

Elder/Nichols Debate: A Response

The debate between Bruce Elder and Bill Nichols in a recent edition of **CINE-TRACTS** illustrates the difficulties inherent in any scientific approach to film criticism. Although the debate does raise such vital matters as the nature of critical explanation and the relationship between criticism and science, questions which tend to receive insufficient attention in film journals, both combatants show by their arguments that neither of them fully appreciates the complexity of the issues which are at stake. This is evident from an analysis of some of their statements. For example, Elder claims that cine-structuralism, which to him represents the paradigm of the "scientific method," 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." (P. 98) However, Elder's pronouncements are quite dogmatic because we are not given any clear account of what to him constitutes the "nature" of both "scientific and aesthetic inquiry." He informs us that "aesthetic inquiry... involves a subjective moment" yet he argues for the necessity of "meta-criticism" which, as he sees it, "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." (P. 99)

Editor's note; The fourth issue of Ciné-Tracts had an exchange between Bruce Elder and Bill Nichols on among other things, film criticism and structuralism.

Elder's arguments are self-contradictory. If "aesthetic inquiry" invariably involves the "subjective moment," then metacriticism is no longer a possible "task." Indeed how can metacriticism provide a reliable yard-stick for evaluating specific critical models if the "subjective moment" always intrudes in "aesthetic inquiry." In his argument regarding the "disanalogies" between scientific and aesthetic practice, Elder presupposes that models of explanation in criticism function very differently to models employed in scientific inquiry. This unproven assumption rests upon a more fundamental assumption which is also unargued: the rigid dichotomy between the activities of what Elder calls **homo scientus** and **homo creator** (P. 105). It could very well be the case that there exists a considerable overlap between "scientific and aesthetic inquiry," that the total divorce between the two pursuits is merely a figment of Elder's imagination.

Bill Nichol's argument relies upon a rather simplistic division of interests. This can be seen from the following quotation from his rejoinder to Elder's article: "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." (P. 106)

Nichols quite rightly distinguishes between "theories" and "models" and between "developing models" and "the testing and formulation of hypotheses" but he himself does not "develop" these vital distinctions any further. Moreover, Nichols does not offer us the distinguishing characteristics which separate "models" from "theories," nor does he consider the possibility of a sophisticated model with wide applicability achieving the status of a "theory."

This article will argue that many problems in criticism generally and difficulties encountered in characterizing the nature of the relationship between scientific activity and critical inquiry originate from the fact that we assume that the terms such as "science" and "criticism" are simple and unequivocal. For example, Elder sees the problem of definition simply in terms of inter-changeability: to define the "scientific method" we just substitute "cine-structuralism." The latter terms also assumes for Elder certain emotive connotations: cine-structuralism represents everything that is regressive and wrong-headed in contemporary film criticism.

The multiplicity of meanings of the term "criticism" becomes apparent from an examination of this term. Film criticism like science may possess a uniform purpose (e.g. the elucidation of filmic works) but its **activity** is by no means homogeneous. Criticism can mean appreciation, but it can also mean censure and denigration; it can mean the assessment of works from various perspectives: ideological, philosophical, ethical, aesthetic. Criticism can also refer to the problems of historical research associated with the understanding of a work. The term can embrace the spontaneous judgement of a film or the lengthy and considered evaluation of its intricate workings. Indeed the terms "judgement," "evaluation," "criticism," are "family concepts," in the Wittgensteinian sense: their meanings overlap at various points but at others they diverge considerably. Thus the film theoretician must be certain about the type of criticism he is performing and the constraints that are inherent in his particular approach.

Elder's uncertain grasp of his own terminology is illustrated by the following comments: "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." (P.99)

On the same page he continues his argument: "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 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**." (italics mine)

Elder offers the reader little amplification of his pivotal notions of "aesthetic relevance" and "aesthetic validity" and the terms "positivistic" and "empiricistic" appear to him to be roughly synonymous. The term "positivism" was first coined by Auguste Comte and "stands for a certain attitude to human knowledge." It attempts to inform us as to "what kind of contents in our statements about the world deserve the name of knowledge and supplies us with norms that make it possible to distinguish between that which may not reasonably be asked."¹ Hence one could argue that positivism is really a **normative** attitude which tries to dictate how we should use such terms as "knowledge," "science," **and** "criticism." Empiricism on the other hand, is the doctrine that all knowledge is ultimately derived from sensory experience and this philosophy was first propounded by philosophers such as John Locke and David Hume.

A useful distinction in the philosophy of science, not considered by either Elder or Nichols, is that between the **process** of science and its **product**. The former refers to what scientists actually do: observing, collating data, experimenting, reasoning; the latter term has to do with such questions as the relationship between statements which make up theories, the form such statements take, the nature of reason-giving in scientific inquiry. The process-product distinction can also be expressed in terms of difference between the context of discovery (it is difficult to find "sound" scientific hypotheses) and the context of validation (how do we formulate: criteria for determining whether or not a hypothesis or model is "sound").

The relevance of the foregoing distinctions becomes apparent if we scrutinize some of Elder's statements. He is entitled to challenge the utility of various "competing methodological tools" in the analysis of particular films and to query their "aesthetic relevance." Questions such as these fall within the domain of the "product" of any inquiry; it is a matter of validation, of questioning the results obtained by various schools of critical thought. However, he is **not** entitled to rule out the efficacy of cinestructuralism or any other "methodology" altogether because such questions fall within the ambit of the **process** of scientific inquiry, its context of discovery. Furthermore, it is evident that Elder's conceptual confusions cause him to make **ex cathedra** pronouncements about the inappropriateness of "the scientific method" to film study.

1. L. Kolakowski, **Positivist Philosophy** (Penguin Bks, 1972) pp.10-11.

What must also be appreciated is that when someone argues for a "science of criticism" or a "scientific method," it is not always clear what exactly is at stake. If such an argument merely implies that criticism should be conducted in a more methodical and systematic fashion than has been done in the past, then most critics, no matter what their persuasion, would concur. Indeed, most critics would argue that critical judgement is not simply an autobiographical revelation, a question of taste which is beyond rational discussion. Even for a critic such as Elder, who insists upon the importance of a "normative base" and "the subjective moment" in "aesthetic inquiry," would concede the above as is evidenced by his interest in "metacriticism." The critic hopes that his judgements about a work possess inter-subjective significance and any programme which promises to make his judgements valid for a greater number of sensitive students of film would be welcome.

But the claim that criticism is or should be a science usually implies more than the advocacy of greater systematization. The argument essentially takes two forms: either that the critic should proceed in his investigations the way a scientist does or, in the case of film, that the critic should enlist non-filmic techniques and bodies of knowledge in order to obtain new insights into his area of specialization. By adapting such "scientific" disciplines as psychology, sociology, linguistics and semiotics to the practice of criticism, it is hoped that criticism will achieve greater organization and reliability. Moreover, the advisability of applying non-filmic techniques and disciplines to film criticism is ultimately dependent upon the way we conceive the relationship between the practice of criticism and scientific inquiry.

The argument that criticism is **not** a science may represent several divergent claims that should be examined separately. On the one hand, it could mean that the scientific **techniques** employed by, say, an empirically-minded critic as he sets about delineating various responses to a given film are very different to the techniques of a physicist when he studies, say, the expansion of gases. However, the claim that criticism is not a science can be based upon a more serious objection than that the critic and scientist employ incompatible **techniques**. It may mean that there exists a great difference between the **methodology** of scientific inquiry and criticism. In other words, the two disciplines are different in their rationales, they use different logics of justification, they abide by different standards of precision and validation. What is at issue here is the pervasiveness of the scientific method itself. Do such disciplines as aesthetics, ethics, and criticism fall within the ambit of the scientific method? Both Elder and Nichols in their arguments do not separate clearly enough questions relating to **technique** from those pertaining to **methodology**.

It should be mentioned that there is an implied contrast between the methodologies of science and criticism in **some** of the attempts to apply scientific disciplines to critical practice. Scientific procedure is conceived as **linear**: we progress from a body of known facts that can be accurately recorded and then proceed on the basis of these facts to such new areas of investigation as criticism. By contrast, traditional criticism is seen as wedded to a will-o-wisp methodology, as following a crooked and devious path. The unsteady hand of the critic is to be stabilized by the sure and confident clasp of the psychologist or semiotician.

Many endeavors to "shore up" critical practice with "scientific" disciplines are based upon certain assumptions about the nature of science and criticism. It is often assumed that the philosophy of science is somehow less problematic than the philosophy of criticism. It is not appreciated that there are such crucial questions as the place and function of models in scientific explanation, the status of the principle of induction, the relationship between theoretical language and observation language, how best to characterize the principle of verification, about which philosophers of science find it difficult to agree.² Thus the scientifically-minded critic must beware of making any rash assertions about the capacity of science vis-à-vis the practice of criticism. As mentioned earlier, exponents of a science of criticism and critics such as Elder who are sceptical about the "scientific method" tend to adhere to a **linear** notion of science.

2. Baruch A. Brody (ed) **Readings in the Philosophy of Science** (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1979) pp.252-293; Stephen Toulmin. **The Philosophy of Science**. London: Hutchison. 1967) pp. 34-42; pp.112-115; K.R. Popper. **The Logic of Scientific Discovery**, (London: Hutchinson, revised 1968 edition) pp. 32-48.

The difficulties encountered by anyone who attempts to characterize the relationship between the "scientific method" and disciplines which are often deemed to fail outside the sphere of the "hard" sciences can be seen from Louis Althusser's discussion of Freudian psychoanalysis and its adoption by Lacan. Althusser offers us a "materialist" analysis of scientific procedure: we commence with a practice ("analytic cure") and a technique ("the method of the cure") 'that give rise to an abstract exposition with the appearance of **a theory**.'³ However, the reverse, not considered by Althusser, could also be quite true: that we start with a "theory" and then set about finding an appropriate "practice" and "technique" for that theory. Althusser's treatment of the "scientific method" as it applies to psychoanalysis borders on positivism. In order to qualify as a new science, psychoanalysis must be based on a new "object," the "unconscious."⁴ It will be recalled that positivism tries to give us clear guidelines as to **what** constitutes "knowledge" and true "science." Nevertheless, Althusser's characterization of the scientific method is very problematic itself. He begs the question as to whether or not one can speak of **a new** "science," in the strict sense of the term, and his notion of "object" receives little explication.⁵ Moreover, Althusser claims that due to the "newness" of Freud's concepts, Freud had to borrow concepts from thermodynamics in order to explain his new "theories." Althusser assures us that modern psychoanalysis as presented by Lacan no longer has to rely upon such primitive **imported** concepts in view of "the light that structural linguistics throws on its object, making possible an intelligible approach to that science."⁶

Althusser does not consider the possibility that "structural linguistics" itself may be problematic and he takes it for granted that the insights of structural linguistics are automatically applicable to psychoanalysis. Indeed, it may very well be that, in the future, linguistics may represent the same sort of "theoretical" liability to psychoanalysis as the thermodynamic "models," employed by Freud, represent to orthodox psychoanalytic theory. It is also questionable that a discipline, which is so dependent upon models from other disciplines, can be regarded as a truly autonomous "science" with its own "object." This latter consideration is vital for current film theory with its heavy reliance upon "imported" concepts.

However, if we adopt the Peircean concept of science which is essentially "circular" then the gap between critical and scientific practice may be considerably narrowed and the question of applying scientific methods to criticism may be seen in a different light. For C.S. Peirce, scientific enquiry in any field involves the constant reappraisal of past facts in the light of present and future information. The signal characteristic of "a scientific" intelligence is its ability "to learn by experience."⁷ What we have here is not inductive (or linear) but **hypothetic** inference: in the former we conclude that facts, similar to observed facts, are true in cases not examined, whereas in the latter we conclude the existence of a fact quite different from anything observed; the former classifies, and the latter explains. We do not simply generalize from observed facts that Napoleon lived; the historical fact that Napoleon lived in the 19th century is a hypothesis which we believe because of certain effects resulting from this fact — "tradition, the histories, monuments."⁸

If scientific inquiry is conceived in the Peircean way, then the gulf between scientific and critical enquiry tends to diminish because we no longer need to dwell upon the observational stage when we characterize the scientific method, nor do we need to concentrate upon the interpretive stage when we describe critical procedure. Indeed, any methodology, be it critical or scientific, that is governed by discernible rules, a methodology which admits the right or wrong procedures, would continually rely upon both observation and interpretation. Moreover, the critic, too "learns by experience" what theories and methods work for him. He must be flexible in his approach to his subject. When he encounters a new work for the first time, he must be willing to re-think his procedures, and, if necessary, he may have to revise some of his previous judgements. Both the scientist and the critic work on certain basic assumptions. The scientist assumes that if all attempts to falsify his hypothesis have failed then his fellow scientists will accept his hypothesis. The critic conducts his craft on the assumption that fellow practitioners agree on such basic questions as what is original and what

3. Louis Althusser, **Lenin and Philosophy**, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) p. 197

4. Althusser, p. 198.

5. Althusser sees scientific progress in terms of "breaks" and "ruptures" in the theoretical base of a science; he does not adhere to the more common notion of scientific progress as a cumulative, self-correcting process

6. Althusser. p.207.

7. C.S. Peirce. **Collected Papers** (Cambridge University Press, 1932) vol. 2, p. 134.

8. W.B. Gallie. **Peirce and Pragmatism** (Penguin, 1952), p. 95.

is cliched, the function of art, the relationship between art and human nature. For instance, if a film critic has conclusively shown that a film only uses stock characters and situations, employs hackneyed themes and tired camera techniques and his interlocutor still does not concede that this makes for a "cliched" film, then the dispute is no longer about the film but about the meaning of the notion "cliched." Similarly, if a physician has used over a long period of time a new vaccine for a previously incurable disease and in every case the patient staged a complete recovery, then the physician would be entitled to argue that he has found a cure for the disease. This is especially the case if the physician can offer a theoretical explanation for the success of his vaccine and other physicians can replicate his treatment. Anyone who refuses to acknowledge that the vaccine does work, is not really calling the efficacy of the vaccine into question but what constitutes correct medical procedure.

Another vital consideration which received scant attention in the Elder/Nichols debate is how the critic actually goes about "reading" a particular film, or as Barthes puts it, "the infinite dialogue between criticism and the work".⁹ When a critic views a new film, he strives for a coherent interpretation of the material before him. He formulates a "hypothesis" as to the film's meaning and tries to articulate as clearly as possible the significance the work has **for him**. His "reading" of the film must be informed by what could be called "interested" objectivity. However, in making out the meaning of a work, the critic relies not only upon his own emotions but also upon the "evidence" which is to be found within the work. For instance, after viewing a film, the critic will form a hypothesis as to its meaning. Subsequent viewings will either confirm his initial reading or may cause him to alter it. In some instances previously unnoticed details within the film may come to light which induces him to discard completely his earlier reading. Thus criticism does involve the unceasing tug-of-war between original "readings" and subsequent exposures which may cause the critic to change his earlier assessment, a flexible system of checks and balances which enable the critic to reduce the margin of error in the appropriateness of his reading. This aspect of critical activity could be described as "scientific" insofar as the critic is employing inductive procedures; he is learning from his experience of various works which sort of interpretation will "wear" and which ones will not.

It is appropriate to conclude this discussion with a brief examination of the philosophy of criticism as espoused by Roland Barthes, who is one of the most astute and perceptive writers on the subject. He is fully aware of the complexity of the critical task and, unlike writers such as Elder or Nichols, does not indulge in simplifications and easy solutions. Barthes urges us to regard a work as an "anthropological fact," which is open-textured and the repository of many "meanings."¹⁰ He also argues that there are several points of entry to a work and no one entry should be declared as the principal one.¹¹ What is more, Barthes appreciates the problem of enlisting appropriate models to the practice of criticism. For instance, criticism should not try to emulate the physical sciences with their statistical norms and their preoccupation with general properties.¹² Furthermore, the nature of "objectivity" in criticism must not be conceived in positivistic terms. For Barthes the problem of "objectivity" should not be boiled down to such questions as "What is the quality of the work that exists outside of us"¹³ but instead, objectivity in criticism should be seen in terms of the rigour and consistency with which we apply a particular code or model to a work.¹⁴ What is required is a "**hypothetical** model of description" which helps us to explain how the infinite variations of a "language" are engendered.¹⁵ Barthes maintains that criticism can be divided in two "parallel" methods: **academic** which is "positivist" or "objective" and **interpretive** which is "attached, more or less explicitly but in any case consciously, to one of the major ideologies of the moment, existentialism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology."¹⁶ However, Barthes argues quite rightly that "positivism is an ideology like the rest" and consequently, there exists no real division between the two methods.¹⁷ Barthes also states that "all criticism must include in its own discourse. . . an implicit reflection on itself; every criticism is a criticism of the work **and** a criticism on itself."¹⁸ The Elder/Nichols debate is not sufficiently reflective "on itself" and, unlike Barthes, both participants are not fully aware of the complexity of critical activity and the difficulties inherent in any endeavour to relate criticism to "science."

9. Roland Barthes **Critical Essays** (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972) p. xii.

10. Roland Barthes **Critique et Vérité**, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966) p. 50

11. Roland Barthes **S/Z** (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970) p. 12

12. Barthes, **Critique et Vérité**, p.66

13. Ibid, p.17

14. Ibid. p. 20

15. Ibid. p. 57

16. Barthes. **Critical Essays**, p. 249.

17. Ibid. p. 250.

18. Ibid. p. 257.

PESARO: HOLLYWOOD 1970's

The fifteenth Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema, held in Pesaro, Italy, 14-22 June 1979, was devoted to the Hollywood cinema of the 70's. sometimes also referred to as the new American cinema. For a festival such as this, founded (1965) and acclaimed on a commitment to the exhibition of little known or available films, often of lesser known national cinemas, the choice requires justification. Why Hollywood. Because there is no more "new cinema," claims the Mostra organizing committee (Lino Micciche, Adriano Apra, Mino Argentieri, Ernesto G. Laura, Bruno Torri, Sandro Zambetti), if by that one means political or movement cinema; even Straub/Huillet, once significantly absent from official festivals, are now showing at Cannes, as are the Taviani brothers and Olmi. More and more, in the last decade, cinema and Hollywood have again become coextensive with one another. Faced with the latter's efficient imperialism, and its strategies aimed at occupying all the spaces of cinema from expressive redundancy to the ethics of poverty, Cinecittà and other national cinemas have reached an impasse. Their historically defined areas of esthetic and ideological productivity have been taken over by a cinematic technology whose primary concerns are not communication, information and the production of meaning, but rather the production of imagery and the mise en scene of information (e.g. **The Deer Hunter, Star Wars, Apocalypse Now**). Even "independent" cinema, where it still exists, is neither really independent nor alternative to the industry's dominance — today's new waves are contemplated in the budget as P.R. expenses when they are not directly planned in the multinational study centres. Thus, the program description states, "after the utopias of the 60's. it is perhaps more useful to look closely at cinema's 'dependence' from Hollywood before dreaming of other 'independencies'."

As in two previous festivals set up to reexamine neorealism and Italian cinema under Fascism, the 1979 Pesaro project was to approach Hollywood "scientifically," without holy reverence but at the same time without the need for ideological exorcism: "gone are the days when some could argue that the worst Soviet film was better than the best U.S. film." The overall intent, then, was to provide otherwise unavailable materials toward a critical reevaluation of Hollywood cinema and its relationship to Italian film culture. Screenings included a section of 30 films never or not yet distributed in Italy (**Sounder, Roseland, The Paper Chase, Heroes, Blue Collar, The Warriors**, etc), a section of some 30 commercially exhibited films, edited and dubbed, which were apparently considered worthy of special attention as vintage auteurial works (Altman, Cassavetes, Forman, Scorsese, Milius, Mazursky, Malick, Cimino, Allen, etc.); and a third section of 20 or so videotaped original versions of previously distributed films. A small opportunity for critical debate and public discussion was provided at the end of a four-day conference in which participated major Italian critics plus a handful of Americans (Robert Sklar, Thomas Guback, Stephen Harvey of the New York Museum of Modern Art, and Tom Luddy of the Berkeley Pacific Film Archive), and after the screenings of Stanton Kaye's **He Wants Het Back** (1978) and Karen Arthur's **The Mafu Cage** (1978) in the presence of the respective filmmakers. No one appeared surprised that, out of the eighty recent films selected — not a few of which were independently produced — only one was directed by a woman. And indeed there were sounds of relief in the audience when Karen Arthur, in answer to the first question from the floor, said that she had nothing against men, in fact she loved them.

The papers delivered at the conference ranged from general overviews of U.S. society in the 70's, a survey of film studies at the university level, and sociological descriptions of the new audiences, the young directors, the new comedians, and so forth, to analyses of the economics of the film industry, thematic criticism, and theoretical genre definitions. A central concern surfacing in nearly all contributions and debates was the "Hollywood myth" — a sure sign that ideology is not so easily exorcised. Guido Oldrini of **Cinema Nuovo**, for one, took issue