

DESCRIPTION

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That film is overwhelming is also a fact about it, the richness is overwhelming, 90 or 100 minutes and you have been taken through a larger span of passion and feeling than really 90 minutes of almost anything else ... And you have the sense often about how terribly little of a film is articulated, as if, if you don't say anything about the film now, the experience of the film will vanish with the film. The density of stimulus is a fact about what's happened to you. Not to come to terms with it is to have something that has happened to you go unremarked, as if intellectually oppressive.

(Stanley Cavell 2005: 180)

[D]escription is a question of how to bring into existence, how, in the course of analysis, to evoke for a reader that lost object ... Ideally we would like to write in such a way as to bring the film into imaginative being for the reader, so that she views it in the process of reading. In reading she becomes a film viewer.

(Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros 1999: 7–9)

[F]ilmic analysis ... constantly mimics, evokes, describes; in a kind of principled despair it can but try frantically to compete with the object it is attempting to understand. By dint of seeking to capture it and recapture it, it ends up always occupying a point at which its object is perpetually out of reach ... That is why [filmic analyses] always seem a little fictional: playing on an absent object, never able, since their aim is to make it present, to adopt the instruments of fiction even though they have to borrow them. The analysis of film never stops filling up a film that never stops running out.

(Raymond Bellour 2000: 26)

Introduction

How do we quote from a film? An essay on a novel or a poem may transcribe words, making them available for a reader's consultation, but the non-literary arts are more

troublesome for the writer. All the arts, even the literary ones, present the challenge of the 'lost object', its unavailability, problems of referencing and description, its difference now from then, but film – visual, aural *and* moving – is a particularly slippery art form. In 'The Unattainable Text', Raymond Bellour vividly expands on this topic; for him film sets up peculiar problems for analysis and description because it is tantalisingly present and yet always escaping (Bellour 2000).

One type of good film criticism has made a virtue of this predicament, and taken the matter far beyond the requirement, or need, to quote. Description is not merely a necessary step on the way to the meat of analysis, it contains the analysis. Through careful choices about how to describe, discriminations are made subtly and implicitly. Description also reflects the impulse, true of much criticism on the arts, to articulate and share an experience. A film may be experienced differently, some things noticed, others not, and by reading the description we come to see a point of view. This may be a correct description, but not the only correct one: it is a *way of seeing* the film. One type of film criticism is inspired by the endeavour to 'capture' a visual and aural medium in a different medium (words): to see how it may exist, and how its existence may be extended, through writing. Indeed, this has been an important, and possibly underdiscussed, motivation of criticism on the visual and aural arts. This essay examines three passages of criticism each of which exemplifies a different challenge for film description: the description of presence, absence and something between both of them, the obscure.

Describing presence

There is a moment in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1942, US) which, even after many viewings, I find elating. It occurs at the Ambersons' Ball when Eugene (Joseph Cotten) dances with Isabel (Dolores Costello). James Harvey shares the feeling and, in his book *Movie Love in the Fifties*, describes it as follows:

They are all coming forward now on the surge of the music and the heightened feeling, walking together: Isabel at the center, Jack and Eugene on either side leading her onwards, with Wilbur (characteristically) lapsing to the rear. Jack is now almost beside himself with happiness: 'By gosh!' he exclaims. 'Old times are certainly starting over again!' Eugene replies over his shoulder, drawing Isabel towards the dance floor: 'Not a bit! There *aren't* any old times. When times are gone, they aren't old, they're dead – there aren't any times but new times!' And with this he takes Isabel into his arms and into the dance, as the ragtime music rises irresistibly and carries them off, the camera following them.

No times but new times – that's crazy, of course (especially in a movie as lovingly about the old times as this one is), and hopeless. But the craziness only makes it feel more infectious and jubilant; the hopelessness only makes you laugh – on the sudden rush of music and movement and feeling that Welles brings off here. Not only by the way he builds to this dance, but by the way

Cotten says his lines, his voice full of that brimmingness I mentioned (he does it better than anyone else), rising with the ragtime music like a singer-actor saying the words that lead into his big song number, leading here instead to his sweeping Isabel onto the floor in his arms on the rollicking ragtime beat. Costello, a very stately woman, looks literally carried away by him and, instead of losing her stateliness, seems to take flight with it – leaning back against his encircling arm behind her, her head and trunk thrown back, drifting and careering on his and the music's movement, as they wheel and rock, the camera receding before them, across the floor among the other couples – and then out of the frame.

(Harvey 2001: 292–93)

The writing unrepentantly embraces the joyful burst. It does not resist by becoming guarded or judicious. Moments of heightened feeling, or those that are emotionally direct, are difficult to handle within the conventions of analysis, especially academic analysis; one becomes aloof and dispassionate, and neutralises their force. Perhaps they are so present to us that there appears to be nothing we need to say, or nothing left to say. Or the direct force of vitality makes us shy away. There are equal worries of emoting and embarrassment, being caught off guard, of betraying naivety (not *knowing* enough). It is to Harvey's credit that he meets the vigour here and dwells upon it. He goes with it. Many narrative films, and not only those from Hollywood, are direct or directly emotional in this way. Film challenges criticism to confront emotional directness while not surrendering to sentimentality of response.

Harvey's description of the Ball began four pages earlier when Eugene and Lucy arrives. It takes us through the development of the sequence so that, like the film – 'the way [Welles] builds to this dance' – the writing can lead us to this heightened moment. 'They are all coming forward *now* ... [my italics]': the description maintains the sense of things moving in the present. In moments like this, the writing does not appear as a piece of film analysis but as a passage in a novel ("By gosh!" he exclaims); a retelling, as if Harvey had adapted the film back again – it was originally a novel by Booth Tarkington – now a book based on the film. Undue emphasis on dialogue often betrays inexperience in film writing. One can sometimes see this in the essays of students new to studying film, struggling to find a way of articulating their thoughts about the medium. They understand they must reference the 'text' but they represent their insights and their thoughts about the meaning of a work through dialogue quotation as if they were attending to the script of a play. In other contexts, one is also aware of detaching dialogue, reducing it to striking or witty aphorisms, or 'great lines', as if they were accompanying lavish stills in a glossy coffee-table book. Nevertheless, one can overcompensate and ignore the importance of dialogue for fear that it is not 'cinematic' enough. Even if one has good intentions, quotation of dialogue can be laborious and cumbersome. Harvey solves the problem of its integration by re-establishing the fictional charge of lines, dramatically situating them, rather than letting them stand apart as quotation, or as discrete example. So as Eugene says, 'Not a bit! There *aren't* any old times. When times are gone, they aren't old, they're

dead – there aren't any times but new times!' he is *replying* 'over his shoulder' and *drawing* 'Isabel towards the dance floor' and *taking* her 'into his arms and into the dance ...'

Italicised and emphatic, '*No times but new times*' is an incredulous response by the author ('crazy, of course'), taking issue with the sentiment, and seems to mark a point where he steps out of the flow of description. Yet, it also has the effect of repeating Eugene's words, albeit in a condensed version, like an echo, given further resonance by the italics as if the moment will not go away, pulling the writer back to a fuller description. The critic participates with the characters in turning over what has been said and meant. The italicised words also lean forward, mirroring the 'surge' and the physical momentum of Eugene and Isabel. The use of 'of course' is often rhetorical (if the craziness is so obvious why does it need to be pointed out at all?) but here signifies realisation, and resignation – 'of course I realise this now' – coming to one's senses after being swept along. It is also indicative, along with the use of 'crazy', of the colloquial tone, which some may feel is, for any number of good reasons, inappropriate. However, it does achieve the sense of being in conversation with the film ('*No times but new times* – that's crazy') and with itself ('*But* the craziness only makes it feel more infectious and jubilant' [my italics]). It *speaks* to the moment, and recognises the movement of (the) experience, which formal writing often erases. Correct formalities of academic prose will not necessarily faithfully evoke the physical and emotional energies and dynamics. This style also, refreshingly, understands the colloquial as honestly reflecting our engagement with stories, especially those in Hollywood movies, which is happily ordinary, relaxed and open, even productively naïve. The risk is that the writing becomes lazy and sloppy or insubstantial to read, something that Harvey does not always avoid. Often, however, he shows it to be a risk worth taking, as slangy outbursts morph into involvements that are more considered and intricate, and whose accuracy stems from sensitivity to immediacy.

This quality is present in the use of 'brimmingness'. Harvey had mentioned earlier that 'the sequence takes its power a lot from the way Welles (the radio veteran) gets his main actors to *sound*: with that peculiar brimming quality, close to *tears* of happiness, that people get in their voices at the top of their feelings' (Harvey 2001: 292). The use of 'brimming' was already befitting and the addition of the extra syllable makes it read as even closer to overflowing. Harvey's writing shows that the experience of a film includes a consciousness of experiencing it, and the articulation of that consciousness. A writer will be especially aware of translating the images and sounds into written language, but any viewers thinking about what they see will be involved in an act of construal, forming descriptions in their minds, gathering their experience into words.

'Costello, *a very stately woman*, looks literally carried away by him and, *instead of losing her stateliness*, seems to take flight with it [my italics]': Costello, despite being 'carried away', maintains her upright quality, and so the sentence, despite its forward movement, is twice stabilised by 'stately' and 'stateliness', each time *held up* by the clause within the commas. The dash further pushes the sentence forward into 'leaning back' ('seems to take flight with it – leaning back against his encircling arm behind

her'), as if it were pressing into it (especially forceful in the typeface, Garamond No. 3, used in the book where the dash is long and almost touches the lettering). It captures the tension between momentum and configuration – pushing forward and leaning back, perhaps also holding back. After all, the 'surge' is relative. Their dancing remains quite steady, formal and controlled, and Harvey's language of 'careering' and 'thrown' and 'rock' might suggest too much speed. These movements are present but they are checked and slightly retarded; Eugene and Isabel are, perhaps, savouring their brief reunion rather deliberately.

Single dashes are used quite frequently in *Movie Love in the Fifties*, perhaps too frequently, four times in this second paragraph (though the final two may be taken as a pair), and for some their overuse may signal over hasty writing. Nevertheless, they can be effective at evoking the dynamics of the film and a viewer's involvement. Moreover, there is a variety of effect. The first use in this paragraph marks an abrupt response, a burst of common sense, and a sudden movement out of the film ('No times but new times – that's crazy, of course'). The second time it captures the 'sudden rush' that 'makes you laugh'. The third has that pushing and pulling quality. The final occurrence acts as a beat's delay, just holding off their departure, '– and then out of the frame'. The main clause between the two final dashes is 'careering', one aspect of movement following from another, a little too hurriedly, nearly out of control,



FIGURE 4.1 'Costello, a very stately woman, looks literally carried away by him and, instead of losing her stateliness, seems to take flight with it – leaning back against his encircling arm behind her.' *The Magnificent Ambersons*, 1942

'her head and trunk thrown back, drifting and careering ... , as they wheel and rock, the camera receding' and yet securely held together by the rhyming 'ing's – 'leaning ... encircling ... drifting ... careering ... receding'. Moreover, this burst of movement is contained tightly, trapped even (hence the thrill), within the sentence by the dashes, and in the film by space and by circumstance.

Portraying an unfolding response is as important as the one-off, discrete encapsulation (achieved, for example, through a pertinent and apposite piece of vocabulary). Eugene's sentiment about 'new times' is 'crazy', but this only 'makes it feel more infectious and jubilant'; it is also 'hopeless' but, 'the sudden rush of music', 'makes you laugh'. Cotten's voice is 'full of that brimmingness', and although 'brimmingness' is apt, the film's effect also depends on 'his voice ... rising with the ragtime music': the 'real time' description ensures not only that a precise point has been made but that it is being made at this precise point, and conveyed.¹ Eugene's leading of Isabel is described three times, first when 'he takes Isabel into his arms', then, when he is 'sweeping Isabel' and then the final euphoric description with 'his encircling arm'. The moment each time receives a more vivid, exact and fulsome expression, reflecting the moment opening up and out, and the giddy sense of release. The writing here dramatises the process of refining a description, the desire to find new ways of describing, and the need, as new ways dawn on you. It also signals, whether intentionally or not, self-reflexively, the process of description. It inscribes an effort, and suggests that a moment is not easy to *get at* in one go. The repetition also reflects that the memory of this 'infectious and jubilant ... rush' might recur during a film of repression and oppression, of moments missed and lives unfulfilled. *How do we come to terms with it?*

Indeed, for Harvey playing out the drama once again in prose, each sentence re-building the scene with words, is perhaps a therapeutic process. Even if the film is immediately in front of him, *recalling* it, or learning to call it (something), becomes revelatory. For the reader, it is perhaps a way of understanding how Harvey comes to see (how one thing leads to another) because of the opportunity to experience it through his eyes. Rather than simply giving a view of what happened, the writing conveys the drama of viewing as it happens and the reader, rather than checking off discrete observations, follows the progression. The writing recognises the film unfolding in time, instead of conflating it, after the fact, into a brief summation that reduces instance to example.

Describing obscurity

Harvey tackles a moment that is emotionally direct. In a passage describing a scene in *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Golding, 1932, US), Charles Affron similarly rises to the challenge of Greta Garbo's intensity. Yet, the sequence has further challenges because Garbo makes it somewhat obscure, almost perverse in its movements, and pushes against the conventions of credibility. As Affron writes, 'She thrives on silence, the unsaid, the paradoxical, the ambiguous' (142). Garbo often makes use of irregular rhythms, but they are especially agitated on this occasion, and therefore threaten the

breakdown of sense and seriousness. Her movements test our tolerance: perhaps too effortful and contrived, they face accusations of artificially straining (after effect).

Affron argues that only by careful monitoring will we discern her purpose. This is what he attempts to do in this exceptional piece of description:

The meeting with John Barrymore signals the disappearance of the ballerina pretext. She is relieved of that category of impersonation to concentrate on emotional states, their essential mechanics, their formal rendering in a physical context. Prey to anxiety, surprised at finding a man in her room, and interrupted in her suicide attempt, she looks at him as if to penetrate his face, but her body barely betrays her agitation. She makes a gesture for the phone, a requirement of probability in the script, but she does it so uncommittedly that the theatrics do not intrude on the personality of her playing.

...

The context has been transcended by her ability to accept fully and to integrate any circumstance into her being – meeting an old lady as she is getting into an elevator, or seeing a strange man in her boudoir as she is contemplating suicide. Garbo's gift is not naturalness, but rather the power to make a whole range of events, from the utterly common to the utterly preposterous, extensions of her self.

The mysterious man in her room becomes something necessary, indeed, expected. The suddenness of his profession of love is no surprise to an audience attuned to the commonplaces of the genre. It is Garbo's reaction that transforms a stock situation, supplying it with a complexity, a richness, and a duration to which it has no birthright ... During his pleadings, she turns her face three-quarters to the camera, and then the metamorphosis begins. It is not a set of grimaces, cliché masks that pass for expressions in acting, but the clearest graphics for ambiguity and change. The actress succeeds in summoning deepness to the surface of her face without betraying depth and without simply being murky. She finds a style pertinent to the wordless situation. Now, the face questions, presents a blank to be filled in and a receptivity to the voice that professes love.

Garbo's eyes widen, reaching up, searching for the alertness required by Barrymore's presence; the outline of the mouth becomes fuller and sharpens. If an answer is not immediately to be found, she begins to entertain the possibility of its existence. This face, unrelated to anything previous in her *Grusinskaya*, is exempt from script, and, I suspect, from direction. In the shortest interval of time, without a trace of discomposure, Garbo registers varying degrees of self-consciousness through the alteration of the relationships between her features. This is a truism, for, in fact, it defines facial expression. Yet in Garbo's face, the alterations are visual events controlled by the star mask that she carries through all of her films. The mask is both cherished and jeopardized, and the rhythm and degree of alteration constitute her screen personality. The alterations in the preceding four frames seem enormous, but they are actually very slight – shifts of chin, mouth, and eyes that, because of our familiarity with her face, cannot

fail to be noticed. The rapidity of the transformation heightens our awareness. Each time I see this shot I experience the same nervousness as when I hear a great singer about to negotiate a very difficult passage – will she get all the notes in on time? will she do it beautifully? will the fixed shape of the phrase contain the vitality of the performer? With Garbo, we see the notes, and their articulation in no way destroys the pattern and integrity of the sequence.

She then yields a bit. The turning in toward Barrymore is accompanied by a tilt of the head, a reservation only partially belied by the half-smile on her lips. This initiation of a profile creates an ambiguous movement by directing that expanse of face away from us toward her costar and withholding the plenitude of her expression, and she offers him something even less penetrable than we have seen. The play of profile/full face is an essential element in this film; the dynamics of encounter is often outlined in its terms ...

The full profile is achieved, replete with smile and a sense of relief and the trust that would logically precede a clinch, or, as this scene has it, a kissed hand and an even franker smile. Yet as soon as Barrymore's eyes no longer meet hers she withdraws into confusion and perplexity, the same as in the beginning of the shot, with the smile melting into an expression of wonder. The effect is pursued to the last instant; her head actually comes closer to Barrymore's but her features remain as distant as they were at the outset.

(Affron 1977: 147–51)

The writing has a shrewd strategy for strengthening its own critical criteria by implicitly dismissing, in the course of describing the scene, other criteria. Some viewers may consider the ballerina role important to her characterisation but Affron sees it merely as a 'pretext'. The purpose of the sentence is not to propose the possibility of it being a 'pretext', but to assume it and to highlight, at last, thank goodness, that the 'meeting with John Barrymore signals [its] disappearance'.² Judging a performance by its success in pretending to represent something is not unusual (for example, someone might say, 'I don't think she was very convincing at portraying a Russian ballerina'), and might provide a clear reference point to stabilise viewing. Affron not only damningly labels this as mere 'impersonation' (and rather clinically as a 'category') but also presents it as something from which Garbo has been waiting to be 'relieved' (as if she were carrying a burden).³ Similarly, he is not afraid to rescue aspects normally considered bad by happily accepting them in his account. The 'utterly preposterous' and the 'suddenness of his profession of love' are not merely tolerated, but embraced, 'expected', precisely so that a 'stock situation' can be transformed. Neither writing nor film is squeamish.

Garbo does not simply supply a 'stock situation' with 'complexity' and 'richness', two common evaluative criteria, but also with 'duration'. This is a crucial quality for Affron and he thinks film criticism should monitor change and development over time. Like Harvey, he pinpoints instances of change so that it is when 'she turns her face three-quarters to the camera' that the 'metamorphosis begins'. A little later a comma isolates 'Now,' to assert the precise moment that the 'face questions'.

Monitoring her handling of 'duration', her 'alterations', will reveal tension and paradox and render us unable to describe her effect definitely, or definitively.

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 the alertness required by Barrymore's presence' – without 'betraying' it by lapsing into undignified clichés about the 'mysterious' and 'enigmatic' woman. Nor are the descriptive attentions intrusive. Respectfully it does not try to know her by explaining every aspect of her being and yet, equally respectfully, the regard for her individuality prevents the descriptions from 'being murky'.

In a scene where careful adjustments of heads and facial features are crucial, the writer's progression through the shot enables him to discover *and* measure the variations. '[H]er head actually comes closer to Barrymore's but her features remain as distant as they were at the outset', is more than an observation, it carries weight because the internal dramatic logic is already well established by the writer; 'at the outset' is a time which has been well marked for us. Similarly, claims about general



FIGURE 4.2 'Garbo's eyes widen, reaching up, searching for the alertness required by Barrymore's presence; the outline of the mouth becomes fuller and sharpens.' *Grand Hotel*, 1932

stylistic strategies – 'The play of profile/full-face is an essential element in this film; the dynamics of encounter is often outlined in its terms' – are now telling rather than simply told.

Affron is referring to the performer's adjustments and alterations to her 'star' image when he says that the 'star mask is both cherished and jeopardized' but this equally reflects the behaviour of Grusinskaya in the story. The language that analyses performance also describes behaviour within the fiction (and vice versa) so the consciousness of character and performer merge. The description reproduces the dynamic of a viewing experience that vacillates between the detail of the film and a more general understanding of its workings. A description of the face in the fiction, 'If an answer is not immediately to be found, she begins to entertain the possibility of its existence', flows into a reflection of method, 'This face ... is exempt from script'. The commentary and the concrete come together, so that a comment on the *performer's* practice – 'I experience the same nervousness as when I hear a great singer about to negotiate a very difficult passage ... With Garbo, we see the notes, and their articulation in no way destroys the pattern and integrity of the sequence' – is immediately followed by an observation on the *character's* behaviour – 'She then yields a bit'. 'She' secretly conjoins performer and character (reflecting the duality of performer and character on film). As the shortness of the sentence plays rhythmically off the previous longer one, the fluency of her behaviour in the fiction is a relief after the personal tensions experienced by Affron. The sentence 'yields' to the preceding paragraph as well as its own as *she* 'yields' not simply to Barrymore but to Affron after all his 'nervousness'.

Like the performer he is appreciating, Affron's flow respects the 'pattern and integrity of the sequence' but also 'see[s] the notes'. Garbo's behaviour 'heightens our awareness' so he becomes responsive not only to her movement within the fiction but to his own movement in relation to the fiction. This is quite different from a method that has a series of points or points of view and then reaches into the film for pertinent examples (even if the points were originally formulated out of a response to the film). Here the writing is synchronised with the dynamics of viewing (even if reflection and mediation are part of the process). The charge of the concurrent is caught in the marked move to the first person. It is not what one thought or thinks, but what one is *thinking*, something adjusting with each 'transformation'.

Moreover, at issue is not simply a heightened observational 'awareness' or personal feelings about the content of the fiction but the quality of its achievement. The viewing experience is a critical one, one question formulating after another – 'will she get all the notes in on time? will she do it beautifully? will the fixed shape of the phrase contain the vitality of the performer?' – concerning the relationship between potential and achievement, the success or failure of execution. The film creates anticipation and tension, moment by moment, regarding the possibilities for accomplishment (and this is much less remarked upon in Film Studies than the suspense generated by fictional components). Hence, our sense of a work being *realised* which is intimately related to our own fulfilment.

Affron's frame-by-frame approach – the book is copiously illustrated with the precise image appearing at just the right moment in the text – magnifies 'very slight' movements in the film ('shifts of chin, mouth, and eyes') and the worry might be that this is an artificially slow way of viewing. Yet, in real time, the 'rapidity of the transformation' *already* 'heightens our awareness', so the frame-by-frame attention is perfectly appropriate, and a necessary tribute. Another concern might be over-confidence about our ability to secure individual instances of meaning, as if her interiority could be transparently interpreted, all the obscurities in her behaviour cleaned up, or explained away. Affron writes:

It is both puerile and unnecessary to ascribe precise thoughts to Garbo during the various stages of this shot – as if she were plucking at an imaginary he-loves-me/he loves-me-not daisy. This is a dangerous temptation when studying the separate frames. The shot's duration and the rapidity of the alterations must be reconstituted. Then, the mechanics of change are once again subsumed into those features, the entity imposes itself on the components, and both are fully perceived. Garbo preserves both, retaining her facial personality while adventuring into such subtle transformations ... Garbo rarely plays at being someone else, nor does she use her face like a semaphor. Her face is like a fabric – so rich that its texture is interesting in itself, so flexible that it retains its design in all degrees of tension. In this shot, the banality of Grusinskaya's mind is transcended by the mobility of the face expressing it, as in those moments in Viennese operetta or musical comedy when the conventions of kitsch somehow lead to strength, grace and integrity.

(Affron 1977: 152)

Affron explicitly acknowledges 'the dangerous temptation when studying the separate frames'. This is not simply to strengthen his critical claims by exhibiting consciousness of his method but to further highlight *Garbo's* consciousness of the medium.⁴ His method is responsive to Garbo's who demands (and deserves) the meticulous viewer, and whose 'mechanics' of performance turn the 'very slight' into 'visual events'. It becomes requisite in a context where no aspect of a film's achievement may be assumed, and where impatience, prejudice and dismissal are possible, even probable, responses, given the 'banality', the 'stock situation' and the abstruse qualities in her presentation. Affron suggests that 'subtle transformations' are not only possible but are facilitated in this environment. Yet, his method respects opacity and obliqueness; it is never simply a matter of 'making things clear'. One indication of 'strength, grace and integrity' in *Grand Hotel* is that the film has elicited these qualities in the writing.

Describing absence

If Harvey examines an exuberant moment of movement in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, V.F. Perkins homes in on perhaps its most 'heart-breaking' moment of inertia near the end of the film:

When Uncle Jack [Ray Collins] reports to Eugene and Lucy [Anne Baxter] on what he has seen during a visit to Isabel and George in Paris, the camera stays rigidly fixed in its concentration on three similarly immobile figures. The setting is a grand reception room in Eugene's mansion, lit by electricity and with a fire burning in the chimney place in the far background. Jack is centred in the middle distance, sitting on a divan to the right of a low table. At right angles to him, away from the table, Eugene sits in a wing chair with his legs crossed and his hands folded in his lap – a posture that he holds throughout. Eugene's figure, at the left of the picture, is the most distant but his face is fully lit and most plainly presented to the camera. Facing him, in the right foreground, at the near end of the divan Lucy is attentive but she neither moves nor speaks. With her head turned from the camera she is a vital witnessing presence that makes a difference to the ways in which Jack and Eugene can speak. If she were to intervene by so much as an intake of breath the fact of it would be registered in the men's reactions; but our access to her expression is limited.

We enter the scene, on a dissolve, at a pause in after-dinner conversation. Jack drains his coffee cup and replaces it on the tray with a care that excuses his glancing only briefly at Eugene then Lucy as he starts to speak, weighing his words: 'I found Isabel as well as usual. Only I'm afraid as usual isn't particularly well.' Two things are immediately apparent. The first is that the matter of Isabel has been avoided until the avoidance itself became too burdensome. The second is the delicacy of Jack's position, negotiating between the different responses – in each case predictably complex and guarded – of father and daughter. Each of Ray Collins' movements is eloquent because when he avoids eye contact he looks straight ahead, in profile; if he addresses Eugene his head turns away; his glances at Lucy create the moments when his face is most revealed to us. Since he looks at Lucy very little, avoidance is again given weight. As soon as Jack puts down the coffee cup he reaches for a cigar and through the rest of the exchange he works it between his fingers as a relief from the pressure of Eugene's gaze. The cigar gives him a reason to stay hunched forward, not to lean back into a posture that would promote contact.

Under Eugene's quiet prodding Jack gives his view that Isabel would wish to return home if George would let her ...

The scene is holdingly, heart-breakingly quiet, visually as well as on the ear. The care put in to the exercise of tact lets us see how embarrassed is the avoidance of embarrassment, but also how delicate is the mutual concern of these friends. Most of all the rigid frame gives an image of paralysis in which the events are held. Submission to George, to Isabel's submission to George, has created a deadlock that only death will break.

Even with so rooted a camera as Welles employs here there is no case for condemning the long take as theatrical. The long take (in fact the duration of any shot) gains its effect in part from the continuous availability of the cut, just as the static camera works as, in part, a refusal of mobility ...

The mutually informing relationship between editing and the long take can be seen at work as our sequence starts and ends. We enter on a silence into which, not prompted by any enquiry, Jack inserts his news of Isabel. The ellipse that finds Jack finishing his coffee, and that passes over for instance the initial moments of his reunion with Eugene, is eloquent that only now and at last are the subjects of most significance being broached, and that no way has been found of speaking about Isabel to Eugene without talking to Lucy about George. The lack of movement at the fade-out on Eugene's words of assent uses the rhetoric of an ending to climax the sense of blockage; the meeting between the three is not over, but everything has been said and nothing is to be done.

Throughout the sequence his withholding of reaction shots, most blatantly of the reverse shot on Lucy, shows Welles exploiting the disadvantage of the long take ... : its lack of flexibility in the presentation of face-to-face encounters.

(Perkins 1999: 63–65)

Like Harvey and Affron, Perkins is attuned to the nuance of performance, and its importance to a fiction film's meaning, structure and effect. Interestingly, those writers drawn to 'ordinary language' description as a mode seem particularly aware of the centrality of the human (in the film), or those writers drawn to the centrality of the human (in the film) feel that such description is most appropriate. Classic pieces of 'textual analysis' (those for example by Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour or David Bordwell) tend to emphasise other aspects of a film, especially editing. They see a film less as a dimensional fictional world, and more as a linear construction; consequently their writing tends to be more dissecting, structural, diagrammatic and programmatic, in approach and tone. In Perkins' writing, features we might characterise as technological, those relating to editing or the camera, are described as an intrinsic part (of the experience) of the fiction. Indeed, this passage takes its place within an analysis of different editing strategies in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and although Perkins does step out of his description to provide a few sentences of overarching assessment ('Even with so rooted a camera as Welles employs here') in general he orientates his criticism around 'the being and doing of the actors' (Perkins 1999: 65).⁵

Perkins writes that 'Each of Ray Collins' movements is eloquent because when he avoids eye contact he looks straight ahead, in profile' and 'straight ahead, in profile' is an unusual juxtaposition. It is fitting for the scene, however, and for Perkins' account, that looking 'straight ahead' entails an avoidance. In simple and ordinary language, it captures Collins' positioning – in relation to the other performers and the camera – and the way the scene makes us contemplate it multi-dimensionally. It expresses complexity of position and composition without the need for geometrical or technological vocabulary. Nor does it surrender to that conceptual abstraction, commonly used in Film Studies, 'space' which would be insensitive to the scene's grieving tone. The neatness and concision of the writing matches Collins' head movements, and like them is 'eloquent'. It is also discreet and modest.



FIGURE 4.3 'holdingly, heart-breakingly quiet ... The care put in to the exercise of tact lets us see how embarrassed is the avoidance of embarrassment.' *The Magnificent Ambersons*, 1942

Perkins draws out a series of apparently contradictory characteristics of presentation that trouble our sense of prominence. Although 'Eugene's ... face is ... most plainly presented', his 'figure' is 'the most distant'. (Perkins avoids the straightforward parallels that are sometimes made in criticism, for example, that the character furthest away is necessarily the least noticeable.) Presenting and withholding are complexly related. Most important in this regard is the figure of Lucy to whom Perkins is 'attentive', just as Lucy is 'attentive', even though 'she neither moves nor speaks'. Her 'witnessing' becomes 'vital', emphasising that silence and stillness can be emphatic, but also that the passive is actively present. There is the recognition of that which does not happen, and the potential of her intervention. One may view the scene and sense Lucy's presence, but not be as mindful as Perkins. Because he wants us to recognise her importance, his commentary, by commenting, makes her more conspicuous. The film resists such emphasis because it would compromise the quietness on which the effect of her presence depends.

Here we see an example of the descriptive critic working on behalf of the film, continuing its work, especially in those places where the film relies on the possibility that significance may be disregarded. Description is not simply a matter of telling us accurately or evocatively what we can see, but what we may come to see. The description of the film is often relating simultaneously what we have seen and what we have yet to see, thus challenging our sense of the obvious. Perkins injects the

strength of the possible into his description while remaining faithful to the muted nature of the actual. With '[i]f she were to intervene by so much as an intake of breath', he renders the slight, the deviation and the imagined melodramatically. Yet, he quickly calms things down on the other side of the semi-colon – 'but our access to her expression is limited' – with the visible (and invisible) matter of fact.

At the start of the passage, Perkins sets the scene, not simply for clarity of exposition but to show that the scene is *set*. The writing lays out the characters' positions carefully, because carefulness, of positioning and otherwise, by character and film, is pervasive. Even though the two-minute sequence is simply three people sitting in a reception room, Perkins conveys it as heavy and strenuous. However, he does not state explicitly that this is the tone of the scene, but embeds the sense in his vocabulary and syntax. The paragraph contains words like 'weighing', 'weight', 'burdensome', 'works', 'hunched' and 'pressure'. Thus, aspects of the scene are described in such a way as to subliminally convey the mood. 'Jack drains his coffee cup and replaces it on the tray *with a care that excuses his glancing only briefly at Eugene then Lucy as he starts to speak* [my italics]': the sentence is straining and a little awkward, rhythmically uneasy, and reflects Jack's difficult negotiation. Later, rather than merely saying 'no way has been found of speaking about' the difficult, or tangled, relationships, Perkins writes, 'no way has been found of speaking about Isabel to Eugene without talking to Lucy about George'. The naming of all the characters, needless by this stage for explication, gives us the terms of a complex equation, and conveys the protraction. It is also expressed in the parlance of a difficult riddle. Perkins writes that the characters show not only 'tact', but also the 'exercise of tact', and more, '[t]he care put in to the exercise'. This is true of the characters, the performers, the rest of the film, and the criticism too: one can see in this clause, and the writing throughout, not simply 'care' or 'tact', but something *more* careful, and effortful, '[t]he care put in to the exercise of tact'.

Perkins often adds one more stage into a clause to provide the sense of a succession of elements qualifying and modifying. The words keep speaking back to each other, and it complicates progression, so that the sentences do not travel straightforwardly to conclusion and completion. Such sentences are ideal for describing films that dramatise impediment, ones like *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which are retarding narrative propulsion. We have 'the rhetoric of an ending to climax the sense of blockage' where 'the rhetoric of' and 'the sense of' are used to modify. These adjustments make 'an ending' and 'blockage' appear less (straightforwardly) final and obstructing while their complicating presence makes moving forward appear ever more forlorn ('the meeting ... is not over, but ... nothing is to be done'). The 'rigid frame' does not only show us 'paralysis', it 'gives an image of' it, where the word 'image' is retrieved from its habitual use in film discussion and its static quality re-established, and emphasised. The scene's 'paralysis' is fittingly caught, and held, in 'holdingly', a word which not only describes the 'holding' quality, but expresses it because of the extension of a syllable ('holding-ly'): it holds on for longer. Everyone, including the critic, is holding their breath. The word is unusual (is it invented by the writer?) but it is brought into the fold by the more common, and obviously sentimental, 'heart-breakingly'

with which it shares opening and closing letters. 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 became too burdensome' is remembered in a later, similar construction, with 'how embarrassed is the avoidance of embarrassment'.

Perkins' descriptions are always aware of, and build in, the alternative possibilities for presentation, as he understands these to be intrinsic to how a fictional world operates.⁶ Important to him is what the fictional world has established as probable, and therefore can choose to omit. The 'withholding' is as emphatic as anything we can actually see. The 'ellipsis' is 'eloquent'. The imagined pervades the actual scene – for example 'the initial moments of [Jack's] reunion with Eugene'. 'The long take ... gains its effect in part from the continuous availability of the cut' and 'its lack of flexibility'; and 'the static camera works as, in part, a refusal of mobility'. The possible and the available (but *not* shown), the avoided and the absent, are ever present aspects in a film, and part of one's experience. They also influence one's judgement of a film's achievement. Perkins demonstrates that good description does not only convey what is literally present in a film, or evoke to make a film present. It puts the matter of what is present at stake.

Notes

- 1 It is worth noting that rarely does an overarching theme or topic, disciplinary or otherwise, prompt or determine Harvey's analysis. His writing therefore is open to register quite striking moments like Eugene's speaking of these words, and is free to choose the terms in which they will be rendered. Such moments may touch us but be easily passed over because they do not fit into a discursive framework. In fact, their ungovernable quality might be what makes them special.
- 2 Note, however, that this judgement does not occur unexpectedly in the book; it relates to understandings about characterisation and performing which Affron introduces earlier in the volume. See note 4.
- 3 For Affron the achievement of Garbo's performance has very little, if anything, to do with this character 'Grusinskaya', and he recognises that movie performance in general has less to do with characterisation (in the sense of accurately performing a role), or 'the exteriorization of the character' (Affron 1977: 142) as he puts it, and more to do with the 'essential mechanics' of 'emotional states' in 'a physical context'. Therefore, for Affron, critical assessments should not be based on the manifestation of individual *characteristics*, and the announcement of them as successful or otherwise, but emerge from entering into the 'mechanics'.
- 4 Affron writes earlier in the book about the medium and its possibilities for 'renewable scrutiny'. For example, 'Effective screen acting exploits ... perceptual dynamics – it not only invites and withstands the activity of our scrutiny, it mirrors the activity. It sets a standard for variation, for composition and recomposition, for sets of processes that thrive on the potential for repeatability' (Affron 1977: 7).
- 5 Perkins emphasises the special relevance of performance during the long take: 'In long take technique, as used here, the characters' experience of change, of simultaneity and succession, convergence and separation, anticipation, process and consequence is made more dependent on the being and doing of the actors' (Perkins 1999: 65).
- 6 See Perkins (2005).

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5

WRITING ABOUT PERFORMANCE

The film critic as actor

George Toles

In the long, post-*Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977, US) slump in American movie ambition (on the level of narrative if not whizz-bang technology), Pauline Kael's reviews for *The New Yorker* came to rely increasingly on lavish assessments of performers' approaches to inadequate material to maintain her customary creative zest. Kael's contrasting depictions of Gregory Peck and Laurence Olivier struggling to stay afloat in *The Boys From Brazil* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1978, UK/US) reveals her matchless ability to make film performances, even thunderously maladroit ones, achieve entrancing life on the page.

When American actors are cast too strongly against type, they look ridiculous. Who could accept John Wayne or James Stewart – or Gregory Peck – as a Nazi sadist? Peck strides into *The Boys From Brazil* with stiff black hair, beady little eyes (one squintier than the other), a chalky complexion, and a thin mustache that seems to be coming out of his nose, and when he speaks in an arch-villain sibilant German accent you can't keep from laughing. In this large-scale version of Ira Levin's 1976 novel, he plays the monstrous geneticist Dr. Josef Mengele, who in his jungle hideaway is still carrying on the experiments he began in the death camps, staring into the future as he walks unconcernedly among the zombie mutants he has created. Charles Laughton was genuinely clammy and terrifying when he did this mad-genius-among-his-mutants number in 1932, in *Island of Lost Souls*, but Peck hasn't it in him to inspire genuine terror. His effects are all on the surface, and he looks particularly bad because he's playing opposite Laurence Olivier, who is the aged hero, Ezra Lieberman, a famous Nazi-hunter (and a fictional counterpart of Simon Wiesenthal). Olivier does a mischievous impersonation of aged, hammy actors, such as the late Albert Basserman and Felix Bressart, with their querulous whiny voices and their fussiness – their way of seeming almost helpless yet