Criticism, Theory, and the Particular

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Criticism studies the particular: this film, that filmmaker. Yet film criticism has long confused particularity with provincialism. Concretness of a topic (a film) has been synonymous with absence of abstract ideas. When we refuse to read a critical essay if we have not seen the film discussed, we assume (rightly) that most critical analyses produce no general knowledge. Most of the essays in this number of *Film Criticism* are particular, dealing with a single film. But here the film becomes a means to examine larger questions. How does character function in cinema? How do frame stories and repetitions structure our experience of a film? What happens to a film's unity when genres intermix? Such questions make criticism more theoretical, more ambitious, and more interesting.

Yet theoretical criticism risks not being read. All you need to grasp the typical essay on *L'avventura* or *Barry Lyndon* is a memory of the film. To do criticism theoretically requires a reader somewhat acquainted with the issues. All of the articles which follow were prepared in the summer of 1978, in a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar for College Teachers. Because of this, they share a body of theoretical assumptions about film narration and the concept of modes of film practice. My purpose in this introduction is to sketch, in broad strokes, the background for the essays which follow.

Film Narration

What distinguishes narration from narrative? Contemporary film theory suggests that emphasizing narration recognizes the dynamic quality of an art work. A narrative implies an abstract, fixed structure, the product; narration may be seen as the process through which the narrative comes to be represented. The difference between the two concepts is nowhere more evident than in the work of Roland

Barthes. In "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1966), Barthes treats narration as one structure among three. *Functions* are those small-scale units that participate in the story's chains of actions (e.g., having a drink, opening a door). *Actions* are the more abstract principles (desire, communication, exchange) that interlock to define characters. *Narration*, in this essay, is the passing of the narrative from donor to receiver, which requires shifting modes of language (personal/apersonal) and an implicit narrating situation. In this essay, narration is the text's most abstract level and is seen as stable and fixed.[1] But in *S/Z* (1970), there is no longer a hierarchy of structures. Barthes treats the entire text as nothing but narration, a mobile, prismatic dissolve of codes.[2] The *hermeneutic* code, for example, gradually unfolds a mystery: a question is asked, deferred, falsely construed, given a partial or ambigous answer, and so on. The *proairetic* code establishes a series of logical actions that shape our expectations (a journey will be completed, an opened door will be closed). Barthes is now attentive to the reader's step-by-step progress through the tale, and he can show how the text baits, distracts, and bamboozles us. By stressing the play of such codes, Barthes seeks to define the process of narration in a classical narrative.

A concept of narration as process of course antedates Structuralist theory. To consider only this century, we can see that the Russian Formalist critics staked their theory on the assumption that aesthetic form and perception were dynamic. The crucial distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, or *story* and *plot*, emphasized how the raw anecdote, the paraphrasable story, was deformed in the process of representation. The same story could yield very different plots through temporal reordering, manipulation of causality, shifts in point-of-view, insertion of foreign matter, and so on. Victor Shklovsky showed that the eccentric narration of *Tristam Shandy* made it typical of literature in general; Boris Eichenbaum demonstrated how the oral conventions of the *skaz*, or comic yarn, deformed the kernel story in Gogl's *The Overcoat*.[4] Even *motivation*--the way in which the presence of a narrative element is justified--can be seen as a process, as when Yuri Tynianov proclaims that we must see form as a struggle among dominant and subordinate factors.[5] In cinema, *Citizen Kane* remains an outstanding example of how narration actively deforms a basic story.

The Formalist tradition sees narration as the process whereby a text is "made strange," disrupting the expectations of normal communication. From another perspective, narration can be anchored within a communication model. Someone gives the story; someone receives it. The real author or the real perceiver is not in question here; rather, we look for marks indicating an *implied* speaker or listener. Simple instances of such marks are personal pronouns and deictic labels (e.g., here, now). For example, the sentence "Call me Ishmael" sets up a (fictitious) relationship of acquaintance between a narrator and an addressee. In a film, optical point-of-view shots from a character's vantage are similarly marked. On the other hand, "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God" seeks to efface any marks of utterance: the sentence comes from nowhere, addressed to no one; it simply states what is. In film, we might think of those

establishing shots of banks, hotels, or saloons that quietly set forth unchallengeable narrative information. The distinction between the marked and unmarked modes has been examined from several angles. One approach, more familiar to Anglo-Saxon literary criticism, sees the problem as that of subjective versus objective narration, or of limited point-of-view versus omniscient point-of-view. More ambitious are the attempts to situate the difference at the linguistic level, using Emile Benveniste's distinction between *histoire* (the impersonal, sourceless utterance) and *discours* (the utterance within the historically defined circuit of communication), or the distinction between *enonce* (the said) and *enonciation* (the saying).[6] Yet another approach is based on speech act theory.[7] What is common to all is the attempt to analyze how a tacit situation of communication leaves its traces in the narrative text.

It is a matter of address that this issue is taken up in John Adams' paper in this volume, As the utterance of disinterested science, the ethnographic film might seem a perfect example of *histoire*. Yet Adams demonstrates that the marks of discourse may not be apparent to a reading that ignores the film's institutional context. The ethnographic film is set within a framework that requires very particular addresser-addressee relations. Even science, it seems, speaks with an accent.

From the idea of narration as the inscription of speaker and listener within the text it is only a step to conceiving narration as the production of implied *subject positions*--roles staked out and trajectories traced in advance. Since Descartes, many philosophers have seen the subject/object relation as an essential and *a prior* one, existing outside history and culture. Recently, two thinkers have suggested that the states of subjectivity and objectivity, and the relation between them, are constructed in and through social practices. Louis Althusser has proposed that ideology operates through institutions (family, school, church) to create subjects which maintain the existing relations of economic production. "The category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects."[8] The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan sees subjectivity as acquired in the course of the child's development of his/her senses (through the apprehension of bodily unity) and in the learning of language (the relation to the Symbolic order).[9] For both Althusser and Lacan, the biological individual--you, me--is not only a subject but is always more than the subject positions we occupy. Subjectivity is but a moment in a larger process--a process which must, from a Marxist or psychoanalyst perspective, be considered inherently contradictory.[10]

What does this imply for the analysis of film narration? For one thing, the cinema may be seen as a particular institution through which society maintains unified subjects. In "The Imaginary Signifier," Christian Metz describes a machine which provides the pleasure of identifying *with oneself*. The cinema creates an objective spectacle for a purely perceiving subject: "At the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived, on the contrary, I am *all-perceiving*."[11] Or the film text itself may be seen as presenting the oscillations of

subject position. Stephen Heath's seminal essay, "Film and System: Terms of Analysis," considers *Touch of Evil* as an example of how the classical film stages the loss and recovery of subject position. An initial violence disrupts the stability of the characters' world and of the audience's relation to that world. The film works its way back to the balancing of character motives, the accomplishment of goals, the solution of the mystery, the satisfaction of the spectator. The metaphorical term *position* gets stretched here, for the connotations of fixity do not recognize how in narration, "position" is rather a constant flux. Heath calls this process "the shifting regulation of maintenance."[12] Nevertheless, the tendency to homogenize this movement may still be implicit in Heath's essay, as William Bywater suggests in his paper in this volume.

A stress on narration brings one more issue to light. In "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Barthes had boldly claimed that everything in a narrative signifies, that "Art is without noise."[13] Yet recent theory has considered the process of narration to go beyond simply delivering a meaning or an effect. A narrative film is homogeneous, but Heath points out: "Homogeneity is haunted by the material practice it repressses, and the tropes of that repression, the forms of continuity, provoke within the texture of the film the figures--the edging, the margin--of the loss by which it moves ...Narrative can never contain the whole film, which permanently exceeds its fictions."[14] The notorious "gaps and contradictions" noted by the *Cahiers du cinema* analysis of *Young Mr. Lincoln* are created by dislocations of narration.[15] Noise, then is necessary to the system: no snug fit between narrative and narration.

To this noise, to the figures of loss and excess which Heath mentions, several papers here address themselves. All concentrate upon narration and its contradictory effects upon certain elements: character, genre, frame story, teleology of action. James Jubak shows how *Doktor Mabuse der Spieler* sets itself the project of dissolving fixed identity (a convention of the espionage film) and ends by questioning the coherence of fictional character. In an analysis of *Raw Deal*, Paul Petlewski reveals conflicting narrational conventions which, derived from different genres, create problems for the film. We might expect that avant-garde films would escape the demands of narration, but two other studies here suggest that they too produce figures of loss. Paul Sandro's examination of *Entr'acte* establishes the film as unable to check a drive toward narrative teleology and closure, drives which can emerge only as parody. Michael Budd finds the *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* torn between two goals--that of delaying the action's revelations and that of clearly differentiating between madness and sanity. These essays show how the analysis of cinematic narration can bring out processes fundamental to the creation of narrative unity.

Modes of Film Practice

At various points I have mentioned the "classical" text. The term is not simply a convenient shorthand, for it points to important work in current film study: the construction of modes of cinematic practice.

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The critic cannot and does not pick films at random, nor does s/he approach those films without presuppositions. Situating a film with respect to other films--the principle of *intertextuality*--is an indispensible step. So we group films. We sort them by country, period, studio, style, genre, author. The usefulness of these categories has been proved again and again. What remains to be considered, however, is whether other groupings may not let us ask fresh questions.

Intent on the particular, critics have wanted to establish the uniqueness of each film they study. Yet uniqueness is a relational concept: something is different from other things. To pinpoint the particular, we must compare. The genre critic enjoys an advantage here, since in analyzing the film one had to define its deviations from generic norms. The difficulty came with specifying the film's style. Auteur theory offered an answer: the personal style of the filmmaker. But the problem of particularity returned. Without an implicit sylistic norm, how could one know that recurrent features of a director's work are also unique or even significant features? If genre criticism lacked stylistic norms, authorship criticism lacked any norms at all. To make criticism concrete, we need to construct a conception of the dominant ways in which films are put together and understood in certain times and places.

The elaboration of such models has barely begun, but some precedents can guide us. The principle of a norm was a central feature of Russian Formalist and Czech Structuralist poetics. Every work, it was argued, had to be situated with respect to the reigning canons of artistic practice.[16] More recently, Roland Barthes provoked a new Battle of the Books with his distinction between the classical, or readerly, text and the modern, or writerly, one. The classical text creates multiple meanings but limits that multiplicity by means of the codes of narration and tactics of reduncancy. The writerly text, conceived in somewhat Utopian fashion, offers an infinite plurality of meaning, a ceaseless play of signs.[17] Barthes also recognizes the limit-work, which, according to Stephen Heath, "would know a certain transgressive force to the extent that it stages the very terms of its own limits": Balzac's *Sarrasine* is such a limit-work, and Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* as analyzed by the *Cahiers* critics would seem analogous.[18] In such theoretical efforts, there is the clear urge to construct models of what can be said and shown within particular representational traditions.

In film study, the search for historically defined norms leads us straight to the idea of a classical narrative cinema. The terms and the idea itself are controversial, but the historical existence and theoretical usefulness of such a concept are hard to deny. "Hollywood filmmaking" names a complex of empirically existing attitudes, practices, and institutions. Our sense of an ordinary film rests in large part upon a tacit model of what a film is and does, and this model can be built only upon the mundane run of films we see. Work habits and studio organization testify to the presence of a rigorous, if not rigid, system. The breakdown of labor; the priority of the script as a blueprint; the codification of staging, lighting, shooting, and editing procedures--all these assume an underlying body of correct standards. The films themselves are repositories of stylistic norms, such as the

famous 180   rule or "axis of action," shot/reverse shot staging, three-point lighting, "montage sequences," and the handling of flashbacks.[19] Much remains to be done to bring this system to light and, in the process, to avoid a sheerly empirical inventory of devices and "first times." There is, nevertheless, little doubt that we are dealing with an actually existing discursive order that has dominated film history.

If this classical cinema seems monolithic, we must look more closely, for we shall find that it has its own tensions. Genres, for example, work to provide a stable narrative frame, yet they can jeopardize individual films' unity. Continuity editing, thought to provide a smooth flow of space and time, is actually predicated upon discontinuities (mismatches, overlapping movements). The urge for spectacle can disrupt narrative balance and unity. As in the study of narration, the critic must be sensitive to strains and failures, to the moment when the discursive order exposes its necessary lacks of coherence.

Two models of film practice become pertinent to essays in this volume. The assumption of a classical Hollywood cinema underpins several pieces. In particular, Thomas Lavoie's essay on *Laura* shows how extensively the classical narrative requires repetitions. Another mode, less widely recognized as such, is that of the art cinema. In my essay, I try to argue that particular historical conditions, formal features, and viewing activities, characterize this mode, and three other essays specify how given films operate in relation to it. Mary Palmer establishes *Petulia* as characteristic of the way in which the art cinema motivates temporal manipulation by the presence of a narrator, "the author." In Robert Self's analysis of *Three Women*, the film exemplifies how shifting point-of-view can produce the ambiguities of subjectivity typical of the art cinema. And Allan Hirsh shows how *La Sirene du Mississippi* relies upon unique and complicated citations of other films. It will be evident that these essays continue to treat problems of narration as well, since one salient feature of a model of film practice will be its processes of representation.

This issue of *Film Criticism*, then, draws upon and contributes to theoretical discusssion. It should not be thought, however, that these essays have lost touch with the concrete. The writers pay exemplary attention to cutting patterns, framing, camera movements, sound--in short, to the specificity of film technique. These essays, I believe, stand as examples of how a precise and particular study of film must, judiciously but vigorously, set forth and test general concepts. In this way, film criticism can contribute to our understanding of how cinema works and works on us.

Notes

[1]Roland Barthes, *Image-Music Text,* ed. and tr. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 109-117.

[2]Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, tr. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 20-21.

[3]See Boris Tomashevsky, "Thematics," in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, ed., *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 66-78; Tzvetan Todorov, "Some Approaches to Russian Formalism," *Twentieth Century Studies* 7/8 (December 1972), 6-19; Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 1-35.

[4]Victor Shkolovsky, "Sterne's *Tristam Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary," in Lemon and Reis, 25-57; Boris Eichenbaum, "The Structure of Gogoal's 'Overcoat,'" *The Russian Review* XXII, 4 (October 1963), 377-399.

[5]Jurij Tynianov, "Rhythm as the Constructive Factor in Verse," in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, eds., *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Cambridge, Mass,: MIT Press, 1971), 128.

[6]Christian Metz, "History /Discourse: Note on Two Voyeurisms," *Edinburgh '76 Magazine* no. 1 (1976), 21-25; Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "A Note on History/Discourse," *Edinburgh '76 Magazine,* 26-32.

[7]John R. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," *New Literary History* VI, 2 (Winter 1975), 319-332.

[8]Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 171. See also Paul Q. Hirst, "Althusser and the theory of ideology," *Economy and Society* V, 4 (November 1976), 385-412.

[9]Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (New York: Norton, 1977), 1-7, 30-113. See also Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) and Eugen S. Bar, "Understanding Lacan," in Lee Goldberger and Victor Rosen, eds., *Pyschoanalysis and Contemporary Science*, vol. 3 (New York: International Universities Press, 1975), 473-544.

[10]For a synthesis of several contemporary theories of subjectivity, including those of Althusser and Lacan, see Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

[11]Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," *Screen* XVI, 2 (Summer 1975), 51.

[12]Stephen Heath, "Film and System: Terms of Analysis, " *Screen* XVI, 1 (Spring 1975), 8.

[13]Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," 89.

[14]Heath, "Film and System: Terms of Analysis," 10.

[15]Editors of *Cahiers du cinema*, "John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*," *Screen* XIII, 3 (Autumn 1972), 5-44.

[16]The most thorough discussion of the concept of a norm is Jan Mukarovsky, "The Aesthetic Norm," in *Structure, Sign, and Function*, tr. and ed. by John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New York: Yale University Press, 1978), 49-56.

[17]Barthes, *S/Z*, 4-9.

[18]Stephen Heath, *Vertige du deplacement* (Paris: Fayard, 1974), 104.

[19]Cf. Noel Burch's reference to "the zero point of cinematic style" in *Theory of Film Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1973), xix, and Guy Fihman, "D'ou viennent les images claires?" in Dominique Noguez, ed., *Cinema: theorie lectures* (Paris: Klinchsieck, 1973), 193-206.