

The Language and Style of Film Criticism

Edited by
Alex Clayton and
Andrew Klevan



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The Language and Style of Film Criticism

The Language and Style of Film Criticism brings together a range of original essays from international academics and film critics highlighting the achievements, complexities and potential of film criticism.

Film criticism is a form of writing which evaluates film and in contrast to the theoretical, historical and cultural study of film, it has been relatively marginalised, especially within the academy. By revealing its quality and distinctiveness, the book shows that film criticism deserves a more central place within the academy, and can develop in dynamic ways outside it.

What particular challenges does the medium of film present for writing and for critical judgement? How is the relationship between critic and film reflected in writing? How can vocabulary and syntax be used appropriately and imaginatively? A range of essays addresses these questions and more, focusing on the methods, concepts and ideas associated with the expression of film criticism.

The book is essential reading for all those engaged in the activity of writing about film – academics, teachers, students, and journalists – as well as readers of film criticism who wish to understand and appreciate its language and style.

Alex Clayton is Lecturer in Screen Studies at the University of Bristol, where he teaches a module on Screen Style and Aesthetics for the MA Cinema Studies programme. He is the author of *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick* (2007) and has published elsewhere on performance, comedy, colour and music in film.

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We dedicate the book to Sarah and Vivienne, our fairest critics.

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>Contributors</i>	xi
 Introduction: the language and style of film criticism <i>Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan</i>	 1
1 Coming to terms <i>Alex Clayton</i>	27
2 Questioning style <i>Robert Sinnerbrink</i>	38
3 Incursions <i>Adrian Martin</i>	54
4 Description <i>Andrew Klevan</i>	70
5 Writing about performance: the film critic as actor <i>George Toles</i>	87
6 Silence and stasis <i>William Rothman</i>	107
7 Four against the house <i>Richard Combs</i>	121

viii *Contents*

8	Being seized <i>Charles Warren</i>	139
9	Memories that don't seem mine <i>Lesley Stern</i>	157
10	<i>La caméra-stylo</i> : notes on video criticism and cinephilia <i>Christian Keathley</i>	176
	<i>Index</i>	192

Figures

0.1	<i>Letter from an Unknown Woman</i> , 1948 © Rampart Productions	10
0.2	<i>The Birds</i> , 1963 © Universal Pictures/Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions	17
0.3	<i>It Happened One Night</i> , 1934 © Columbia Pictures Corporation	20
1.1	<i>His Girl Friday</i> , 1940 © Columbia Pictures Corporation	31
1.2	<i>His Girl Friday</i> , 1940 © Columbia Pictures Corporation	31
1.3	<i>His Girl Friday</i> , 1940 © Columbia Pictures Corporation	33
2.1	<i>Jeanne Dielman</i> , 1975 © Ministère de la Culture Française de Belgique/ Paradise Films/Unité Trois	49
2.2	<i>Jeanne Dielman</i> , 1975 © Ministère de la Culture Française de Belgique/ Paradise Films/Unité Trois	51
3.1	<i>Le Samouraï</i> , 1967 © Compagnie Industrielle et Commerciale Cinématographique (CICC)/Fida Cinématographique/Filmel/TC Productions	59
3.2	<i>Ohayo</i> , 1959 © Shôchiku Eiga	62
3.3	<i>Ordet</i> , 1955 © Palladium Film	67
4.1	<i>The Magnificent Ambersons</i> , 1942 © Mercury Productions/RKO Radio Pictures	74
4.2	<i>Grand Hotel</i> , 1932 © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)	78
4.3	<i>The Magnificent Ambersons</i> , 1942 © Mercury Productions/RKO Radio Pictures	83
5.1	<i>The Boys From Brazil</i> , 1978 © Incorporated Television Company (ITC)/ Lew Grade/Producers Circle	91
5.2	<i>The Boys From Brazil</i> , 1978 © Incorporated Television Company (ITC)/ Lew Grade/Producers Circle	92
5.3	<i>A Place in the Sun</i> , 1951 © Paramount Pictures	100
5.4	<i>City Lights</i> , 1931 © Charles Chaplin Productions	102
6.1	<i>Notorious</i> , 1946 © Vanguard Films/RKO Radio Pictures	108

6.2	<i>Notorious</i> , 1946 © Vanguard Films/RKO Radio Pictures	111
6.3	<i>Notorious</i> , 1946 © Vanguard Films/RKO Radio Pictures	111
6.4	<i>Notorious</i> , 1946 © Vanguard Films/RKO Radio Pictures	113
6.5	<i>Notorious</i> , 1946 © Vanguard Films/RKO Radio Pictures	115
7.1	<i>Boudu Saved From Drowning</i> , 1932 © Les Établissements Jacques Haik/Les Productions Michel Simon/Crédit Cinématographique Français (CCF)	123
7.2	<i>Psycho</i> , 1960 © Shamley Productions	136
8.1	<i>Diary of a Country Priest</i> , 1951 © Union Générale Cinématographique (UGC)	144
8.2	<i>Diary of a Country Priest</i> , 1951 © Union Générale Cinématographique (UGC)	146
8.3	<i>La Jetée</i> , 1962 © Argos Films	153
9.1	<i>Killer of Sheep</i> , 1977 © Charles Burnett	165
9.2	<i>Killer of Sheep</i> , 1977 © Charles Burnett	166
9.3	<i>Killer of Sheep</i> , 1977 © Charles Burnett	168
10.1	<i>Notes Toward a Project on Citizen Kane</i>	182
10.2	<i>Notes Toward a Project on Citizen Kane</i>	183
10.3	<i>Listen to Britain</i> , 2001	185
10.4	<i>Listen to Britain</i> , 2001	186

INTRODUCTION

The language and style of film criticism

Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan

We characterise film criticism as a form of writing which addresses films as potential achievements and wishes to convey their distinctiveness and quality (or lack of it).¹ For many people film criticism is something by an opinionated journalist, a film critic, who tells you whether a film is worth seeing. The most characteristic trait of a newspaper or web review is the announcement of judgements on the acting, story and cinematography (often narrowly conceived). If the writer avoids the temptation to indulge in superlatives and hyperbole and stays clear of well-worn adjectives such as 'gritty', 'dark', 'glossy', 'cinematic', 'stylish', 'thought-provoking' or 'true-to-life' – along with the stultified system of values to which they appeal – such reviews can be a source of pleasure as well as utility. But for the editors of this volume, film criticism can do a great deal more. We find the best criticism *deepens* our interest in individual films, *reveals* new meanings and perspectives, *expands* our sense of the medium, *confronts* our assumptions about value, and *sharpens* our capacity to discriminate. Moreover, it strives to find expression for what is seen and heard, bringing a realm of sounds, images, actions and objects to meet a realm of words and concepts. Engaging with film through criticism therefore means involving ourselves not simply with a series of points and arguments but with language and style.

In a thorough and eloquent essay exploring the history of film criticism and analysis, Adrian Martin has asked why, in accounts of criticism, 'the *materiality* of the writing of [Manny] Farber – or [Jonathan] Rosenbaum or David Thomson or Meaghan Morris – [is] so often rendered immaterial, a wasteful luxury, mere surplus value ... *écriture* is again divorced from content, to be damned or indulged accordingly'. Pointing out that 'writing is always more than simply "badly done" (dense, circumlocutory, baroque) or a "good read" (witty, racy, stylish, etc.)', Martin calls for a better sense 'of the *action* of critical writing, what it can conjure, perform, circulate, transform'. 'In writing as much as film,' he adds, borrowing a phrase from Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'we must come to close terms with what is "at once mysterious and materialistic" in

matters of style' (Martin 1992: 131). This volume of essays aims to answer Martin's call. Coming 'to close terms' with matters of style and language will yield a sharper recognition of the 'action of critical writing', and, in turn, a stronger sense of the achievements and potential of film criticism.

That potential has been, in our view, underestimated. If in broader culture, criticism has been too often conflated with cursory forms of reviewing, it has had parallel fortunes within academic Film Studies. Although film criticism exists within the academy, it has never quite cemented itself within the discipline (unlike literary criticism). As Film Studies became institutionalised, criticism was thought lacking in analytic and scholarly rigour; socially, politically, culturally or historically blind; purposeless in its failure to address 'important' issues; theoretically unsophisticated and not suitably self-reflexive; and linguistically naïve in its attachment to ordinary language. Perhaps these assessments are not consciously held or propounded in a way they once were, but they may still operate implicitly as assumptions, and affect the processes and pedagogy of film study.

Sidelined within academia, the purposes and principles of film criticism have been misunderstood. This has been exacerbated by the way film criticism is commonly conflated with 'close textual analysis' (or some variant thereof). Such analysis tends to appear in more or less formalist guises and often distrusts the subjective attitudes of criticism with regards to interpretation and prose style. More recently, 'textual analysis' seems to have been enlarged as a category to include any academic work that refers to a film's image and/or soundtrack. Rather than objects of criticism, most commonly, particular films are objects to be analysed, specimens used to investigate cultural, historical or theoretical positions, contexts and tendencies.² This is true even of aesthetically orientated work. Most academic writing aims for a prose that is neutral, objective or informational. It is generally suspicious of personal involvement with films and apprehensive of value judgements, except for ideological critique (for instance, where a film is implied to be 'transgressive' in some way, or its representation of a social group 'positive'). It is felt, perhaps, that serious academic analysis should differentiate itself from the evaluative reactions of the ordinary film viewer – 'he's really good in this', 'this is definitely her best film' – or that 'opinionated' newspaper reviewer.³ For the most part, films are used illustratively (valued primarily for their usefulness) rather than engaged with critically (valued for their achievements). Despite this, much film writing, of whatever hue, in its choice of films and examples, and in its assumptions, either contains remnants of film criticism, or is haunted by its absence. One ambition of the volume is to help film criticism emerge from this illicit and ghostly existence.

Stanley Cavell provides a useful insight into criticism, by way of Immanuel Kant, which he understands as originating in an experience of pleasure and a desire to communicate value:

It is a requirement I impose on the choices of the films I take ... that they be films of cinematic, or say aesthetic, value, by which I mean two things primarily: (1) that I judge them to be of value (in Kant's sense of aesthetic value,

the test of which is my declaration that they provide me with a pleasure I am compelled to share with others, a judgement I demand that others agree with, knowing that my subjectivity may be rebuked); (2) that I am prepared to account for my insistent pleasure by a work of criticism (brief or extended) which grounds my experience in the details of the object: in a word, I show that the object is, in the sense Walter Benjamin develops in 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', criticizable, we might say interpretable. What is not criticizable in this sense is not a work of art.

(Cavell 2005b: 297)

Cavell emphasises the matter of 'value' as intrinsically linked to the impulse to share it ('by a work of criticism (brief or extended)'). In his collection of essays which explore the relationship between philosophy and criticism, Cavell begins his discussion of *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1953, US) with Fred Astaire walking on a platform, and structures his discussion around it, because it 'singled [him] out for a response of pleasure' which he had a 'compulsion to share' (Cavell 2005c: 26, 9). Cavell calls such pleasure 'insistent': the work will not give up its pleasurable hold on him *and* it urges him to spread the word. The critic puts his or her subjectivity on the line, 'knowing that [it] may be rebuked'. At the same time, this desire to share entails the conviction that others are capable of encountering a form of this pleasure if disposed towards the artwork in a particular way. The judgement of value is therefore understood not as mere whimsy, but as capable of reaching *intersubjective* accord, hence also disputation, when a work of criticism makes the shareable grounds of that judgement available to discourse ('criticizable').

Cavell equates the 'criticizable' with the 'interpretable' and elsewhere he notes that 'for something to be regarded as an interpretation ... there must be conceived to be competing interpretations possible' (Cavell 1981: 36). Any single critical perspective or claim therefore implicitly recognises (or should recognise) the existence or possibility of other perspectives. Hence the meaning of a text is plural even though the particular judgement being offered issues from a singular, subjective experience, and the tone may be passionately insistent. The individuality and personality of this critic is watching and writing, in this way, now, and this is *his* or *her* criticism. The passage quoted above from Cavell acknowledges three interlinked aspects of criticism: its testimonial or proclamatory aspect (a 'declaration that [an artwork] provide[s] me with ... pleasure'); its rhetorical or petitioning aspect ('a judgement I demand that others agree with'); and its justifying or evidential aspect ('which grounds my experience in the details of the object'). The latter aspect is important because the claim is authenticated by an appeal to features of the work which are capable of independent affirmation.

For this reason, and despite the fact that criticism by necessity originates in personal experience, the aspiration towards intersubjective understanding means that it cannot straightforwardly be called 'subjective'. Nor, of course, could any critical claim be called 'objective'. Indeed, the 'subjective-objective' relation is one of those false dichotomies that nevertheless holds a surreptitious power. Misgivings about criticism

being subjective are addressed by Roland Barthes in his cogent little treatise on the identity and benefits of literary criticism, *Criticism and Truth*:

One usually understands by 'subjective' criticism a discourse left to the entire discretion of a *subject*, which takes no account at all of the *object*, and which one supposes (in order more effectively to attack it) to be nothing more than the anarchical and chattily long winded expression of individual feelings. To which one could reply for a start that a subjectivity which is systematised, that is to say *cultivated* (belonging to a culture), subjected to enormous constraints, which themselves had their source in the symbols of the work, has, perhaps, a greater chance of coming close to the literary object than an uncultivated objectivity, blind to itself and sheltering behind literalness as if it were a natural phenomenon.

(Barthes 2004: 35)

Barthes' defence, faced with suspicion of the 'subjective' in criticism, is to point out that subjectivity is not an asocial, nebulous entity turned in on its own haphazard feelings, but is already related to the world, shaped by it and participating within it. More radically, throughout his book, he implies that even if the work is from a different time or place, the critic can only come 'close' to the object, reveal its 'truth', through his or her own subjectivity. The phrase 'sheltering behind literalness' could fairly describe much modern methodology, where an acknowledgment of the writer's subjectivity is feared to contaminate the impartiality of the 'findings'. Quite a lot of contemporary work in Film Studies has seen 'the self' as an untrustworthy guide, and has sought to initiate and justify claims outside it, often in reference, explicitly or implicitly, to an objective spectator (however complexly conceived).

The problem here, as George Toles has pointed out, is that 'If all issues pertaining to *personal* identity are infinitely problematic ... where do we derive our assurance that we can construct meaningful diagrams of "others"?' (Toles 2001: 83). Toles feels he cannot write from this position because he 'cannot *know* this average spectator well enough to speak for him or her' (Toles 2001: 99). He continues:

I cannot see the point ... or the theoretical usefulness, of continued reports on what other spectators are supposed to have 'seen' in a movie if they are not accompanied by some kind of personal accounting. What have we seen for ourselves, and how has the complex bundle of desires and fears that all our experiences draw from helped to shape what we have seen?

(Toles 2001: 99–100)

For Toles, this 'complex bundle of desires and fears' affects our viewing and as insecure as it may be that 'bundle' may also be our only reliable starting point.⁴ He writes: 'As is so often the case with art, the first intimation that a film has achieved something difficult and worth understanding may be the depth of our imaginative identification with what we see' (Toles 2001: 81). Much film criticism builds out of an 'imaginative identification'. Unlike most contemporary forms of textual

scholarship which stress the importance of a work's origins, its historical, cultural or national context, more often than not criticism emphasises those qualities that are discovered through an imaginative engagement with the text, and with each other (through dialogue, during teaching). Good criticism does not operate in a vacuum and it is interested, implicitly or explicitly, in comparing and contrasting one work with another, identifying, for example, generic or stylistic variation in order to assess possibilities and discriminate. It may draw on a film's context to recognise the achievement of creative personnel or to grasp parameters and choices. It may be stimulated to reference society, culture and art as matters arise, happily bridging different times and places. However, 'external' information is not foundational nor does it legitimise the assessment. Ultimately, criticism is observational and responds to the work as it appears. Lack of knowledge will result in aspects of the work escaping, maybe even in misunderstandings and mistaken attributions, but the compensation is the revelation produced by new connections. Much contemporary scholarship situates the film elsewhere, out there, but it is equally interesting to ask how we find it *here*. Given that the work may be a long way from home, why does it *appear to me* as an achievement?

The distrust of subjectivity and scepticism towards evaluation go hand in hand. From the point of view of the critic, however, evaluation is not simply something one might do, something optional; it is intrinsic to the viewing experience. This is how the text makes sense to us: *what it means to us*. Viewers feel a work to be deft, tender or delicate, or perhaps condescending, smug or arch as much as they feel for characters or their situations (indeed, whether the fiction affects them or communicates to them at all will depend on the quality of the expression). Moreover, one might argue that most, if not all, films are made to be good and this objective is an integral part of their presentation and address. For film criticism, the tension between a film's aspiration or potential and its actual achievement is as palpable to a viewer as that generated by plot or character or composition. The viewer monitors the success with which the film handles its elements; and this is not of supplementary interest, but of pressing importance every step of the way. It affects the moment-by-moment viewing of the film.

Such monitoring is not straightforward. Films have a special talent for concealment, paradoxically perhaps because of their directness, materiality and capacity for demonstrative revelation. They appear to be simultaneously too ordinary in their easy recording of reality and too extreme in their easy use of affective devices. They inevitably have a concern for surface, which means they often appear to be superficial, banal and vulgar. This is especially true of popular cinemas, where commercial production exploits the ease with which the medium can sentimentalise and seduce. Separating the genuine from the fake, or the creative from the compliantly conventional, has been the task of criticism on all the arts, but film renewed the challenge. The projects, in the 1950s and 1960s, of journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma* (in France) and *Movie* (in the UK), were precisely to reveal the artistry in despised genres and forms of Hollywood and to show that their product was not enslaved to populism and commerce. The mass production of films in studio-era Hollywood, with its

instincts to recycle conventions and conceal craftsmanship, required new ways of approaching the old critical problem: how to identify genuine accomplishment?

Grappling with Hollywood films has been particularly testing and fruitful for film criticism. The famous ending of *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946, US) might appear to be conventional, sentimental and conservative, but George Toles considers it to be otherwise. To claim this is not straightforward, however, because the scene's power evidently depends on convention and sentiment:

Capra seizes on conventions as the quickest route into a scene, just as Astaire sidles his way into a dance by a series of simple, orthodox steps which are minimally communicative about the flights of invention that his motions will inscribe later on. Conventions bring the *ground* for scenes into preliminary focus, but the scene-structures that feel their way into being on that ground are meant to shed this easy affiliation with the usual setup and become self-sustaining. Capra is not at all interested in the habitual, somewhat protected mode of response that conventions necessarily bring with them. What he consistently strives to distil out of them is a moment that effectively bursts the bounds of the familiar situation. His goal is to powerfully transcend convention without undermining it ... Convention allows Capra to bring the viewer swiftly into the midst of a strong dramatic situation.

(Toles 2001: 57)

Toles writes in a way that refuses the customary dichotomy between 'conventional' and 'unconventional', where the former is rendered a synonym for uninventive, derivative, inexpressive, plodding. On the contrary, the comparison of Capra, who 'seizes on conventions', to Astaire, who 'sidles his way into a dance', offers a vivid way of grasping how conventions can enable and not merely restrict. Rather than conventions being a creative dead-end or feeble resort to cliché, they are recast, in Toles' language, as facilitating the emergence of something agile. Steps, like conventions, may be 'simple, orthodox', 'easy', 'habitual' and 'minimally communicative', but what is crucial is the potential they afford, as moments and scenes 'feel their way into being on that ground'. A sense of this potential is conveyed by the prose style, in particular the striking use of verbs, where those that convey liveliness – 'to seize', 'to sidle' – push through to those that are positively transformative – 'to shed', 'to burst', 'to transcend'. The metamorphosis (caterpillar into butterfly) imagery may not be spelt out but its insinuation is vital for the passage's full effect. A convention, like a chrysalis, may be inert and sheltering – but what it produces may 'shed that easy affiliation', 'become self-sustaining', capable, indeed, of 'flights of invention'. The problem is not that some cinemas are conventional (e.g. Hollywood) and some are not (e.g. Experimental), because every type of cinema has conventions, characteristics, generic or otherwise, and constraints, but that our *own* conventional ways of seeing and categorising – our 'easy affiliation[s]' – might lead to misjudgement. Toles' writing aims to ease us out of static understandings, not simply by explaining Capra's use of convention, but by rendering its trajectory and dynamic.