

POETICS OF CINEMA

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The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice

La Strada (1954), *8 1/2* (1963), *Wild Strawberries* (1957), *The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Persona* (1966), *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), *Jules et Jim* (1962), *Knife in the Water* (1962), *Vivre sa vie* (1962), *Muriel* (1963): Whatever else one can say about these films, cultural fiat gives them a role altogether different from *Rio Bravo* (1959) on the one hand and *Mothlight* (1963) 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 variable 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 have to include literary modernism, from Proust and James to Faulkner and Camus.) More specifically, the art cinema as a distinct mode appears after World War II when the dominance of the

revealed. It will not do, however, to characterize the art film solely by its loosening of causal 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 will 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* (1959) and *And God Created Woman* (1956) are no more typical of this than, say, *Jules et Jim* and *Persona* (whereas one can see *Le Mépris*, 1963, 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.

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*, 1960) 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 (*La Strada*; *Wild Strawberries*; *The Silence*, 1963), an idyll (*Jules et Jim*; *Elvira Madigan*, 1967; *Pierrot le fou*, 1965), a search (*L'Avventura*; *Blow-Up*, 1966; *High and Low*, 1963), even the making of a film (*8 1/2*; *Le Mépris*; *The Clowns*, 1971; *Fellini Roma*, 1972; *Day for Night*, 1973; *The Last Movie*, 1971). 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*; Ray's *Apu* trilogy, 1955–1959; *Alfie*, 1966). If the classical protagonist struggles, the drifting protagonist traces an itinerary, an encyclopedic survey of the film's world. Certain occupations (stockbroking in *L'Eclisse*, 1962; journalism in *La Dolce Vita* and *The Passenger*, 1975; prostitution in *Vivre sa vie* and *Nights of Cabiria*, 1957) favor a survey form of narrative. Thus the art film's thematic of *la condition humaine*, its attempt to pronounce judgments 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* (1952), *L'Avventura*, *Deserto rosso* (1964), and *Une femme mariée* (1964). In some circumstances the characters must attribute their feelings to social situations (as in *Ikiru* [1952], *I Live in Fear* [1955], and *Shame*). In *Europa 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 spectrum of possibilities. The options range from documenting factuality (e.g., *Il Posto*, 1961) to intense psychological subjectivity (*Hiroshima mon amour*, 1959). (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 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 *À bout de souffle* signaling 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. André 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 continuum 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 identifiable 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 (Buñuel's anticlericalism, Fellini's shows, Bergman's character names). The film also offers itself as a chapter in an *oeuvre*. 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 citations: 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 authorial 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 des 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 Satyajit 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 forward 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 *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 art cinema might be "When in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity."

The drama of these tendencies can play across an entire film, as *Giulietta 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 *Giulietta*, 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 (Giuliana 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 found, but the ending of *L'Avventura* refuses to specify the fate of the couple. At the close of *Les 400 coups* (1959), 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 theater 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; she or 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.

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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 perceptual 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* (1928), *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), *Lancelot du Lac* (1974), *Play Time* (1967), and *An Autumn Afternoon* (1963). 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 jump cut 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 irresolution of the freeze frame in *Les 400 coups* with its powerful closure in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, 1969.) More interestingly, we have seen an art cinema emerge in Hollywood. The open endings of *2001* (1968) and *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) and the psychological ambiguity of *The Conversation* (1974), *Klute* (1971), and *Three Women* (1977) testify to the assimilation of the conventions of the art film. (Simplifying brusquely, we might consider *The Godfather I* [1972] as a classical narrative film and *The Godfather II* [1974] 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. 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's author; 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

homogenous 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 causality 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 in its turn, an important point of departure. By the 1960s, the art cinema enabled certain filmmakers to define new possibilities. In *Gertrud* (1964), Dreyer created a perceptual surface so attenuated that all ambiguity drains away, leaving a narrative vacuum.¹⁰ In *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), Resnais dissolved causality altogether and used the very conventions of art cinema to shatter the premise of character subjectivity. In *Nicht versöhnt* (1965), Straub and Huillet tool 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* (1971) and *Death by Hanging* (1968). 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* [1967] 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* (1972) and subsequent works to use Brechtian principles to analyze art-film assumptions about the unity of ideology. 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.

Afterword

The preceding is the oldest essay in the volume, published in 1979 and reprinted here without revision. Like many early statements in a research tradition, it has a peremptory tenor: This is this, that is that, no fine gradations allowed. To revise it would go beyond mere updating; I'd want to query its overconfident generalizations. Some of my claims (like the faith in an emerging "historical-materialist" cinema) and terms (like "the narrator") no longer convince me. Many of the generalizations still seem to me on the right track, but they would need much more nuancing and refinement, and the result would be very different, and much longer.

Actually, some of the refinements have snuck into other things I've written. Never expecting to reprint the piece, I cannibalized it twice. I used it to counterpoint a study of classical Hollywood narrative (*The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 370–377), and I expanded it in a discussion of modes of narration (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, pp. 205–233). These are more informative, but several readers have told me that they

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prefer the cleaner outlines of the original, and it has found its way into anthologies and course packets, so I bring it back one last time. As you might expect, though, I can't refrain from making a few new remarks, if only to flag some points that could be usefully rethought. Kristin Thompson and I have tried to offer a more systematic and comprehensive discussion of some of these issues in our survey text, *Film History: An Introduction*.¹¹

Since I wrote the piece, some scholars have examined the art cinema as an institution in world film commerce. A great many fiscal mechanisms support production, distribution, and exhibition on the European scene.¹² The varied mix of funding sources (private capital, national subsidy, and European Union programs) has brought forth resourceful media players such as Marin Karmitz of Paris, who started by owning theater screens and has become both a producer and distributor of major films from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Somewhat surprisingly, American investment and distribution have also helped sustain art cinema, from small companies supporting the 1950s efforts to current interest on the part of Sony and others in financing Asian projects.¹³

In any producing country, films assume many diverse shapes. There are always genre pictures, particularly melodramas and comedies showcasing popular local talent. (The farce featuring TV performers seems a cross-cultural constant.) Local output also usually includes a few prestige items, often adapted from national literary classics or based on memorable historical episodes. But Europe also promoted a conception of creativity that was rare elsewhere: the auteur film. The idea of a director expressing his (only rarely her) vision of life on film remains crucial to the art cinema. The head of New Danish Screen, a funding scheme from the nation's film institute, says, "We secure a place to develop a director's personal style without the pressure of commercial success criteria."¹⁴ Yet personal style can have cultural and financial implications. The idea of authorship can accommodate policies that demand that local films reflect national culture (who was more French than François Truffaut, more Bavarian than Rainer Werner Fassbinder?), while also providing a marketable identity to films made with low budgets and relatively unknown stars. A sector of world film commerce still depends on the auteur premise. Acknowledging a powerful creator as the source of the film's formal and thematic complexity yields something marketable internationally, a brand name that can carry over from project to project. Pedro Almodóvar, Lars von Trier, Michael Haneke, Roman Polanski, and a few others are still guarantees of saleable cinema. Individualized branding is even more important as creators become international directors, as Lone Scherfig moves from Denmark to Scotland to make *Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself* (2002) or the German Tom Tykwer allies with Miramax to make *Heaven* (2002). And, of course, the concept of authorship spread outside Europe rather quickly, with Kurosawa Akira and Satyajit Ray becoming celebrated as individual creators in the 1950s and 1960s.

Two institutions that I didn't mention have become ever more important in the cultivation of art movies. The first, and less studied, is the film school. The USSR founded a national film school in 1919, and European countries followed after World War II. Film schools have multiplied since the 1960s, either in universities or

under the auspices of national film institutes. Apart from ensuring a flow of trained professionals into the industry, film schools carry in their curricula and course assignments certain presumptions about what constitutes aesthetically worthwhile cinema. Judging from my limited experience, European film academies were in the 1990s still quite oriented to the idea of individual expression—though my sense is that students who were interested in TV production, where most of the jobs were, were less committed to auteur premises. It would be a big project, but someone should study the policies, the taste structures, and the craft practices of non-U.S. film schools, and analyze the films that result.

A second sort of institution is receiving more study just now. The filmmakers and movements that defined the postwar art cinema earned much of their fame on the festival circuit, from *Rashomon* (winner at Venice in 1951) through *If* (winner at Cannes in 1969). When my essay was published in 1979, there were at most 75 principal film festivals; today there are about 250, with hundreds more serving local, regional, and specialist audiences. The development of low-budget independent cinemas, the ease with which films can be submitted on video, and the huge variety of festival themes (e.g., animation, science fiction, gay and lesbian, and film scores) have made the scene overwhelming. There is even a trade magazine for festival planners.¹⁵ Each year hundreds of programmers are chasing the world's top three or four dozen films. Everyone wants red carpet events, with major stars and directors turning up for the press. If a festival isn't allowed by the international association to award prizes, the organizers can still fly in three or four critics from the Fédération Internationale de la Presse Cinématographique (FIPRESCI) and establish a jury for a FIPRESCI prize. Festivals enhance tourism and give even the smallest city a moment in the limelight. As packaging events, they build an accumulating excitement around films that many attendees wouldn't bother to see in regular theatrical runs.

At the same time, festivals are the world's alternative to Hollywood's theatrical distribution system. A decentralized, informal network of programmers, gatekeepers, and tastemakers brings to notice films of daring and ambition.¹⁶ Festivals are the major clearinghouse for art cinema, with prizes validating the year's top achievements. To win at one of the big three—Berlin, Cannes, and Venice—or to be purchased at Cannes, Toronto, or Sundance lifts a film above the thousands of other titles demanding attention. The payoff goes beyond cinephilia: Taiwan and Iran have used victories on the festival circuit to improve their cultural image.¹⁷ Hong Kong cinema would not have gained its prestige in the West without the energetic proselytizing of festival programmers and loyal journalists.¹⁸

Not all movies screened at festivals are art films, but festivals sustain the formal and stylistic conventions that my essay tried to isolate. Those conventions emerged earliest, I still believe, in Western and Eastern European cinema, but the essay did slight other cinematic traditions. For example, filmmakers in developing countries like Turkey and Egypt were sensitive to developing art cinema trends, but I simply didn't know enough about them. Nor did I know enough about South American film to do justice to it. Italian neorealism had a strong influence there in the 1950s, and a few filmmakers, notably Leopoldo Torre Nilsson in Argentina, quickly picked up

on Bergman and Antonioni. Brazil's Cinema Novo and other trends criticized art cinema traditions in ways roughly comparable to the politicized modernist cinema of Europe.

Asia may have lagged somewhat, with the exception of Japan. Although lacking exact counterparts to the standard-bearers of European art movies, Japan had an experimental tradition in mainstream production, and there were many more convention-busting directors at work than the essay suggests (such as Suzuki Seijun and Wakamatsu Kojiro). As the 1980s unfolded, however, the other cinemas of Asia were drawing heavily on the models I review here. Directors of the Fifth Generation in China, the Hong Kong New Wave, and above all the New Taiwanese Cinema were salient examples. Chen Kaige's neorealist *Yellow Earth* (1984) and his more stylized efforts like *The Big Parade* (1986) and *King of the Children* (1987); Edward Yang's *That Day, on the Beach* (1983) and *The Terrorizers* (1986); Ann Hui's *The Secret* (1979); and Patrick Tam's *Love Massacre* (1981) and *Nomad* (1982)—these and many other works attest to the emergence of a transnational Chinese art cinema. Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild* (1991) brought Hong Kong art cinema to maturity, and his time-bending lyricism, from *Ashes of Time* (1994) to *2046* (2004), has been indebted to Western literary and cinematic models.¹⁹ In Taiwan, the earliest New Cinema films belong to an autobiographical redrafting of neorealism, but several directors moved beyond it. Edward Yang was strongly influenced by European cineastes, notably Antonioni, and his masterpiece *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991) married local realism (the film is based on a notorious murder) and self-conscious artifice. Hou Hsiao-hsien was no cinephile, working instead in Taiwan's local industry, but after making triumphant contributions to New Cinema realism, he widened his ambitions. He experimented with decentered historical narrative (*City of Sadness*, 1989; *The Puppetmaster*, 1993), reflexive construction (*Good Men, Good Women*, 1995; *Three Times*, 2005), extreme technical restraint (*Flowers of Shanghai*, 1998), and self-conscious invocations of film history (the Ozu homage *Café Lumière*, 2004).²⁰

The 1990s also saw the emergence of a new generation of Japanese directors, including Kore-eda Hirokazu (*Maborosi*, 1995), Suwa Nobuhiro (*M/Other*, 1999), Aoyama Shinji (*Eureka*, 2000), and Kitano Takeshi, who shifted between poetic genre films and more abstract efforts like *Dolls* (2002). At the same period, South Korean directors Hong Sang-soo (*The Power of Kangwon Province*, 1998), Lee Chang-dong (*Peppermint Candy*, 2000), Kim Ki-duk (*The Isle*, 2000), and Park Chan-wook (*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, 2002) began winning festival acclaim. Mainland China has reinstituted art cinema as an export commodity, with films such as Tian Zhuangshuang's *Springtime in a Small Town* (2002) and Jia Zhang-ke's *The World* (2004).

Many of these newer traditions, it seems, replay at an accelerated pace the trajectory of European art cinema. An indigenous realist movement, somewhat comparable to Italian neorealism, becomes more conscious of the conventions involved in realism, and develops more abstract experiments in form. The emergence of Iranian cinema is a remarkable instance. Budgets are bare-bones by Western standards, and by using nonactors and locations, filmmakers have presented post-Shah Iranian culture to a world that knew little of it. The humanistic strain of neorealism finds echoes in films

Hollywood cinema was beginning to wane. In the United States, the courts' divorce-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 international art cinema, and subsequent examples would include most works of the New Wave, Fellini, Resnais, 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* (1977) and *Stroszek* (1977) 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 film 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 director, 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-scène (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* (1960), Anna is lost and never found; in *À bout de souffle* (aka *Breathless*; 1960), the reasons for Patricia's betrayal of Michel remain unknown; in *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), the future of Antonio and his son is not

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Figure 5.1 *Moment of Innocence* (1996): Reenacting Makhmalbaf's youthful assault, several performers meet, along with their props, in the final freeze frame.

like *The Key* (1987), *The White Balloon* (1995), *The Apple* (1998), *The Child and the Soldier* (2000), and *Blackboards* (2000). At the same time, and often within the same films, we find sophisticated games with cinematic technique. *The Mirror* (1997) starts with a little girl's frustration with trying to cross a busy intersection, then shifts its story action almost wholly to the soundtrack when she barricades herself behind her household gate and refuses to meet the camera. Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Moment of Innocence* (1996) shows him staging a film based on a crime he committed in his youth, and the result is a dizzying *mise en abyme* reminiscent of *8 1/2* (Figure 5.1). The country seems immersed in cinephilia. When a laborer and film fan pretends to be director Makhmalbaf, Abbas Kiarostami covers his trial and stages a meeting between him and Makhmalbaf. He calls the result *Close Up* (1990). But then the impostor justifies himself by making his own film, called *Close-Up Long-Shot* (1996). Kiarostami himself—superb screenwriter, director of exemplary documentaries and fiction films, and experimenter with portable video and Warholian recording (*Ten*, 2002; *Five Dedicated to Ozu*, 2003)—stands as an emblem of a culture in love with cinematic artifice but also compelled to bear witness to the lives of ordinary people. Who in the West would have predicted that a great cinema, at once humanist and formalist, would have come from Iran?

Not that the period proved unproductive elsewhere. Russia and Eastern Europe contributed to the tradition of philosophically weighty works with Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* (1975) and *Nostalghia* (1983) and Krzysztof Kiesłowski's coproductions, notably the *Three Colors* trilogy (1993–1994). Aleksandr Sokurov created mournful, quasi-mystical works (*The Second Circle*, 1990; *Whispering Pages*, 1993) that paralleled the elegiac music pouring out of late Soviet and post-Soviet composers like Artymov and Kancheli. In Hungary, Béla Tarr (*Satanstango*, 1994) and György Fehér (*Passion*, 1998) created harsh, palpably grimy tales of rural life. France continued to support Philippe Garrel, Claire Denis, and others of ambitious bent, whereas Belgium sustained the regional realism of the Dardennes brothers, Jean-Pierre and Luc. Denmark provided Europe's newest Cinema of Quality, with well-carpentered scripts, thoughtful themes, and versatile actors, as well as, thanks to the Dogme 95 impulse, some films pushing against the ethos of professionalism

with rawer works. A film, said Lars von Trier, should be "like a pebble in your shoe."²¹ Yet quite outside the dominion of Dogme lay Christoffer Boe, whose *Reconstruction* (2003) owes a good deal to Alain Resnais' polished time jumping.

American filmmakers have been assimilating art-film conventions for a long time, as my essay suggests, but the process has been given a new force by the rise of the independent film sector. Steven Soderbergh can remake an Andrey Tarkovsky film (*Solaris*, 1972 and 2002), Paul Thomas Anderson can borrow sound devices from Jacques Tati (*Punch-Drunk Love*, 2002), and Hal Hartley can absorb ideas from Jean-Luc Godard and Robert Bresson.²² The burst of experimentation on display in films like *Memento* (2000), *Adaptation* (2002), and *Primer* (2004) probably owes as much to the European heritage as it does to U.S. traditions of film noir and fantasy. In many respects, the U.S. indie cinema blends European art-cinema principles with premises of classical Hollywood storytelling.²³ Ahmad, the protagonist of Ramin Bahrani's *Man Push Cart* (2005), has as firm a set of purposes as any Hollywood hero, but the first half-hour of the film conceals them from us. Instead, the scenes concentrate on his daily grind as he sells coffee and pastries from a wheeled stall. We get to know him by the way he lugs his propane tank, fills the coffee roaster, unpacks doughnuts and Danishes, and hauls his massive cart through midtown traffic. Suspending our awareness of the protagonist's goals forces us to focus on minutiae of the story world.

Several books would be needed to do justice to this worldwide activity,²⁴ so I'll close by pointing out two areas that have intrigued me from the standpoint of a poetics. First is a new stylistic trend that coalesced as I was writing my essay. As if in rebuke to the 1960s reliance on montage and camera movement, several directors cultivated an approach based on the static, fairly distant long take. In Europe, this took the shape of what I've called the *planimetric image*. The shot is framed perpendicular to a back wall or ground, with figures caught in frontal or profile positions, as in police mug shots. We can find this emerging in the 1960s, with the new reliance on long lenses, but it became a feature of much European staging of the 1970s and 1980s, and it was picked up in other national cinemas (Figures 5.2–5.3).²⁵ This device presents the scene as a more abstract configuration, perhaps distancing us from its emotional tenor, and it can support those psychologically imbued *temps morts* that are crucial to the realistic impulse of the mode. This visual schema can also display some of the arresting boldness of an advertising layout, as in the *cinéma du look* trend of 1980s France (Figure 5.4). The planimetric image became quite common in world cinema (Figure 5.5) and constitutes one of the art cinema's permanent contributions to cinema's pictorial repertoire. As a substitute for orthodox shot/reverse-shot cutting, it became a staple of deadpan humor in both art films like Kitano Takeshi's and cult hits like *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004).

Even when not composed with planimetric flatness, the very long take also became a prominent technical option. In Europe, Miklos Jancso was identified with a dynamic and fluid choreography of camera and figures in shots running for many minutes. By contrast, the "minimalist" films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, such as *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), employed quite static shots with little or no camera movement (Figure 5.6). Allied with the planimetric composition, the



Figure 5.2 Manuel de Oliveira uses the planimetric image as a theatrical address to the audience in *The Cannibals* (1988).



Figure 5.3 The flattened image suggests a family portrait gone wrong in Terence Davis' *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988).



Figure 5.4 Leos Carax' *Mauvais Sang* (1986) uses the planar image for surprise dramatic effects as Lise, pursuing the hero, flings herself at a subway door.



Figure 5.5 In *Maborosi* (1995), Hirokazu Kore-eda mutes the drama of a drunken husband returning home. The distant, perpendicular framing accentuates the slight gesture of the wife quietly lowering her head.



Figure 5.6 Bach in a distant, static shot (*The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, 1968).

static long take became somewhat common in the 1970s. In the 1980s, apparently unaware of the European developments, Hou Hsiao-hsien made the fixed-camera long take central to his style, but his use of the long lens supports more dynamic staging principles than we see in most European instances.²⁶ Hou's complex blocking is often employed to highlight small actions taking place quite far from the viewer (Figures 5.7–5.9). His fixed long takes appear to have influenced many other directors in Asia, though few have matched his virtuosity in recessive staging and dense image



Figure 5.7 *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* (1985): With the family gathered, the grieving mother buries her face in the dead father's blankets.



Figure 5.8 *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*: She is drawn up and back by her relations, her movement and the panning camera revealing one of the sons against the back wall.



Figure 5.9 *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*: The mother is pulled back into the adjacent room, and while she's visible in the distance, her sons kneel in the foreground. Hou Hsiao-hsien's long lens creates layers of space that are dynamically blocked and revealed by small movements of the characters.



Figure 5.10 *In Peacock* (Gu Changwei, 2004, China), the telephoto full shot recalls not only the planimetric image but also the staggered staging arrangements of Hou Hsiao-hsien.

design (Figure 5.10; see also Figure 5.5). Today's festival films are likely to include at least some striking long takes with minimal camera movement, and entire films can be built out of them. The international currency of the device is evident with the French film *Un couple parfait* (2006), directed by the Japanese long-take adept Suwa Nobuhiro. Moreover, a director may decouple the fixed camera from the long take, creating unusually strict constraints on camera placement. We now have movies consisting wholly of conversations in automobiles, with the camera anchored outside the windshield (Kiarostami's *Ten*) or angled from the dashboard (Figure 5.11).

A second aspect touched on in this essay became a concern of my book *Narration in the Fiction Film*. The art cinema engages us not only by asking us to construct the *fabula* action but also by teasing us to make sense of the ongoing narration. So how is this slippery narration patterned across the length of the whole film? Taking as my example Resnais' *La Guerre est finie* (1966), I argued that many art films create a "game of form." The film initially trains the viewer in its distinctive storytelling tactics, but as the film proceeds, those tactics mutate in unforeseeable ways. In *La Guerre est finie*, the key device—the hypothetical sequence, showing several alternative actions the protagonist might take in the future—is announced quite early. At first it seems difficult and disruptive, but through repetition it becomes stabilized. Then, however,



Figure 5.11 Although it contains nearly 1,000 shots, Simon Staho's *Day and Night* (2004, Denmark) employs only two camera positions, one showing the car's driver, and the other showing the passenger seat. Any action taking place outside the car is viewed from those fixed angles.



Figure 5.12 *Vagabond* (aka *Sans toit ni loi*; 1985): The most peculiar of the initial "reverse shots" of the police investigation.

the narration renders the hypothetical sequences more indeterminate, introducing uncertainty by mixing in flashbacks and abrupt transitions to new scenes. The final section of the film is the most transparent, as the story action comes to the fore, but there are still variations that make the premises of presentation somewhat unpredictable. The finale leaves open both the consequences of story causality and the rules governing the narration itself.²⁷

This game of form isn't present in every film that belongs to the mode, but it does reappear.²⁸ A striking instance is Agnès Varda's *Vagabond* (aka *Sans toit ni loi*; 1985). The film has a characteristic art-cinema situation: an unexplained psychological crisis that makes a young woman quit her job as secretary and take to an itinerant life in Montpellier. Her meanderings are presented more or less in chronological order, as she links up various people in the neighboring villages and sinks into drunkenness and exhaustion. The film begins with the discovery of her frozen corpse and assumes the time-honored structure of a posthumous inquiry. People who encountered Mona introduce flashbacks showing the last weeks of her life. But to the inevitable question *What led up to her death?* the film adds, *To whom are the witnesses telling their stories?*

At the death site, the police question the witnesses. The scene is conventional and coherent, except for a curious framing that might give wary viewers some pause (Figure 5.12). And once Mona's body is removed, a female voice, heard over shots of the beach and sea, interjects itself. "People she had met recently had remembered her. . . . They spoke of her, not knowing she had died. I didn't tell them." This quasi-documentary commentary might lead us to expect to see who's speaking, but we never do. If it is Varda's voice, as I think it is, we have the oscillation among objectivity, subjectivity (how people recall Mona), and authorial intervention characteristic of art-cinema narration. In announcing that "these witnesses helped me tell the last weeks of her last winter," the commentary sets up some rather ambivalent ground rules. The people who recall Mona might speak to one another, as in ordinary cinematic conversation, and these would segue into flashbacks. This is the *Citizen Kane* option. Alternatively, the witnesses might be testifying explicitly for the camera, responding to an offscreen questioner in documentary fashion. This strategy is pursued in Hou's biographical picture *The Puppetmaster*. *Vagabond*, it turns out, uses both devices, and it introduces

Figure 5.13 *Vagabond* begins his tale.



Figure 5.15 *Vagabond* housework.

still other variations, disquieting with

Vagabond's the beach; we another about her. But already quite visible, angle composition come out of the ordinary testimony, but afterward, the break into the tell us about Paulo, than to justify the moment out of the house whom she's after this, with and now she curled up she a soliloquy.



Figure 5.13 *Vagabond*: The garage owner begins his tale.



Figure 5.14 *Vagabond*: The garage owner ends his tale, annoyed.



Figure 5.15 *Vagabond*: Yolande halts her housework.

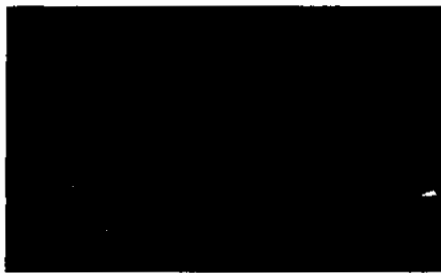


Figure 5.16 *Vagabond*: Yolande recalling seeing Mona and David.

still other variants. The witnesses "help" the filmmaker "tell" Mona's story in several disquieting ways.

Vagabond's first flashback is introduced by idling boys recalling seeing Mona on the beach; we simply overhear their reference to her. Later, at a truck stop a driver tells another about picking her up, and then a garage owner tells another man about hiring her. But already there's a modulation. The man whom the truck driver addresses is quite visible, but the first view of the *garagiste* talking of Mona comes in a reverse-angle composition, so we see only the shoulders of his listener (Figure 5.13). When we come out of the flashback, he is still talking, but to an unseen listener (Figure 5.14). In an ordinary film, such variations might simply serve to underscore the garage owner's testimony, but here they also glide into a pattern of narrational uncertainty. Shortly afterward, the maid Yolande turns from her dusting toward us to describe how to break into the chateau that her uncle guards (Figure 5.15). This monologue doesn't tell us about Mona, and it is more properly addressed to Yolande's layabout boyfriend, Paulo, than to anyone else, inside or outside the fictional world. In retrospect, we can justify the moment as Yolande talking to Paulo, who may be offscreen (he slips in and out of the household), but this is by no means definite. The fact that we never see to whom she's speaking dramatically violates the internal norm set up so far. Very soon after this, when Yolande meets Paulo at the chateau, she again addresses the camera, and now she confides that she was moved by seeing Mona and another vagrant, David, curled up sleeping together (Figure 5.16). This time, there can be no doubt that this is a soliloquy. The objective portrayal of quite unfeeling male witnesses has shifted into



Figure 5.17 *Vagabond*: David in the boxcar, his gaze shifting from side to side.



Figure 5.18 *Vagabond*: The shepherd and his wife: Is he addressing her or us?

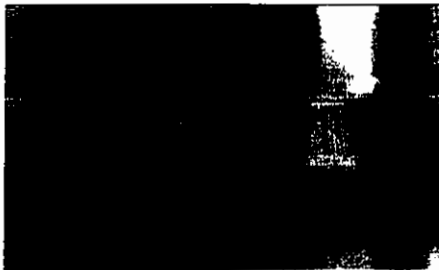


Figure 5.19 *Vagabond*: Near the end of her life, Mona's gaze brushes across the camera axis.



Figure 5.20 *Vagabond*: Assoun after kissing Mona's scarf; the witness is silent.

a subjective monologue, with a woman telling us spontaneously of her yearning for love and companionship.

As if taking his cue from Yolande, David the hippie is soon given a recounting scene too. He squats in a boxcar and tells how he enjoyed being with Mona when she had grass (Figure 5.17). In story-world terms, his testimony undercuts Yolande's romanticism; he and Mona's relationship was based on staying stoned. Narrationally, all bets now seem off. Is he soliloquizing? Unlike Yolande, he doesn't look straight at us; his eyes move sharply left and right. So is he speaking to other people? No other characters are visible, and the train moves away while he's still speaking.

Across all these scenes, the narration has laid out contradictory cues, and these block any consistent construal of the characters' circumstances in these recounting scenes. As the film goes on, the inserted recollections continue to oscillate among these possibilities, mixing in other variants. Sometimes the repetitions affirm earlier inferences we might have made, as when Yolande soliloquizes to the camera one last time before leaving the story action; she is the only character given these private monologues. At other times, the characters recount Mona's behavior to the camera, or past it, or to someone in the scene, or perhaps some combination of all (Figure 5.18). Perhaps most disconcertingly, at certain moments Mona's eyes graze the camera, sometimes pausing as if she were looking at us (Figure 5.19). The narration's determination to throw us off balance runs to the very end, when Assoun, the Tunisian immigrant worker who was closest to Mona, simply kisses her scarf and looks out at us silently (Figure 5.20). In this purely emblematic moment, he seems not to be responding to anyone on the scene, either character or filmmaker.



Figure 5.21 *Caché* (Michael Haneke, 2005): The central family's apartment house, seen on video. But who is watching the tape?



Figure 5.22 *Caché*: A nearly subliminal shot follows. Where does this image belong in the story chronology?

At the close, the tale of Mona's wanderings retains its episodic quality, and her motives remain enigmatic. We construct this art cinema *fabula* in and through a series of incompatible judgments about her made by diverse characters. So far, so conventional. But by equivocating about the situation in which the characters recount their stories, Varda also invites us to enter the typical game of formal hesitation. Perhaps the ambivalences of the onlookers' glimpses of Mona can finally be attributed to the supreme control of this narration over the primary conditions of the story. The voice-over commentary that quite early announced the film's method also includes a telling passage. "I know little about her myself," says the woman's voice, "but it seems to me that she came from the sea." At this moment we see a shot of Mona striding out of the ocean, watched by the biker boys. The backstory begins with an oscillation between objective presentation and a frank gesture of authorial imagination. Perhaps everything that follows, even the firm texture created by regional customs and dialects and nonactors, is to be understood as subordinate to the creative energies of authorial vision (not an implied author, or a "cinematic narrator," but the person who made this movie for us).

This poignant film is crisscrossed by many other patterns, notably the planimetrically composed tracking shots that coax us to find another theme-and-variations structure.²⁹ A complete analysis would also show how the game of form in the various narrators' accounts blocks our constructing a complete psychological profile of Mona. Instead, it swerves us toward comparing the productive or unproductive lives of the characters she touches. One of the film's thematic dilemmas is how utter freedom can be reconciled with the danger of solitude, and this tension is played out in these onlookers who admire, criticize, or worry about Mona, homeless and lawless. Still, our consideration of themes, as abstractions from our experience of the film, should be balanced by considering how we make sense of the narration moment by moment, registering its mixed signals and following its zigzag paths. A crucial part of *Vagabond*'s respectful uneasiness about Mona's choices is born of an ambiguous narration.

Such formal play constitutes one norm within art cinema narration. It's as apparent in the disjunctive editing and misleading camera positions (Figures 5.21–5.22) of *Caché* (2005) as in works from 40 years before. As the next two essays try to show, the study of this tradition from the standpoint of poetics continues to bring new possibilities to light.