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Film, Form and Phantasy

Adrian Stokes and Film Aesthetics

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For Jasmine, Eloise, Thea and Joseph

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This book has evolved over a long period of time. It began in the enormously stimulating postgraduate seminars on psychoanalysis run by the late Richard Wollheim in the philosophy department of University College at the University of London in the mid-1970s. Wollheim's writings have been, and remain, a constant source of inspiration for the past thirty years.

For many years the writing of this book was a a lonely business, so my thanks also go to the late Jill McGreal, my partner at the time, with whom I had endless conversations about philosophical matters and who bemusedly encouraged my enthusiasm for Adrian Stokes.

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Introduction

It is simple, immaculate: the perfection of Vermeer no longer needs expounding. His pictures contain themselves utterly self-sufficient. In each of them the surface and design alike mark an act which is accomplished and complete. Its limits are unconcealed . . . On the surface of these pictures the forms of life lie flatly together, locked side by side in final clarity.¹

The material beauties of Vermeer's world uncover themselves quietly, neither sought for nor unexpected. The nature of things is perfectly visible; objects receive the light as if by habit, without welcoming or shrinking. Encrusted, lustrous, or with the lucent enamelled facets of the later works, these textures are familiar companions of life: they make no claims. Their character is not spectacular, the drips of light take no account of it. They never remind us that they could be touched. Often it is not matter that occupies the eye, so much as the reciprocal play of nearness and distance. Overlapping contours, each accessory to the next, confine the space, an envelope of quiet air. And suspended in it, near or far, bound unresisting by the atmosphere, each object yields up to the light its essence, its purest colour.²

That these two quotations from the late Lawrence Gowing's monograph on Jan Vermeer should stand at the beginning of a book dedicated to an understanding of film will warn the reader that what follows is committed to recovering film, or at least fairly large parts of it, often implicitly, for the visual arts in general. Gowing's writings also serve as exemplars of a mode of understanding art. He was also an art historian and critic strongly influenced by the English aesthete, art critic and historian Adrian Stokes whom he knew and whose work provides the critical framework of the present book.

While such a project may fly in the face of what was once orthodox film theory which has been adamant in constructing film as an autonomous art severed from the fine arts, nevertheless, it does find strong precursors in earlier film theorists like Rudolf Arnheim and Sergei Eisenstein. Similarly, among modernist-inclined film-makers and theorists this broad visual art approach has found support in the post-war writings of the American film-makers and writers Stan Brakhage, Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow and Stanley Cavell. This book's project is to offer an understanding of film, using Stokes' ideas expressed in his essays on architecture, painting, sculpture and dance.³ However, it does not necessitate making film a subjunct of these practices,

but rather, I hope, sets out common ground which I believe exists between these visual arts, especially in the relationship between the psychology of the artist and spectator and the 'image in form' constituting particular films.

Gowing's *Vermeer* also stands as a remarkable instantiation of a critical sensibility which merges a sharp eye with a view of art that finds in the form of art a resonance as pervaded by meaning and phantasy as that found in art's so-called content or subject matter. It lends an integrity to the art object *qua* object, such that its representational properties are of a piece with its wholeness as object. Furthermore, there is to be found in such criticism a belief that the quality of the art object, whether a painting or sculpture, reflects qualities in both the psychical life of the viewer and in the world itself. In other words, it resists a purely formalist understanding, paradoxically perhaps, by lending a particular meaning to what we know as form, a meaning that Stokes isolated and called the 'image in form'.

My aim is to explore such a sensibility with respect to film and, in furtherance of this aim, to discuss the writings of Stokes, to whose work Gowing's *Vermeer* owes much for its approach, its style and its aesthetic. One question in response to such a project may be: What can a Stokesian view of visual art have to say about an entirely different medium, film? First, the area that the book will concentrate on is the nature of the aesthetic and psychological relationship to the visual arts, the nature too of the visual art object and the relationship between form in visual art and meaning. These are major questions for both art and for the philosophy of art, and in many ways, the book will try to articulate a possible answer. Just as ambitiously perhaps, it will attempt to go some way to providing an answer – or at least an intelligible response – to the question of how film can be addressed on such matters alongside other arts such as painting, sculpture and architecture.

At the core of this viewpoint is the ancient idea that art is an intentional activity. All art is artefactual and thus intentional, even when it comprises the found object or blank canvas or screen where the artist's role seems quite minimal and does not involve making anything at all. Intentionality, albeit complex, lies equally at the centre of the industrially produced Hollywood film with its studio-based communities of directors, actors, writers, designers, cinematographers, costumiers, and so on.

As the product of desires, beliefs and feelings, art is inevitably something to which we respond with the same mental phenomena of desires, beliefs and feelings. As intentionality is a necessary condition of human agency so the latter is intrinsic to art practice, spectatorship and our understanding and appreciation.

In so far as what follows is an exploration of Stokes' ideas, it is committed to Kleinian psychoanalysis. Melanie Klein moved to England in the 1920s where, after a protracted struggle in the 1940s, she established her ideas in the mainstream of English psychoanalysis. Her impact on the wider cultural field has been fairly muted. Richard Wollheim, Peter Fuller, Michael Rustin

and Eric Rhode come to mind as writers who used Klein's ideas in their pursuit of an understanding of the arts and culture.⁴ By and large, however, Klein's major influence has been on the practice of psychoanalysis itself and its attendant fields (e.g. child welfare). In the past twenty years it has been Lacanian ideas that have dominated the academic disciplines of literary criticism, film theory, feminism, photographic theory and cultural theory. In what follows, I shall claim that Kleinian psychoanalysis established a more sophisticated understanding of certain theoretical areas, particularly of phantasy, a central concept in much cultural theorising over the years (e.g. sexual difference, ideology, representation).

The other figure whose influence pervades the book is Richard Wollheim, who almost singlehandedly has merged Kleinian psychoanalysis, Stokesian aesthetics and analytical philosophy in an influential view of the visual arts, especially painting, best represented by his magnum opus *Painting as an Art*. To this extent the book is also in the very broadest sense Humean in that, like the eighteenth-century Scottish empiricist philosopher, it takes the naturalistic view that art must be grounded in human nature, in particular, in mental processes. Art, on this account, first profoundly established by Hume, is a response to human psychology and the needs expressed by the latter. If there is a unity in art it is in terms of the unity of the mind. The book is fully committed to this view.

Broadly speaking, Kleinian psychoanalysis can be differentiated from orthodox Freudianism by its strong accent on phantasy, its complex rendering of the Oedipal and notably the pre-Oedipal period of infancy, its adherence to a form of Freud's own often disparaged love and death instincts, and its placing of the ego, conscious and unconscious, in the forefront of its theory. Equally, Stokes is the subject matter of the book only in so far as his ideas resonate for film. Much of his work addressed areas in which I have no particular expertise – architecture, painting, sculpture and dance. At the moment of writing, barely any writing exists on Stokes.

What follows attempts to break with dominant modes of explanation in film and art in general flowing from the semiological camp. It contests the relevance of Jacques Lacan and the structuralist and so-called post-structuralist school which currently dominates in much visual cultural theory – film, art history, art theory, photography, and so forth. The reign of Saussurian linguistics has meant it would seem a daunting legacy of intellectualism, linguistic reductionism and indifference to the complexities and importance of aesthetics and aesthetic judgement itself. To this extent I have located the ideas in the English Romantic tradition of John Ruskin and Walter Pater. But since I started to write this book in the late 1980s I have found that it was critically hemmed in on another side by the wave of cognitivism that began to emanate from America and that by the mid-1990s was in full flood. A distancing from semiotics led to a defence of Freud from cognitive psychology as it found its place in film studies.

Stephen Bann has suggested a methodological division in British art history between a philosophical and scientifically-based approach exemplified by Ernst Gombrich (the science of perceptual psychology) and one which is experiential and phenomenological, represented at its best by Gowing who was primarily a practitioner, a painter. It is the Gowing approach that I wish to establish here on the terrain of film. A return to and a recovery of the experience of film is the clarion-call of what follows, and as Bann points out, to understand Gowing better it would be profitable to read Stokes (similarly, Hegel is helpful for an understanding of Gombrich). In such a project, where the confrontation of the artwork by the spectator is central, we would expect the notions of perception, form, phantasy and imagination to come to the fore. To this extent Stokes serves more as a model, albeit one who cannot be equalled. For in Stokes, particularly in his post-war writing when Kleinian explanations and concepts take their place alongside aesthetic and art history ones, there is an attempt to found the experience of the art object (importantly for artist as well as spectator) in a Kleinian psychology.

As a means of engaging the subject in hand, I have taken as my larger topic the traditional distinction in film theory between montage and realism. This has been a useful and at the same time misleading demarcation of film into two strands which characterise in a fairly exclusive way a fundamental difference in ontological and epistemological frameworks governing the two positions. Realism has represented the priority of the real, the idea of the camera reflecting the world, and in so doing more often than not commenting upon it – two incompatible ideas if reflection is meant as a neutral activity and ambition. Montage has always evoked the idea that film constructs its own world through the technique of editing and that it is expressive primarily of the film-maker, of personality itself.

Both polarities have had their prime statesmen – Eisenstein for montage and Bazin for realism. What follows is in many ways an attempt to rearticulate these two notions as they relate to film. For it is true to say that they both express plausible and attractive intuitions about film, and perhaps about art *per se*. To throw them into a wider framework of art theory, as Eisenstein did, will hopefully shed light on how they may be understood which may prove fruitful for any future understanding of film.

The crucial and perennial problem in much of this theoretical work has been the meshing of the social and psychological determinants of actual works of art themselves. To explain a work of art, be it a painting, sculpture, building or film, is to face the problem of how a coarse-grained determinant, say the studio system in Hollywood during the 1930s, has its precise effect in the complexities and details of a particular film and not in Hollywood films in general. Between such explanation are placed other factors such as genre, authorship, technology, actors, stars, and so forth. Equally, and less ably addressed, is the problem of what kind of explanation is being adduced

in such a scenario. Too much does the actual quality of a work of art, its aesthetic impact or otherwise, fall through the explanatory grids being applied. To some extent this position has been welcomed in the name of a critique of high art whereby distinctions are not tolerated, on political grounds, between the works of popular culture and high art. The analytical concepts and system do not recognise any difference between 'good' and 'bad' works of art and as such the latter distinction ceases to exist. It is not the limitations of the analysis that are brought to the forefront, but rather the analysis seems to prove the case itself. The differences between works of art on such grounds are elitist, ideological, culturally determined – whatever.

Aesthetics understood as the philosophy of art and not simply the technical aspects of an art has been neglected in the history of cinema, brief as it is. Aesthetics itself has been the target of a concerted attack by many film theorists in recent years. Seen as an ideological system and thus determined by class interests, it has been replaced by the idea of a contextualisation of art. Thus any film must be fundamentally understood and explained as being a reflection of or determined by particular conditions of existence which are necessarily economic, ideological and political in nature. This view is one found in art theory in general. T. J. Clark has come to represent this view in its most concerted attack on what has been perceived as a view of the autonomy and aesthetic level of art more often than not represented by the arch-modernist, Clement Greenberg. In many ways the argument is an old one between a form of relativism and a form of absolutism. Quite crudely, in modern terms, Marx versus Kant.

To take a philosophical stance on film is to address certain abstract questions, ones which involve the conceptual relationships holding in any understanding of what is film. These abstract questions can be construed in a purely conceptual fashion or they can be articulated and resolved through a more substantive analysis which involves a discussion of films and their makers. It is this latter approach that I will take in what follows. For the discussion of art without addressing artworks themselves is to ignore the potency of art itself in explicating any understanding of it. In film this idea has been fairly widely held, particularly in the influential *auteur* theory, although the latter is misleading in that its claim to being a theory seems to be misplaced. The idea that films can be understood by alluding to the themes in the work of an artist or film-maker is innovative only within a certain context in film, when the studio system was dominant in Hollywood. Otherwise, art criticism has been involved in such an approach to understanding art for some time.

In founding an aesthetic of film it would seem to be necessary to broach the issue of human nature for to answer certain questions about art as representation, or art as an object or the judgement and value assigned to film itself involves issues of psychology. This is not a novel approach. Eisenstein found it necessary to base his ideas loosely on a theory of Pavlovian

psychology. Years later, and in a very different vein, Christian Metz used psychoanalysis to understand cinema. In the interwar years Rudolf Arnheim implicitly embraced a psychologistic system to render a formalist view of film as art. André Bazin's realism was always infused with ideas culled from a mix of phenomenology and existentialism prevalent in post-war France. What separates some of these attempts from philosophical ones is the claim that psychoanalysis or psychology is a science and therefore free from ideological views of human nature associated with philosophical systems. This seems to be a covert way of attempting to establish the truth of such theories by fiat.

The book seeks to establish a close relationship between the disciplines of philosophy, art history and criticism. This is on the grounds that much pioneering work has been covered on certain issues in the visual arts since the inception of German art history in the nineteenth century. By treating film as an art, a visual art, perhaps something useful can be gleaned from these debates especially those by Heinrich Wölfflin, Ernst Gombrich, Michael Podro, and many others. Of course, the differences between painting and film are profound, but they share concerns in aesthetic terms. The book is divided into three parts. In Part I the notions of representation, depiction, expression and phantasy are set out in largely philosophical terms. In Part II I examine Stokes' writings and their context, especially as they allude to the carving and modelling distinction. In Part III, these ideas are applied to the traditional division in film between montage and realism, paying particular attention to Hitchcock and Ford as representatives of the success of art in traditional Hollywood and to so-called 'art-cinema' film-makers like Rossellini, Eisenstein and Dreyer. There is a final chapter on the implications of Stokes' ideas for black-and-white cinematography.