

Viewing as Action:

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Film and Reader Response Criticism

The only character is the spectator.
Alain Resnais

One of the major developments in literary criticism over the past decade has been a growing concern with the role of the reader in actualizing and creating meaning. The rise of the reader correlates with the decline of the text as a stable, decipherable entity. Whereas the American New Critics, influenced by the Romantic, organicist view of the text, searched for unifying themes and patterns of imagery, meanings embedded *in* the text, response critics analyze the production of meaning through the act of reading. The New Critical methodology of retrospective close reading spatialized the text; most response criticism emphasizes the dynamic, temporal aspect of the interaction between text and reader. By redefining the critical enterprise as the description of a process, rather than the discovery of a product (meaning), response critics try to evade the major pitfalls of interpretation.

Another likely reason for the shift of critical perspective is the increasingly intense and self-conscious reader involvement demanded by the texts themselves. Just as the New Critical approach offered a way of coping with the intricate, self-referential texture of Modernist writing, so response criticism is itself a response to the "ludic" emphasis in much contemporary literature. Epitomized by Nabokov's novels, such works are primarily constituted, not as representations or criticism of life, or as self-contained artifacts, but as elaborate games with their readers. Their challenge is not so much to our ideas about life as to consciousness itself, to the conventions by which we structure and apprehend "reality." Response critics are particularly attracted to such works, not only because they engage their readers so directly, but also because they dramatize the constructive nature of perception.

The relationship between response criticism and developments in hermeneutics and contemporary literature is fairly evident; less obvious, but just as important, are its connections with cinematic experience. In this essay, I propose to examine the work of two of the most influential response critics—Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser—in relation to film. Although neither critic deals directly with film, the conception of literature underlying their methods is strikingly cinematic, while the methods themselves are often explained through film analogy. Their work is another indication of the extent to which our experience of films has altered, often unconsciously, the way we write, read, and think about literature. In turn, the methods of Fish and Iser offer

valuable tools to the practical film critic. We need new ways of analyzing film response. The idea is to restore film to the dynamic, experiential context usually ignored or suppressed by formalists, while avoiding the breezy imprecision of impressionist criticism and the narrow dogmatism of much psychoanalytic study. Of course, both methods entail disadvantages of their own; my claim is not that they offer a complete and infallible account of response, but simply that they bring into relief some of its neglected features.

Stanley Fish is best known for the model of reading set forth in his essay "Affective Stylistics: Literature in the Reader" (1970).¹ Fish's affective method is simply "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time."² By "response," Fish means a succession of deliberative acts performed by readers of specifiable linguistic and literary "competence" under pressure of the temporal flow. These acts include "the making and revising of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgments, the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, the giving and withdrawing of approval, the specifying of causes, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers, the solving of puzzles."³ Although the acts are primarily cognitive, they result in such emotional experiences as surprise, regret, embarrassment, fulfillment, and frustration. This activity occurs on levels ranging from syntax to plot and is seldom fully conscious. The method involves reading "in slow motion" so as to reveal "events" one does not notice in normal time. Meaning, for Fish, consists of these events and our description of them, not of themes or other patterns that we extract from the text.

Even so compact a summary of the approach ought to suggest several areas of affinity with film. First of all, there is the concept of the text as developing experience instead of stable object. To underscore this point, Fish makes a distinction between literature and "kinetic" art. The physical form of the book encourages us to mistake it for a stationary and autonomous object, while "the great merit (from this point of view) of kinetic art is that it forces you to be aware of it as a changing object—and therefore no 'object' at all—and to be aware of yourself as correspondingly changing."⁴ Of all the arts, kinetic and otherwise, film is most marked by its capacity to blur the distinction between subject and object. Unlike a printed page, a painting, or a mobile, a reel of film cannot be directly perceived, but is part of the mechanical exploitation of a physiological phenomenon. At its most basic phenomenological level, then, film reminds us that what we see depends on how we see. Even our sense of the externality of the images on the screen is weakened by their power to replicate acts of consciousness. As Hugo Münsterberg argued in his pioneering treatise on the psychology of film, the relation between "the mental mechanism" and the picture on the screen is one in which "the objective world of outer events has been shaped and molded until it becomes adjusted to the subjective movement of mind."⁵ Hence, the common feeling that the film we are watching is simultaneously inside and outside of us, a kind of waking dream. The visionary, as opposed to merely visible, quality of the film image is as much responsible as its evanescence for its resistance to objectification.

Because his analyses depend on the reader's projections relating to subsequent events, Fish emphasizes the sequentiality of reading and the importance of our first encounter with the work. Both are more conspicuous

features of cinematic than literary experience. In the typical viewing situation, we see a film only once, and are locked into a predetermined succession of sound and images. Unlike a reader, the viewer cannot slow down or speed up, reread, skip ahead or back, stop and resume at his pleasure.⁶ Of all time-arts, film exercises the most complete control over the audience's experience of the temporal flow. In reading *Fish*, one gets the impression that he wishes literature, in this respect, were more like film. Indeed, in describing the operation of his method, he uses an analogy that treats the purely conceptual events of language as if they were visible: "It is as if a slow motion camera with an automatic stop action effect were recording our linguistic experiences and presenting them to us for viewing."⁷ What he offers us, in effect, is a *moviola* or a *Steenbeck* for words.

Finally, there is a profound connection between film experience and the paranoid elements in Fish's model of reading. In Fish's critical scenario, the reader functions primarily as victim; his responses are largely determined by textual stimuli, and they lead him into a series of traps carefully prepared for him by a Machiavellian author. Punitive and disruptive effects are conspicuous, and are therefore useful to a critic intent on making response "predictive and normative." But their significance is more than rhetorical. Fish has perceived the paranoia that lies at the heart of narrative and brilliantly extended it to all linguistic experience. As Robert Scholes has pointed out: "The spectator or reader of a narration assumes that he is in the grip of a process controlled outside himself, designed to do things to him which he will be powerless to resist, and that if he struggles will only enmesh him farther in the author's toils."⁸

In film viewing, our sense of such a process is intensified by the inexorability of the temporal progression, and the lack of an object, such as a book, to manipulate. Consider the different sense of an ending we have in reading and viewing. Unlike a viewer, a reader can tell when a work will end from the number of pages ahead (and we all look). We do know that feature films normally last around two hours, but their perceived duration varies greatly. Our uncertainty about *when* a film will end intensifies our anxiety about *how* it will end. Film is also inherently more intimidating than linguistic experience because it adds to the anxieties related to knowing those associated with seeing. As life and literature have taught us, one should never trust appearances, but in film they are our main source of information and evidence. This seems to be one of the self-reflexive points of the complex visual deceptions in Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* and Alain Resnais' *Provvidence*.

In this connection, one might also note the striking correspondence between Fish's model of reading and the experience of what Leo Braudy calls (in what is perhaps too pat a category) the "closed film": "In closed films, the audience is a victim, imposed on by the perfect coherence of the world on the screen."⁹ We are "lured" into the films and "feel somehow that the camera's point of view is the perspective of the Enemy, personal or providential." Braudy also observes that our paranoia is reinforced in such films by the prevalence of entrapment as motif, theme, and technique.

One of Braudy's "closed" film directors, and an ideal subject for Fishian analysis, is Alfred Hitchcock. He aspires to the greatest possible control over the audience's responses and, significantly, regards such control as distinctively cinematic: "If you free the spectator to choose, you are making theater,

not cinema." Although he likes to present himself as a mere (innocent) purveyor of thrills, he typically seeks to implicate us directly in the morally ambiguous and frightening world of his films. As Robin Wood and other critics have demonstrated, he will often victimize us by exploiting and exposing the voyeuristic element in film viewing. In *Psycho*, for example, a shot of Tony Perkins spying on Janet Leigh as she undresses for her shower makes us uncomfortably aware of our own prurient interest, previously stimulated by Hitchcock through other scenes of semi-nudity, and this complicates our response both to the horrible murder we are subsequently forced to witness and to the murderer. Hitchcock achieves a similar effect more subtly in *The Birds*, with an aerial shot of the heroine as she steers her boat across Bodega Bay. The unusual angle implies a subjective view—but whose? Because the shot offers a bird's eye view without the clear presence of a bird, for the moment we are the birds. This visual link between spectator and watching bird suggests a deeper one. It points us towards the realization that as much as we may fear a bird attack on the vulnerable heroine, we also desire it. The Hedren character is, after all, too smug, too impeccably dressed and coiffed, and in this scene, sexually on the make. The birds, with their sharp eyes and beaks, are the embodiments of evil; they are also the agents of our hostility (and Hitchcock's). Note that none of these perceptions are *in* the film; they are created out of acts we are led to perform while watching the film.

Hitchcock, of course, represents an extreme view of film art; but while other directors may not share his somewhat unsavory enjoyment of punitive manipulation, or his skill at it, they all engage in it to some extent. Consider Antonioni's use of the slow pan in *L'Avventura*. Conventionally, the slow pan is a suspense-building shot, which eventually reveals something sought after or dreaded by the audience, a character, or both. When Antonioni uses it during the search for Anna on the rocky island, we expect it to reveal the missing girl, or at least a significant clue to her disappearance. Instead, it reveals nothing, except another searcher, moving into the frame from a different direction. The effect is pointedly anti-climactic. When this shot is repeated several times, another effect is produced—we begin to expect disappointment and, finally, stop caring. In this way, we move closer, not theoretically, but experientially, to the alienated consciousness of Sandro and a poignant awareness of human isolation.

If film lends itself particularly well to "affective" analysis, it also aggravates some of the problems raised by the method. One of these is the difficulty in demonstrating unconscious effects. Because of the more highly concentrated nature of cinematic than literary response, presumably more of the action is "underground." We simply don't have time to register consciously everything that happens in our minds as we watch a film. The analyst has to "slow down" the film experience very much indeed to record many of its events, and this inevitably intensifies whatever doubts we may have about the validity of his description. As a result of its emphasis on authorial strategy and control, the method also raises the problem of intention. Fish argues that it is the effect itself that is important, not whether it was actually intended or by whom. Nevertheless, Fish's analyses assume intention, and this is even harder to establish for narrative film, both because of its collaborative nature, and the susceptibility to "accident" inherent in its dependence on the material world. This problem is obviously less acute for animated film and certain

"experimental" works.

Perhaps the most serious difficulty we encounter in applying Fish's method to film is its inability to account adequately for diversity of response. Fish asserts that "what happens to one informed reader of a work will happen, within a range of nonessential variation, to another." As part of a physically present film audience, we are much more aware of shared responses than we are in reading. We sense the orchestrated intake of breath at a Hitchcock film and join in the escalating laughter at a silent comedy. But because of the intensity and complexity of our involvement in a good film, we also feel that much of what we see is uniquely ours.

This brings us into the territory of Wolfgang Iser. In his "phenomenological" approach, he tries to include what Fish's method suppresses: the individual and creative (undetermined) elements of response. Up to a point, Fish and Iser agree. They both think that meaning is produced through the interaction of text and reader, and they regard this interaction largely as a process of anticipation and retrospection, continually undergoing modification as one reads. Both value the disruptive experience, as becomes apparent if we compare Iser's list of activities with that of Fish (quoted earlier): "We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept or reject."¹⁰ However, Iser differs from Fish in his emphasis on the indeterminate, polysemantic nature of literary texts. He is interested in the "unwritten" part of texts, in the "gaps" which stimulate the creative participation of the individual reader. The text delimits, but does not control the connections. It is therefore capable of several different realizations and can never be exhausted by a single reading. For Iser, the joy and excitement of reading lies in the process of trying to remove indeterminacy, to fill in gaps, while simultaneously becoming aware of other possibilities through the attempt to exclude them. Instead of trying to describe "the structure of the reader's experience" as Fish does, Iser analyzes the "unwritten" text and its *potential* realizations.

In one of his essays, Iser repeatedly compares the opening of gaps in the text to a "cutting technique."¹¹ He notes that "the most frequent application of this technique occurs where several plot threads run simultaneously, but must be dealt with one after the other." Such inter-cutting is certainly found in the novel (after all, D. W. Griffith said he learned the technique from Dickens), but it is the forte of film narrative.

Although Iser makes no reference to Eisenstein, his view of gaps and their connection as the basic element of aesthetic response is strikingly similar to that of the great film theorist. In discussing how sequent sentences act on one another, Iser notes that the reader "has to accept certain perspectives, but in doing so inevitably causes them to interact."¹² This is also the basis of Eisenstein's theory of montage: "two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition."¹³ Eisenstein's phrasing suggests the mechanistic view, but he goes on to insist that the combining occurs in the mind of the spectator, not in the film, and that it depends on "a tendency to bring together into a unity two or more independent objects or qualities."¹⁴ The close relationship between Eisenstein's work and the ideas of both Iser and Fish is particularly evident in the following passage:

A work of art, understood dynamically, is just this process of arranging images in the feeling and mind of the spectator. It is this that constitutes the peculiarity of a truly vital work of art and distinguishes it from a lifeless one, in which the spectator receives the represented result of a given consummated process of creation, instead of being drawn into the process as it occurs.¹⁵

What is less clear, at least in *The Film Sense*, is whether Eisenstein thinks the spectator's activity is determined by the text or merely guided by it. He seems to vacillate on this point. Influenced, perhaps, by his interest in Pavlov, he writes that montage "includes in the creative process the emotions and mind of the spectator. The spectator is *compelled* [my italics] to proceed along that selfsame creative road that the author travelled in creating the image."¹⁶ Here, Eisenstein sounds like Fish, but only a page later, he is much closer to Iser's position: "every spectator, in correspondence with his individuality, and in his own way and out of his own experience—out of the womb of his fantasy, out of the warp and weft of his associations, all conditioned by the premises of his character, habits and social appurtenances, creates an image in accordance with the representational *guidance* [my italics] suggested by the author, leading him to understanding and experience of the author's theme."¹⁷ Eisenstein ends up stating the conflict as a paradox: "This is the same image that was planned and created by the author, but this image is at the same time created also by the spectator himself."¹⁸ Eisenstein's desire to have it both ways points up the double-edged nature of montage. As the element of film form that allows the director the most freedom in manipulating time and space, it permits him a considerable degree of control over the spectator's responses. But, as Eisenstein's own films and theoretical writing demonstrate, the "new concept or image" comes out of a complex and fleeting interaction of film and viewer, involving the integration of at least three levels of perception: structural (exposition, plot, theme), visual/aural and rhythmic. The gap created by the juxtaposition of images opens up a range of possible connections that can neither be exhausted or strictly determined.

Even though Iser draws analogically on film montage, he seems to regard film as inherently inferior to literature. For example, he voices, in phenomenological terms, a familiar literary complaint about the literalism of the film image: "With the novel the reader must use his imagination to synthesize the information given him, and so his perception is simultaneously richer and more private; with the film, he is confined merely to physical perception, and so whatever he remembers of the world he had pictured is brutally cancelled out."¹⁹ Although one cannot deny that literary works require a more complex operation of "picturing" or visualization, one can counter with the argument that our filmic confinement "merely to physical perception" necessitates a greater degree of conceptual activity. Brady makes a similar point with respect to differences between characterization in literature and film: "Film character achieves its complexity by its emphasis on incomplete knowledge, by its conscious play with the limits a physical, external medium imposes on it."²⁰ A recent instance of this kind of play is the splendidly opaque performance of Catherine Deneuve in *La Grande Bourgeoise*. The plot turns on the question of her motivation, and countless close-ups of her lovely, impassive face invite us to search it for the truth. Like the other characters, we speculate, form conclusions, are betrayed, and ultimately defeated. But this process guarantees her reality more powerfully than the film-makers' assurance that all events are based on historical fact. Insofar as she presents

a seductive surface that both impels and frees us to construct its depths, Deneuve is emblematic of the cinema itself. Film techniques of lighting, composition, and camera movement do, of course, guide the spectator, but cinematic "signs" cannot be manipulated with the precision of words. As a result, film stimulates not less, but a different and perhaps more intense participation, than literature. Although Iser occasionally uses film as a foil to literature in arguing for his approach, no medium offers a more convincing validation of it.

In much the same way that Fish's model of response brings Hitchcock to mind, Iser's evokes Jean Renoir. Iser claims that "reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative," while Renoir tells us that "a film is only good if it leaves room for collaboration by the spectator." Unlike Hitchcock, Renoir wants to preserve and even extend the visual freedom enjoyed by the audience at a play. He does not seek to impose his meaning on us, but invites us through his long takes and slowly panning camera to explore his images and discover in them the meanings that have excited him. Like Iser, he values the illusion of "reality" and recognizes that he can achieve it only by allowing us to participate in its creation.

We need not choose between Fish and Iser, though we may be more attracted temperamentally to one model than the other. We might do best to combine their approaches, since all films, in varying degrees and proportions, entangle us as cooperative victims and engage us as collaborators. What they do not do is wash over us, hypnotize us, or move past us like a parade. Such familiar notions have done much to obscure the strenuous cognitive and creative activity that film viewing demands, and which constitutes the basis for much of our emotional involvement. Of course, there is a qualitative difference in our experience of the latest light entertainment feature and the labyrinthine complexities of a film like *Last Year at Marienbad*. The difference, however, is not between active and passive viewing, but in the extent and cohesiveness of the activity they require, and also the degree to which they make us conscious of it. *Marienbad*, by frustrating the usual ways in which films allow us to make sense of them, highlights the sense-making activity itself and obliges us to reflect on it. It is less an "open" film than an exercise in indeterminacy, moving us towards a preference for the "surfaces of mystery" over a static and rigid solution, for the lover's pursuit over the husband's possession.

As the quintessential time-art, film has sharpened our sensitivity to the dynamic features of literary experience. At the same time, the centrality of such dynamism to the analytic procedures of Fish and Iser makes them particularly useful in film study. They remind us that action-packed events occur in the mind, not on the screen. They also provide us with ways of "seeing" some of these events, and, insofar as we are defined by our acts, ourselves.

NOTES

¹ *New Literary History*, 2 (Autumn 1970). I should note that he has since then subjected some of his assumptions and claims in that essay to metacritical scrutiny and moved away from a descriptivist position. He now sees interpretive strategies (including his own) as creating, through constructive acts of perception, the texts they purport to describe. Thus he can no longer claim to show how we actually read, but only how we could or should read. However, he continues to use his affective method, defending it as "a superior fiction." I might add that I find it considerably more plausible as an account of the reading process than the one which critiques it.

² Op. cit., pp. 126-27.

³ "Interpreting the Variorum," *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (Autumn 1976), 474.

⁴ "Literature in the Reader," 140.

⁵ *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Co., 1916), p. 135.

⁶ Of course, nothing about film is static, including its qualities as a medium. The development of home projection systems using tape or disc will give to film a literary manipulability and a longer time span. The result, I think, will be a more "novelistic" cinema.

⁷ "Literature in the Reader," 128.

⁸ "Narration and Narrativity in Film," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 1 (August 1976), 289.

⁹ *The World in a Frame* (New York: Anchor Press, 1977), p. 49.

¹⁰ *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), p. 288.

¹¹ "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," *Aspects of Narrative* (English Institute Essays), ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York, 1971), pp. 1-45.

¹² *The Implied Reader*, p. 277.

¹³ *The Film Sense* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1942), p. 4.

¹⁴ *Film Sense*, p. 5.

¹⁵ *Film Sense*, p. 17.

¹⁶ *Film Sense*, p. 32.

¹⁷ *Film Sense*, p. 33.

¹⁸ *Film Sense*, p. 33.

¹⁹ *The Implied Reader*, p. 283.

²⁰ *The World in a Frame*, p. 184. Although Braudy is more of a formalist than Iser, the sub-title of his third section, "The Aesthetics of Omission," indicates a similar awareness of the role of the audience.