from puns and epigrams to purple patches, from metaphorical fancies to metaphysical affirmations, from savage denunciation to lyrical praise. If a reviewer comes to seem, over the years, a "character" or even a celebrity to be interviewed, that is the reward accorded someone whom an impersonal institution has allowed to cultivate a colorful style.

Although most essayistic and academic writers are at pains to distinguish themselves from reviewers, all critics are rhetorical creatures. Reviewers' arguments, organizational structures, and stylistic flourishes may look simple, but that is chiefly because their rhetoric need

not deal with interpretation and all its problems. (Of course, evaluation is no simple matter either, and most academic critics have defined it out of existence or left it to the reviewers.) In any event, as we shall see in Chapters 9 and 10, interpretive film criticism has its own characteristic *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*.

Defining critical rhetoric as the persuasive use of discourse has the advantage of recognizing the comparatively small role that rigorous logic and systematic knowledge play in film interpretation. For one thing, film study has not evolved through the clash of tidily presented opposing views. The history of film criticism is largely that of predecessors ignored or forgotten, ships passing in the night, people talking at cross-purposes, wholesale dismissals of prior writers' work, and periodic cycles of taste. Obliviousness is of course common in other fields of inquiry, but more than most of his peers in philosophy or psychology or art history, the academic film interpreter avoids dialectical confrontation with alternative positions. At a scholarly conference in film studies, a paper devoted wholly to scrutinizing another critic's interpretation will be taken as a sterile exercise. Instead, the interpreter practices a strategy of exclusion (no mention of other interpretations) or one of supersession, declaring an earlier interpretation fine as far as it goes (which is never far enough). Furthermore, an attention to specialized topoi and recurrent enthymemes shows how film criticism, especially in the last fifteen years, relies heavily on appeals to authority—either previous writers or some theoretical doctrine. (The canonical statement of this tendency might be the catchphrase "Psychoanalysis teaches us that . . .") And we must be prepared to recognize even the *absence* of traditional rhetorical devices as having a belief-inducing effect. Donald McCloskey finds this to hold across a range of academic discourse. Since long and complex arguments foster the suspicion that the writer is putting something over on us, "the Announcement, the more bald, unargued, and authoritarian the better, is the favored form of scholarly communication."<sup>44</sup> In film studies the parallel is the sheer general assertion ("Art illuminates the human condition," "Cinematic pleasure depends upon voyeurism"). The general assertion is typically linked to a network of in-house beliefs that go without saying.

Studying critical rhetoric, then, requires us to analyze interpretations for their characteristic argumentative, organizational, and stylistic maneuvers. It requires not a hermeneutics of interpretation—though we

should be sensitive to what critics imply, and what they seem to repress—but rather what I shall call, at the end of this book, a poetics of practical interpretive reason.

### An Anatomy of Interpretation

The notion of interpretation as an inferential and rhetorical practice should, by now, have suggested why I do not share Barthes's suspicion that "reading" is an irreducibly heterogeneous activity. Interpretation is one of the most conventional things that film critics do. Even when a critic purports to produce an "unconstrained" interpretation, he or she will not only use standard strategies but will very likely generate a highly routinized reading, rather as the improvising pianist will often fall back into the most banal tunes and chord progressions.

I do not say, however, that the *desire* to interpret does not have diverse temperamental sources. Criticism certainly gives pleasure to its practitioners. It yields the intellectual satisfaction of problem-solving, the delight of coming to know a loved artwork more fully, the mastery of a skill, the security of belonging to a community. Less innocent interpretations of interpretation are suggested by Susan Sontag's charge that the interpreter is something of a sadist: "Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art . . . the compliment that mediocrity pays to genius."<sup>45</sup> Or the interpreter may appear somewhat masochistic, using the critical institution to confirm that interpretive inadequacy evoked by Frank Kermode: "World and book . . . are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing."<sup>46</sup> It seems evident, though, that the critic's darker drives remain largely sublimated in all institutionally acceptable interpretive activity.

This is not to disparage critics for obeying norms. Whatever creativity is, puzzle-solving and persuasion would seem to partake of it. No interpretation is produced by rote. The apprentice learns to construct an institutionally significant problem. The skilled critic finds a fresh analogy, produces an exemplar, or pulls off a powerful rhetorical effect. In all such cases, we see how creativity is *enabled*, not constrained, by institutional practices of language and reasoning. The comparison to which I shall often revert is that of the artisan. There are inept electricians, passable potters, and highly creative cooks. Like them, the critic practices a craft, and there is nothing inherently ignoble in that.

The interpreter's craft consists centrally of ascribing implicit and

symptomatic meanings to films. *Ascribing* here captures several important senses: inferred meanings are *imputed* to a film, but they are also (and principally) "scribed," written up, articulated in language. The ascriptive acts take place within an institutional frame of reference, which defines, usually tacitly, how the writer is to proceed. The goal assigned to the interpreter is to produce a persuasive and novel interpretation, in a process that is at once psychological, social, and discursive.

We can conceive this process as involving four activities. Once the film has been selected:

1. *Assume the most pertinent meanings to be either implicit or symptomatic or both.* In the next two chapters, I will survey the principal trends in the history of film criticism and show how each has subscribed to particular assumptions about these two sorts of meaning.
2. *Make salient one or more semantic fields.* In ascribing meanings the interpreter must mobilize semantic fields (for example, thematic clusters, binary oppositions). Chapter 5 examines how this occurs within film criticism, considering the various principles of semantic discrimination and the particular domains most frequently drawn upon.
3. *Map the semantic fields onto the film at several levels by correlating textual units with semantic features.* The cognitive skills of interpretation—building analogies, mental modeling, the hypothesizing of unity and pattern, picking out relevant passages—all come into play here. At any moment, the problem of recalcitrant data may emerge. Chapters 6–8 study how interpreters use concrete strategies to make films able to bear semantic fields.
4. *Articulate an argument that demonstrates the novelty and validity of the interpretation.* Chapters 9 and 10 survey critical rhetoric as a distinct aspect of the interpretive act, tracing how the arguments, organizational structures, and styles of discourse operate within an institutional framework, in order to persuade the critic's audience.

These activities do not necessarily take place in the sequence I have outlined; each one can accompany, inform, or interrupt the others. You might be struck by an anomalous textual feature (3) and then seek out a semantic category that would explain it (2). Trying to cast your idea into acceptable critical prose (4) might force you back to

other aspects of the semantic field (2) and then back to the text (3)—all the while assuming a certain kind of meaning to be present (1). Or, more likely, these activities occur “in parallel.” In any event, what the outline and the following chapters provide is neither a phenomenological, step-by-step description, nor a psychological or sociological flowchart, but rather an analysis of the logic underlying the interpretive activity. What follows seeks to show that, whatever the vicissitudes of the critical instincts, interpretation answers to the reality principle often enough to constitute no less a craft than land-surveying or wine-making or parlor magic.

### 3

## Interpretation as Explication

If we examine this more closely, and I think close examination is the least tribute that this play deserves, I think we will find that within the austere framework of what is seen to be on one level a country-house week-end, and what a useful symbol that is, the author has given us—yes, I will go so far—he has given us the human condition.

—Tom Stoppard, *The Real Inspector Hound*

On a summer day, a suburban father looks out at the family lawn and says to his teen-aged son: “The grass is so tall I can hardly see the cat walking through it.” The son construes this to mean: “Mow the lawn.” This is an *implicit* meaning. In a similar way, the interpreter of a film may take referential or explicit meaning as only the point of departure for inferences about implicit meanings. In constructing those meanings, the critic makes them apparent. That is, she or he *explicates* the film, just as the son might turn to his pal and explain, “That means Dad wants me to mow the lawn.”

Explicatory criticism rests upon the belief that the principal goal of critical activity is to ascribe implicit meanings to films. In this chapter, I will consider how this belief has emerged historically within criticism of mainstream and experimental cinema. The next chapter surveys a significantly different conception of the interpreter’s goal. Both chapters aim to describe the first area of critical practice outlined at the close of the last chapter—the conceptions of meaning that underlie interpretive conventions.

### The French Connection

Shortly after the Second World War, explicatory criticism emerged as a distinct trend. In France, England, and the United States there