

On Film Style

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This essay is one of three published in this edition on the concept of style. It was inspired by the Synoptique Style Gallery (founded in November of 2004), which was the beginning of an ongoing project investigating ways to discuss the concept of film style. These essays will provide some of the groundwork for a Forum on Film Style to be published in in Synoptique 7 (February of 2005).

If a man approaches a work of art with any desire to exercise authority over it and the artist, he approaches it in such a spirit that he cannot receive any artistic impression from it at all.
—“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”

Working on the style gallery came with a proviso: along with a few others, I would write an initial response. Easy I thought. I had a clear idea of what I wanted going in, now I just had to jot it down.

So what was my idea? Simple: despite the theory, the politics and everything else that encrusts work situated in a competitive, disciplinary discourse, I believe film study is still, thankfully, a practice of object-love. In other words, the root of most scholarship can still be traced back to the individual scholar’s love for the films they discuss. For me, the gallery would thus have two purposes:

1. to gather proof that I wasn’t wrong in my faith about our work’s basis in object-love;
2. to put participants in the position of declaring the connection between their scholarship and their object-

love.

In film of course (and I imagine in other arts as well), style is all you get. But in preparing for the gallery, I discovered that “style” was a dangerous word. “Style” has been a rallying cry for a long series of on-going debates about the institutional make-up of film studies as an emerging (and, some would have us believe, disappearing) discipline. Through this we have learned that to define style (perhaps even to talk about it) is simultaneously to regulate what (in) film should be studied in the context of the university. The gallery I hoped could provide a way around this fear by creating a space where we could trace a wide variety of film research back to a recognizable and common love of (or, in the life-less jargon of our day, “commitment to”) particular films.

This of course was foolish. The gallery, which I hoped would get us past the disciplinary squabbles that allowed some of us to believe we dealt with style—real style—while others with equal satisfaction could sleep peacefully knowing that they did not, began to betray recognizable fault lines. The division between gallery participants and non-participants in my circle of acquaintances, for example, began to mirror rather uncomfortably the division, familiar from scholarly publications and academic conferences, between “formalists” and “culture studiers”.

The gallery is still of course a success. That much is clear. But I’m waiting for the culture studiers to step in and drop the style bomb the formalist gallery desperately needs (a culture bomb won’t work). Film

is a made thing; it is nothing but style. But film is also an artistic, cultural object. What then is the relationship between style and culture? What is the relationship between people's object-love and their interest in culture? Where are the style examples that point toward answers to these questions? With clipboard in hand, pencil whetted, and white lab coat draped squarely across my shoulders, I'm waiting for these clips and commentaries to appear on-line.

In the meantime, it seems worthwhile to state informally three thoughts about object-love that relate to the questions of style posed by the gallery.

1.

I believe that good film scholarship is hard to read. Not because of obscure theory, not because of opaque writing, not because of insistently declared political platitudes, not because of the apparent marginality or temporariness of its concerns. No, good film scholarship is hard to read because you continually want to put it down and watch the film it's discussing. Good criticism excites you by presenting genuine insight that allows you to see the film better. It's impossible when reading it to avoid asking yourself, "Is that true? How could I not see that?" The only legitimate response to good criticism is to go back and see the film again for yourself to verify what you are being told. Object-love, with its necessary focus on the matter of the film, on its style, always seeks out and aims to produce this kind of scholarship.

2.

Object-love reminds us that our basic unit of study is the film: not the body of work, not the national, cultural context, not the industrial history, not the political program of the artist or the critic. These areas of study (and more besides) may be essential to the study of film; but their value as knowledge depends upon the value of the individual films they make sense of.

3.

Object-love reminds us that criticism should always concern itself with beauty. This is a word more troubling even than style. We distrust beauty, and depending on how badly we have been abused by the beautiful, we may even hate it. Beauty is not fair and has nothing to do with merit or just desserts. There is nothing egalitarian or democratic or progressive about it. We learned this years ago on the playground

and at homecoming. Beauty is a mysterious power that overwhelms us, sometimes, in the world of art, by hiding itself in abject ugliness. Beauty reminds us that the object is bigger than we are and that this is why our love is worthwhile. We may dislike it or distrust it, but beauty is not going away. More importantly, in the world of made things, beauty is all that finally matters. As art scholars, our choice is not therefore between treating beauty or not; it is between treating beauty well or treating it badly. Object-love is fundamentally an aesthetic endeavour.

I must seem at this point to have wandered far from the subject at hand since I offer no theory or system of style. I offer only the belief that style must be understood film-by-film through careful attention to the details of their representations. I've called these details beautiful, insisted on the value of that beauty, and implied in a most impressionistic, non-scientific way that our attention to the details of this beauty may be motivated by a love similar to the one that makes my beloved's eyelashes worth counting. Sue me. I'm no advocate of a sterile formalism.

But I'm not advocating for impressionism, cinephilia, or a new generalism either. I'm advocating for scholarship that seeks concrete detailed knowledge about the workings of the very objects that moved us to become scholars in the first place. And for us to be prepared to teach that knowledge to others in a variety of formats. This knowledge is available through no system of style, no theory of film, no idea of culture. It is available only through the difficult work of the critic drawn to these objects with passion, humility and, yes, love.

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