

Introduction and Disclaimer

RES SEVERA VERUM GAUDIUM

A. H. Hatto wrote an analytical postscript to his translation of Wolfram von Eshenbach's *Parzival* that he called "An Introduction to a Second Reading." It is in that spirit that these essays are offered as guides to the reconsideration of some films that have engaged, distracted and inspired this writer, have yielded profitably to study and have rewarded patient scrutiny. As these essays contain spoilers, they should not be read before the films have been seen. The engineering of first impressions is the prerogative of the filmmakers and should not be compromised. Criticism is secondary to and cannot substitute for the immediate, concrete experience of film. If one wants to know nature, one should ask nature, not Aristotle. If one wants to know a film, one should see it. But however necessary spontaneous, precritical response may be for entertainment, it may not be sufficient for full appreciation. Pauline Kael boasted that she would never see a film more than once before writing about it, but not everyone is blessed with a photographic memory. By contrast, Jane Smiley asserts that no single reading can exhaust a great book. She explains, "The novel is a form of overwhelming abundance, in which we essentially lose ourselves. We cannot grasp abundance, we can only live through it. So a great novel overwhelms our capacity to grasp it, which is why each time we read it we come away with a new response." So it is with the best of cinema.

Some people worry about art being analyzed to death. This writer's experience has been that art is analyzed to life. Works as complex as *Finnegans Wake* yield little to unprepared or cursory examination. As the philosopher Daniel Dennett says, increased understanding cannot diminish value unless that value is based on confusion.

These essays are in no way intended as practical, journalistic criticism in the support of the idle, uncritical, escapist, culinary consumption of mass-mediated art as a mere confection. They are not meant for those who (*fruges consumere nati*) prefer naive ingestion of art, or who watch film, as Jean Cocteau said, "out of the corners of their eyes," or who, like Susan Sontag, fear that most criticism is desecration, or who consider the search for meaning to be vulgar, or who construe all analysis as theory-patter and psychobabble. Instead, they are modestly narrowcast *ad referendum* to those who are in sympathy with the spirit in which they are written for whatever potential analytic and interpretive utility may be gleaned, with no attempt to codify any absolute standard of correctness.

The community to which these essays are targeted consists of those who seek a deeper constructive, collaborative involvement with these films through adventurous, imaginative, dialogically engaged participation. It is hoped that the attention and curiosity of such receptive readers may be directed to previously unconsidered perspectives beyond their horizon of expectations such that an opportunity to gain interpretive leverage may be found and the satisfaction afforded by expanded awareness may be cultivated.

There is literally more to perception than meets the eye because subjective experience is not uniquely determined by external stimuli. Facts are not accessible independent of theories and interpretive predispositions. Sheer, uncommitted description is impossible, and the unbiased, pretheoretical, theory-neutral observer is a fiction. Observation presupposes theory. An

observation is meaningless until a theory renders it relevant, recognized and appreciated. There is no neutral, universally valid algorithm for theory choice. Theory choice is expedient, utilitarian and pragmatic, not schematic.

Subjectivist aesthetic theories hold that art requires a creative act on the part of the observer, who invents rather than discovers meaning, regardless of what the artist may have intended, which is ultimately unknowable. For example, reader-response criticism regards literature not merely as a spectator sport but as a dynamic process in the reader's mind. The complicity of the subject in the actualization of potential meaning in the text is recognized and acknowledged. The active reader participates in the construction and realization of the text via anticipation, frustration, reappraisal, retrospection, reconstruction, and covert wish fulfillment. Meaning is context-dependent and is derived from function within a conceptual framework.

David Bordwell specifies four types of cinematic meaning: referential, explicit, implicit, and symptomatic. Comprehension is the construction of referential and explicit meanings. To interpret is to ascribe implicit and symptomatic meanings. The implicit is intentional, but must be reconstructed and demystified. The symptomatic is involuntary, unintended and unnoticed. Art remains partly a riddle even to its creator, and the author often fails to appreciate his own cleverness. Even when authorial intentions are explicit and conventions seem to constrain meaning, the audience is at liberty to exert interpretive prerogative so long as violence is not done to the facts.

The issue of whether any particular interpretation is the one intended by the artist does not arise. A psychologist administering a Rorschach Test to a patient is analyzing the patient, not the maker of the inkblots. Roland Barthes writes of "the death of the author," which, when it occurs by suicide, precludes controversy. Narrative ambiguity is the result of voluntary authorial interpretive abdication. In the absence of contradiction, subjective interpretation cannot be wrong. Interpretations represent that which is symptomatic not only of the artist but of the interpreter, who is equally subject to psychoanalytic scrutiny. It is stipulated that these essays are neither manifesto nor apology, but lyric, confessional, self-revelatory, impressionistic free association, and not speculative of authorial intention.

Only logical problems can be solved without remainder, while great art is connotatively and interpretively inexhaustible. The multidimensionality of art demands a correspondingly complex, flexible, ecumenical and adaptive response. Not all theories are equally enabling, but no single interpretation can circumscribe and exhaust all potential meanings. Symbols should be allowed to sound all the harmonics that the mind is capable of accommodating. The variety of interpretive frames of reference and critical modes entertained should thus be maximized. The critic should be under no illusion of closure because curtailing the program in response to a pedantically narrow construal born of the reductive fallacy can only result in the devaluation of art.

Divergent interpretations reflect ontologically irreducible subjective predispositions, idiosyncratic metacritical presuppositions and the fact that irony may be extended indefinitely. Interpretations are always contingent, provisional, discretionary, and without decisive resolution, there existing no privileged Archimedean point from which to adjudicate disputes among unimpeachable verdicts of taste. Thus, they cannot be dogmatically prescribed as normative, axiomatic truth claims subject to rebuttal. They are gratuitous and suggestive rather than onerous and conclusive. Recognizing the futility of rhetorical proselytizing, only consideration is solicited, not consensus. This unbounded, omnivorous, open-ended pluralism, which might seem

like mere defensive, criticism-deflecting rationalization, defends all critics equally and precludes all controversy.

Interpretation may be infinite in theory, but in practice one is necessarily limited to a finite heuristic search of those few dimensions of greatest personal significance, thus inevitably committing the heresy of paraphrase. Structuring the debate and narrowing the focus of discussion through the eclectic isolation of certain properties for consideration and the deployment of certain critical and metacritical strategies are intended neither to foreclose nor discourage any possible alternative readings. These essays are merely an opportunistic, tactical examination of an attractive ensemble of interpretive exemplars constituting a minor subset arrayed in a tiny corner of a vast possibility space. No pretense is made to comprehensive, encyclopedic coverage nor to conclusive argument.

In the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, Richard Rayner (3/5/06) writes that “anthologies are arguments and secret autobiographies,” and David L. Ulin (2/4/07) writes of criticism as “an autobiographical art” and “an art of accumulation.” Accordingly, these essays are presented in chronological (autobiographical) rather than systematic order and the author acknowledges his anthological tendency to select similar works and to apply particular theories to them such that plurifilmic patterns emerge. Many of the technical issues addressed may be pursued further by consulting the bibliography provided.

The purging of jargon from these essays in deference to conceptistas was considered (*questione della lingua*). Preferring flattery to condescension, auxetic arcana will be unapologetically employed at least as Easter eggs and definitely as an affirmation of civilization, with which aversion to the dictionary is inconsistent. To the extent of its generosity, erudition is not elitist (*sit venia verbis*). In the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 12/16/07, Meghan Daum writes of Judith Thurman that her “refusal to talk down to her readers is as much a moral position as an aesthetic and literary standard.” All readers who resent and detest scholarship and are prone to rationalize it as logorrhea (or what Heller McAlpin calls “theory-choked academese”) are sincerely and desperately advised to go while the going is good. In the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 7/23/06, Richard Schickel writes that Stanley Cavell “has never met a movie he cannot obfuscate with a viscous prose style that reaches ever higher levels of unintended risibility.” Let the same be assumed here. Those who denounce anything not meant for them as “rambling” are directed to Matt 7:3 and Luke 6:41. Finally, and fundamentally, what do you want for nothing?