

BRUCE ELDER: A CRITIQUE OF CINE-STRUCTURALISM
Review Article of Bill Nichol's book *Movies and Methods*

WITH A RESPONSE FROM BILL NICHOLS

The notion that metacritical theories can offer methodological procedures for conducting an objective, scientific analysis of a work of art has been a perennially attractive one. Structuralist criticism is, of course, founded on this notion. The aspiration of the structuralist critics for a scientific criticism reveals itself in two ways. In the first place, structuralists take-up *models* imported from such scientific disciplines as linguistics, psycho-analysis, anthropology, and apply them, *mutatis mutandis*, to the analysis of artistic works. Secondly, this criticism attempts to make use of the scientific *method*: certain hypothetical models are applied to certain works as a means both of revealing the underlying character of the work and of validating and refining the model itself.

The reasons for the extreme interest which structuralist methods of criticism have generated in the few short years since its introduction into the American critical scene are many. Not the least important amongst them is historical. The scientific and objective character of structural analysis has seemed to many to be a most appealing alternative to the mainstream critical tradition the basic weaknesses of which had revealed themselves in the arbitrary and relativistic qualities of impressionistic criticism. But structuralism as a critical methodology (or more strictly, a group of critical methodologies that share a certain family resemblance) has too in its own time led to certain excesses which are now becoming quite apparent. The time has come to question the basis of the structuralist methodology. Laudable as the empirical, scientific character of structuralism seemed for the aforementioned historical reasons, its has had a very truncating effect on the critical enterprise. In part, this is due to certain fundamental disanalogies between the nature of scientific and aesthetic inquiry. This disanalogy reveals itself in the different means each of these disciplines employs to assess the value of models developed. In the scientific field, the value of a model can be determined objectively; only the conformity between the predictions predicated on the model and actual state of affairs need be considered. (Even the criterion of simplicity, if one wishes to consider it, is an objective and mathematically definable one.) In the field of criticism, however, the *range* and *depth* of insight provided are of concern. Hence, in aesthetic inquiry, the value of a model involves a subjective moment, and so cannot be objectively determined. An adequate meta-critical theory must, therefore, provide some basis for making a qualitative assessment of a model. The empirical and positivistic character of structuralism prevents it from furnishing this basis.

This problem of value manifests itself in yet another form. The models which one employs as investigative tools delimit the domain into which one may inquire, as only a limited range of phenomena can be explainable by any given model. In the field of science, this poses no problem for a model need only explain something about some phenomenon to have some heuristic value. In the field of aesthetic inquiry, however, a far different state of affairs obtains. Not every sort of structure or relation which one can uncover in an artwork has aesthetic value: hence a metacritical theory must provide some ground for deciding whether any given relation or structure is aesthetically relevant. Structuralist methodologies, being positivistic in character, cannot provide such a ground. In the absence of such a ground, the complexity which that methodology can uncover comes to be valued. Thus we have the spectacle on the contemporary critical scene of a number of competing methodological tools, each of which celebrates a certain kind of structural and relational complexity without giving us any reason to believe that such complexity has any aesthetic relevance. In many cases, it does not.

The lack of a normative base in their work has also influenced the structuralists approach to metacriticism. Metacriticism properly has two tasks: in the first place, it must develop a methodology which, while it enables one, to unfold the foundational presuppositions that underlie one's critical practice, itself remains free from such presuppositions since it is only a methodology for such an explication. Secondly it must attempt to determine the aesthetic validity of these presuppositions by testing them against actual work.

The desire to conduct artistic inquiry using scientific procedures has caused structuralists to accept the first task, but not the second. At the same time, the normative poverty of the discipline has led to a decrease of concern with the task of aesthetic analysis. Thus the literature of structuralism has taken on an increasing reflexive character; text piles upon text, each attempting to expose the operative concepts that lie behind the thematic concepts explicated in the previous text and each then in turn being subjected to similar sort of analysis. All the while, the level of methodological inquiry becomes increasingly remote from actual films. The task of criticism is thus abandoned in favour of arid methodological inquiry.

That methodological aridity is a danger to which any structuralist and semiological analyses have succumbed is nowhere in greater evidence than in the rigorously positivistic and empiricistic character of their quest to uncover cinematic codes. The pursuit could be described essentially as one that attempts to demonstrate that one can observe that certain common patterns, of, say, shots exist in certain groups of films. No attempt is made, however, to show that such patterns have any aesthetic validity; to my knowledge, no one has undertaken an analysis which would reveal that these patterns exploit certain material properties of the film in order to create tension. Similarly, the analyses of cinematic narratives found in the structuralist literature consist in demonstrating that one can discover certain narrative patterns in certain types of films; the question of whether such narrative patterns have any basis in the nature of the film material is never broached. Anyone familiar with Plato's allegory of the cave will immediately recognize the kind of knowledge for which the structuralists are seeking. Plato terms it *pistis* and describes it as being the second lowest form of knowledge.

Elevating models which fail to provide a normative basis for critical judgements to the level of critical paradigms has many consequences. The critical enterprise either becomes a mechanistic procedure of enumerating and

cataloguing strategies, relations and structures or one in which a work of art is measured against some arbitrary criterion, the aesthetic relevance of which is uninterrogated. This latter approach is exemplified by Martin Walsh's criticism of Rossellini (*Jump Cut* No. 15). The argument of the article runs roughly as follows: A film (work of art) is good only if it is non-illusionistic, i.e. if it reveals the manner by which its signifying practice is produced; evidence is presented to the effect that Rossellini's works (specifically *Roma*, *Citta Aperta* and *La Prise de Pouvoir de Louis XIV*) are illusionistic; therefore Rossellini's works are poor. Even overlooking the error of equating illusionistic art with art which reveals masks the manner by which its signifying practice is produced and the obviousness of the point established by critical scrutiny, one would still have to consider this piece as remarkably bad criticism. The criterion of value is a completely unjustified statement of preference, the aesthetic relevance of which is never demonstrated. The art work is simply measured in quite a mechanistic fashion against this criterion.

In spite of these fundamental problems, the structuralist critics have laboured to produce a literature on the cinema which aspires toward uncompromisedly high standards of conceptual clarity and philosophical rigour. Their continued exchange of ideas on topics of central concern have led them to question, refine, re-work, or even reject their critical paradigms and to develop ever more adequate ones. This kind of collectivity, of course, has been made possible only by their ability to move beyond critical methods founded on a thoroughgoing critical relativism. But, unfortunately, even this collectivity has at times a rather perverted air about it, and their exchanges seem more like incestuous chatting-up of each other than genuine dialogue directed at scrutinizing their fundamental critical premises.

Bill Nichols' new anthology *Movies and Methods* (University of California Press, 1977), manifests both these strengths and weaknesses. Almost all the articles have an exceptionally high degree of scholarly seriousness and rigour. Unfortunately, the book is hardly adequate for its apparent use, as a core text in survey courses on film criticism and critical methodology. For one thing, it provides very little sense of the evolution of film criticism. Such critics as Kracauer, Bazin, Wood and others whose work has for years constituted the basic reading for foundational courses in film criticism make only cameo appearances in the text. Moreover, these critics are all represented in articles that have little relevance to the issues raised in the more recent structuralist articles. Articles by those individuals of greater relevance to the key issues raised by the cine-structuralists are not included. The most striking example of this is the omission of the famous exchange between Lovell and Wood on the viability of non-structurally based criticism, an exchange which in fact played a major role in the shaping of structuralist critical practices. (One must, in fairness, allow that reasons other than editorial preference may account for this and that Nichols does refer to the debate on page 7.) By representing these critics in this manner, Nichols makes them appear as relics from another age with little relevance to the contemporary critical scene.

Replacing these critics in the position of critical prominence are the critics of the structuralist/semiological pantheon: the Russian formalist Brik and Schlovsky, the Althusserian-influenced *Cahiers du Cinema* critics and the semiologists Metz and Eco. The critical methods of almost all of these men are founded upon a more or less rigorous structural re-reading of Marx or on the work of Freud. Perhaps the most unfortunate consequence of this degree of emphasis on structuralist-based criticism is that it reduces the advantages to be gained from comparative study.

Other than the limitations which result from this highly biased selection of articles, Nichol's book has several serious shortcomings. One of the most startling is Nichol's misrepresentation of the formalist position in criticism.

Nichols characterizes formalist criticism, *via differens*, by distinguishing it from contextual criticism, Contextual criticism as Nichols describes it is criticism which takes into account the manner in which the filmic object situates itself and is determined by some broader context — be it psychological, sociological or socio-economic — while formalist criticism is concerned only with the internal relations in a work. (p.5) Surely the proper term for what Nichols calls formalist criticism is immanent criticism: "formalism" has acquired a much more specific meaning.

Formalist criticism proper is associated with certain notions related to the material character of the art object, it concerns itself with the manner in which the artwork exploits certain essential material features of the medium in which it is realized in order to evoke tensions. Nichols overlooks this essential feature of formalism and even goes so far as to misrepresent it by suggesting that formalist criticism encompasses the study of types of codes and systems which are not materially based (p.7). This misrepresentation allows Nichols to characterize *auterist* criticism as a species of formalist criticism, ignoring the fact that the Romantic basis for this theory lies in a notion of art as personal expression and in a concern for the relationship between features immanent to the work (for example recurrent iconographical elements) and the psychological content of their production that is almost certainly at odds with the foundational concepts of formalist criticism. As though this misrepresentation were not enough, Nichols compounds error with confusion when he proceeds to suggest that Kracauer's theory of film can be categorized as a formalist theory simply because it is an essentialist theory. What lies behind such a claim is of course a failure to distinguish between the conditions necessary for a theory to be considered formalist and those conditions which are sufficient to considering it to be of this type. Though a materialist basis is a necessary condition for a theory to be formalist, it is certainly not a sufficient condition.

Such confusions as these make it readily apparent that Nichols fails to grasp those particularizing features of formalist criticism which enable one to speak of formalist criticism as a distinct category of immanent criticism. And from this fundamental misunderstanding a host of misrepresentation follows.

That Nichols considerably underestimates the importance of the material properties of the cinema and their role in shaping cinematic expression is revealed by a comment he makes on the situation of the independent filmmaker. He writes, ". . . a frequent tenet of *auteur* criticism is that a tension exists between the artist's visions and the means at his disposal for realizing it; studio pressure, genre conventions, star demands, story requirements (sic) . . . But this kind of tension does not exist for the independent filmmaker, his vision and his work enjoy a far less mediated relation." The naiveté of asserting that the independent filmmaker works free of any market pressure, one might still wish to quarrel with this comment. Many (myself for one) consider the nature of the cinematic material and form to be the primary constraint on the filmmaker's work. If that is so, the claim that the independent filmmaker's vision and his work enjoy a far less mediated relation would seem to be something of an overstatement.

The ignorance and hostility toward notions of formalist criticism which Nichols displays is also reflected in the selection of articles. At one point in his anthology, Nichols makes a sadly revealing comment: "Of the areas of theory, criticism and history — history is the one in which there does not seem to be as much activity, or at least innovative activity as there is in the area of theory and criticism." (p.3) Such a statement seems to overlook the seminal studies of Noel Burch; Sitney's important propositions concerning the construction of a film history on a model on which the dynamics of historical progression are conceived of as lying in the impulse towards transformation of the forms which dominate at any particular moment in

the history of an artwork; the many important studies of Soviet cinema which followed the reappraisal of the constructivist movement in the Soviet arts which took place at the beginning of the seventies; and finally, Annette Michelson's reading of the historical progression from Malevich to the independent cinema. Nichols has overlooked all this work and drawn almost exclusively from the three or four dominant film journals.

Nichols's misrepresentation is not confined to the area of formalist criticism or to the area of contemporary critical practices. At one point Nichols includes Eric Rohmer as one of those who, along with F. Truffaut, marched under the banner of *auteurism*. Surely the fact that the early Cahiers harboured two opposing critical camps, the Bazinian realists and the auteurs, and that Rohmer aligned himself with the former, not the latter should be common knowledge among film scholars. And in the context of comments on the development of film theory (comments which are framed in such a manner as to suggest that the rise of structuralist paradigms to a position of dominance in critical practice has been marked by a quantum leap in the quality of critical practice in the cinema), Nichols suggests structuralist film criticism made much more extensive use of concepts from disciplines outside of film studies to provide the principles which inform critical practice (p.3). This, is simply historical nonsense. Almost all the major film theories have been informed by the philosophical tendencies of the period during which they were formulated. One could cite the important influence Neo-Kantian psychology had on the work of Arnheim, historical dialectics on Eisenstein, material theories on Kracauer, Personalism and phenomenology on Bazin and left liberal social theory and Neo-Hegelianism on Grierson and Rotha as just a few examples. The enormity of the oversight which characterizes this remark reveals the kind of intolerant dogmatism which results whenever one particular paradigm becomes excessively dominant in critical practice. In a way, this volume sadly reflects the situation of much contemporary critical practice.

Even in his area of specialization, Nichols makes some comments that reveal some pretty serious oversights. Structuralism, Nichols characterizes "as an attempt to elaborate governing rules, or conceptual models that inform and order appearances or phenomena." He then proceeds to suggest that this sort of enterprise "can be seen originating in the work of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud." (p.461) This, of course, is also historical nonsense: the enterprise which Nichols describes can be traced back at least to the pre-Socratic philosophers.

Nichols does however, avoid one of the besetting sins of structuralist critics. Lacking any solid understanding of the nature of aesthetic value, the structuralists tend not to see their activity as one of arriving at any final absolute truth, rather they view themselves as "playing against the text" — taking up one line of critical attack on the work to discover where it leads, then dropping this line for another in order to play the same game again, but so to speak, on a different field. At its worst, this feature has led to a certain faddishness in the taking up of models which are subsequently disposed of just as they reach a kind of hegemony. This, of course prevents them from considering their work as a kind of cumulative enterprise erecting an ever-growing body of information about specific films. Thankfully, Nichols seems not to have fallen for this.

Nichols own contribution to the text is an essay entitled "Style, Grammar and the Movies." Nichols courageously takes on one central model which has preoccupied an enormous number of semioticians of the cinema. Nichols suggests that this model is one which depends upon the opposition between pairs of discrete items and that the discreteness of the units means the model is digital rather than analog in character. Since this model has led to certain difficulties, Nichols proposes to develop a model on which the information

transmitted on films is conceived of as being encoded in analogic rather than digital form, i.e., our understanding of that information relies on our understanding of its place in a continuum of variation, rather than in a commutative differentiation.

The reason why semioticians of the cinema have gravitated towards the digital model, Nichols suggests, is explained in part by the fallacious assumption that models that are derived from a study of language can be applied without substantial alteration to the cinema. He goes further, however, to suggest that this desire is motivated by that kind of "epistemological error" which has ideological and hence socio-political determinants: the digital model of the communication process is informed by the forces of oppression and exploitation.

Nichols goes to no great length to demonstrate precisely how this conception of communication process is shaped by these social forces nor does he ever specify the nature of the epistemological error. This latter omission, made glaring by the frequency with which Nichols lays the charge, is quite surprising in light of Nichols' discussion of Metz. In discussing Metz's analysis of Mitry, Nichols remarks upon the vagueness and lack of material basis which characterize Metz's description of the notion of "current of signification" which is nowhere (not contained in any of the images) and yet everywhere. Nichols attributed Metz's belief in the existence of such a ghostly phenomenon to the fact that Metz fails to recognize that the cinema conveys information by analogue as well as digital means; had Metz conceived of the possibility of analogic modes of conveying information, he would, Nichols suggests, have had no need to resort to postulating such phantomic phenomena. This, of course, is not the explanation of the reason for the error at all: Metz's view is idealistic. It is surprising that Nichols did not bring out this point.

Nor does Nichols' suggestion that an analogic model be applied to the study of the communication process in the cinema really take us that far, since in theory, any analogic model, finely broken down, can be resolved into a digital model. The problem does not lie in the conception of the communications process as being based on discrete pairs of items — the significance of any lexical item is obviously based upon the fact that it applies only in certain limited and specifiable conditions and hence involves a differentiation between the conditions under which it applies and those under which it does not apply. Nor does the problem lie in the belief that the nature of relations between the paired items always involves opposition. Only determination involves a negation, an opposition. Rather the problem is that the relationship is actually one which involves different moments — opposition or antithesis being one, synthesis being another. Unfortunately space does not permit me to pursue the ramifications of this fact in depth; the fruits of such realization can, however be found in John Tulloch's article in the new periodical *The Australian Journal of Film Theory* entitled, "Genetic Structuralism and the Cinema — a Look at Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*".

If these qualities of Nichols' work reflect the tone of the pervading critical scene (as I indeed think they do), what sort of needs does it indicate? One fundamental oversight which stems from the positivistic outlook is a failure to come to terms adequately with the nature of the aesthetic experience. Although as Nichols himself points out (p.378) some structuralists have given evidence of an increasing concern about the nature of the relationship between the art object and the perceiver, the models which have been used to help them understand the nature of this relationship have usually been psychoanalytic.

Psychoanalytic criticism generally does one of three things. Sometimes, it degenerates into the process of sifting out the symbolic content of a work and

constructing an interpretation of the work but on the basis of this and others it attempts to understand how the formal construction of a work is determined by its psychological content (for example how the use of the flashbacks and the narrative identification of mother and child in *Cria* is used to incarnate the Electra situation) and at still others it demonstrates how the formal conditions of a work operate within the psychological economy to provide qualification. These approaches have certain problems in common. One is that they are all essentially interpretive aids; they aid one in producing a kind of analysis of the text of a work but help very little in dealing with that upon which aesthetic value depends — relation and proportion. In light of this, it is remarkable that those structuralist critics who have been so insistent on the value of psychoanalytically based criticism have continued to maintain what are, finally, orthodox approaches to psychoanalytic criticism and have overlooked entirely the work of such radically innovative thinkers as Ehrenzweig. In *The Hidden Order of Art*, he proposes that the ordering patterns in a work of art are derived from two quite different kinds of perception: a kind of gestaltist vision which operates by differentiating elements in the perceptual field and forming these elements into a conceptually definable figure and a kind of holistic scanning vision which unconsciously absorbs the entire visual field and holds it in an undifferentiated totality. One could, I think, demonstrate that certain tensional features of an artwork result from the way in which the interaction of these ordering systems acts to set up patterns of dissonance and mutual interference. By describing this unconscious ordering, this theory opens up our understanding of another level which the artwork uses to create tension.

Another aspiration frequently voiced by the cine-structuralists that makes it difficult for them to adequately come to terms with the phenomenal aspect of the aesthetic experience is that of "decentering the subject", i.e., of shifting the focus of analysis away from the personality who generates structure towards the structural system itself. In the case of the critic, this implies a bracketing of the consideration of the personal element in his response. This project, it seems to me is a misguided one. Arnheim has demonstrated the process of perceiving an art object is not merely a passive one; rather it involves the perceiver in a kind of creative construction. Indeed, in a Neo-Kantian turn, he demonstrates that the artwork of which we become aware is not a brute material object which exists independent of any activity of understanding but rather a phenomenal construct whose meaning is conferred upon it by a creative act of understanding. One central task of metacritical theory should be therefore to explain how the perceiver's own existential situation comes to be embodied in the construction of the phenomenal art object. The whole idea of decentering runs counter to this. (In fairness one must allow that Nichols' attitude on this matter is not one of simple rejection of such concerns for he comments with favour on the suggestion that the image-viewer interaction be further scrutinized (p.378). He also praises the project of decentering. It would seem that he would have a difficult task in reconciling these views.)

The concept of an artwork as a phenomenal object casts doubt on the whole idea of an artwork as being an object which embodies deep structures which underlie and inform surface appearances. A phenomenal object is, by definition, constituted strictly by its appearance; it is precisely an object without a hidden otherness, an object which conceals nothing of its being. The only sorts of relations and structures which it can embody are manifest relations between elements of its appearance. Consequently the only sort of analysis appropriate to an object which has this sort of ontological status is one which devotes itself to elucidating the internal interrelationships between the object's sensible elements. An analytic approach bent on discovering latent structures, structures other than those interrelating sensible qualities seems, in this context to be quite mistaken. The possible retort that when structuralists talk of deep structures they are really only speaking

metaphorically, distinguishing between more obvious structures (surface structures) and less obvious ones (deep structures) does not hold up under scrutiny. 'First it is clear that when structuralists talk about deep structures that they are speaking about structures whose ordering principles do not rely exclusively on the object's perceptual features for they involve the object's relation to certain economic, social, political, or psychological formations which stand outside the artwork.

The creative character of the perceiver's response is also important when considering the normative basis of one's critical practice. Just as the act of perception is not only one of passive response to a material object but rather one of creative construction, so too the values involved in the critical process are not values inherent in objects but are actually realized in the formulation of an authentic critical response to a work of art: thus the individual who responds genuinely to a work of art is not a *homo scientus* discovering through analytic inquiry values objectively embodied in a work of art but rather a *homo creator* who through his creative activity of responding to a work actually brings its values into being.

The prime virtue of a work of art may indeed be just this, that it evokes a response that involves the realization of value. The scanting of this fact which characterizes the structuralist methodologies threatens to pervert the nature of the critical process converting it from *creation to techne*.

This would be a serious blow to good criticism.



REPLY TO BRUCE ELDER BY BILL NICHOLS

Elder attacks structuralist criticism (to him an undifferentiated amalgam of recent critical approaches) in general and my anthology, **Movies and Methods** in particular, out of an apparent need to defend the virtue of aesthetic inquiry. The attack is poorly executed as well as misdirected. Does this mean that aesthetic inquiry has indeed lost its virtue? Let us examine Elder's attack in some detail and then see what consequences its tactical errors and strategic failures have for aesthetic inquiry itself, if any.

Every author hopes for a sympathetic reviewer, but most would settle for reviewers who could at least read. Elder, unfortunately, cannot. He does not seem to lack the basic skills of literacy; rather he seems possessed by a blinding kind of zealotry. From the start, it leads him into muddled thinking even before he begins to discuss the anthology.

Elder introduces the notion of "metacritical theories" in his first sentence as a source of procedures for the scientific study of art. He does not distinguish metacriticism and theory though, nor does he explain where his notion of the "scientific" comes from (it sounds like Northrup Frye's which is itself fairly vague), nor does he say whether theory only generates procedures for the scientific study of art. If "metacritical theories" applied to structuralist criticism simply means borrowing models and using methods, the distinction

between metacritical theories and criticism grows all the more vaguer. Elder compounds his muddle by failing to distinguish theories from models — is there a theory of how to borrow models; is science based on models or theories — which is more fundamental? By the end of the first paragraph he further confounds things by telling us that structuralists use the scientific method, applying models to works to reveal something about the work and to refine the model. Do we really need a scientific method to apply models or build analogies? Is this any different from new criticism in literature or **auteur** criticism in film? And in the use of the scientific method why doesn't Elder distinguish between developing models and the formulation and testing of hypotheses that leads to models and, sometimes, theories?

This initially blurred picture of the "enemy"— structuralist criticism — never comes into clearer focus. Structuralism remains a group of critical methodologies with a family resemblance (unspecified) that aspires to objective, scientific analysis through recourse to a metacritical theory (unspecified) that tells it to borrow models and use a peculiar kind of scientific method involving models but not hypotheses. conveniently, this blur allows Elder to classify linguistics, psychoanalysis and anthropology as scientific disciplines without ever differentiating natural from social sciences or empirical from non-empirical science (if the latter does not exist, as it does not seem to for Elder, then why is psychoanalysis called a science as well as a **model** for structural criticism?).

Elder's conclusion from all this is that structuralism is positivistic and lacks a normative base (another one of Elder's ill-defined terms). The lack of a normative base means that structuralism cannot support aesthetic inquiry. A telling blow has landed to the solar plexus of structural methodology! — Or has it? It is telling only if structuralism aspires to aesthetic inquiry as fervently as it seems to aspire, for Elder, to scientific objectivity. Although some "structural" authors have attempted to propose criteria of value (Wollen's chapter on **auteur** criticism in **Signs and Meaning in the Cinema** or perhaps Walsh's **Jump Cut** article referred to by Elder though it is not clear how a criterion of non-illusionism is based on structuralism rather than a Marxist (via Godard and Brecht) theory of aesthetics, these attempts have been soundly criticized long before Elder rode onto the scene.

Even **Movies and Methods**, a threat to the virtue of aesthetic inquiry if ever there was one according to Elder, inaugurates its "Structuralism-Semiology" chapter with Sam Rhodie's **Totems and Movies** and includes Ron Abramson's critique of Wollen's chapter — both articles point out the obvious danger of basing aesthetic judgements on structural analysis. Had Elder read them with care perhaps he would have saved himself the effort of reiterating rather tired warnings against a tendency to confuse structural complexity (in Ford over Hawks, for example, for Wollen) with aesthetic value. Most scholars who are even remotely involved in current research recognize that structural and semiotic methods ask how messages are constructed, what rules or codes organize them. They ask **how** meaning is communicated not how **well** it is communicated or even, necessarily, **what** meaning is communicated.

Elder's charges against **Movies and Methods** are too unfocused to be considered point-by-point. His greatest distortion is to pretend it is something it doesn't claim to be (a "coretext in survey courses" dominated by structuralist criticism). Not only does the introduction make clear that the anthology presupposes background knowledge — the classic texts and great men whose absence or "cameo" appearance upsets Elder (I'm still trying to find Kracauer's contribution) are described as "the building blocks for much of what is included here" (p.3) — it also devotes only one of seven chapters to structuralism-semiology. Conveniently, though, Elder never mentions that there are feminist, genre, auteur, political or theory chapters, the better to fabricate a straw man for his vituperations.

Elder's next greatest concern is the anthology's distortion of formalism. He chides "Nichols" (the author of a text written in 1972-73) for confusing formalist and imminent criticism. Without citing sources to support His claim he informs "Nichols" that formalist criticism "concerns itself with the manner in which the artwork exploits certain essential material features of the medium in which it is realized in order to evoke tensions." Apparently tensions yield aesthetic experiences and structuralism fails to isolate tensions or only locates those not rooted in "material features" (which features are again on vaguely specified).

This concern about formalist criticism is not a side issue but central to Elder's attempt to rescue aesthetics from the structuralist peril. Apparently formalism falls on the side of aesthetic rather than scientific inquiry though Elder does not wheel out a "metacritical theory" to say so. The closest he comes is to declare that the notion of "an artwork as phenomenal object casts doubts on (the idea that it) embodies deep structures which underlie and inform surface appearance." Perhaps this is what Elder considers providing a normative base. He would be hard put though to deny that the notion of an artwork posed by a structural or marxist perspective "casts doubts" on the idea that it is "constituted strictly by its appearance."

For Elder the appearance of an artwork is a function of its material organization (in a non-marxist sense — material means the physical "stuff" of which the work is made). Aesthetics is linked to the ways in which "tension" (again unspecified as to its range and depth) arises from material features. Since Elder's formalist criticism studies how material features are exploited to evoke tensions it puts us on the royal road to aesthetic inquiry. So far so good. What threat, though, does "structuralist criticism" pose to this nicely packaged itinerary? None at all as far as I can see (and Elder graciously grants "Nichols" an "area of specialization" — structuralist criticism). Since structuralist work uses different assumptions about appearances, and asks different questions about signification, and since efforts to tie structuralism to aesthetics or criteria of value have long since been recognized as misguided in most cases, Elder's valiant defense of aesthetics' virtue seems rather pointless. Let Elder clarify his own assumptions and apply them. Let him produce results rather than attacks on chimerical enemies. Let others then judge the value of the result obtained. In this way we can at least learn something about Elder's notions of aesthetics and formalist criticism while Elder can, hopefully, spare himself the embarrassment of tilting at windmills.

Two final points. First, once we take up assumptions which "cast doubt" upon the primacy and finality of appearances we also begin to doubt the primacy of "material features" and their internal tensions in Elder's sense. External constraints may be just as significant. Hence the difference between a commercial auteur artist and an independent filmmaker remains valid. All art which circulates within a capitalist economy is subject to "market pressure" as Elder calls it, true. This is not the point. The auteur is subject to a range of specific pressures which cannot be cavalierly flattened into the market: does Elder truly believe that the market for "art" functions in a purely homologous manner to the Hollywood industry of production, exhibition, distribution, with star, studio, producer demands, and so on? Saying that all art contends with market pressure, therefore, what really works as a primary constraint is the "nature of cinematic material and form" is flatly absurd. This point is driven home, from a "structuralist perspective" by the editors of **Cinéthique** (in an attack on Metz's **Langage et Cinéma**):

If the analysis takes into account not just the primary object of semiology (the study of cinematic language), but its secondary object as well (the study of film as systems), it is possible to argue that the specific codes

(those peculiar to the film material —B.N.) are not necessarily the most important codes of a film system. The nonspecific codes (those carried by the filmmaterial but also found elsewhere like speech or gesture - B.N.) also play a role in the establishment of that system, and the question then is whether this role is not perhaps always the primary one.
(**Screen**, 14, no.1/2, p.198.)

This leads to a second and final point. "Structuralism" as Elder constitutes it poses no threat to his brand of aesthetic inquiry. There is indeed a spectre haunting Elder's aesthetics, however. It is Marxism. Oddly enough, Elder doesn't even want to use the word and makes little reference to the marxist edge to **Movies and Methods** or to the degree to which marxist assumptions interact with structural, psychoanalytic feminist, semiotic, and formal methods to pose a very real threat to Elder's notions of a normative aesthetic. Basically, the threat takes the form of reminding us that pleasure is not innocent whereas Elder's brand of aesthetics rests upon a kind of pre-social, "innocent" pleasure exemplified by his reference to Ehrenzweig. Although mechanisms of the sort Elder refers to may be involved, Cinéthique's question remains the central one: how nonspecific **and** specific codes fabricate a film system and whatever significance and /or pleasure it may afford. By whom and for whom, at what price and to what end is aesthetic pleasure organized? Laura Mulvey, for example, reminds us of the sexist bias built into the star system and the images of women generated there in her article, **Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema** (**Screen**, 16, no.3, 1976.) Pursuing this sort of question is not simply to ask different questions of film (as Elder's formal and structural methods do), but to challenge the very viability of traditional aesthetics and its attempt to isolate art from ideology. By refusing to debate this challenge in favour of attacking an imaginary enemy, Elder conveniently attempts to let himself off the hook. The hook, however, will not disappear by wishing it away. In fact, from where I stand, it suspends Bruce Elder in thin air. Hopefully he will find a way to get his feet back on the ground where some real material tensions stand waiting to confront him. ○