The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice

David Bordwell

La Strada, 8-1/2, Wild Strawberries, The Seventh Seal, Persona, Ashes and Diamonds, Jules et Jim, Knife in the Water, Vivre sa vie, Muriel: whatever else one can say about these films, cultural fiat gives them a role altogether different from *Rio Bravo* on the one hand and *Mothlight* on the other. They are "art films," and, ignoring the tang of snobbishness about the phrase, we can say that these and many other films constitute a distinct branch of the cinematic institution. My purpose in this essay is to argue that we can usefully consider the "art cinema" as a distinct mode of film practice, possessing a definite historical existence, a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures. Given the compass of this paper, I can only suggest some lines of work, but I hope to show that constructing the category of the art cinema is both feasible and illuminating.

It may seem perverse to propose that films produced in such various cultural contexts might share fundamentally similar features. Yet I think there are good reasons for believing this, reasons which come from the films' place in history. In the long run, the art cinema descends from the early *film d'art* and such silent national cinema schools as German Expressionism and Neue Sachlichkeit and French Impressionism.[1] (A thorough account of its sources would also have to include literary modernism, from Proust and James to Faulkner and Camus.) More specifically, the art cinema as a distict mode appears after World War II when the dominance of the Hollywood cinema was beginning to wane. In the United States, the courts' divorcement decrees created a shortage of films for exhibition. Production firms needed overseas markets and exhibitors needed to compete with television. In Europe, the end of the war reestablished international commerce and facilitated film export and coproductions. Thomas Guback has shown how, after 1954, films began to be made for international audiences.[2] American firms sponsored foreign production, and foreign films helped American exhibitors fill screen time. The later Neorealist films may be considered the first postwar instances of the internation art cinema, and subsequent examples would include most works of the New Wave, Fellini, Resnais,

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Bergman, De Sica, Kurosawa, Pasolini, et al. While the art cinema is of little economic importance in the United States today, it evidently continues, as such international productions as *The Serpent's Egg* or *Stroszek* show.

Identifying a mode of production/consumption does not exhaustively characterize the art cinema, since the cinema also consists of formal traits and viewing conventions. To say this, however, is to invite the criticism that the creators of such films are too inherently different to be lumped together. Yet I shall try to show that whereas stylistic devices and thematic motifs may differ from director to directory, the overall *functions* of style and theme remain remarkably constant in the art cinema as a whole. The narrative and stylistic principles of the films constitute a logically coherent mode of cinematic discourse.

Realism, Authorship, Ambiguity

The classical narrative cinema–paradigmatically, studio feature filmmaking in Hollywood since 1920–rests upon particular assumptions about narrative structure, cinematic style, and spectatorial activity. While detailing those assumptions is a task far from complete,[3] we can say that in the classical cinema, narrative form motivates cinematic representation. Specifically, cause-effect logic and narrative parallelism generate a narrative which projects its action through psychologically-defined, goal-oriented characters. Narrative time and space are constructed to represent the cause-effect chain. To this end, cinematic representation has recourse to fixed figures of cutting (e.g., 180 continuity, crosscutting, "montage sequences"), mise-en-scene (e.g., three-point lighting, perspective sets), cinematography (e.g., a particular range of camera distances and lens lengths), and sound (e.g., modulation, voice-over narration). More important than these devices themselves are their functions in advancing the narrative. The viewer makes sense of the classical film through criteria of verisimilitude (is x plausible?), of generic appropriateness (is x characteristic of this sort of film?) and of compositional unity (does x advance the story?). Given this background set, we can start to mark off some salient features of the art cinema.

First, the art cinema defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode, and especially against the cause-effect linkage of events. These linkages become looser, more tenuous in the art film. In *L'Avventura*, for example, Anna is lost and never found; in *A bout de soufle*, the reasons for Patricia's betrayal of Michel remain unknown; in *Bicycle Thieves*, the future of Antonio and his son is not revealed. It will not do, however, to characterize the art film solely by its loosening of casual relations. We must ask what motivates that loosening, what particular modes of unity follow from these motivations, what reading strategies the film demands, and what contradictions exist in this order of cinematic discourse.

The art cinema motivates its narratives by two principles: realism and authorial expressivity. On the one hand, the art cinema defines itself as a realistic cinema. It wil show us real locations (Neorealism, the New Wave) and real problems (contemporary "alienation," "lack of communication," etc.). Part of this reality is sexual; the aesthetics and commerce of the art cinema often depend upon an eroticism that violates the production code of pre-1950 Hollywood. *A Stranger Knocks* and *And God Created Woman* are no more typical of this than, say *Jules et Jim* and *Persona* (wheras one can see *Le mepris* as consciously working upon the very problem of erotic spectacle in the art cinema). Most important, the art cinema uses "realistic"--that is, psychologically complex-characters.

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The art cinema is classical in its reliance upon psychological causation; characters and their effects on one another remain central. But whereas the characters of the classical narrative have clear-cut traits and objectives, the characters of the art cinema lack defined desires and goals. Characters may act for inconsistent reasons (Marcello in *La Dolce Vita*) or may question themselves about their goals (Borg in *Wild Strawberries* and the Knight in *The Seventh Seal*). Choices are vague or nonexistent. Hence a certain drifting episodic quality to the art film's narrative. Characters may wander out and never reappear; events may lead to nothing. The Hollywood protagonist speeds directly toward the target; lacking a goal, the art-film character slides passively from one situation to another.

The protagonist's itinerary is not completely random; it has a rough shape: a trip (*Wild Strawberries, The Silence, La Strada*), an idyll (*Jules et Jim, Elvira Madigan, Pierrot le fou*), a search (*L'avventura, Blow-up, High and Low*), even the making of a film (*8-1/2, The Clowns, Fellini Roma, Day for Night, The Last Movie, Le mépris*). Especially apt for the broken teleology of the art film is the biography of the individual, in which events become pared down toward a picaresque successivity (*La Dolce Vita, The Apu Trilogy, Alfie*). If the classical protagonist struggles, the drifting protagonist traces an itinerary, an encyclopedic survey of the film's world. Certain occupations (stockbroking in *Loeclisse*, journalism in *La Dolce Vita* and *The Passenger*, prostitution in *Vivre sa vie* and *Nights of Cabiria*) favor a survey form of narrative. Thus the art film's thematic of *la condition humaine*, its attempt to pronounce judgements on "modern life" as a whole, proceeds from its formal needs: had the characters a goal, life would no longer seem so meaningless.

What is essential to any such organizational scheme is that it be sufficiently loose in its causation as to permit characters to express and explain their psychological states. Slow to act, these characters tell all. The art cinema is less concerned with action than reaction; it is a cinema of psychological effects in search of their causes. The dissection of feeling is often represented explicitly as therapy and cure (e.g., *Through a Glass Darkly, Persona*), but even when it is not, the forward flow of causation is braked and characters pause to seek the aetiology of their feelings. Characters often tell one another stories: autobiographical events (especially from childhood), fantasies, and dreams. (A recurring line: "I had a strange dream last night.") The hero becomes a supersensitive individual, one of those people on whom nothing is lost. During the film's survey of its world, the hero often shudders on the edge of breakdown. There recurs the realization of the anguish of ordinary living, the discovery of unrelieved misery: compare the heroines of *Europa 51, L'avventura, Deserto rosso,*, and *Une femme mariée*. In some circumstances the characters must attribute their feelings to social situations (as in *Ikiru, I Live in Fear*, and *Shame*). In *Europe 51*, a communist tells Irene that individuals are not at fault: "If you must blame something, blame our postwar society." Yet there is seldom analysis at the level of groups or institutions; in the art cinema, social forces become significant insofar as they impinge upon the psychologically sensitive individual.

A conception of realism also affects the film's spatial and temporal construction, but the art cinema's realism here encompasses a specturm of possibilities. The options range from a documentary factuality (e.g., *Il posto*) to intense psychological subjectivity (*Hiroshima mon amour*). (When the two impulses meet in the same film, the familiar "illusion/reality" dichotomy of the art cinema results.) Thus room is left for two reading strategies. Violations

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of classical conceptions of time and space are justified as the intrusion of an unpredictable and contingent daily reality or as the subjective reality of complex characters. Plot manipulations of story order (especially flashbacks) remain anchored to character subjectivity as in *8-1/2* and *Hiroshima mon amour*. Manipulations of duration are justified realistically (e.g., the *temps morts* of early New Wave films) or psychologically (the jump cuts of *A bout de souffle* signalling a jittery lifestyle). By the same token, spatial representation will be motivated as documentary realism (e.g., location shooting, available light), as character revelation, or in extreme cases as character subjectivity. Andre Bazin may be considered the first major critic of the art cinema, not only because he praised a loose, accidental narrative structure that resembled life but also because he pin-pointed privileged stylistic devices for representing a realistic continum of space and time (deep-focus, deep space, the moving camera, and the long take). In brief, a commitment to both objective and subjective verisimilitude distinguished the art cinema from the classical narrative mode.[4]

Yet at the same time, the art cinema foregrounds the *author* as a structure in the film's system. Not that the author is represented as a biographical individual (although some art films, e.g., Fellini's, Truffaut's, and Pasolini's, solicit confessional readings), but rather the author becomes a formal component, the overriding intelligence organizing the film for our comprehension. Over this hovers a notion that the art-film director has a creative freedom denied to her/his Hollywood counterpart.[5] Within this frame of reference, the author is the textual force "who" communicates (what is the film *saying*?) and "who" expresses (what is the artist's *personal vision*?). Lacking indentifiable stars and familiar genres, the art cinema uses a concept of authorship to unify the text.

Several conventions operate here. The competent viewer watches the film expecting not order in the narrative but stylistic signatures in the narration: technical touches (Truffaut's freeze frames, Antonioni's pans) and obsessive motifs (Bunuel's anticlericalism, Fellini's shows, Bergman's character names). The film also offers itself as a chapter in an *ouvre*. This strategy becomes especially apparent in the convention of the multi-film work (*The Apu Trilogy*, Bergman's two trilogies, Rohmer's "Moral Tales," and Truffaut's Doinel series). The initiated catch citiations: references to previous films by the director or to works by others (e.g., the New Wave homages).

A small industry is devoted to informing viewers of such authorial marks. International film festivals, reviews and essays in the press, published scripts, film series, career retrospectives, and film education all introduce viewers to authroial codes. What is essential is that the art film be read as the work of an expressive individual. It is no accident, then, that the *politique de auteurs* arose in the wake of the art cinema, that *Cahiers du cinéma* admired Bergman and Antonioni as much as Hawks and Minnelli, that Robin Wood could esteem both Preminger and Satayajit Ray. As a critical enterprise, *auteur* analysis of the 1950s and 1960s consisted of applying art-cinema reading strategies to the classical Hollywood cinema.[6]

How does the author come foreward in the film? Recent work in *Screen* has shown how narrational marks can betray the authorial code in the classical text, chiefly through gaps in motivation.[7] In the art-cinema text, the authorial code manifests itself as recurrent violations of the classical norm. Deviations from the classical canon–an unusual angle, a stressed bit of cutting, a prohibited camera movement, an unrealistic shift in lighting or setting–in short any breakdown of the motivation of cinematic space and time by cause-effect logic–can be read as "authorial commentary." The credits for the film, as in *Persona* or

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Blow-up, can announce the power of the author to control what we see. Across the entire film, we must recognize and engage with the shaping narrative intelligence. For example, in what Norman Holland calls the "puzzling film,"[8] the art cinema foregrounds the narrational act by posing enigmas. In the classic detective tale, however, the puzzle is one of *story*: who did it? how? why? In the art cinema, the puzzle is one of *plot*: who is telling this story? how is this story being told? why is this story being told this way? Another example of such marking of narration is the device of the flashforward—the plot's representation of a future story action. The flashforward is unthinkable in the classical narrative cinema, which seeks to retard the ending and efface the mode of narration. But in the art cinema, the flashforward functions perfectly to stress authorial presence: we must notice how the narrator teases us with knowledge that no character can have. Far from being isolated or idiosyncratic, such instances typify the tendency of the art film to throw its weight onto plot, not story; we play a game with the narrator.

Realism and authorial expressivity, then, will be the means whereby the art film unifies itself. Yet these means now seem contradictory. Verisimilitude, objective or subjective, is inconsistent with an intrusive author. The surest signs of authorial intelligibility–the flashforward, the doubled scene in *Persona*, the color filters at the start of *Le mépris*–are the least capable of realistic justification. Contrariwise, to push the realism of psychological uncertainty to its limit is to invite a haphazard text in which the author's shaping hand would not be visible. In short, a realist aesthetic and an expressionist aesthetic are hard to merge.

The art cinema seeks to solve the problem in a sophisticated way: by the device of *ambiguity*. The art film is nonclassical in that it foregrounds deviations from the classical norm–there are certain gaps and problems. But these very deviations are *placed*, resituated as realism (in life things happen this way) or authorial commentary (the ambiguity is symbolic). Thus the art film solicits a particular reading procedure: Whenever confronted with a problem in causation, temporality, or spatiality, we first seek realistic motivation. (Is a character's mental state causing the uncertainty? Is life just leaving loose ends?) If we're thwarted, we next seek authorial motivation. (What is being "said" here? What significance justifies the violation of the norm?) Ideally, the film hesitates, suggesting character subjectivity, life's untidiness, and author's vision. Whatever is excessive in one category must belong to another. Uncertainties persist but are understood as such, as *obvious* uncertainties, so to speak. Put crudely, the slogan of the art cinema might be, "When in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity."

The drama of these tendencies can play across an entire film, as *Guiletta degli spiriti* and *Deserto rosso* illustrate. Fellini's film shows how the foregrounding of authorial narration can collapse before the attempt to represent character subjectivity. In the hallucinations of Guiletta, the film surrenders to expressionism. *Deserto rosso* keeps the elements in better balance. Putting aside the island fantasy, we can read any scene's color scheme in two registers simultaneously: as psychological verisimilitude (Guiliana sees her life as a desert) or as authorial commentary (Antonioni-as narrator says that this industrial landscape is a desert.)

If the organizational scheme of the art film creates the occasion for maximizing ambiguity, how to conclude the film? The solution is the open-ended narrative. Given the film's episodic structure and the minimization of character goals, the story will often lack a clear-cut resolution. Not only is Anna never

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found, but the ending of *L'avventura* refuses to specify the fate of the couple. At the close of *Les 400 coups*, the freeze-frame becomes the very figure of narrative irresolution, as does the car halted before the two roads at the end of *Knife in the Water*. At its limit, the art cinema creates an *8-1/2* or a *Persona*, a film which, lacking a causally adequate ending, seems to conclude several distinct times. A banal remark of the 1960s, that such films make you leave the theatre thinking, is not far from the mark: the ambiguity, the play of thematic interpretation, must not be halted at the film's close. Furthermore, the pensive ending acknowledges the author as a peculiarly humble intelligence; s/he knows that life is more complex than art can ever be, and the only way to respect this complexity is to leave causes dangling, questions unanswered. With the open and arbitrary ending, the art film reasserts that ambiguity is the dominant principle of intelligibility, that we are to watch less for the tale than the telling, that life lacks the neatness of art and *this art knows it.*

The Art Cinema in History

The foregoing sketch of one mode of cinema needs more detailed examination, but in conclusion it may be enough to suggest some avenues for future work.

We cannot construct the art cinema in isolation from other cinematic practices. The art cinema has neighbors on each side, adjacent modes which define it. One such mode is the classical narrative cinema (historically, the dominant mode) . There also exists a modernist cinema--that set of formal properties and viewing protocols that presents, above all, the radical split of narrative structure from cinematic style, so that the film constantly strains between the coherence of the fiction and the perceptural disjunctions of cinematic representation. It is worth mentioning that the modernist cinema is not ambiguous in the sense that the art cinema is; perceptual play, not thematic ambivalence, is the chief viewing strategy. The modernist cinema seems to me manifested (under various circumstances) in films like *October, La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc, Lancelot du lac, Playtime,* and *An Autumn Afternoon*. The art cinema can then be located in relation to such adjacent modes.

We must examine the complex historical relation of the art cinema to the classical narrative cinema. The art film requires the classical background set because deviations from the norm must be registered as such to be placed as realism or authorial expression. Thus the art film acknowledges the classical cinema in many ways, ranging from Antonioni's use of the detective story to explicit citations in New Wave films. Conversely, the art cinema has had an impact on the classical cinema. Just as the Hollywood silent cinema borrowed avant-garde devices but assimilated them to narrative ends, so recent American filmmaking has appropriated art-film devices. Yet such devices are bent to causally motivated functions--the jumpcut for violence or comedy, the sound bridge for continuity or shock effect, the elimination of the dissolve, and the freeze frame for finality. (Compare the narrative resolution of the freeze frame in *Les 400 coups* with its powerful closure in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.*) More interestingly, we have seen an art cinema emerge in Hollywood. The open endings of *2001* and *Five Easy Pieces* and the psychological ambiguity of *The Conversation, Klute,* and *Three Women* testify to an assimilation of the conventions of the art film. (Simplifying brusquely, we might consider *The Godfather I* as a classical narrative film and *The Godfather II* as more of an art film.) Yet if Hollywood is adopting traits of the art cinema, that process must be seen as not simple copying but complex transformation.

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In particular, American film genres intervene to warp art-cinema conventions in new directions (as the work of Altman and Coppola shows).[9]

It is also possible to see that certain classical filmmakers have had something of the art cinema about them. Sirk, Ford, and Lang all come to mind here, but the preeminent instance is Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock has created a textual persona that is in every way equal to that of the art-cinema author's; of all classical films, I would argue, Hitchcock's foreground the narrational process most strikingly. A film like *Psycho* demonstrates how the classical text, with its psychological causality, its protagonist/antagonist struggle, its detective story, and its continuous time and homogeneous space, can under pressure exhibit the very negation of the classical system: psychology as inadequate explanation (the psychiatrist's account); character as only a position, an empty space (the protagonist is successively three characters, the antagonist is initially two, then two-as-one); and crucially stressed shifts in point-of-view which raise the art-film problem of narrational attitude. It may be that the attraction of Hitchcock's cinema for both mass audience and English literature professor lies in its successful merger of classical narrative and art-film narration.

Seen from the other side, the art cinema represents the domestication of modernist filmmaking. The art cinema softened modernism's attack on narrative casuality by creating mediating structures–"reality," character subjectivity, authorial vision–that allowed a fresh coherence of meaning. Works of Rossellini, Eisenstein, Renoir, Dreyer, and Ozu have proven assimilable to art-cinema reading stategies: each director has been assigned a distinct authorial world-view. Yet modernist cinema has responded in ways that make the art cinema in its turn, an important point of departure. By the 1960s, the art cinema enabled certain filmmakers to define new possibilities. In *Gertrud*, Dreyer created a perceptual surface so attenuated that all ambiguity drains away, leaving a narrative vacuum.[10] In *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, Resnais dissolved causality altogether and used the very conventions of art cinema to shatter the premise of character subjectivity. In *Nicht Versöhnt*, Straub and Huillet took the flashback structure and *temps morts* of the art cinema and orchestrated empty intervals into a system irreducible to character psychology or authorial commentary. Nagisha Oshima turned the fantasy-structures and the narrational marks of the New Wave to political-analytical ends in *The Ceremony* and *Death by Hanging*. Most apparently, Godard, one of the figureheads of the 1960s art cinema, had by 1968 begun to question it. (*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* can be seen as a critique of *Deserto rosso*, or even of *Une femme mariée*.) Godard also reintroduced the issue of montage, a process which enabled *Tout va bien* and subsequent works to use Brechtian principles to analyze art-film assumptions about the unity of idealogy. If, as some claim, a historical-materialist order of cinema is now appearing, the art cinema must be seen as its necessary background, and its adversary.

NOTES

I am grateful to Edward Branigan, Noel Carroll, Bruce Jenkins, Bob Self, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson for their helpful criticisms of this essay.

1 More radical avant-garde movements, such as Soviet montage filmmaking, Surrealism, and *cinéma pur* seem to have been relatively without effect upon the

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art cinema's style. I suspect that those experimental styles which did not fundamentally challenge narrative coherence were the most assimilable to the postwar art cinema.

2 See Thomas Guback, *The International Motion Picture Industry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), *passim.*

3 See, for example, Philip Rosen, "Difference and Displacement in *Seventh Heaven*," *Screen* XVIII, 2 (Summer 1977), 89-104.

4 This point is taken up in Christian Metz, "The Modern Cinema and Narrativity," *Film Language*, tr. by Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 185-227.

5 Arthur Knight compares the Hollywood film to a commodity and the foreign film to an art work: "Art is not manufactured by committees. Art comes from an individual who has something that he must express . . . . This is the reason why we hear so often that foreign films are 'more artistic' than our own. There is in them the urgency of individual expression, an independence of vision, the coherence of a single-minded statement." In Michael F. Mayer, *Foreign Films on American Screens* (New York: Arco, 1965). vii.

6 "The strategy was to talk about Hawks, Preminger, etc. as artists like Bunuel and Resnais" (Jim Hillier, "The Return of *Movie*," *Movie* no. 20 [Spring 1975], 17). I do not mean to imply that auteur criticism did not at times distinguish between the classical narrative cinema and the art cinema. A book like V. G. Perkins' *Film as Film* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1978) insists not only upon authorial presence but also upon the casual motivation and the stylistic economy characteristic of the classical cinema. Thus Perkins finds the labored directorial touches of Antonioni and Bergman insufficiently motivated by story action. Neverthless, Perkins' interpretation of the jeep sequence in *Carmen Jones* in terms of characters' confinement and liberation (pp. 80-82) is a good example of how Hollywood cutting and camera placement can be invested with symbolic traces of the author.

7 See, for instance, Mark Nash, "*Vampyr* and the Fantastic," *Screen* XVII, 3 (Autumn 1976), 29-67, and Paul Willemen, "The Fugitive Subject," *Raoul Walsh*, ed. by Phil Hardy (London: Edinburgh Film Festival, 1974), 63-89.

8 Norman Holland, "The Puzzling Movies: Three Analyses and a Guess at Their Appeal," *Journal of Social Issues* XX, 1 (January 1964), 71-96.

9 See Steve Neal, "New Hollywood Cinema," *Screen* 17, 2 (Summer 1976), 117-133, and Paul Willemen, "Notes on Subjectivity: On Reading Edward Branigan's 'Subjectivity UnderSlëge Screen XIX, 1 (Spring 1978), 59-64; cf. Robin Wood, "Smart-Ass and Cutie Pie: Notes toward an Evaluation of

Altman," Movie no. 21 (Autumn 1975), 1-17.

10 See David Borwell, *The Films of Carl Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

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9 See Steve Neal, "New Hollywood Cinema," *Screen* 17, 2 (Summer 1976), 117-122, and Paul Willemen, "Notes on Subjectivity: On Reading Edward Branigan's 'Subjectivity Under Siege,'" *Screen* XIX, 1 (Spring 1978), 59-64; cf. Robin Wood, "Smart-Ass and Cutie Pie: Notes toward an Evaluation of Altman," *Movie* no. 21 (Autumn 1975), 1-17.

The Salisbury Conference : Literature, History, and Film 19-22 June 1980 Salisbury State College, Salisbury, Md.

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