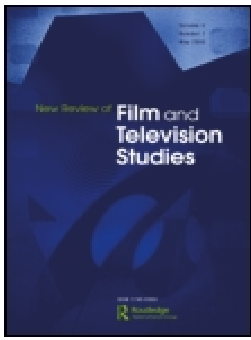

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REVIEW ESSAY

Solipsistic film criticism. Review of *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*

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This review of *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (Klevan and Clayton) considers the presuppositions of romantic film-philosophy, its influence on film criticism, and its tendency towards solipsism. This review also presents a theoretical framework for analysing descriptive passages in film criticism.

Keywords: film criticism; textual analysis; film-philosophy; Stanley Cavell; description

> [T]here is often a hostility towards any kind of explanation which involves a degree of distancing from the 'lived experience' of watching the film itself. Yet clearly any kind of serious critical work ... must involve a distance, a gap between the film and the criticism, the text and the meta-text. It is as though the meteorologists were reproached for getting away from the 'lived experience' of walking in the rain or sun-bathing. (Wollen 1972, 169)

Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (2011) have collected together a group of eminent critics and scholars to carry out metacriticism, that is, to examine film criticism as a form of writing, which involves analysing statements critics make about films. In a lucid contribution, Robert Sinnerbrink examines Stanley Cavell's reading of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975), noting how Cavell employs a paratactic writing style. Before this, Sinnerbrink outlines what he calls (here and in other publications) Cavell's 'romantic film-philosophy', which he contrasts to the theoretically laden 'rational film-philosophy' of the cognitive-analytic tradition. He asks an important question about how a romantic-based philosophy convinces when it does not rely on the theoretical notions of evidence and formal argumentation. He (and Cavell) responds that it lies in the style of the philosophical writing itself, which is conceived as combining aesthetic, philosophical and theoretical modes (43). I return to this issue at the end of this review essay, when discussing solipsism in romantic film-philosophy. However, we should note that, if cinema (like philosophy) responds to and tries to overcome scepticism and solipsism, as Cavell contends, then romantic film-philosophy is hindered by its own slide

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towards a solipsistic form of film criticism. In his contribution to the volume, Adrian Martin examines passages in the film criticism of John Flaus, Shigehiko Hasumi and Frieda Grafe, which he characterises in terms of the literary form of *ekphrasis*, or the vivid and imaginative redescription of visual experiences. George Toles focuses on the way critics such as Pauline Kael evaluated performance. In a reflexive moment, William Rothman examines his own practice of close reading in his seminal book *Hitchcock – The Murderous Gaze* (1982), and comments on its similarities and differences to Cavell's practice. In contrast to Cavell, Rothman's readings do not just focus on what is represented in a film, but also include the technology (usually limited to the camera) that produces film images. He then mentions his predilection for using frame enlargements (over 600 in *The Murderous Gaze*) as a form of evidence. From this visual, technologically enriched perspective, Rothman writes for this volume a subtle, nuanced reading of the way the camera framings, angles and shot changes in the racetrack scene in *Notorious* (Hitchcock, 1946) 'serve both to enhance the expressiveness of the characters' postures and gestures and to articulate the dramatic and psychological progression of the sequence within the context of the film as a whole' (109). Richard Combs discusses four reviewer-critics (Manny Farber, Kael, David Thomson and Raymond Durgnat) in light of their nostalgic search for authentic moments in fiction films. Charles Warren addresses what it means for a critic to be 'seized' by a film, and pursues this elusive concept through the writings of André Bazin and Susan Howe. Lesley Stern employs Siegfried Kracauer's work on photography and film to write a poetic, reflexive piece of creative nonfiction around Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977). The volume ends on Christian Keathley examining audio-visual forms of criticism – explanatory-analytic videos as well as more creative video works, such as Paul Malcolm's 'Notes Toward a Project on *Citizen Kane*' and Victor Burgin's *Listen to Britain* (2001). The volume tries to justify criticism as a legitimate form of writing in the university. However, at what price? In this review essay, I only have space to consider the contributions of the editors, so my comments are limited to their chapters, although this does not imply the other contributors deserve less attention. On the contrary, the volume is let down by the editors.

Clayton begins his chapter ('Coming to Terms', 27–37) with a critical analysis of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's well-known textbook *Film Art: An Introduction*. His main objection appears to be that textual analysis (as presented in *Film Art* and, presumably, elsewhere) distorts because it imposes arbitrary categories onto a film. He focuses on the problems with Bordwell and Thompson's analysis of *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), particularly their study of the film in terms of cause–effect logic:

> the references to 'cause' and 'effect' ... seek to translate narrative depictions of social life into the language of physics. The metaphor of a 'cause–effect chain' offers the film as something like a vast queue of dominoes, each domino causing the next domino to fall, the various lines of dominoes splitting and converging in an intricate (but essentially meaningless) display. (29)

We could question Clayton's attribution of the cause–effect chain as a mere metaphor, or interrogate his own visual metaphor of the abstract cause–effect chain as a line of dominoes, or challenge his parenthetical comment that the chain metaphor makes no sense. His comments stand as a provocative although misguided analysis of *Film Art*. However, halfway through his chapter, Clayton drops his critical, analytical tenor when he summarises Cavell's discussion of the same film in *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cavell 1981, 161–87).

The problems are twofold: Clayton's uncritical acceptance of Cavell and the different genres of writing he is comparing – a textbook written for beginners, and a professional philosopher's monograph containing original and astute discussions. Both types of text serve a different purpose and audience: a textbook is aimed at freshmen students, who require close supervision and guidance because their level of knowledge is basic, while the monograph is aimed at readers who require deep understanding of a discipline to appreciate its insights. If Clayton had written a rival textbook analysis of *His Girl Friday* – an analysis for beginners informed by criticism that avoids the problems he identifies in *Film Art* – then his chapter would be less uneven and slightly more credible.

In terms of Clayton's uncritical acceptance of Cavell, we can note in passing that it is possible to appreciate an author and yet still offer criticisms of his or her work. Noël Carroll, for example, admires *Pursuits of Happiness*, but this does not prevent him from finding weaknesses in the book. One such weakness is Cavell's

> penchant for philosophical ascent: a topic will emerge in the discussion of a film that will prompt Cavell to think about the issue per se, often in terms reminiscent of existential psychology, and then Cavell will return to the film, suggesting that his remarks are something that can be attributed to the film. (Carroll 1982, 105)

Carroll then discusses Cavell's analysis of *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey 1937), adding that:

> Cavell's marriage of textual explication and philosophizing resembles the type of allegorical reading that is called, in some circles, application. But how beneficial is this combination of tasks to either explication or philosophizing? We are most comfortable with allegorical readings when the truths hidden in the story pre-exist the text in question, preferably in another text. But when, as in Cavell's account of *The Awful Truth*, the proposed theme appears to be only fleetingly related to the film and the idea at hand seems to be something just discovered by Cavell, one asks how this film could possibly be expressing it. (Carroll 1982, 106)

From Carroll we learn about Cavell's approach to criticism – his strategies for discussing films, and the context from which his strategies emerge. Cavell does not come out of nowhere, but combines standard explication with philosophical reflections. Carroll summarises Cavell's position and then questions it, both philosophically and by referring to examples. In doing so, he discovers areas of weakness.[1] Carroll therefore raises a number of serious objections to *Pursuits of Happiness*, but you would never think the book had any flaws at all after reading Clayton's summary. Whereas Carroll offers a balanced review of the book, one attuned to its strengths and weaknesses, Clayton just offers one-sided

favouritism, which appears all the more partial since we know from the first part of the chapter he can be a shrewd, critical reader.

Klevan's chapter, simply called 'Description' (70–86), contains too much repetition of the words of the critics under discussion (James Harvey, Charles Affron, Victor Perkins), combined with simple descriptions or paraphrasing of their words. (As we shall see later, Klevan conflates description and analysis, and he misrepresents textual analysis in film studies.) We find very little actual analysis of the work of these critics in Klevan's chapter. As just one of many typical passages, we see him referring to Affron on Greta Garbo. He quotes from Affron at length (the quote covers one and a half pages of Klevan's chapter). However, this is not a problem, since we need to read Affron's description in detail. The problems emerge when Klevan begins to discuss the quotation:

> Throughout the passage, the vocabulary reflects the *movement* between her elevations and dejections, her optimism and despondency, her surface and depth. 'The actress succeeds in summoning deepness to the surface of her face without betraying depth and without simply being murky.' These fine critical distinctions are endowed with the spirit of Garbo and the tone of her performance: her command of majesty and profundity ('summoning deepness') and integrity ('without betraying depth') and sincerity ('without ... being murky'). It also holds true for the writing in the passage. It summons Garbo's depth in its evocations – 'Garbo's eyes widen, reaching up, searching for alertness required by Barrymore's presence' – without 'betraying' it by lapsing into undignified clichés about the 'mysterious' and 'enigmatic' woman. (78)

What does Klevan actually add to our understanding of Affron's description? The first sentence, on the three conceptual oppositions, is simply a paraphrase of Affron. Klevan then quotes Affron, praises his distinctions, saying they repeat Garbo's performance,[2] before repeating the words again, this time with one or two word synonyms. This is followed by more quotations, a line of commentary (that Affron does not use clichés when describing Garbo's acting). The last few words of the paragraph (not quoted here) end on a repetition: Affron's phrase about Garbo's acting not 'being murky' is repeated for the third time in this one paragraph. As we can see, Klevan's main strategy is simply to repeat or paraphrase Affron's words.[3]

We also see Klevan's lack of analysis in his discussion of Perkins on *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles 1942). Klevan is discussing Perkins' repetitions and variations:

> The variations on 'avoid' mean that the concept becomes increasingly 'burdensome' with 'avoided', 'avoidance', 'avoids' and 'avoidance is again given weight'. Furthermore, 'avoided until the avoidance itself becomes too burdensome' is remembered in a later, similar construction, with 'how embarrassed is the avoidance of embarrassment'. (85)

The paragraph ends there: Klevan has quoted the repetitions without commenting on, praising or criticising them. For him, simply quoting them is sufficient. The reader encounters such redundant duplications of the critics' words, unaccompanied by any form of analysis, throughout Klevan's chapter.

At times, Klevan not only quotes, but also intervenes in a major way by italicising a few key words he is quoting. Moreover, on a few occasions he does come up with his own comments and evaluations, such as: 'Neither writing nor film is squeamish' (77). (However, the sentence immediately before this insight is made up of four quotations.)

In reading Klevan's chapter, I was reminded of Carroll's *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (1988). Carroll spends the best part of his book analysing the film criticism of Rudolf Arnheim, Bazin and Perkins, and the philosophical assumptions behind their criticism. Chapter 2 is devoted to a detailed critique of Bazin. On one occasion, Carroll quotes two paragraphs from *What is Cinema?*, one on Jean Tourane's film *Une fée pas comme les autres* and the other on Lamorisse's *Le ballon rouge* (see Carroll 1988, 157–60). These two quotations are accompanied by over two pages of closely argued commentary and analysis. Carroll summarises, gives an example, asks questions (six in total) of Bazin's arguments in these two fragments, finds inconsistencies in the way Bazin distinguishes the long take from editing and even uses a thought experiment ('Imagine a case where ... ' [159]). Carroll's reading is revelatory – it challenges Bazin's well-known distinction between the long take–deep focus on the one hand and editing–montage on the other. Carroll argues that Bazin does not sufficiently acknowledge that both techniques work in a similar way in a fiction film. Consequently, Carroll concludes, the distinction is one of degree, not of kind. In contrast, there are no revelations, analyses or hardly any commentary in Klevan's discussion of his three chosen critics.

Furthermore, Klevan only discusses 'description' as a concept in a rather casual manner at the beginning of his chapter. He says that a description 'contains the analysis', and that it aims to capture an experience of the film (71). He does not present any attempt to understand the implicit assumptions and presuppositions that inform descriptive passages in film criticism, nor does he make explicit the evaluative and rhetorical values critics use. Klevan's chapter represents a lost opportunity to say something significant about description in particular or film criticism in general.

The issue is not simply how much text Klevan quotes, but what he does not do. In his chapter, he does not generalise from his well-chosen examples; he makes no attempt to distinguish different types of description; he does not explain how critics form judgements or why they form them, nor does he spell out a method or procedure that others could take as a starting point. Providing a method (whether to analyse films or film criticism) turns analysis into an explicit, repeatable activity, rather than one based on unarticulated intuitions and hidden assumptions.[4]

To understand the place of description in film criticism, Edward Branigan (1993) turned to the work of Monroe Beardsley (1981) to distinguish description from analysis, interpretation and evaluation. Branigan describes description narrowly, as an empirically verifiable statement ('the light coming through the window is red' etc.). Branigan tells us

> Analysis is concerned with problems of segmentation, with breaking something into component parts in order to discover how it works and creates effects (e.g., discovering the elements of plot and style that function to summarize or accent a phase of the story). (1993, 6; I shall return to this shortly)

An interpretation attempts to explain an aspect of a text by placing it within a broader context, while an evaluation makes a normative judgement. Analysis and especially interpretation abstract and generalise from experience rather than fetishise it.

Description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation are functional heuristic distinctions that, in any example of criticism, are not sharply distinguishable. For example, no description is purely descriptive, while evaluation depends on some form of description and interpretation. The passages of criticism Klevan discusses are not pure description, in Branigan's narrow sense of the term, but constitute a subtle mix of description supplemented with interpretation and evaluation.

Branigan and Beardsley place description within the context of other critical activities. If we examine more closely the critical practice of verbal description, we soon encounter a number of theoretical issues to address. Are the descriptive passages in film criticism passive records of the film scenes, where the critic's role is merely to transcribe a pre-existing spatio-temporal order? If critical descriptions are not passive records, then they must be structured by some linguistic and rhetorical organising mechanisms. How, then, does the critic's language order and unify the events described? What lexical, grammatical, stylistic and rhetorical figures do they employ? Reading Klevan's account of description (in a book called, let us remember, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*), one is at a loss to find any answers to these or similar questions. (In contrast, Sinnerbrink's analysis of parataxis in Cavell is informative.)

If we accept the premise that descriptive passages are governed by language and rhetoric in addition to the events described, we can identify a series of questions concerning how 'organising mechanisms' of language structure the events. Meir Sternberg (1981, 70) lists the following issues (which I have turned into direct questions):

- Is the description organised from the general to the particular, or along a scale of importance?
- How and why do the ordering mechanisms (lexical, grammatical, stylistic and rhetorical figures) make sequential sense?
- How do the ordering mechanisms exploit or tighten or supersede otherwise established contiguities and similarities?
- How do the ordering mechanisms relate to models of life and art and communication?
- Does the coherence the ordering mechanisms yield derive some structure from natural processes or become naturalised through cultural fiat and aesthetic convention?

- How do the ordering mechanisms interact and clash as reference points and to what descriptive and rhetorical effect?

And later Sternberg mentions how a description may be structured according to 'order of discovery, of perception, of emergence and disappearance, of association by contiguity and similarity' (1981, 84) – modes of structuring that reveal a narrator's point of view. The narrator does not, therefore, simply divulge information, but manipulates it, by withholding and gradually revealing it (Sternberg 1981, 84). Such manipulation creates a tone, a voice, an attitude, from which the reader builds up an image of a narrator describing the events. Such a theoretical perspective would, for example, greatly enhance Klevan's impressionistic discussion (75) of Harvey's description of the ball scene in *The Magnificent Ambersons*. More generally, a close reading of descriptive passages in film criticism via Sternberg, in combination with Beardsley's and Branigan's categories of critical activity, can help us understand the subtle linguistic and rhetorical nuances in what, at first glance, looks like a banal, mimetic form of writing.

All of these questions and theories therefore open up enormous possibilities for exploring the textuality of descriptive passages. Sternberg presents several examples. See, for instance, his analysis of a descriptive passage about fog from *Bleak House* (quoted in Sternberg 1981, 61–2) and analysed in terms of a series of linguistic and rhetorical devices (1981, 64), or his analysis of a sentence from Genesis:

> To the reader who has followed Abraham's history, the narrator's statement that 'The field which Abraham purchased of the sons of Heth, there was Abraham and Sarah his wife buried' (Genesis, 25.10) clashes ... with the plain facts communicated earlier: Sarah predeceased her husband. So if the text is to make any sense, the two versions must be taken to offer distinct but complementary readings of reality. The same pair of events have been presented first in chronological and then in scalar sequence; first as separate and discontinuous stages in an ongoing action, and then (note how the singular form of the verb 'was' turns the coordinator 'and' into 'together with') as a unitary complex, which plays down the temporal discreteness of the deaths while highlighting the spatial contiguity of the dead within their common burial-ground; first as a progression governed by historical time and accident, and then as a final retrospect *sub specie aeternitatis*. (1981, 81)

Sternberg is stressing the conflict that exists in the sentence from Genesis between the natural chronology of events and their linguistic representation, with the latter winning out – especially in the way the temporal sequencing of the deaths is minimised, while the spatial contiguity of the dead occupying the same ground is emphasised. The motivation for the emphasis on spatial contiguity over temporality is, Sternberg suggests, to stress a shift in perspective from the historical to the eternal.

Finally, I turn to the primary conflict in Clayton and Klevan's collection, between film criticism and textual analysis. We saw above that Branigan defines analysis as an activity that segments a text into its fundamental elements.

Crucially, he points out why this is important – 'to discover how it works and creates effects'. In other words, analysis is not an arbitrary, meaningless activity. Moreover, it achieves this aim by studying filmic elements through a rich series of concepts, such as: 'repetition, alternation, symmetry, dissymmetry, reversal, difference, splitting and doubling, condensation and displacement' and 'entry or transgression, transfer and substitute, cluster or constellation, enigma or problem, name or title' (Elsaesser 2012, 114, 115).[5]

More generally, textual analysis creates a distance between film and analysis, as the quotation from Wollen opening this review essay makes clear (written before textual analysis became an established activity in academic film studies in Britain). Wollen's meteorological metaphor distinguishes the surface, phenomenal, 'lived experience' of the weather in the present moment from the abstract, theoretical analysis of the multiple, underlying, impersonal causes of a particular weather system.

In contrast to textual analysis, the film criticism that Clayton and Klevan quote is phenomenological; it describes the action, events and gestures in the film world in experiential terms. What this means is that the critic follows the film's surface as it unfolds moment-by-moment, repeating in writing what the critic considers to be significant gestures and events present on screen. This activity is an impressionistic type of *mise-en-scène* criticism, and raises a number of interesting theoretical issues and problems, such as the legitimation of the critic's experience as, in itself, the foundation of criticism. (This problem is on a par with George Kubler's claim that, if we want to analyse the rail network, studying the experiences of a single traveller is insufficient [1962, 9].)

The critics that Clayton and Klevan quote (Cavell, Harvey, Affron, Perkins) need to be questioned for focusing almost exclusively on the aesthetics of gesture, for simply accepting what is given – that is, for sticking only to surface reality, for limiting themselves to describing an experience of film in the present moment (although usually in combination with memories), and for writing criticism that is enclosed in on itself (keeping at bay foreign concepts such as 'causality'). For example, the editors write in the Introduction that '"external" information is not foundational nor does it legitimise the assessment. Ultimately, criticism is observational and responds to the work as it appears' (5). Later, they quote Perkins, who argues that justifying a critical comment is not a matter 'of public rhetoric ..., a problem of making one's articulation acceptable and persuasive to others, but there is regularly a more important problem with oneself, of finding the words that fit one's sense of the moment or the movie' (19). Whereas textual analysis relies on a series of intersubjective methods based on explicit, repeatable, shared principles (not – let us note – eternal, unchanging rules), film criticism of the type advocated by Clayton and Klevan is entirely introspective and solipsistic, concerned only with the individual, private experiences of the critic, experiences to which the critic apparently has direct and unmediated access (which reduces subjectivity to pure consciousness).

These charges need to be worked through and modified in light of specific examples (it seems that Cavell is prone to these charges more than other critics). Moreover, once these objections are made, the critical work of Cavell, Harvey, Affron and Perkins can be defended more rigorously, modified or abandoned. However, in his chapter Klevan does not acknowledge that such objections to the criticism he is discussing even exist. Moreover, with his focus on gesture and performance, one may think Klevan would find inspiration from established theories, such as Deleuzian film theory (*Cinema 2*'s study of the body in modern cinema [Deleuze 1989, especially 189–203]),[6] or theories of film that attempt to bring together the apparently incompatible Deleuze and phenomenology (such as Laura Marks [2000]), or theories of performance (whether defined narrowly, in terms of stage performance, or more broadly, as a performance of social identity). Performance studies in its narrow sense, most relevant to Klevan's focus, is based on concepts from proxemics, kinesics and effort–shape analysis (which studies the body in terms of gestural movements, postural movements, effort and shape), all of which offer explicit, repeatable, shared methods of analysis to deepen our understanding of body posture and gesture. (These theories and methods, of course, need to be modified in light of the way the body is presented on film.) However, the reader does not find any conceptual work of any kind in Klevan's chapter, for he is nostalgically trying to return to a pre-'textual analysis', pre-Deleuzian and pre-performance studies phase of film criticism. It may work for him. However, it becomes a problem when he tries to place his solipsistic form of private criticism alongside textual analysis, Deleuze and performance studies in the university curriculum.

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Notes

1. Carroll also finds a problem with Cavell's strategy to regard 'a relationship between characters in the film as a metaphor of the director's relationship to the audience' (1982, 106). Carroll focuses on Cavell's analysis of *Bringing Up Baby*, and questions whether the Grant/Hepburn relation can characterise the relation between Hawks and the film's audience. 'Grant stands to Hepburn as an obsessive compulsive does to an hysteric. Yet Hawks as a director is anything but an hysteric; he is a coolly calculating manipulator. As well, this form of interpretation cannot be an acceptable one for film criticism. The results would be disastrous' (1982, 106).
2. If a critic describes an action, one would expect there to be some correspondence between the action and words (without, of course, expecting there to be a complete correspondence).
3. Klevan continues to discuss Affron in the following paragraphs, but he uses the same strategies – primarily paraphrase and quotation, with an occasional comment (78–80).

4. Monroe Beardsley provides a series of criteria for developing a method. 'An action can be methodized only if (a) there are alternative ways of performing the action, (b) it is possible to keep in mind general principles, or rules, while performing the action, and (c) a good reason can be given for following those rules rather than others' (1981, 130). If Klevan believes a method is unnecessary, he needs to indicate whether he thinks his way of carrying out metacriticism is the only way to carry it out, what general principles he is following and why he follows those principles rather than others. If he thinks he is not following any principles, but is working entirely spontaneously, then he is open to the charge of solipsism, which is not a firm basis on which to make this type of film criticism (and metacriticism) teachable.

   The need for methods has been recognised since Ancient times. *Topoi*, for example, are methods for argumentation: 'Aristotle's book *Topics* lists some hundred *topoi* for the construction of dialectical arguments. These lists of *topoi* form the core of the method by which the dialectician should be able to formulate deductions on any problem that could be proposed' (Rapp 2010). Rapp defines a *topos* as 'a general argumentative form or pattern', and goes on to point out that 'the *topos* … is crucial for Aristotle's understanding of an artful method of argumentation; for a teacher of rhetoric who makes his pupils learn ready samples of arguments would not impart the art itself to them, but only the products of this art, just as if someone pretending to teach the art of shoe-making only gave samples of already made shoes to his pupils'. Klevan only presents ready-made shoes to his readers. (In my own work, I spell out methods in detail. See, for example, Buckland 2006, chap. 2; 2012, chap. 1; Elsaesser and Buckland 2002, chap. 1.)
5. It would take a whole essay to spell out how these concepts aid textual analysis. Elsaesser's book chapter, from which the quotations derive, is a good starting point (2012, chap. 9), followed by Raymond Bellour's exemplary textual analyses, represented in his book *The Analysis of Film* (2000). Clayton and Klevan give a one-dimensional account of Bellour's work in their introduction (14–16; see also Klevan 82). Just reading Bellour's one-page summary of his six main textual analyses (2000, 13–14) exposes the superficiality of Clayton and Klevan's account of his work.
6. Although Klevan focuses on critics who discuss the movement-image of classical Hollywood, rather than the time-image of modern cinema, these critics discuss the films on the small scale, molecular level of the 'event' (characteristic of modern cinema's time-image, a cinema of the body) rather than the large scale, molar level of narrative (of classical Hollywood's movement-image, a cinema of action).

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