

MODES OF REPRESENTATION IN THE CINEMA:

Towards A New Aesthetic Model

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SECTION I

In this article, we are concerned with two poles of stylistic possibility in the cinema: the first mode, that constituted by the demands of creating a simulacrum of reality we shall call "The Cinema of Presentation"; the second mode, which is constituted by the demands of illustrating a body of conceptual material we shall call "The Cinema of Illustration". And that which is constituted by the demands of constructing a nexus of internal relation we shall call "The Cinema of Construction".

In this essay we shall have little to say about "The Cinema of Construction" for although it is of tremendous importance artistically, it has remained a minority practice. Instead we shall focus on the differences between "The Cinema of Presentation" and "The Cinema of Illustration" and consider "The Cinema of Construction" only in passing, in order to highlight certain aspects of the other cinematic modes.

Let us begin with an "imaginary" example that can exemplify the differences between these two cinematic modes. Suppose an exchange between two individuals which consisted of one individual making insulting remarks to the other until he was sufficiently angered by the comments of the first to interrupt him and to make a scathing retort were to be presented in films of each of these two modes.

This exchange might be typically filmed by a Hollywood director of the

1. In fact a medium shot would probably also intercede between the long shot and close-up to suture the spatial rupture between these two sorts of shots. The use of this shot is largely irrelevant to our inquiry here. About this shot, I only wish to note that it reveals that this style involves the use of devices which minimize discontinuities so as to prevent the materiality of the form from obtruding on the viewer's consciousness.

2. A note on the concept of authenticity as it applies to documentary film in general is in order. A recurrent topic of debate around documentary film has concerned the "objectivity" of film. In my opinion, this question has done much to stymie thinking about documentary film in general. In fact I would contend the whole question is based on the false notion that objectivity, honesty, and truthfulness, are mutual conditions for one another.

Be that as it may, it is clear to me that the whole enterprise of cinema direct is misrepresented by these suggestions. Far it was not at all objectivity which this movement aspired toward. What was at stake was not the invention of a form of cinema which effaced the filmmaker's personality, but rather a form of cinema which guaranteed that the event depicted was allowed to run its natural course with a minimum of interference on the part of the filmmaker, and that, in the film's construction no devices are used which might suggest that the event unfolded other than it actually did. This refusal to interfere in the event is what is implied by my use of the term authentic. I should perhaps remark that I consider it a part of the honesty of cinema direct that the personality of the filmmaker is revealed rather than masked. Nor was objectivity a part of the naturalist ideal of which this movement often seems the heir.

3. To be quite strict about in the particular example which we have cited, the "witness character" of the style (the affirmation of the presence of the camera person by the use of the hand held camera and particularly the use of rapid, almost gestural camera moves) means that the informing principle of the work are based not upon the demands of the mimesis of the real world but rather the demands of the mimesis of the observation of reality

classic era of Hollywood film (roughly 1935-1945). in the following way. The scene would probably be established by a master-scene followed by a series of close-up shots which would be cut together on the shot/reverse shot pattern.¹

The change from shot to shot would be cued by the evolution of the dramatic action; in one instance from our example, a cut would occur at just that moment when the dramatic centre shifts from the person making the insult to the person responding to those insults. Indeed, the change of shot from the one individual to the other might even so slightly anticipate the second character's verbal expression of his anger, presenting us first with the angered expression, his face, and then his reply.

In the case of an American cinema-verite or a Canadian Candid-Eye film of the late fifties, a pan rather than a cut would most likely be used to articulate the shift of the dramatic centre from one individual to the other. This pan would not be co-ordinated with the shift of the dramatic centre; in fact, in all probability it would follow rather than precede the interruption by the second character.

What can be inferred from these differences in the two ways of filming the above scene? Let us consider first what the structure of the first way of filming the incident reveals. This structure depends on the partition of the passage into discrete units and the subsequent re-synthesis of this unit into a holistic form. Since the division of the pro-filmic event into units and the re-synthesis of these units into a holistic form depends upon the "architectonic of the drama" of the passage, the final structure of the passage can be understood as falling under the control of a transformative principle. This results in the rupturing of the artwork from the surfaces of reality. This rupture is effected to free the film's structure from determination by exclusively mimetic concerns; and thus, to bring it under the control of an informing principle, the character of which is determined both by the demands of articulating a certain body of concepts in concrete photographic images and sounds (the materials given a filmmaker to use) and by a set of specific historical conventions of the period in which the film was made.

In these terms, our simple example could be explained in the following way. The structure of the sequence is based upon a certain understanding of human psychology. In a certain context, the passage could illustrate that aggression is a form of protection against being humiliated. This understanding would be conveyed not only by what is sometimes referred to (metaphorically, I presume) as the "content" of the passage, it would also be reflected in the very structure of the passage. The fragmentation of the pro-filmic event, the synthesis of the resultant cinematic units, the angle from which the shots are taken, the placement of the cut in relation to the insult would all be determined (in part) by the demands of illustrating such an understanding of this piece of human behavior.

The second method (cinema verite of presenting the incident suggests something quite different. The imprecise co-ordination between changes in the camera, shifts in the dramatic centre of the event, and the use of the hand held camera facilitate rapid changes of field. In addition, the use of continuous sequence-shots rather than sequences involving an intricate synthesis of a number of precisely defined cinematic units is designated to guarantee the authenticity of representation;² events are allowed to unfold beyond the filmmaker's control. Inasmuch as this form is founded on the idea of authenticity, it can be said to be shaped by demands which are primarily mimetic in character.³

The fact that the pro-filmic event is not under the filmmaker's control and that the film's style is determined primarily by the demands of creating an

In this regard, it is interesting to note that Leacock, who once described c.v. as films which presented "aspects of reality" felt constrained to revise this description in such a way as to incorporate a reference to the observational dimension of the work: more recently he has described the films as films which present "aspects of the filmmaker's perception of reality."

authentic (i.e. unmanipulated) depiction of reality suggests that the form of the film is not designed to illustrate an already formulated view of reality. What we see, rather, is the product of a filmmaker's exploration of reality, a reality which, inasmuch as it is not controlled, is presented as being both complex and ambiguous.

The panning and zooming movements of the camera which are so very prominent in this kind of cinema convey yet another impression. In Terrence MacCartney-Filgate's **The Back-Breaking Leaf** (N.F.B.), there is an interview with a tobacco-picker. During the course of the interview, the interviewer asks him if tobacco-picking is hard work. As the picker boasts about finding the work easy, the camera's field of view closes in on him to show his face twitching anxiously, revealing that he is not being entirely honest.

The use of camera movement to disclose a particularly revealing detail is common feature of cinema verite both in North America and in France.⁴ This device is a close relative of what has been called commentative montage. The commentative use of montage involves a reference to an object which lies outside of the diegesis upon which it comments. Hence it bears evidence of being an intellectual construction. The use of a camera movement to "discover" a commentative detail (e.g. a twitching face) has quite a different signification. The lack of a cut affirms the integrity of the diegesis and provides assurance that the commentative object is part of that diegesis. This tends to naturalize the commentative detail by removing it from the intellectual realm and, placing it in the real world.

4. This proclivity for "the revealing moment" might account in part for the admiration many Canadian Candid Eye Filmmakers felt for the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson. Further aspects of the relation between aspiration of the movement and the work of Cartier-Bresson are discussed in my article on "Candid-Eye Cinema" in Feldman and Nelson eds., Canadian Film Reader, pp.90-92.

The subjective dimension or what we have called the witness character of these films ascribes to this sort of camera movement yet another significance. Within this context, the camera movements appear to be used to scrutinize the surfaces of reality to be engaged in a quest for something that will dispell the ambiguity that surrounds the real — to be searching for something which will help consolidate the filmmaker's and the viewer's understanding of that which is being depicted; that something, of course, is the revealing detail. Thus, there is established a search and discovery motif, which informs the structures of these types of films.⁵

5. There is I believe, another historical reason for this use of camera movement. Certain features of style of American C.V. film developed in part to adapt the rhetoric of the classic American narrative film to the exigencies of an uncontrolled shooting situation. Our Simple little example contains a care for Illustration The panning action we discussed appears to have been used to approximate the shot/reverse shot formation which was so prevalent in the classic American film. At the same time, the fact that the panning action follows rather than anticipates the shift in the dramatic center from one individual to another suggests that the filmmaker has been embarrassed in his attempts to conform to the conventions of that cinema; his lack of control over the pro-filmic event, therefore, renders this rhetoric unattainable.

The sense of ambiguity and uncertainty which this style of cinema so frequently suggests follows from the epistemological stance underlying this mode of cinema. This stance can be understood by comparing with that which underlies the Illustrative mode of cinema. In "The Cinema of Illustration", the interplay between close-ups (which usually furnish evidence about the motivations for the character's actions), and the long shots (which usually present that action), mirrors the interaction between desire and behavior. The relation of causality between a psychological state and the behavior which underlies it implies a coherence, of the sort that can be grounded in a conceptualization of the deeper dynamics of either context or of behaviour. It is this conceptualization which determines the use of a particular form. This form is used to illustrate a certain understanding of human behaviour and is indeed a key reason why I consider the formations of this sort of cinema to be "illustrative" in character.

The Cinema of Presentation proposes quite a different epistemic model. This model is descriptive rather than analytic in character. The more descriptive quality of this mode of cinema is nowhere in greater evidence than in the different stance this cinema takes on the use of conceptually-based structures. The more descriptive stance assumed by the Cinema of Presentation leads it to reject the use of concepts which might extend our inquiry beyond the immediately observable. In films of this mode, therefore, we simply observe character's behaviour; we are not presented with suggestions about why they behave as they do. Exponents of this position would claim to ask questions about the inner dynamics of reality and would carry us

6. Susan Sontag, **On Photography** (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977) p.102

7. The importance of this inquiry is testified to by the fact that the arguments advanced by both Bazin and Kracauer in favour of the "Cinema of Presentation" were founded on ideas about the nature of the photographic image.

8. An example of a film of this mode is Brittain's **Never a Backward Step**.

9. This refusal to consolidate the narrating voice into one single person gives this text a kind of openness which is typical of much recent film-making.

beyond the limits of what is given to us in appearance, and so, beyond the limits of certainty and into the realms of speculation. It is because this mode of cinema adheres so resolutely to that which is given to us in appearance that one is justified in claiming that the stance assumed by The Cinema of Presentation is an empirical one.

SECTION II

Photography, it seems, can well serve as a kind of paradigm for the cognitive claims for mimeticism. It is hardly surprising, then, that that sort of photography which is most commonly prized is, as Susan Sontag points out⁶ not Beauty but Truth. The significance of this paradigmatic role of the photographic should be further explored.⁷

We could begin by asking what it is that photography proposes as a form of cognition. Certainly, it is not anything like what has traditionally been understood as knowledge, for knowledge has always been thought to demand analysis, reflection and organization, to demand that details be subsumed under general explanatory principles. A photograph, however, merely presents a plethora of unsorted facts; as a form, photography provides merely a stockpile of impressions not at all unlike that which thoroughgoing empiricists claim constitutes the contents of the human mind. The similarity of the empiricist conception of the human mind as a theatre of impressions and the cinema as a showplace of illusions is the obvious to be missed and we know, of course, that the cine-empiricists did not miss it. It is a small wonder then that advocates of the Cinema of Presentation such as Ayfre expound a type of phenomenism and that forms of the Cinema of Presentation reflect this same view. To recognize that the epistemological assumptions which lie behind the metaphor of cinema for the processes of consciousness are the very notions which Lenin attacked in his work on criticism is a very telling comment on the ideological presuppositions which underlie the Cinema of Presentation.

The empiricism which underlies The Cinema of Presentation (and which follows from the photographic) involves the idea that the range of human insight is severely restricted. The importance of this idea to the structure of films of the Presentational mode can be discerned by considering examples from the Canadian cinema. A rather extraordinarily large number of English Canadian documentary films trade in tensions which develop from the incompatibility between the questions which the films propose and the methods they adopt for inquiring into those questions.

There are a variety of modes of this sort of organization. All of them though, are based on initially proposing a question, a riddle or an enigma (e.g., "What was Norman Bethune really like" in Brittain's **Bethune**, or "What is man that a machine is not" in Koenig and Kroiter's **The Living Machine**) and then proceeding to demonstrate that the question is unanswerable, at least in strictly empirical terms. The variety of these modes of organization depend upon the different means used to demonstrate that such questions are empirically unanswerable.

One mode, for example, depends upon the use of a number of commentators who collectively present conflicting ways of thinking about the question under inquiry;⁸ in such films, any strategies or any manner of organization that might provide evidence concerning the relative merits of the various viewpoints presented are carefully avoided.⁹ This is done to create the impression that all forms of understanding can be reduced to opinion or belief. The relativity of truth, of course, is a lynchpin of empirical philosophy.

A related form of organization depends upon casting the film's narrator in the role of a **historian**, i.e. a person who sifts through historical documents of various sorts (diaries, journals, historical relics, newspaper reports) in an attempt to discover a key to answering the problematic upon which the film is based.¹⁰ What such films usually end up demonstrating is that the facility which guides the evidential character of the document renders them inaccessible to any such inquiry. Questions that are involved in the film's problematic are demonstrated to be unanswerable in empirical terms.

A third form, similar in many respects to the above, is based on the attempt to use photographs as a means of deciphering the past.¹¹ Films of this mode rely on the assumption that the iconography of the photographic image is a product of the particular time during which it was made¹² and hence, that an understanding of the nature of that iconography will disclose the peculiar quality of that time. These films generally conclude by demonstrating that the past which is embedded in the photograph is obscured by the forcefulness with which the photograph asserts itself as belonging to the present. The clues to the past lie more in the absences which the photography more in the unrepresented events which condition¹³ the making of the photograph than in the abundant and precise detail that constitutes the major attraction of the photograph. Thus, it is films of this mode which most clearly present the limitations of empiricism for they typically culminate in the discovery of a dilemma which subverts not only the programme of inquiry these films initially undertake, but also the very form of cognition which a photograph proposes.¹⁴

Here another of the characteristics of The Cinema of Presentation comes clearly into view. Some of the films of this mode exploit the photographic image's richness of detail to evoke a feeling of nostalgia, others exploit the temporality which is inscribed in a photograph to evoke a feeling of loss. In either case, the films merely trade in the emotions elicited by these features of a photograph. Structures which might organize and reveal those material features of the photograph which elicit these feelings are seldom, if ever, developed.

SECTION III

Since the lack of such structures is a defining characteristic of The Cinema of Presentation, some inquiry into this matter should be conducted. We shall pursue this inquiry by contrasting films of this sort with a pair of works from The Cinema of Construction, Michael Snow's **One Second in Montreal** and Hollis Frampton's (**nostalgia**).

These works too are based on similar ideas about the still photograph or more exactly the still photograph as it is incorporated in a film. But what sets these films apart from those which we have been discussing is that these works use those material features of the image which they explore to provide the foundation for the film's structure. In **One Second in Montreal**, it is the temporality which is inscribed in the filmic image on which Snow concentrates and the formal construction of the piece depends entirely on Snow's understanding of temporality in film. Snow rephotographs a number of still images — all of which are marked by a poverty of formal intricacy and by a consequent richness of allusion to events beyond the spatial and temporal frame of the photograph. and transposes them to a film in which each in turn is held for a long period of time. As in the case of Warhol's films, the prolonged, non-moving image is used to deflect attention to the material processes of recording and projection. to the flow of the celluloid strip through the projector, and thus to the film's temporality. This awareness of the flow of time, along with the photograph's allusions to events going on outside themselves make us anticipate the event which might succeed the event depicted. In this way then, the form of the film derives from one of the features of the narrative.

10. Donald Brittain's **Bethune** and **Under the Volcano** are examples of films of this mode.

11. Examples of films of this mode are Colin Low's **City of Gold** and Koenig's **The Days of Whiskey Gap**.

12. Perhaps the best example of a work of art which is constructed on this assumption is Michael Lesy's photo book **Wisconsin Death Trip**.

13. Often, this feature of a single still photograph is used to evoke a sense of absent narrative. Atget's photographs of empty streets are good examples of a case in point.

14. It should be noted that there is a sort of self-reflexivity inherent in all these modes of organization that here reaches its apogee. In all cases, these films comment on the limitation of that empiricism which provides that form. In this case though that self-reflexivity is doubled by another, namely the reflexive reference to the film's assumptions about the nature of photographic iconography.

In a similar vein, Hollis Frampton's (**nostalgia**) confronts the fact that a narrative involves structures of anticipation and recollection. In this work, a series of twelve still photographs are presented, accompanied by a sound track which comments on the succeeding photograph in the series. This displacement of the verbal description of the photograph evokes a forward-and-backward-looking activity of mind as one is forced to anticipate the image as the image is presented. This forward-and-backward-movement, of course, alludes to the form of the narrative. Moreover, the descriptions themselves serve to link this narrative form to features inherent in the still photographs themselves since collectively the descriptions present a catalogue of ways of "reading" a photograph, many of which are based on the narrative. The tentativeness of the descriptions suggested by the fact that they are presented as conjectures or as incomplete and faltering recollections reveals the insuperable difficulties of recovering the past.

15. This explains why many exponents of the Cinema of Construction prize those works in which strategies which foreground the material properties of their work. It is not because such films in revealing the process by which their meaning is produced they repudiate the politically dangerous practice of disguising their mode of operation but rather that such films acquire as added complexity by bringing additional features of the work under formal control.

What I wish to make clear through these descriptions is that the characteristic differences between The Cinema of Construction (of which Snow and Frampton are exponents) and "The Cinema of Presentation" (which the Unit B of the National Film Board practiced) revolves around the difference between using the material features of the cinema **as the basis for the film's structure**. **City of Gold**, for example, simply uses photographs of the past to evoke the sentiments of nostalgia, mystery and contemplation. **One second in Montreal** or (**nostalgia**), on the other hand develop structures which formalize the features of the work which evoke those sentiments. Thus, "The Cinema of Construction" takes what in "The Cinema of Presentation" is unconscious and unformed raises it to the level of consciousness and brings it under formal control.¹⁵

16. Koenig and Kroiter's *The Living Machine* and Colin Low's *Universe* are examples of this mode

To return to our main argument, there remains one final form of organization which is based on the demonstration of the inability of photographic and cinematic imagery to provide the key to answering certain questions. This form depends upon raising questions about fundamental aspects of our social and political existence.¹⁶ Such films develop a sense of mystery as the empirical tools which the filmmakers employ fail to unravel questions they set out to untangle. From this failure, a quality of mystery results. It is this quality of mystery which, I believe, Peter Harcourt was responding to when he spoke of Unit B films as possessing "...the quality of suspended judgement, of something left open at the end, something undecided."¹⁷

17. Peter Harcourt. "The Innocent Eye" in Feldman and Nelson. eds., *Canadian Film Reader* (Toronto, Peter Martin Associates/Take One. p. 72).

When considering this form, one is again struck by the fact that this way of organizing a film simply exploits the capacity of a certain characteristic of the photographic image, namely its resolute facticity, to evoke a certain emotional effect.

Certain other characteristic differences between The Cinema of Illustration and The Cinema of Presentation remain to be commented upon. One of these differences is that The Cinema of Presentation makes much more extensive use of the moving camera. In part, of course, this is due to its use of the long take; the moving camera provides for variety without a change of shot. In fact, the system of change of point-of-view within a single long take sometimes imitates the system of the change of shots in classical cutting but without fragmenting the naturalistic unities of time and space.

The use of the moving camera holds other advantages for the Presentational mode of cinema. For one thing, the use of the moving camera serves to extend the lateral space of an image. We have seen that such devices as the cropping of objects at the frame edge or the use of an open compositional form which negates the use of boundary are devices that serve to suggest a continuity between the space of the image and the space of the surrounding world. The use of the moving camera sometimes serves similar ends for the moving camera continually implies the space that it leaves behind and the

space that it moves towards. When watching a moving camera shot, we are acutely aware that the frame is simply a mask that isolates a small portion of space from the larger space that it is being moved across.

Another prevalent feature of The Cinema of Presentation is the use of what many film historians and film critics rather loosely refer to as composition in depth (deep-focus, i.e. the use of a broad span of critical focus with key compositional elements distributed across the entire span.) Composition in depth is simply a photographic device which enables similar compositions to be used in film, and for similar reasons. The resultant multiplicity of compositional elements within a single frame can also be understood as a form of response to the reduction in the complexity of internal relations which could be a consequence of the refusal to employ anti-naturalistic montage formations. The use of an elaborate mise-en-scene re-established a new category of complexity to take the place of that which had been eliminated; relations failing in this category, however, have the advantage, from the naturalistic point of view, of not violating the integrity of real space and time.

Much the same point can be made in regard to the narrative structures which characterize The Cinema of Presentation. Like the montage formations of The Cinema of Illustration, the narrative structures operate to create a tightly-knotted web of internal relations within a single, highly-focused intrigue. This quasi-abstract structure is less highly developed and as a result the film's complexity depends on the intricacy of the interrelation between its multiple plots rather than on the complex structure of a single plot.¹⁸

One final contrast between our two modes of cinema is the contrast between the rhythm and phrasing characteristic of each. Even though the styles of both kinds of cinema are characterized by strong rhetorical continuity, settled phrasing and a minimum of dislocating effects which might disturb, the flow of energy transports one through the work. There are, nonetheless, discernible differences in the qualities of rhythm and phrasing which distinguish the two kinds of cinema. In The Cinema of Illustration, each scene is usually resolved into a number of discrete units; this means that its rhetorical style involves frequent, highly accented rhythms. This is usually used to create rhythmic figures which, like verse rhythms, involve regular, repeated units of accent and rhythm. The phrasing characteristic of The Cinema of Illustration also involves highly organized internal relations which are frequently based on patterns of repetition and symmetry; indeed, even the common long-shot/close-up/reverse-close-up formation involves symmetry and mirror-phrasing.

In The Cinema of Presentation on the other hand, scenes are not resolved into as many discrete units. As a result, accents recur less frequently. This recurrence therefore is not as amenable to being patterned. As a result, the rhythms typical of The Cinema of Presentation are more like prose rhythms than verse rhythms. Much the same can be said of the phrasing typical of this sort of cinema. The fact that the rhetorical units are much longer means that there is a much less frequent use of patterns of symmetry and repetition in the phrasing.

One feature which all four of the modes of organization have in common is that they employ forms which contain an epistemological problematic. Indeed, they incorporate a rather Kantian turn of thought, for they reveal the radical limitations of knowledge in order to open the doors to belief. The **ethos** of these films, then, involves an image of man as enormously limited in his powers to understand the cosmos, bewildered and sustained by faith alone. Though few would deny that this is not a very progressive image, it is most definitely one that has been expressed, and indeed implicitly condoned, not only of a goodly number of English Canadian Documentaries, but many films of the Presentational mode in general. ○

18. Both the mise-en-scène and narrative then achieve complexity through the use of multiplicity of elements rather than through the mathematical precision of their arrangement of smaller numbers of elements. It is worth noting that full complexity of the relations between a multiplicity of elements can be realized only when the classical principle of the subordination of all the elements under a single, dominant element is eschewed in favour of the principle of equivalency of various elements.