FILM AESTHETICS AND
THE COLLEGE TEXTBOOK

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When Karl Shapiro wrote that "Everything we are taught is false," he was not necessarily thinking of film textbooks, but the apothegm is irresistably applicable. Even the comparative youthfulness of film scholarship as a discipline affords no reason—or excuse—for the clumsy introductory text-books stuffed with grim regularity into faculty mailboxes or pressed into hand by perspiring salespeople. I shall not be concerned with the intro-ductory history text, which poses idiosyncratic problems, but instead with those books which aim to introduce students to film aesthetics. What makes them inadequate? The thoughts that follow are prompted not only by the recent publication of Lincoln F. Johnson's *Film: Space, Time, Light, and Sound* but also by a rereading of several similar volumes (Ralph Stephenson and J. R. Debrix's *Cinema as Art,* Louis D. Giannetti's *Under-standing Movies,* and Lee R. Bobker's *Elements of Film*).

   Let it be said at once, however, that Johnson's work is by far the best of the lot. Although he divides the aesthetics of film into the familiar categories of space, time, color, sound, formal structures, "tenses" (tem-poral structures), modes, and genres, it is less its organization than its wealth of examples and illustrations which elevate the book above others of its kind. The standard material on editing, camerawork, sound, and optical effects is illuminated by many refreshingly unhackneyed exam-ples (e.g., from *Naked Night, The Last Command, Uberfall,* and *Missis-sippi Mermaid).* Perhaps more immediately striking are the seven hundred and fifty illustrations, all well-printed frame enlargements. Such pictorial material considerably increases the book's usefulness: the most spectacu-

lar instance is the 120 frames of the Odessa Steps sequence, (amplifying Johnson's perceptive discussion), but the briefer commentaries on *Meshes of the Afternoon, La Dolce Vita, Entr'acte, Olympia,* and *Red Desert* are as densely illustrated. A useful filmography, bibliography, and glossary are provided. In sum, *Film: Space, Time, Light, and Sound* is by far the most scrupulously planned and mounted of the textbooks introducing film aesthetics. *As* such a text, however, the book shares serious deficiencies with its predecessors, and these deficiencies are pervasive enough to permit one to pick out some conventions of the genre.

Factual Errors

While no human can write about films without some slips of the pen, sheer mistakes crop up with disappointing regularity in introductory film texts. Indeed, I would guess that many texts average one factual error every two pages. To take some at random: We are told that the opening sequence of *Citizen Kane* consists of "dollies in" to Xanadu (Giannetti, 69) and that Kane dies with a glass of water in the foreground and a nurse in the background (Bobker, 56, 75; Stephenson & Debrix, 57); that Rossellini favors deep-focus shots (Giannetti, 96); that "jump cuts" are used in *The Graduate* (Giannetti, 127); and that the tracking shots in *Night and Fog* are linked by dissolves (Bobker, 147); that Kane's wife is named "Mary" (Stephenson & Debrix, 57); that one film movement is called "German Impressionism" (Stephenson & Debrix, 66); and that the mother and children in *Birth of a Nation* are "picnicking" during Sherman's march to the sea (Stephenson & Debrix, 83). It is a pleasure to discover that Johnson commits far fewer slips than the norm. (Some glaring ones: *Olympia* is not five hours long; Eisenstein's conception of the dialectic is avowedly materialist, not Hegelian; Kane does not die during a clap of thunder and a lightning flash; intellectual montage in *Potemkin* does not mean "seeing Vakulinchuk's thoughts" [120].) On the whole, however, factual errors constitute one of the least embarrassing aspects of such texts. The conceptual strategies demand more detailed examination.

Cinema as Coded A Priori

If one persistent belief haunts introductory texts, it is that technique has meaning inherently, independent of context. The rampant rummaging

for "symbols" in such texts would be distracting enough (although the vogue word is currently "metaphor," suggesting that the authors don't use the term with great precision), but the deeper assumption is that a given technique is coded *a priori* to mean something. "When movement is from right to left, a certain sense of tension and unnaturalness is the result" (Giannetti, 35). "Negative images suggest a sense of looking beneath the surface of things" (Giannetti, 43). "Lighting from above often suggests spirituality" (Giannetti, 35). "When a person is tightly framed, he seems to be confined" (Giannetti, 60). "Cutting may be regarded as the spatial equivalent of a sudden leap of thought or feeling: tracking as the spatial expression of a gradual growth of ideas or emotion" (Stephenson and Debrix, 74). "Double-exposure splits up the world represented on the screen into, on the one hand, a physical world with flesh and blood characters and, on the other, an immaterial world inhabited by beings of dream or memory" (Stephenson and Debrix, 147). And so on, right down to the hoariest of all: low-angle shots mean dominance, high-angles mean superiority (Stephenson and Debrix, 46-47, Giannetti, 28). Johnson, unfortunately, follows this recipe-book thinking. Some examples out of many: "Closed compositional form suggests rational calculation, open spontaneity and immediacy" (Johnson, 24). "While the lateral movement of the camera and planes in depth can effectively articulate three-dimensional space, actual movement in depth will more directly involve the spectator" (Johnson, 38). "The fade seems to imply some kind of resolution; the freeze frame does not" (Johnson, 64).

Indefensible as such claims are, their assumptions are still more problematic. First, the sample is askew. The material which the authors inventory is not cinema *in toto* but certain historical styles stemming from the Soviet and German traditions of the 1920s and the art-house styles of the 1950s and 1960s. You will thumb through these texts in vain looking for analyses of works by Renoir, Bresson, Godard, Mizoguchi, Lang, Ozu, Tati, Keaton, Ford, Fuller, Hawks, or Dreyer, let alone Hanoun, Oshima, Warhol, Frampton, Snow, or Brakhage. You will find instead explications of *Potemkin, La Dolce Vita, Citizen Kane, Wild Strawberries, Caligari, Red Desert, Hiroshima Mon Amour,* and *Juliet of the Spirits.* Bobker even goes so far as to denigrate films which use techniques differently than the Great Tradition permits: e.g., commentary describing onscreen action is "the worst possible use of narration" (95); "The sound must faithfully reproduce the voice" (93). (Bobker thus implicitly ranks *Diary of a Country Priest, A Man Escaped,* and *Playtime* lower than his prized *Graduate.*) Such a limited choice of films swerves these authors into other problems as well, but it's worth noting that the rules for meaning cited in these books are determined largely by a cramped

sample. Whatever cinema is, it is much more than Fellini and
Bergman.

More important, on what grounds can we say that techniques "naturally"
mean anything? Do the tight framings in *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* con-
fine the judges? Do the fades in *La Femme Mariée* imply resolution? Is
everyone in an Ozu film "dominant" because of the omnipresent low angle?
Obsessed with interpretation, these texts seek a formula and find it in
treating films as combinations of fixed, abstract meanings. The authors are
unaware of a theoretical tradition running from Eisenstein to Metz urging
that connotative meanings in cinema are "coded" contextually, historical-
ly, and generically, but not in some mythical Eden where Adam named
all the techniques. The result of each assumptions is to see analyzing a
film as like decoding a rebus: a high angle plus backlighting plus a tight
frame equals a vulnerable, spiritual prisoner.

Concretely, these recipes discourage the analysis of *whole* films, since
sequences are used simply to illustrate the application of a rule. (Johnson
is a generally healthy exception to this trend.) Furthermore, there is little
comparison of how a technique is used in two or more films, thus ignor-
ing the possibility that the same technique can have wholly opposite
results, depending on the context. In sum, the uncontextual assumptions
of such texts hardly reflect scholarly practice in the field and indeed
perpetuate some gross errors.

The Form / Content Split

Vociferous in advocating the unity of form and content (neither is
afforded the luxury of rigorous definition), our authors in practice
sharply separate them. This is not just for analytical purposes, but in the
very foundations of their presuppositions: all presume some "content"
independent of the form which "expresses" it. *Film: Space, Time, Light,
and Sound* provides a typical example, wherein content is a reality base
distinct from form. "Space, Light, sound, tempo, accent, and rhythm do
more than simply carry a story; they shape it, modify its content, deter-
mine its meaning" (4). Style does not *constitute* the story; the story as
seen as a ground from which the medium works. A similar concept
appears in the distinctions Johnson proposes between "description" and
"decoration" (132-137, 169-170), or in the difference between a form
"imposed on the material" and a form "growing out of the material"
(219). If the medium transforms reality (as the authors never tire of
asserting), what then is *descriptive* handling and how can form *grow out*

of the material? On the evidence offered in the texts, the authors cannot
both concede the overarching powers of the medium and distinguish
between more or less formalistic results. In practice, the solution is ideo-
logical; whatever is most familiar (i.e., in line with an unacknowledged
paradigm of classic cinema style) is the most realistic, and whatever is
not is "distorted," "stylized," or "imposed form." Thus content is
separated from form. Needless to say, much of recent film theory, both
Marxist and Formalist, has devoted considerable energy to showing that
all filmic "realisms" are styles, systems as "stylized" (though not overtly)
as any "distortion."

Expressionism and "Comment"

In these texts, almost every film is an expressionist film. Objects, decor,
camerawork, editing, sound, and color seem to exist almost solely as pro-
jections of characters' inner states. To take a few instances: The ship
in *A Taste of Honey* expresses "both the vitality of the girl and the con-
fusion of her thoughts" (Stephenson and Debrix, 52). A shot of Antoine
from *The 400 Blows* is glossed thus: "His inward agitation is conveyed by
the diagonal lines of the fence" (Giannetti, 15). When Death looms up
to black out the shot in *The Seventh Seal*, "We *are* the Knight at that
moment" (Bobker, 59). Johnson follows the same path: the captain's
walk in *Frustration* "gives visual expression to the quarrel" (Johnson, 29);
the camera rhythm of *Vivre Sa Vie* "serves as a visual counterpart to the
social and psychic dislocation of the characters" (Johnson, 36); *Ecstasy*'s
slow motion "expresses the woman's boredom and frustration" (Johnson,
61); Brakhage "translates psychic disruption into filmic disruption" (86);
and so on. No wonder *Red Desert* and *Juliet of the Spirits* are *de rigueur*
in these volumes, since they provide examples of color used expression-
istically.

Such expressionism, apart from its obvious overtones of evasiveness
and critical puffery, again anchors the texts in a questionable position.
How can the *mise-en-scène* of Ozu, Tati, Godard, or Ford (to take only a
few examples) be seen as simply a projection of the characters' psychic
states? We must remember that this position constitutes only one approach,
not cinema *en bloc*; it may seem to succeed with the Expressionist classics
and the 1960s art-house films (though Noel Burch has suggested richer
ways of plumbing the latter), but it is limiting. As with the notion of
a priori coding, this approach tries to render films easily readable by a
set of abstract rules. (Needless to say, much expressionist readings are

rarely contextual.) Thus the film is seen not as a system, not an organized structure of motifs and devices; the possibility of formal *play* is negated in favor of a univocal "psychological meaning."

There is, however, an alternative proposed by these texts: symbolic "comment." This means that the director interferes with the film to inject his or her personal attitudes. Giannetti, Stephenson and Debrix, and Bobker lean heavily on the catchall term, "symbol," whereas Johnson more cautiously uses the term "comment." In the "comment" category, though, he places some rather oddly-assorted instances (e.g., the nondiegetic inserts of *October* and the still diegetic ending of *La Notte*). Such concepts again depend on a split between narrative "content" and visual style, since the story is not assumed to be expressive in itself; it is a kind of virus which will spread unless the director injects "comment" to control it. The narrative constitutes a prior reality which the director must alter symbolically. Now the implications of a disjunctive relation between authorial intelligence and narrative presentation are fruitful, and many directors have explored them, but these textbooks claim to want a unity of style and "content." The problem has not been faced and worked out at the theoretical level.

Confused Categories

The lineage of these texts stretches back to Aristotle: the organization is typological. Categories are subdivided, distinctions proposed, films pigeonholed. Typology rules the textbook from the overall organization of the chapter titles down to the more local distinctions in each chapter. Giannetti, for instance, divides the elements of film into picture, movement, editing, and sound (allotting a chapter to each), and then within each chapter makes further subdivisions (e.g., realism/expressionism). Similarly, Bobker distinguishes between story, image, sound, and editing. An alternative scheme, applied by Stephenson and Debrix, lays out film space, film time, film space-time, the "surface of reality," and sound. These divisions are close to Johnson's but his is certainly the most elaborate typology of any. Still, it carries to an extreme the confusions of previous outlines. Because film scholarship seems to have arrived at virtually no agreement on the conceptual organization of film aesthetics, the textbook writer is forced to organize it all him- or herself. But since the textbook writer is not a theorist (or, often, a film scholar at all), the resulting organization is usually idiosyncratic and illogical. Consider, for example, some of the distinctions proposed in *Film: Space, Time, Light,*

and Sound. Narrative, we are told, may be "continuous" (i.e., chrono-
logical), "simultaneous," "parallel," or "involuted" (giving the past or
future "present force," whatever that means). Not only are these categor-
ies not exclusive (a "parallel" narrative may also be "continuous") but
the criteria for distinguishing them are not clear (distinctions of order,
duration, and psychological effect are jumbled). Similarly, modes are
divided into formalist, realist, and "fantasy and expressive distortion."
It is not apparent what criterion distinguishes them, since Johnson's
descriptions (see pp. 205, 219, 230-231) are neither logically exclusive
nor exhaustive. Furthermore, the terms are often muddled, as when
"realism" is used, alternately, to mean "verisimilar," "typical," and
"factual." (There is surely something wrong with a category that lumps
together *Moana, The 400 Blows, Foolish Wives, The Last Laugh,* and
Breathless all as "realist" films.) Such lapses make the categories virtually
impossible to apply to individual films: why put *Ballet Mecanique* in
the formalist bin but put *Entr' acte* in the fantasy one?

Equally baffling categories run through the book (e.g., the division
of forms into "tectonic," "theatrical," and "organic"; or the distinctions
among "genres"), but we need to consider a possible defense. After all,
we will be told, there are "in practice" many cases which straddle cate-
gories. Of course, but surely the initial problem is to define the concepts
themselves precisely. (It would also be nice if there were at least a few
clear empirical instances.) As they stand, such categories remind one of
Borges' famous "Chinese encyclopedia" which divides animals into
(a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs,
and so on. Most often our texts abolish what Michel Foucault has called
a "grid of identities, similarities, and analogies" and move into the realm
of the logically capricious. Do we expect students to take seriously our
urgings to clarify their thinking if we hand them textbooks which muddle
the very distinctions the authors seek to establish?

Lack of a Generalizable Method

Still other strengths and weaknesses of the current set of assumptions
ruling textbooks are aptly summarized in Johnson's analysis of *Ivan the
Terrible.* The choice itself reflects many of the book's virtues: close
consideration of visual style, a desire to examine a long-bypassed work,
a sensitivity to graphic and plastic values. In the course of the analysis,
several items of interest are pointedly handled. But it remains inadequate
on several grounds. It is marred by factual errors: Johnson claims that

the color segments in Part II are "tinted," calls a rooster an eagle (on which hinges a major part of his argument) and mistakes the number of parts in the film. The Expressionism assumption is probably appropriate to this film, although it remains unproven that, for instance, the cutting of re-action shots is "rapid, suggesting the agitations and, in the end, the con-flicts" (216). Vague comments on the music and editing jostle uncon-textual readings of Ivan as evocative of Christ. Though Johnson starts to-ward a formal analysis by dividing the film into parts and noticing (as no critic before has, I believe) how specific leitmotifs dominate each part, he provides no explanation why or how he arrived at his conclusions. That is (and this too is typical of these textbooks), the individual analyses do not exhibit a consistent method, and thus do not show a student how he or she can verify the author's conclusions—let alone how he or she could apply a similar method to other films to discover things inde-pendently.

Some Conclusions

An introductory textbook will not be more sophisticated than the field it surveys; it is usually much simpler. Even so, the texts in review, all pre-sumably produced with honest hopes, cannot suffice to introduce students to film aesthetics. Perhaps we should have no textbooks at all; I would certainly prefer students to read Bazin or Eisenstein fresh rather than banal secondhand reductions. But the reality of the situation is that many film teachers (usually trained in other disciplines and new to cinema study) rely on such books to organize their courses. Textbooks, then, will be with us a long time. More positively, good texts are plainly feasible: it should be possible to clarify and compare positions, to synthesize research findings, to summarize methods of approach. But this means that the texts must be written by film scholars. I have deliberately avoided men-tioning the most striking feature of all these works (with the exception of the Stephenson and Debrix volume): the utter ignorance of writings on film aesthetics. The textbook authors seem not to know that there is an interesting tradition of theorizing about film art; that Canudo, Delluc, Epstein, Dulac, Eisenstein, Vertov, Pudovkin, Kuleshov, Arnheim, Jaubert, Moussinac, Bazin, Ayfre, Leenhardt, Souriau, Agel, Mitry, Cohen-Séat, Metz, Laffay, Comolli, Oudart, and others have addressed the very questions which these texts gropingly raise. Though the answers are far from complete or consistent, the textbook author must at least take this tradition into account. The average film teacher, unfortunately, cannot

be counted upon to know film aesthetics; the textbook author must. In any other field, a request that an author know previous research would be laughable, but in film study it amounts to a fairly modest proposal. Indeed, if publishers continue to grind out stacks of glossy paperbacks jammed with stills and unreliable prose, film scholars may have to conclude that using a textbook makes them accomplices in what Virgil Thomson called, in an ugly but unsparing phrase, "the appreciation racket."

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