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Film as Film
Understanding and Judging Movies

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6 ‘How’ Is ‘What’

A persistent assumption in the previous chapter was that matters of balance and coherence are crucial to our appreciation of Cinema. I shall now try to justify this assumption and look at some of its most important implications.

Coherence is the prerequisite of meaning. It is the means by which the film-maker creates significance. The spectator employs a continuous coherence-test in order to recognize meaning at all levels. It is the means by which he makes sense of the images, the means by which he adjusts both his visual and his mental focus. At a certain brute level, that is clearly so: a patch of coloured light ‘is’ sea through its place in a network of relationships within the image which in turn relates to common experience outside the cinema.

While I have no wish to argue by sleight of hand from this brute level of consistency-dependence to my larger claim, it is not possible to make a clear distinction of kind between this and the higher or deeper levels. Does not a similar test, progressively refined, control recognition of that sea as background information incidentally necessary to the foreground action; as itself a focus of dramatic interest, the source, say, of likely danger or sustenance; as the symbolic representation of a state of mind, a wish, a fear, an impulse; finally, as suggesting an extension beyond the immediate concerns of character and action into the realm of ideas? How can that sea embody, say, human aspiration, unless through its relevance to figures whose aspirations we observe or share?

It can be made to do so, by the absolute negation of coherence. The sea image may be hurled into the movie with such aggressive disregard for dramatic relevance that our minds, intolerant of disjunction, search for conceivable connections and explore the symbolic connotations of Sea in quest of the one least tenously related to the matters in hand. For it is certainly true that common experience and agreed usage have given objects a range of meanings quite independent of their presence in movie images; and that those meanings may readily be incorporated by pointing the camera appropriately. At its crudest, one could ‘film’ an idea by setting it down on paper and focusing on the printed page.

So my first statement on coherence needs amendment. Meaning may exist without internal relationship; but coherence is the prerequisite of contained significance. By this I mean significance which we find within, rather than attached to, the form of the film.

Despite my earlier reservations on the subject, the ‘nature of the medium’ is unavoidable if we want an aesthetic basis for critical judgements: the concept of the ‘cinematic’ needs thorough overhaul, but it cannot be abandoned. It is re-established as a critical tool, not just useful but necessary, once we pursue a definition which respects both the synthetic nature of the movie and the logic of its forms. The specifically filmic qualities derive from the complex, not from any one of its components. What distinguishes film from other media, and the fiction movie from other forms, is none of the elements but their combination, interaction, fusion.

The meanings which are contained most securely within a film are those formed at the deepest level of interrelation and synthesis. The point needs particular stress because it is only as we approach this level that it begins to make sense to talk of a film as self-contained in its significance. A movie cannot be both absolutely self-contained and meaningful. It draws non-stop on the values and knowledge which we bring to it. Recognition and interpretation of the film’s experience both depend on an immediate responsiveness at the level where meaning is given rather than created.

The kitchen scene from The Courtship of Eddie’s Father, for example, refers out to our awareness of, among other things, the fragility of china, the uncertain stability of a high stool, and
American assumptions about the proper roles and interests of parents. These given meanings are essential to the significance of the scene. But as components only, The special concern of the movie is to put such components into significant relationship; their correlation is the content of the film.

Our understanding and judgement of a movie, then, will depend largely on the attempt to comprehend the nature and assess the quality of its created relationships. We are mistaken if we persuade ourselves that one film is more subtle or profound than another on the grounds that its typical reference points include data drawn from the philosophy of Hegel or the poetry of Goethe rather than from conventions of dress or fashion in motor transport. The subtlety, complexity or intelligence of a picture is not to be found in its given meanings. These qualities may be seen in its organization; they should not be claimed for (nor should naivety, crudity or triviality be charged against) isolated units.

If we agree in making qualities of organization and coherence a primary issue in critical judgement, complexity and subtlety are vindicated as highly relevant criteria. But they are so for aesthetic reasons, and not because complex views or statements are generally preferable to simple ones. Complexity of viewpoint requires and justifies elaborated expression. But the simpler statements under-employ a complex medium. They need only the diagrammatic relationship of a few givens to yield significance at a level we could call that of asserted meaning. At this level coherence exists but lacks density. In bald oppositions like those between palaces and slums, battlefields and stock-markets, we find generalized images joined to create approximations to verbal messages. Film becomes a substitute for speech, a translation of verbal statements, rather than an alternative, independent mode of communication.

A movie whose significance is restricted to the message-making level competes in an area where images are markedly less efficient than words. Less efficient because less clear. If we wish to transmit a verbal message it makes little sense to interpose unnecessary coding and de-coding stages between sender and receiver. We simply create additional opportunities for 'interference' and distortion. The Potemkin lions have already provided an example of the imprecision which descends upon attempts to make images do the work of slogans or verbal metaphors.

Asserted meanings, crude juxtapositions, tend to be both blatant and unclear, like over-amplified noises bellowing from a faulty loudspeaker. When a film's significance is wholly formed at this level it is better described as imposed than as contained. This description will indicate its status as meaning which is created by the superficial effort of organization involved in such manoeuvres as using a character as the mouthpiece for a speech.

Not that there is any law which bars characters from speaking their thoughts. Far from it. Density of coherence, by its nature, cannot be instantly achieved. A level of asserted meaning is an indispensable stage between the setting out of givens and the creation of a complex structure. Many fine movies start from simple propositions and crude confrontations. Thus Ugetsu Monogatari is built from a schematic opposition of misery and ambition, devastation and toil. La Règle du jeu opens with a blatant juxtaposition of modern technology and romantic chivalry. In Johnny Guitar and Carmen Jones, the initial relationships between solidarity and isolation, freedom and enclosure, are boldly outlined.

Asserted meanings cannot be ignored; but equally they should not be overvalued. What matters is the extent to which these bold statements are refined by the pattern of detail built over and around them. In any of the films listed above we find subtlety and complexity not (where it's nonsensical to look for them) in the initial scheme, but in an organization of details whose relationships simultaneously complicate and clarify the movie's viewpoint. At this level of coherence significance is locked into the picture's form. We are taken beyond the realm of the language substitute which provides an illustration of messages, opinions and themes. The separately discernible meanings become important less for their independent value than for their contributions, mutually deepening and defining, to a total vision.

What we see here is, primarily, a way of seeing; the direct
registration and embodiment, in a 'secondary world', of a point of view. Our approach to the significance of this world is through the subtle laws which structure its relationships. But the following would be as true, and perhaps closer to the nub of the matter: significance provides the path by which we approach and seek to make manageable the intricacies of structure.

The cinema offers no difficulties to our perception and judgment, and no challenge to the film-maker when it sets out to employ only one of its resources. Critical and creative problems arise from the attempt to balance requirements of equal weight but divergent tendency. Useful criteria take account of relatedness by directing us not to single aspects but to the value of their interaction and the extent of their integration. The formal disciplines of balance and coherence embrace the effort to maintain the various elements in productive tension and neither to push them into symmetrical alignment (repetition) nor to let them fall into blank contradiction.

Friction impedes movement; at the same time movement is impossible without friction. By a similar paradox the film-maker finds a degree of resistance in his material which both provides and restricts the channel of communication. Resistance offers a principle of tension by which to locate his work within the secure frame of reference on which internal relationship depends.

Certainly the spectator needs such a frame in order to perceive relationship. But the need, and the means of supplying it, arise from the same source: the hybrid nature of film, the synthesis of reality and magic implied by the cinema's basic mechanism.

The movie is committed to finding a balance between equally insistent pulls, one towards credibility, the other towards shape and significance. And it is threatened by collapse on both sides.

It may shatter illusion in straining after expression. It may subside into meaningless reproduction presenting a world which is credible but without significance.

The meanings I attach to the word 'significance' are, I trust, clear. But in a context where people are known to burst into song on the tops of trolley-busses, with the full support of invisible orchestras, or sprint down hillsides actively pursued by bouncing boulders, or drag wild leopards determinedly up the steps of Connecticut jails (and I would be the last to suggest they cease exhibiting such fine accomplishments), the concept of credibility needs careful definition. As an illusion-spinning medium, film is not bound by the familiar, or the probable, but only by the conceivable. All that matters is to preserve the illusion.

On one level cinematic credibility is no different from that which we demand of other story-telling forms. It depends on the inner consistency of the created world. So long as that is maintained, the premises are beyond question: people can express their feelings in impromptu song, with or without instrumental backing; inanimate objects can be self-willed and malevolent; Death can be a devotee of chess. But the created world must obey its own logic. There is no pretext, whether it be Significance, Effect or the Happy Ending, sufficient to justify a betrayal of the given order. In a fictional world where anything at all can happen, nothing at all can mean or matter.

This fact has specific implications for the movie. It gives the criterion of credibility a physical dimension which it has not had elsewhere in art since the decline of representational painting. Faced with the camera's obstinate literal-mindedness (which means our literal-minded approach to the camera's products), the film-maker follows Conrad's advice to the drowning man: 'In the destructive element immerse . . .' Conquest through submission: since the image insists on its relationship with visual reality, the film-maker takes that as one of the starting points for his organization and works through it to achieve reality for his imagined world. In this sense even the fiction movie is a documentary - the Authentic Record brought back from a fictional universe.

Here too it is important that we avoid confusing credibility with authenticity. The question of authenticity simply does not arise when we enter a fictional world. There is no actuality against which we can check images derived from One Million Years B.C. or 2001. But the image must be credibly derived from the created world in order to maintain its reality.

A very basic demonstration of the two levels of credibility is
provided by Hitchcock's *The Birds*. On the first level, we can make no difficulty about the fact that the feathered kingdom is seen to declare war on humanity. That is given. But it is also given that the attackers are ordinary, familiar birds. Nothing in our experience or in the film's premises permits them to develop intermittent outlines of luminous blue as they swoop, or to propel themselves in a manner that defies the observable laws of winged flight.

While it was scarcely Hitchcock's fault if his movie's central hypothesis was weakened by the fallibility of Special Effects, other directors have voluntarily incurred a similar breakdown, most often by forcing their actors into unconvincing postures or movements in order to fit a preconceived image. The more aspiring among inept film-makers frequently do this in pursuit of Dramatic Impact, which is like cutting off one's nose to beautify one's face. Nothing the camera does can offer any threat to the credibility of the imagined world. It has complete freedom, within that world, to seek its most revealing image. It can hang from the ceiling, look through kaleidoscopes, coloured filters or distorting lenses, and register with varying degrees of definition, grain and focus.

But we make sense of the movie image by relating it to our common knowledge and experience of the visible world. The relationship cannot be one of simple correspondence. In the colour movie, for example, the prominence or absence of particular tones may be thoroughly abnormal or designedly unnatural; no part of the greatness of a Western like *Johnny Guitar* or a musical like *The Pirate* could be traced to the likelihood of their colour-schemes. An apparent artificiality of décor in no way undermines the kind of belief assumed by *The Wizard of Oz*.

In *Moulin Rouge* John Huston established (and exploited with, for the most part, enthralling results) a system of colour based on the palettes of the Impressionists and therefore owing nothing to naturalism. Yet he had not created a world whose reality could tolerate a room that changed colour in sympathy with its occupant's moods. When the director characterized his hero's jealousy by flooding the set with, in the film's own terms, inexplicable green light, he broke down the essential structure of his picture's relationships and thus destroyed the world within which his hero existed. A minor, momentary relationship between the hero's temper and a literary convention of colour ('green with envy') was surely not worth achieving — or, more strictly speaking, capable of being achieved — at the sacrifice of the fundamental pattern. Here, as in my earlier examples from *The Red Desert* and *The Criminal*, the short cut is seen to create a short-circuit.

No game worth watching changes its rules at the players' convenience. From the spectator's point of view, part of the function of the narrative discipline is to prevent the story-teller's making things easy for himself at the expense of his work. But while a coherent principle of organization is essential, it is not in itself enough. A game may be played in strict accordance with a consistent body of rules yet remain a dull game. The rules provide a basis, not a substitute, for skilled and exciting play.

In like manner the disciplines of credibility adopted by the film-maker can be of only partial help to our understanding and judgement. By enabling us to explain why some part of a movie's structure is incoherent they allow us to indicate that the work is flawed; how seriously flawed will depend on how marginal or central the incoherence proves to be. But when we've said that a film is credible, we've not said much. We have established the soundness at only one end of its balance.

I have now described both sides of this balance, credibility as well as significance, in terms of coherence. But as the *Moulin Rouge* example has shown, the relationships concerned are of different kinds. The problem of balance arises because different relationships may make incompatible demands. When that happens opposed strains lead not to productive tension but to breakdown.

The image too has its givens. Like the created world, and in harmony with it, the image retains its sense and validity so long as it follows the logic of its premises. We can adjust to any scheme of selection provided that it is appreciable as a scheme. In coming to terms with the cinema's artifice we need to be able to sense which elements of our common experience apply and which are
suspension. The credibility of an artificial world, the reliability of an artificial eye, depend on the consistency of their relationship with our reality and on a system of deviation from the norms of our experience.

In the photographic film tension is applied whenever the image is required to act not just as representation but also as a significant structure. The relationship between image and thought may conflict with or reinforce that between image and object. As the weight of meaning carried by the image increases, so does the strain placed on this balance. At any point short of collapse, the tension is a source of strength and energy: Up to this point, the greater the force of expression which the image can be seen to bear, the more illuminating will be the interlock between what is shown and the way of showing it.

The movie's technical conventions allow the film-maker himself to define the principles of organization which are to control this relationship. When we enter the cinema we have to accept the implications of a controlled viewpoint. Since the camera has no brain, it has vision but not perception. It is the film-maker's task to restore the selectivity of the cinematic eye. In this process he may control our perception so that his vision and emphases dominate our response to the created world.

A scene in Rope demonstrates how extensively the controlled viewpoint may heighten our response to action without making our awareness of control a barrier to imaginative involvement. The two murderers have placed their victim's corpse in an unlocked chest. At their dinner party refreshments are served from the top of the chest-coffin. The books which are usually kept in the chest have been placed in the next room. After dinner the housekeeper begins to clear the chest. When she has finished doing so she will want to replace the books. She makes three journeys to and from the dining-room, taking away empties and bringing back books. Throughout this deliberately extended scene the camera stands fixed so that we can watch her going about her perilous business. We know where the young criminals and their guests are standing. We can hear their conversation, but we can see only the back of one of the guests at the very edge of the screen.

Hitchcock has deliberately chosen an angle which prevents us from seeing either of his guilty heroes. The suspense of the scene depends on our being made to wait for the moment when the housekeeper opens the chest. It is heightened by the frustration of our desire to know whether either of the heroes is in a position to observe what is happening and so intervene to prevent catastrophe. The effect depends on a calculated refusal of desired information.

A similar refusal of information occurs in William Wyler's The Loudest Whisper. We are shown a schoolgirl telling her strait-laced grandmother a scandalous lie about the relationship between two of her teachers. However, we do not hear the accusation because at the moment the child begins to speak Wyler cuts in a shot from the front seat of the car in which they are travelling. The glass panel behind the chauffeur prevents our hearing the rest of the conversation. The obvious intention is to heighten the menace of the scene, to emphasize the 'unspeakable' nature of the charge. There is no need for us to hear the actual words spoken since we are well enough aware that the accusation is of homosexuality.

Both Hitchcock and Wyler in these scenes are exploiting the opportunities created by the necessity of a controlled viewpoint to heighten our response by providing only a partial 'view' of the action. In each case the alert spectator is likely to be aware of the device employed to secure the effect. Yet I would maintain that there is a great disparity between the strength and validity of the two devices.

When Wyler changes our viewpoint he quite clearly does so at his own convenience and at our expense. The camera changes position only in order to explain the silence; the effect is scarcely more subtle than a simple cut-out on the sound-track. The change of angle covers the silence, but gives us no new or interesting information which would justify the change itself. There is, literally, no excuse for the device: we are deprived of what we expected to hear and offered no compensatory distraction. We are thus encouraged to notice the nature of the device, at the expense of the response which it was too clearly designed to provoke.
But in Rope the effect of the restrictive viewpoint is in no way damaged by our awareness of the director’s design. What we are prevented from seeing is fully covered by what we do see and know. The position of the guests at one side of the room was established naturalistically before the housekeeper began her clearing up; as so often in Hitchcock’s work, the fact is initially offered as a piece of neutral, more or less irrelevant information so that it is not questionable later, when it takes on its more threatening aspect. We could still object to the camera device if Hitchcock had not employed his décor so cunningly. He has placed his actors in such a way that within this setting there is no angle from which the camera could embrace both the corner where the heroes are standing and the housekeeper’s passage from sitting-room to dining-room. In order to stand back far enough to include both points the camera would have to travel, and see, through the wall opposite the sitting-room door. If this episode occurred early in the film we might suspect that the wall, like Wyler’s glass panel, served only the purpose of restricting our knowledge. But the camera has explored the apartment so freely in the preceding sequences that by the time Hitchcock begins to exploit his décor for dramatic effect we have come to accept its reality and the limitations which it imposes. We cannot, at this stage, see the décor as something which exists purely at the director’s convenience in order to inhibit the camera and limit our access to the action.

Hitchcock’s cunning makes him seem to be a victim of the situation at just the point where he is most completely its master. The scene has been moulded so that, whatever happens, we shall be able to see only one of the focal points of its drama: either the housekeeper and the chest or the heroes. If the camera were to move to show the heroes we would lose sight of the housekeeper; as long as its eye remains fixed on the housekeeper we are unable to see the heroes. Hitchcock’s camera is obsessively concerned with the menace of the housekeeper’s actions. It ‘can’t take its eyes off her’. But the same presentation, just as skilfully integrated, would seem ridiculous applied to an event of less gravity: if, for example, the chest was known to contain only the evidence of some minor indiscretion and not the corpse of a man who was son, nephew, pupil, best friend and fiancé to the various guests.

The emphasis provoked by Hitchcock’s confined viewpoint is consonant with the dramatic import of the action it shows. This cannot be claimed for Wyler’s glass silencer; the action here is not sufficiently ‘charged’ to bear the weight of meaning which the scale of the device asserts.

Emphasis depends on the establishment of a norm. In the fictional film the norm is given by the nature of the spectator’s relationship to narrative. Our relationship to stories is that of an interested observer – the satisfaction they offer depends upon the extent to which they arouse concern. Once our interest in a story is aroused our drive is to discover what happens. So it is the structural information, the facts which indicate possibilities of development and resolution, that we grasp first and with most ease. When we have grasped the available structural information our perception of less specifically functional information increases.

With reference to this characteristic the film-maker establishes his norm, a base from which he can move in order to assign degrees of importance to objects and events within his world. While each film-maker establishes his own base, he does so by reference to a standard expectation. As ‘interested observers’ we expect the image to be the ideal record; freed from human contingencies, its attention is devoted to the matter of greatest moment for us.

Since the spectator expects the image to operate as a clear presentation of necessary facts, he is able to comprehend its other functions by sensing the import of deviations from the norm. The anticipation of relevant information in the image provokes close attention, in part at least because despite the ‘perfection’ of the record we can never be certain whether information which appears merely contingent may turn out to be structurally vital. When the amount of clearly relevant information is reduced, our attention may be directed towards a more intense scrutiny of the less extensive and less active images. We are provoked to assume...
an enhanced relevance in what we do see because it is given a special status in the film's world, an emphasis that implies heightened significance.

The degree of deviation from the norm indicates the scale of emphasis assigned by the film-maker. The less completely the image is committed to offering us information about developments in the film's world, the more it asserts its own significance either as a particularly revealing view of that world or as a presentation of a particularly significant aspect.

The controlled viewpoint presupposes a continuous quest for the most revealing presentation of events. But it remains open to the film-maker to heighten or subdue our awareness of his control. We can be made more or less conscious that we are seeing the world through a particular 'eye'. That is why it is possible for the film-maker to establish emphasis from his own base and in his own way. For Otto Preminger

the ideal picture is a picture where you don't notice the director, where you never are aware that the director did anything deliberately. Naturally he has to do everything deliberately – that is direction. But if I could ever manage to do a picture that is directed so simply that you would never be aware of a cut or a camera movement, that, I think, would be the real success of direction.

This 'real success' is unattainable, at least so far as the alert spectator is concerned. Ironically, one of the major pleasures of a Preminger movie is the grace and fluidity of his camera movements. But Preminger's ideal picture makes sense as an aspiration which reflects one attitude to the spectator and one type of viewpoint. Preminger uses means of emphasis which do not draw our attention to the image as an image but rely on arranging the action so that the scale of significance is established there. In Rope of No Return the symbolism is so completely absorbed into the action that it may easily pass unnoticed. When the heroine drops most of her belongings into the water as she is lifted from a raft grounded on the rapids, the camera does nothing to emphasize the meaning of the incident. It could be seen, at best, as a demonstration of the dangerous power of the current (her bag hurls away downstream); at worst, it might look like mere padding designed to keep the action moving along for a few extra seconds. In either case a claim that the event has symbolic significance would seem an absurd and pretentious exercise in 'reading-in'.

Still, the claim is made. The loss of the bag is the first in a series of events which, in the course of her journey, strip the heroine of the physical tokens of her former way of life. This process parallels the character's moral development from fatalistic acceptance towards a degree of self-conscious decision. The two movements are united in the final shot of the movie: the heroine herself removes and throws away a pair of flashy red shoes, her last remaining item of 'uniform'.

The fact that the bag is lost to the rushing waters is itself significant. Contrasted attitudes to the river point up different attitudes to life; the heroine initially regards it as an irresistible force of nature, but to the hero it is a force which must be mastered, used and, when necessary, defied. The first time we see Robert Mitchum in relation to the river he is riding along the bank in the opposite direction to that of the current. But our first sight of Marilyn Monroe on the river shows her as its victim, swept along helplessly on a raft she cannot control.

Preminger reveals significance by a dramatic structuring of events which his camera seems only to follow – never to anticipate. Moreover, the image appears to attempt always to accommodate the entire field of action so that it is the spectator's interest which defines the area of concentration.

At the other end of the scale Hitchcock is prepared to indicate areas of concentration very forcibly. The chest-clearing scene from Rope impresses on us the fact that our view is partial and that the area of our concentration has been defined by the director. Hitchcock allows us no independent selection. Moreover, he is fully prepared to use a camera which anticipates the action. The shot which follows the heroine's plea for help in Marnie is a camera movement towards a door, the very deliberation of which predicts an event of crucial significance.

1. Otto Preminger in Movie magazine, No. 4, p. 20.
The distinction between these two approaches is necessarily one of degree. Hitchcock’s ability to impose an area of interest is contingent upon that area’s being or quite rapidly becoming as important to us as his treatment assumes. Preminger’s open image imposes on us his sense of foreground and background; obviously a certain anticipation of events is inherent in the movement from sequence to sequence. While neither of these tendencies can be observed in a pure state, in Hitchcock the norm is a base for meaningful deviation while Preminger works by accumulation, enriching the basic structure by the addition of detail whose significance the spectator is free to observe or ignore. The contrast between their methods is further reflected in their narrative styles. Hitchcock tells stories as if he knows how they end, Preminger gives the impression of witnessing them as they unfold. Employed without skill, Preminger’s method would be dull and unrevealing; Hitchcock’s would be bombastic.

What matters to our judgement of the ‘Hitchcock tendency’ is not that an assertion of significance is made, but that we can feel it to be justified. Then the correlation of emphasis assigned with importance perceived maintains the authority of the image. It creates stress without strain by winning our acceptance of the given viewpoint.

The fictional world is not some inert matter to be galvanized into significance by the rhetorical manipulation of the movie’s language. The trouble with Wyler’s usage in The Loudest Whisper is that it places too great a reliance on the independent value of a technical device as a source of impact and meaning. We can claim that it ‘uses the medium’, but larger claims for a productive relationship of viewpoint and event can be advanced only when the film-maker maintains the correspondence between stylistic and dramatic weight.

In his own interest the film-maker must protect the channel through which his personal vision becomes communicable, the terms from which it derives its sense, strength and clarity. The more urgent his desire to communicate, the more persistently is he likely to be tempted to go beyond those terms in order to heighten meaning and impact. But when he disrupts his established discipline, in however worthy a cause, he is like a mason digging away his foundations to quarry stone for a steeple.

The hallmark of a great movie is not that it is without strains but that it absorbs its tensions; they escape notice until we project ourselves into the position of the artist and think through the problems which he confronted in his search for order and meaning. The more each element is not just compatible with, but an active contributor to, the network of significant relationships, the more value we can claim for the synthesis achieved.

Here the details of the realization will reveal concentration of function and effect. That is what distinguishes the examples of film-craft which I have held up for admiration; they achieve simultaneous relevance on the planes of action, thought and feeling. Cause and effect become inseparable because the aspect that exists in its own right stands also in a productive relationship: speech to gesture to décor (The Courtship of Eddie’s Father); action to image to cutting (Carmen Jones); event to location to lighting to mood (Rebel Without a Cause). At such levels of integration no question arises whether the camera moves to accommodate the movements of the characters or the characters move to justify the movement of the camera (The Cardinal, Rope); whether the décor takes on meaning because of the action within it or whether it is the décor that makes actions meaningful (Johnny Guitar, River of No Return). Questions like these become pure chicken and egg.

The great film approaches an intensity of cohesion such that its elements do not operate solely to maintain or further the reality of the fictional world, nor solely to decorative, affective or rhetorical effect. Of course this is a counsel of perfection, even though it is one derived from existing movies. Exodus, Johnny Guitar, Letter from an Unknown Woman, Psycho, La Règle du jeu, Rio Bravo, Wild River: these are among the films which I recall as approaching this condition most closely. Yet each of them does contain actions and images whose sole function is to maintain the narrative. In most cases these moments are to be found during the initial exposition; in Psycho, notably and on account of its peculiar construction, they occur at the end. But these masterpieces
allow us reasonably to hope for the next best thing to total cohesion: minimum (credible) redundancy. And they remind us that the minimum can be minute.

To hope for the fewest possible one-function elements in a film is not to demand that every element be of equal significance. There is a modulation of scale within each image just as there is throughout the whole movie. While we may expect each action to be relevant, only some will be climactic. One of the advantages of the narrative 'frame' is that the relevance of details to theme and viewpoint is a variable; it may occasionally be relaxed without threatening the overall coherence of the film.

Yet the movie that contains too much material serving only to maintain its reality pays the penalty of slackness and dullness, occasional or total. An even higher price is paid for unattached decoration, emotion or assertion: in vacuity, sentimentality or pretension. If I have said little in this chapter about such traditional failings—or about the traditional qualities like inventiveness, wit and economy—it is not because I think them unimportant. Rather, because they result from defects or achievements of balance and integration, and are most clearly defined in those terms. What, after all, is sentimentality if not a failure of emphasis, a disproportion between pathos asserted (in music, say, or image or gesture) and pathos achieved, in the action? What is pretension other than an unwarranted claim to significance, meaning insecurely attached to matter? And what inventiveness, but the ability to create the most telling relationships within the given material?

How can economy be defined unless by parity between energy expended and effect conveyed? 'Energy' itself is a matter of scale: a fast camera movement will claim most in a predominantly static movie; a big close-up will hit hardest in a picture mainly composed of more distant images. Consider again the Psycho slaughter. I have already talked of the concentration of imagery that Hitchcock's fragmented treatment allowed. It is equally valid to remark that without such concentration, the treatment would have fallen quite flat. If the emotional intensity of the scene's action permits extreme imagery, it is also largely a consequence of it. The correspondence between action, image, meaning and effect is so tight that each maintains the others. In theory, for example, Hitchcock could have given a more detached image at a number of points by moving the camera back through the open door of the bathroom. But the more distant view would have been quite inappropriate to our experience of the action. The limitation of space was not entirely physical; it corresponded also to a psychological-emotional enclosure.

Hitchcock's achievement here represents as well as may be the achievement of any fine film-maker working at his peak. He does not let us know whether he is finding the style to suit his subject or has found the subject which allows him best exercise of his style. He builds towards situations in which the most eloquent use of his medium cannot emerge as bombast.

At the level of detail we can value most the moments when narrative, concept and emotion are most completely fused. Extended and shaped throughout the whole picture, 'such moments compose a unity between record, statement and experience. At this level too, sustained harmony and balance ensure that the view contained in the pattern of events may be enriched by the pattern of our involvement. When such unity is achieved, observation, thought and feeling are integrated: film becomes the projection of a mental universe—a mind recorder.

Synthesis here, where there is no distinction between how and what, content and form, is what interests us if we are interested in film as film. It is that unity to which we respond when film as fiction makes us sensitive to film as film.