**Cinemimesis:
Realism, Representation, and Form
in David Bordwell's Theory of Film**

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Abstract

The film theory of David Bordwell has, for nearly two decades, been subjected to frequent criticism on a variety of grounds. Bordwell's work is a popular target for such criticism insofar as it embodies and exemplifies certain historically dominant assumptions about the relationships between both film and theory and film and its subject matter. This paper revisits the assumptions manifest in Bordwell's work, in an attempt to locate and to broaden the grounds for their further contestation. This analysis demonstrates how, within Bordwell's writing, a theory of cinematic representation, a theory of spectatorship, and a prescriptive theoretical project are each structured by a common, epistemologically contingent means of thinking about the nature of cinematic representation, one which describes cinema foremost as a medium capable of determinate and truthful representation, even when it is deployed for non-practical or aesthetic purposes. The broader social and cultural implications of this structure are explored.

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INTRODUCTION: THE WRITING OF CINEMA

For some time, the discipline of film studies has been involved in a labour of self-critical reflection; film theory has doubled back on itself, has taken to the registration within its own discourse of a certain discontent, a restlessness, a dissatisfaction with the terms on which it engages its objects of study.¹ What is more, film studies has come to narrativize this aporia by structuring it as a contestation of the very foundations on which the discipline is constituted. At the risk of reducing a complex problem and of reinscribing what are probably unhelpful distinctions, we may describe the familiar polarization as follows: on the one hand, we find those who would regard the production, reception, and study of cinema as foremost matters of cultural intervention, bearing social and political consequence; on the other hand, we find those who would locate the most enlightening aspects of cinema in the study of its texts, in the knowable specificity of the form of their significations, and in the internal history thereof.

The inscription of this axiology into the constitutive discourse of the very field of film studies itself is furthermore subject to indefinite iteration. There is ample evidence of a common investment not in the resolution but rather in the perpetuation of the terms of this contestation as “one of the most contemporary intellectual debates”—between, as a recent account describes it, “questions of class struggle and the unconscious,” on the one hand, and the “threadbare nonsense” of the ‘third way’” of mid-level historical

¹ That this self-reflection is being *written* as such should not be taken for granted. It is evident enough, I suggest, in the very publication of such anthologies as *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996) and *Reinventing Film Studies*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000).

research, on the other.² I suspect that the necessity of thinking *this very contestation*—i.e., that film studies engage with not only the theorization of cinema but also with the contestation of the grounds of its theorization—is itself symptomatic. We ought not to take this peculiar phenomenon for granted, but rather to attempt to situate it, to explore both the conditions of its possibility and the solutions that it may suggest.

The notion of cinema as worthwhile object of study presupposes a certain theoretical investment in the import of that object—as site of contestation or negotiation of social and cultural meaning or identity, through its uses or through its conveyance of images, as site of aesthetic productivity, etc. By virtue of the very nature of this investment, the cinematic object is engaged, I argue, as though it had the properties of a *language* or a *sign*. This engagement and its consequences should be viewed as symptomatic and contingent. Nevertheless, by understanding cinema to be theoretically constituted as though bearing the properties of a *language-like sign* as such—a sign the nature of which is subject to contestation—we may revisit the terms of the debate. Indeed, what we discover is the contestation of no less than the status of the sign itself, namely of the terms according to which the sign might be subject to thought. The very structure of this debate is itself symptomatic of and contingent upon the enabling

² Colin McCabe, “Preface,” in *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory*, by Slavoj Žižek (London: BFI, 2001), vii–ix. The most recent exchanges are those occurring between Colin McCabe and David Bordwell (in “Slavoj Žižek: Say Anything” [online, 2005]) on the one hand, and Slavoj Žižek and David Bordwell on the other (see also David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005], 260–264 and Slavoj Žižek, “*Da Capo senza Fine*,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek [London: Verso, 2000], 213–262).

possibilities of a certain epistemological configuration. We ought to explore the way in which this very configuration in many respects determines the terms of the debate.

i. The Split Sign

First, it will serve us well to remember that cinema itself emerged within a given historical and cultural context, within a certain epistemological milieu that enabled its very conception, negotiated its reception and use, and furthermore *determined the very terms on which cinema itself might be thought*. These terms constituted cinema foremost as a mode of determinate representation within a positivist discourse of rational empiricism; in doing so they conceived of a common signifying logic for all such representations, be they natural languages, images, or symbolic codes. We ought to take no aspect of this discursive formation for granted, insofar as it predetermines to a considerable extent the ways in which cinema may be theorized; for the cinema had—and has—no ontology other than that which was granted to it in the moment of its emergence within this radically contingent discursive formation, a formation that has since been renegotiated perpetually in the production of popular and theoretical discourse.

Second, we ought to recall how, paradoxically, the very discursive formation that enabled the thinking of cinema as determinate representation also enabled the critique of that very determination. For, as Jacques Derrida has famously shown,³ the self-critical epistemology that undertook to apotheosize representations themselves as the signifiers of empirical truth also undertook to subject those very representations to formalization and

to reduction, in an attempt to stabilize and to make knowable the terms of their relation to that truth. When pushed to their limit, the conditions of that relationship folded back upon themselves, such that the sign in its knowability came to be the arbiter of the means by which truth itself came to be known. As a consequence, the very thinking of the sign came to be split against itself. The sign is either venerated as a means of producing constative discourse and thus of knowing and anchoring transcendental truth, or it is apprehended as an object existing only in relation to itself, subject to free play and being granted performative force.

It is this very split, I argue, that is inscribed within the thinking of film studies today. On the one hand the cinematic object is apprehended within a powerfully overdetermined discourse that constitutes it foremost as a medium of determinate representation; theory produced within this tradition assumes that, within its ontological kernel, cinema is somehow capable of functioning as a sign permitting access to truth. Within such theory, the value of the sign is in its ability to represent truth. On the other hand, cinema is apprehended as a sign in free play, subject to deployment and use in contexts of social and cultural power relations; the value of the sign is in its ability to be performed, to be reiterated by social subjects in the performative production of social reality. The distinction is one between “truth *value*” and “the value of force.”⁴ These two ways of thinking the sign have folded back, tellingly, *into film theory itself*, such that we

³ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” translated by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc*, edited by Gerald Graff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 13; emphasis original.

have, on the one hand, the advocacy of film theory on the grounds of “solid film scholarship,”⁵ and, on the other, a call for the production of “really useful” theory, namely that which thinks the cinema in ways that are themselves socially productive.⁶ In this way, the bifurcated nature of the sign gives structure to film-theoretical discourse itself.

ii. *The Performativity of Theory*

I suggested that the distinction between the thinking of the sign in accordance with its truthfulness and its thinking in accordance with its use was not necessarily helpful. Indeed, it has been suggested that the very distinction between the sign as *constative* or truth-stating on the one hand and the sign as *performative* on the other is a false one. We need not recount a familiar narrative to explain how this thinking came about; we may simply acknowledge the possibility of an erosion, destabilization, and inversion of the dominant notion of the sign as adequate representation of the anterior and unified truth of the world.⁷ Furthermore, it has been well demonstrated that there is

⁵ David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, “Introduction,” in *Post-Theory*, xiii. What constitutes “solid film scholarship” is explicated as follows:

A theory of film defines a problem within the domain of cinema (defined nondogmatically) and sets out to solve it through logical reflection, empirical research, or a combination of both. *Theorizing* is a commitment to using the best canons of inference and evidence available to answer the question posed. The standards ought to be those of the most stringent philosophical reasoning, historical argument, and sociological, economic, and critical analysis we can find, in film studies or elsewhere (even in science). (xiv; emphasis original)

⁶ Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, “Introduction,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, 1.

⁷ It is this doubt in the constative or fact-stating capacity of language that comes to be expressed most famously, for example, in the later writings of Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*, Second Edition, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe [Oxford: Blackwell, 1958]) and in the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin (*How To Do Things with Words* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962]). Austin drew a distinction between *constative* or fact-stating discourse on the one hand and *performative* discourse on the other, namely that which is not true or false in itself but rather produces certain states simply by virtue of its

social and political import in thinking of the sign as performative tool in the negotiation of social reality.⁸ In order to steer a course out of the aporia of film studies, then, I suggest that what is necessary is a deconstruction of the dominant logic that necessitates the thinking of cinema foremost as a determinately representational sign. The implications of such a deconstruction will necessarily fold back into theory itself, in such a way that we might come to think of film-theoretical writing itself as a performative act. For it is, after all, only in the course of theorization itself that cinema comes to be constituted in theoretical terms. It is for these reasons that I intend to perform a reading of certain critical and theoretical writings of David Bordwell. This reading will constitute an attempt to deconstruct the dominant position within the film-theoretical axiology that constitutes the cinematic object itself as a variable, split, constative–performative sign—namely that position which holds the ontological kernel of cinema to be its status as a signifier of constative or truth-stating utterances.

utterance. Even in the very drawing of this distinction, Austin expressed doubt that it was really a useful one at all. The limits of Austin's configuration were subsequently explored and exploited by Jacques Derrida; arguably, Derrida simply takes the founding assumptions of Austin's own model through to their logical conclusion. Importantly, Derrida asserts that if the performative did exist as a category, it "would be tantamount to communicating a force through the impetus [impulsion] of a mark...It does not describe something that exists outside of language or prior to it. It produces or transforms a situation, it effects" (Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 13). Derrida exploits Austin's dependency, for example, on the stability of the context of utterance, the intentionality of the speaker, and of an existing convention for performance. By showing that each of these necessarily—on the basis of the very condition of iterability of language—contains the possibility of instability within them, each being radically contingent, Derrida deconstructs the requirements of "total context" that necessarily constituted Austin's successful performative utterance. In doing so, Derrida broadens considerably the scope of performativity.

⁸ See, e.g., Ernesto Laclau, "Preface," in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, by Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1992), ix–xv; Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Butler, "Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism," in *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality*, 11–43. Butler asserts that "[t]he reiterative speech act thus offers the possibility—though not the necessity—of depriving the past of the established discourse of its exclusive control over defining the parameters of the universal within politics" ("Restaging the Universal," 41).

The conditions that enable the very thinking of cinema in this way will be revealed in the specificity of their historical and epistemological contingency. Specifically, this analysis will attempt to show how, within Bordwell's work, a set of ontological commitments, a corresponding critical methodology, a theory of textuality and subjectivity, and a prescriptive theoretical project are all structured concentrically by a common set of assumptions concerning the constative logic of signification and reference. Again, I argue that Bordwell's film theory is one that apprehends and subjects cinema to analysis foremost as a medium that is, in its ontological essence, capable of determinate *representation* of transcendental truth. As such, it is my intention with this analysis to make clear the extent to which certain realist assumptions about the nature of signification and reference, themselves grounded in specific epistemological and cultural discourses, in turn determine both the conditions of possibility and the shape of the very objects they endeavour to describe, effectively prescribing a certain, radically contingent *finitude* or *structure* to the thematization of cinematic textuality and spectatorship. It is this finitude that may be overcome with the rethinking of *film theory itself* as bearing performative agency; I shall therefore conclude with some brief remarks suggesting why this sort of rethinking is necessary.

iii. A Note on Commitments, Metatheory, and Method

I describe Bordwell's theory as one that analyzes cinema as a medium capable of determinate representation of some anterior truth, and furthermore as bearing a signifying logic that is subject to formalization. In doing so I am necessarily taking as meta-

theoretical background a certain western-philosophical, historical-epistemological narrative, namely that which describes the reconfiguration of knowledge structures in modernity such that they become themselves analyzable and subject to reduction.⁹ This narrative itself ought not to be taken for granted, insofar as it is structured by the logic of

⁹ My assumptions concerning this history and its implications for the thinking of language as self-critical representation are drawn from two primary sets of discourses. The first of these comprises certain writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (among others) that notoriously have come to be known in North America as works within the broadly defined field of “poststructuralism” (on the problems with this description see, e.g., Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott [New York: Routledge, 1992], 3–21). I take for granted neither that the sorts of writing traditionally subsumed under this label in any way constitute a homogeneous epistemology or unified set of assumptions, nor, indeed, that the writings of Foucault and Derrida are fundamentally reconcilable. I employ each only to the extent that they seem to offer fecund methodological models given my purposes here, an appropriative practice that has itself been legitimized within certain recent cultural theories (here the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Judith Butler seems to provide the most admirable models). I have, for better or for worse, confined myself to working with English translations of both Foucault and Derrida. For exemplary work see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002); and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002); Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play”; *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976); and *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981); and Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

The second of these comprises the ontological-relativist work that developed out of twentieth-century Anglo-American analytical philosophy. This work will help to supplement the Foucauldian-Derridean meta-theoretical framework where it seems appropriate in keeping with the necessity of performing a “double writing” of the object—namely a critical reading of its structures of signification simultaneously with a reading that seeks to move beyond it, a double effort both to invert and to displace it (cf. Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 21). I therefore necessarily assume some degree of translatability between analytical philosophy and the structural analyses of Derrida and Foucault; in this respect I follow Jonathan Culler (see *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982], 152, n. 11) and Jürgen Habermas (see “The Horizon of Modernity Is Shifting,” in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, translated by William Mark Hohengarten [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992], 4–5. It ought to be noted, however, that Habermas’s project is not particularly sympathetic to either Derrida or Foucault; see especially extensive critiques in Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, translated by Frederick G. Lawrence [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987], and see Derrida’s reply in “Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion,” translated by Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc.*, 156–158, n. 9). The ontologically relativist position specifically is developed in, for example, W. V. Quine, *From A Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953); and *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); Nelson Goodman, *The Structure of Appearance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951); and *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1968); Richard Rorty, “The World Well Lost,” *Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1972): 649–665; and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

a certain historicity, but also insofar as its teleological conclusion is in a sense the elevation of the structure of self-critical language itself to quasi-transcendental status. Yet because David Bordwell's work is itself foremost the theoretical writing of representations—a performance of the subjection of representations to analysis in the critical-realist tradition—and is therefore in a sense complicit in this very narrative, I hold that his work is best analyzed from within it, using its own deconstructive tools. The precise nature of this relationship between methodology and object of study I intend to make clear in the section that follows, dedicated to meta-theoretical explication and textual framing. Ultimately, however, I do not aspire to make any firm commitments other than those that are manifest in the course of my writing, and even those I make tentatively and from within the limits of my own theoretical competence. My writing here constitutes as much an attempt to learn these theories—to work through them, to discover their limitations—as it does an attempt to apply them productively.

I. FRAMING

1. Structure, Sign, and Play in Bordwell's Theory of Film

I have indicated broadly that my reading of Bordwell's film-theoretical work attempts to demonstrate how that work is structured by a common set of radically contingent assumptions concerning signification, textuality, and reference. Indeed, these assumptions are themselves the product of a paradoxical formation that arises when language (or any form of signification, to the extent that it may be treated as a language, either structurally or functionally) is viewed as a knowable, neutral framework or mirror for the description or representation of a transcendental object world. In summary, the goal of any critical-realist or formalist approach to representation is to thematize a reduction of the signifying structure itself by subjecting it to analysis.¹⁰ We can recall that Derrida explains how this technique "consists in reducing or deriving the signifier, that is to say, ultimately in *submitting* the sign to thought."¹¹ What is essential to keep in mind here is how, in such a manner, the critical-realist project effectively is attempting to eliminate the very mark of *différance* upon which it is founded, to re-stabilize and to restore absolute presence. Derrida remarks: "For the *paradox* is that the metaphysical reduction of the sign needed the opposition it was reducing. The opposition is systematic with the reduction. And what we are saying here about the sign can be extended to all the

¹⁰ This doubling of philosophical discourse back onto itself is, of course, historicized most famously in Foucault, *The Order of Things*; see especially 324–5.

¹¹ Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," 281; emphasis original.

concepts and all the sentences of metaphysics, in particular to the discourse on 'structure'."¹²

To see how this is the case in Bordwell's production of a logic of cinematic signification, it is necessary to indicate precisely where in his writing relevant issues of textuality, spectatorship, and theory are at stake. I must emphasize that the order in which I address these issues is effectively arbitrary, and that the sorts of relationships that my account may suggest implicitly to obtain between them can in no way be determined with any certainty. The relationships that I present here are not substantive, and I do not think that any claim to the contrary would be in the spirit of either an archaeological enquiry or deconstructivist reading.¹³ If, in the course of my argument, I seem to suggest that epistemological commitments beget textual models or that textual models beget theoretical projects, such relationships should be apprehended as being offered for the sake of expository convenience alone.

I shall, then, in the pages that follow, undertake to demonstrate how the logic of critical realism, including its fundamental, structuring contradictions, operates at various levels in Bordwell's writing. Specifically, I intend to indicate the following: *first*, how a certain set of critical-realist theoretical commitments both enables the conditions for and initiates a process of abstraction of such a category as the normative, bounded, unified, representational cinematic text, subject to a certain immanent, analyzable logic; *second*,

¹² Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," 281; emphasis original. Cf. also: "This means that difference makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. Without the possibility of difference, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space. That means by the same token that this desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction. Difference produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 143).

how that same abstracted, normative text is utilized to produce a set of conditions for normative spectatorship that implicitly initiates a corresponding, normative subjectivity; *third*, how that abstract text is hypostatized to become not simply a normative category but an ideal one, serving not only as the foundational norm for a specific mode of representation (classical Hollywood cinema) but in fact for all posited cinematic modes, the very possibility of the existence of which modes is realized in relation to the same abstracted norm; and, *fourth*, how the same abstracted, normative text—including its corresponding logic and corresponding normative spectatorship—in turn forms the basis for a further set of criteria that establish the parameters for a prescriptive critical and theoretical practice. Before we commence with this reading, however, it is worth attending in some detail to the question of method.

2. “Problems of Outlining”

i. Wherever We Are...

My selection from among the specific texts authored or co-authored by David Bordwell is based on a number of related factors; it is worth spending some time reflecting upon the advantages and limitations of these factors in detail. I must emphasize first, though, that to identify certain structures or logic informing the theoretical models that emerge from Bordwell’s writing is not to attempt to point to some larger project or agenda on behalf of which a particular author labours, or in the service of which

¹³ On the irrelevance of such formulations see Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 157–65.

particular texts manifest and situate themselves.¹⁴ It would be inappropriate to seek to apprehend some biographical or other sort of extratextual frame that served as structuring mechanism for a theoretical project. This study engages no material other than various concepts as they may be found to materialize in the “play of language,” the “chains of signification” of the texts being studied, and likewise their play within the broader discursive economy.¹⁵ Unfortunately, this refusal to demarcate the bounds of a project in accordance with some textually or extratextually posited unity does not assuage, but rather only serves to aggravate, the sorts of methodological difficulties that Jacques Derrida has characterized as “problems of outlining,” of circumscribing and unifying a given body of work in the process of reading it.¹⁶ What is more, each of these surely must be acknowledged themselves to be *empirical* problems.¹⁷ Author, texts, passages, specific subject matter engaged, oftentimes obliquely, within each passage, and, surely

¹⁴ Such an attempt would not constitute the first. See, for example, Robert B. Ray, “The Bordwell Regime and the Stakes of Knowledge,” *Strategies* 1 (1988): 142–181; Andrew Britton, “The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole: Wisconsin Formalism and ‘The Classical Style’,” *CineAction!* 15 (winter 1988–89): 47–63; Barry King, “The Wisconsin Project,” *Screen* 27, no. 6 (November–December 1986): 74–88; and “The Story Continues...Or the Wisconsin Project Part II,” *Screen* 28, no. 3 (summer 1987): 56–82; and, finally, Kristin Thompson, “Wisconsin Project or King’s Projection?,” *Screen* 29, no. 1 (winter 1988): 48–53; and David Bordwell, “Adventures in the Highlands of Theory,” *Screen* 29, no. 1 (winter 1988): 72–97. That Bordwell’s work has already been subject to such “outlining,” however, cannot simply be ignored, insofar as this sort of hypostatization profoundly affects the relative currency of the work in question within the broader economy of film-theoretical discourse.

¹⁵ On this refusal to presuppose a unified object of study, cf. especially Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158–9. In particular, Derrida cautions that “[t]he security with which the commentary considers the self-identity of the text, the confidence with which it carves out its contour, goes hand in hand with the tranquil assurance that leaps over the text toward its presumed content, in the direction of the pure signified” (159; emphasis original). On the “play of language,” see Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*, 95–6.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 160.

¹⁷ Cf. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 162.

not least among these, the nature of my responses—each of these constitutes a choice that serves fully *to produce* the object of study through a critical reading of it.¹⁸

These choices are never fully justifiable. Derrida does counsel that a recognition of such problems should permit (1) an acknowledgement of the historical situatedness of the epistemological assumptions that motivate one's own reading strategy; (2) the possibility of a need for justification of the particular "path" to be taken through the object-text in question; and (3) a possible need to account for the precise selection of texts to be analyzed.¹⁹ For Derrida, the requirement of these sorts of justifications in turn prompts his assertion that the corresponding choices are necessarily "exorbitant," insofar as they are amenable not within the criteria of the empiricism that constitutes the necessity of their being made, but rather within the project that seeks to "exceed" it.²⁰ In summary, Derrida offers the assurance that "[w]e must begin *wherever we are* and the thought of the trace, which cannot not take the scent into account, has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be."²¹ And thus in Derrida's decision, for example, to read Rousseau, and even then only certain passages, the criterion for selection becomes not Rousseau's limited historical "privilege," but rather the extent to which the texts in question seem "to be most revealing."²² It remains for me, then, to say something about the choices I have made in reading David Bordwell's film-theoretical writing.

¹⁸ Cf. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 160–1.

²⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 161–2.

²¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 162; emphasis original.

²² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 162.

ii. A Rigorous and Robust Theory

What is the nature of Bordwell's usefulness here? The extent of David Bordwell's contribution to contemporary academic film-theoretical discourse must be measured in no terms other than those suggested by the role it is assigned, however ambivalent or contradictory that role may be, within the discipline's own discursive economy. There can be little doubt that this role has been great, if difficult to measure empirically. This disciplinary attention to Bordwell's work certainly constitutes a component in my decision to attend to it, but there are other factors. First among these is that Bordwell's work has consistently made theoretical accounts of film signification and textuality one of its primary concerns. For example, Bordwell's theories of cinematic narrative are simply unparalleled in their depth and detail, as are his justifications of the theoretical grounds within which he establishes his case. That Bordwell's scholarly rhetoric is so fastidious and rigorous allows it to stand up to substantial scrutiny, but also necessarily makes it all the more compelling for deconstructive critique.²³

Bordwell's work here follows—and, I suspect, should be read as an explicit engagement with—previous attempts to model the logic of film signification through recourse to structural or formal analysis of continuity editing and narrative comprehensibility. We may count Noël Burch's formalist *Theory of Film Practice* and Christian Metz's structuralist-semiotic model among these.²⁴ That Bordwell's work

²³ On the productive relationship between textual rigour and opportunities for deconstruction, see below (§ I, 3, i).

²⁴ Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, translated by Helen R. Lane (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973); Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, translated by Michael Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); and *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the*

should be read foremost as a continuation of this tradition and not a break from it is something that I hope to make evident through the course of this analysis. Foremost, however, is simply the notion that each of these theories constitutes an attempt to rationalize a certain formula of cinematic narration as the zero-degree of cinema, and to model it through the formalization of an abstract logic of realist representation.²⁵

What distinguishes Bordwell's work, and what is of primary interest, given the goal of my study, is the range of film-theoretical concerns that it addresses. The total body of Bordwell's work not only incorporates a set of explicitly theoretical projects, but comprises enquiries into theoretical structure at a variety of different levels, engaging, at various moments, not only film theory's *de facto* primary objects of study—individual cinematic texts as such—but also film-theoretical discourse proper. While *Narration in the Fiction Film*, for example, operates primarily to construct a profoundly detailed model of a certain normative logic of narrative signification, *Making Meaning* attempts to classify processes at work in the film-theoretical production of interpretive meaning. Yet these particular projects are never entirely exclusive of one another. Even *Making Meaning*, ostensibly concerned with describing certain institutionalized practices within the discipline, necessarily reproduces and renegotiates a certain logic of textual signification in the process. Likewise, the findings of *Narration in the Fiction Film* become evidence in favour of Bordwell's preferred theoretical project of "historical

Cinema, translated by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

²⁵ What precisely constitutes a "model" of film signification is perhaps simply a matter of an arbitrary degree of relative formalization in the logic of the theory in question. Cf. Foucault's description of the "economy of the discursive constellation" in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 74.

poetics.” It is the diagnosis of precisely this sort of concentric functioning of various levels of film-theoretical discourse that is of paramount interest here.

In selecting from among Bordwell’s various writings, I have attempted to achieve neither utter comprehensiveness, nor even what might be considered a determinately representative sample of some abstractly posited, total body of Bordwell’s work, insofar as one might be considered to exist (and we have already seen why it may not); rather, I have proceeded in a fashion that serves best to permit analysis of a specific, radically contingent logic of signification, and of its structuring role across various levels of film-theoretical discourse. For this reason I have worked liberally with materials culled from a modest variety of written texts authored or co-authored by David Bordwell, comprising both books and journal articles, the latter including invited responses to critics.²⁶ The selected books are well-known works, perhaps more likely to be considered as exemplary sites of exposition of the theories in question; nevertheless, I have tended not to privilege the authority of any one text over any other, and enlightenment on certain issues has, indeed, often been found in unlikely places.²⁷

²⁶ In certain instances it has seemed appropriate to read Janet Staiger’s and Kristin Thompson’s contributions to *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* along with Bordwell’s. The three authors’ arguments are frequently, by necessity, co-dependent and therefore somewhat inextricable in terms of their mutually constituted determining logic and theoretical foundations. Although the decision to conflate the writing of Staiger and Thompson with that of Bordwell does not sit well with me for a number of reasons, I follow the authors’ own guidance on this matter (“Although parts and chapters are the work of single authors, we have conceived and executed the book as a unified argument, sharing assumptions and terminology. We have not, however, striven for complete homogeneity” [Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), xv]). I have opted in citations of *CHC* to note in each instance the individual author or authors.

²⁷ Attention to purported textual “margins” constitutes familiar deconstructive strategy. Derrida, in his reading of Kant’s third *Critique*, reflects: “It may appear that I am taking unfair advantage by persisting with two or three possibly fortuitous examples from a secondary subchapter; and that it would be better to go to less marginal places in the work, nearer to the center or the heart of the matter [*le fond*]. To be sure. The objection presupposes that one already knows what is at the center or at the heart of the third *Critique*,

iii. *Attitude toward Object-Theory and Extant Readings thereof*

Some comments on the marked limitations of my engagement with Bordwell's writing are also in order. First, I must stress that this project does not aspire to polemic or to the denigration of Bordwell's work, of his choice of founding theoretical assumptions, his methodology, or his prescriptive theoretical project. The self-imposed task of reading Bordwell's texts is in some respects infelicitous, insofar as that author has already been subject to thoroughgoing criticism on a variety of grounds and in a variety of contexts. I do not intend for this project to initiate further specific criticisms. On the contrary, there are relatively few aspects of Bordwell's theory to which, were that theory considered *on its own merit*—i.e., in accordance with the standards and criteria implied by Bordwell's own methodology and theoretical commitments—I might raise serious objection. I am sincere in my insistence that it is only the conceptual density and rigour of Bordwell's writing that make it so fruitful for this sort of analysis.²⁸ My goal is simply to re-read the sorts of structures already at work at various levels within the text, with a particular emphasis on their relationship to and within the broader epistemological problems of signification, textuality, and reference that I have been discussing.

that one has already located its frame and the limit of its field. But nothing seems more difficult to determine...I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a work" (Jacques Derrida, "Parergon," in *The Truth in Painting*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987]), 63). See also, e.g., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface," in *Of Grammatology*, by Jacques Derrida, lxxvi; and "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chriaman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66; Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 161–2; Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 139–40.

²⁸ Deconstructive readings generally do not exploit conceptually weak writing; rather, the sorts of structures of signification (marks of *différance*, etc.) that they claim to identify are necessarily present in any self-referential text; see, e.g., Barbara Johnson, "Translator's Introduction," in *Dissemination*, by Jacques Derrida, xv–xvi.

For similar reasons, a thorough review of the range of extant critical response to David Bordwell's work lies, regrettably, outside the immediate scope of this project.²⁹ The exclusion of such a review is not by any means intended to deny the relevance of such a body of critical literature to my own work. Indeed, this relevance holds in at least two respects. The first of these concerns is, not surprisingly, the fact that much of what is worth pointing out in the present context has already been said more elegantly and with greater authority elsewhere; many aspects of my discussion will be, wherever appropriate, situated within the context of existing literature. The second concern, no less important, relates to the role that such a body of critical literature, expansive as it is, might play in performatively situating Bordwell's work within the discursive economy of academic

²⁹ A comprehensive recounting of the extant literature here would constitute a Herculean task in its own right. It is sufficient, I think, to point out that most criticisms of Bordwell have tended to engage the nuances of his arguments in their specificity. Familiar targets are include his methodology in producing the classical Hollywood cinema as stylistic norm; his characterization of critical interpretation and its disciplinary implications; the specificity or non-specificity of his narrational model; and the lack of social or political engagement permitted by his formal poetics.

See, for example (and this list is by no means intended to be exhaustive): Robert B. Ray, "The Bordwell Regime"; Andrew Britton, "The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole"; Barry King, "The Wisconsin Project"; King, "The Story Continues...Or the Wisconsin Project Part II"; Rick Altman, "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (spring 1989): 321–359; Bill Nichols, "Form Wars: The Political Unconscious of Formalist Theory," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (spring 1989): 487–515; Edward Branigan, "On the Analysis of Interpretive Language (Part I)," *Film Criticism* 27, no. 2–3 (winter–spring 1993): 4–21; Rick Altman, "Film Studies, Inc.: Lessons from the Past About the Current Institutionalization of Film Studies," *Film Criticism* 27, no. 2–3 (winter–spring 1993): 22–30; David A. Cook, "Making Sense," *Film Criticism* 27, no. 2–3 (winter–spring 1993): 31–39; Thomas Elsaesser, "Film Studies in Search of the Object," *Film Criticism* 27, no. 2–3 (winter–spring 1993): 40–47; E. Ann Kaplan, "Disorderly Disciplines," *Film Criticism* 27, no. 2–3 (winter–spring 1993): 48–52; Bruce F. Kawin, "Wild Blueberry Muffins," *Film Criticism* 27, no. 2–3 (winter–spring 1993): 53–55; Robert B. Ray, "Film Studies/Crisis/Experimentation," *Film Criticism* 27, no. 2–3 (winter–spring 1993): 56–78; Robin Wood, "Critical Positions and the End of Civilization; or, A Refusal to Join the Club," *Film Criticism* 27, no. 2–3 (winter–spring 1993): 79–92; Colin MacCabe, "Preface," in Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*; Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*, 1–27; Žižek, "Da Capo senza Fine," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 213–262.

film theory. Indeed, my own work, itself a re-reading of Bordwell, comprises a response to—and aspires to fruitful intervention in—this very situation.

3. Deconstruction as Performance, Performance as Deconstruction

Simply to observe these sorts of relationships, and to describe in exhaustive detail the precise structure and functional logic of Bordwell's abstracted, ideal cinematic narrative text, would be to risk simply performing a repetition of it. It is not my goal to re-describe, re-summarize, or re-abstract an already abstract structure. Certainly, it is my objective to isolate certain structures of signification, but this is only in the interest of placing them in an historical context in order to reveal the conditions of their possibility. This work constitutes familiar archaeological and deconstructive practice; I have already outlined some of the broader methodological principles I apprehend to guide this sort of analysis. In the process of performing this reading, however, we ought to supplement these principles with those of a further reading strategy, one aimed at addressing problems encountered at the level of Bordwell's *writing* proper. For this purpose I have sought recourse in the use of certain *deconstructive* strategies of reading, those oriented toward an engagement with certain problems and contradictions encountered within the very fabric of the texts. While the primary work of this project remains the investigation of certain structures of signification and textuality operating within Bordwell's theoretical models, deconstructive work will benefit us at moments when it immediately serves the

interests of that task, as when close attention to the surface of the texts in question is warranted.³⁰

i. A Tentative Performance

The inventory of available deconstructive tactics is broad, and these procedures have been both well documented and widely contested.³¹ Because I suspect that what I am attempting here will, in its execution, likely suggest no more than a rather tentative, limited *performance* of a particular deconstructive practice, with some of its techniques seeming more appropriate than others, I think it necessary to offer a very brief overview of the sorts of principles in accordance with which I shall try to operate.

Deconstruction as a technique for close textual reading finds its origin in Derrida's contention that any writing within logocentric metaphysics—that which works continually to privilege the transcendental object through its attempts to subject structures of signification to analysis and reduction—will itself contain a trace or mark of

³⁰ That the formation here, within the structure determining the priority of my own methodology, is *supplementary* in the Derridean sense is clear; a (Derridean) methodology of textual deconstruction supplements, is appurtenant to, what is essentially a (Foucauldian) archaeology—namely that which determines the epistemic configuration that I argue informs the thinking of cinema as analyzable sign and structure. And so, in an arguably self-deconstructive move, a certain metaphysics is hereby replicated. On the “uncanny repetition” between what a text does and what it says, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 137–8. See below for specific discussion of my limited commitments to deconstructive technique.

³¹ Deconstruction, like the broader poststructuralist epistemology in which it is generally situated, by no means comprises a homogeneous catalogue of procedures or commitments. I am not concerned to engage the problem of certain tendencies in the North American reception and use of French “poststructuralism.” Rather, I wish simply to allow my methodological decisions to stand on their own merit. The writing that has helped to shape my limited understanding of deconstructive technique include, most notably, Jacques Derrida, “The Exorbitant Question of Method,” in *Of Grammatology*, 157–164; and Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*. See also Barbara Johnson, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Dissemination*, xiii–xvi; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” in *Of Grammatology*, lxxiii–lxxviii.

différance, and so of the purported originary split from absolute presence upon which the articulating systems of language and knowledge are founded. This perceived split is reconstituted in a chain of binary oppositions (signifier/signified, absence/presence, writing/speech) that structure western metaphysics. It is precisely this trace that deconstruction seeks not only to locate but also to invert and to displace, by revealing contradictions or ambiguities that systematically function to structure a given text. Thus we witness in Derrida's reading of Rousseau—and, in particular, in the reading of Rousseau's ambivalent usage of the word *supplement*—the location of the paradoxical structure of logocentric metaphysics within the very structure of the text itself.³² In this manner, deconstruction initiates, as Barbara Johnson observes, an "elaboration of a critique of the metaphysical forces that structure and smother difference in every text," one which furthermore assumes, among other things, that "certain levels of any rigorous text will engender a systematic double mark of the insistent but invisible contradiction or difference (the repression of) which is necessary for and in the text's very elaboration."³³ And so the goal of deconstruction is not to judge writing to be faulty on the basis of isolated inconsistencies or flaws in logic, but rather to demonstrate how a certain fundamental ambivalence or contradiction necessarily structures and organizes its very possibility.

³² See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 141ff, 163; *Dissemination*, 70–1, 95–6 (where the structuring contradiction is centred on the play of the sign *pharmakon* in Plato's *Phaedrus*); Spivak, "Translator's Preface," lxxv; Johnson, "Translator's Introduction," xiv. A famously productive use of the technique can be found in Spivak's deconstruction of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze's transparent initiation of a particular subaltern subjectivity, which she achieves by reading their use of the term "representation" to signify interchangeably both the theorist's "speaking on behalf of" (*vertreten*) and "standing for" (*darstellen*) the subaltern subject; see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 69–72.

³³ Johnson, "Translator's Introduction," xvi.

Such a structuring contradiction could presumably, through the lens of a deconstructive heuristic, be found to constitute the very basis of David Bordwell's conception of cinematic signification and textuality. The location of such a contradiction as some sort of organizing totality within Bordwell's writing is not the primary concern of this study.³⁴ Nevertheless, it is clear that deconstructive work will be of tremendous assistance in addressing certain structuring contradictions that tend to recur within the "play of language" in Bordwell's work.

ii. Deconstruction, Film, and Film Theory

Deconstructive technique originated, as I have suggested, in Jacques Derrida's critique of various writings in the western philosophical tradition—those of Rousseau, Kant, Plato, etc.—that constitute the *thinking* of problems of representation and

³⁴ My commitment to deconstruction is such that I recognize its limited methodological value in situations encountered in the process of close textual reading, particularly those where ambivalence in the "chain of signification" does indeed point to a fundamental structuring contradiction. I am less certain of the immediate value, for our purposes here, of deconstructive critique that exploits "fortuitous" puns and etymologies (for a discussion and defense of this method, see Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 141–151). Jonathan Culler has observed that deconstruction as an interpretive framework does not transcend the sorts of problems that such frameworks inevitably introduce, noting that "[e]ach theory sheds light on certain questions and the error would be to assume that these were the only questions," and that "deconstruction practices a style of reading, encouraging critics to identify or produce certain types of structure" (*On Deconstruction*, 207, 213). I recognize that this ambivalent methodological commitment introduces a "blind spot" within the structuring hierarchy that organizes my own writing, as follows: archaeological work attempts to reach beneath the surface of the text, to unify it, in order to retrieve its "pure" signified content, while deconstruction locates contradictions manifest in the play of signifiers. And yet Derrida, it seems to me, might recognize that this is justifiable as a necessary consequence of the nature of the object text:

Even if there is never a pure signified, there are different relationships as to that which, from the signifier, is *presented* as the irreducible stratum of the signified. For example, the philosophical text, although it is in fact always written, includes, precisely as its philosophical specificity, the project of effacing itself in the face of the signified content which it transports and in general teaches. Reading should be aware of this project, even if, in the last analysis, it intends to expose the project's failure. (*Of Grammatology*, 160)

knowledge. It seems to me that deconstruction is most effective when applied to this sort of writing; for better or for worse, I read Derrida's project as first and foremost an engagement with—a deconstruction of—the way in which the thinking of representation and knowledge is self-reflexively produced and performed through the process and tradition of its *being-written as theory*. Nevertheless, as is well known, Derrida's ideas have come to enjoy far broader influence in certain North American academic contexts, and in literary studies in particular. While the appropriation of Derrida's work has occurred to a considerably lesser extent in Anglo-American film studies—largely limited, it would seem, to the deconstructive reading of cinematic texts³⁵—we ought to attend very briefly to some of the extant, putatively deconstructive film-theoretical discourse. Indeed, this consideration in itself will allow us, in what will surely constitute an uncanny redoubling, both to initiate and to exemplify just the sort of film-theoretical deconstructive practice that I have in mind.

The most systematic attempt to import deconstruction into film theory seems to be that initiated by Peter Brunette and David Wills.³⁶ In a highly original and wide-ranging work, Brunette and Wills set out to apply a vast catalogue of Derridean procedures to various aspects of cinema and film theory. They outline the historical and institutional

³⁵ See, in particular, the discussion in David Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 22–24 and *passim*. See also the overviews provided in Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-structuralism, and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Peter Brunette, "Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction," in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 91–95.

³⁶ Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

reasons for film theory's rejection of Derrida, and assert that Derridean deconstruction may and ought to be employed for political ends;³⁷ indeed, their insights in these particular respects seem to me to be of considerable value. What is fascinating to observe, however, is how, in proceeding with their attempt to apply deconstruction to film theory, Brunette and Wills simply reconstitute a certain, dominant thinking of the ontology of the cinematic object itself. It will be elucidating for our purposes to consider briefly how this is so.

First, Brunette and Wills attempt to deconstruct, in turn, the assumptions that govern the thinking of certain, predominant sub-disciplines of film theory, namely film history, authorship studies, and genre.³⁸ Their discussion of each of these provides what is admittedly trenchant critique of the ways in which the respective methodologies of these fields serve to minimize differences and thus to limit knowledge structures (via an emphasis on movements and periods; teleological narratives of filmmakers' careers and biographies; etc.). It is important for our purposes, however, to observe how this engagement with the specific methods of various supplementary film-theoretical discourses serves, quite simply, *to reconstitute the anteriority of the cinematic text itself as object of knowledge*.

Second, Brunette and Wills's subsequent move to deconstruct the cinematic text proper (occurring, as it does, uncannily, only *after* a framing discussion of various framing discourses) necessarily works to reproduce certain dominant assumptions about the very nature of the cinematic medium itself. Consider the precise manner in which

³⁷ Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 20–29.

they begin to deconstruct cinematic signification. At the outset of a chapter tellingly entitled “Film as Writing,” Brunette and Wills argue, in what will become their founding assumption, that “to the extent that [film] is a language, it is to be considered as a type of writing.” This is so, they suggest, even though “the visual occupies a position of primacy with respect to the verbal similar to that which speech occupies with respect to the written.” Despite this putative mimesis afforded by cinema, cinema is in fact more like writing (i.e. in a denigrated, supplementary position) because it requires the articulation of an “apparatus.”³⁹ With this claim having been made, Brunette and Wills assert: “If it can be agreed that the Derridean concept of writing applies also to film, it then becomes a matter of the strategy implied by such an application.”⁴⁰ We need not attend to the impenetrable logic of this manoeuvre, in which cinema is shown ontologically to be a more privileged representation than speech, only to have a distancing re-inscribed upon it through the invoking of the “apparatus”; we need simply to witness the extent to which the attempt to justify the deconstruction of cinema itself *necessitates the direct positing of an ontology of the cinematic apparatus*, namely the imputation of its identity to Derridean “writing.” Later, Brunette and Wills undertake analyses of such phenomena as the screen-as-hymen, and cinema as an “anagram of the real,”⁴¹ before proceeding with a pair of minimally engaging textual deconstructions. The authors thus, in the course of their insistent attempts to import Derridean techniques into film studies, earnestly apply an array of deconstructive techniques to film theories of textual categorization and analysis,

³⁸ Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 33–60.

³⁹ Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 61, 62.

⁴⁰ Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 61, 62.

to film theories of signification, to the ontology of cinema, to material elements of the apparatus itself, and to individual cinematic texts. The sort of multi-layered theorization that Brunette and Wills undertake simply works to re-inaugurate, to re-establish a certain cinematic ontology by reproducing an existing meta-theoretical economy of supplementary discourses, texts, translinguistically conceived signifying logic, and apparatus.

Conversely, it is not sufficient simply to demonstrate the functioning of a certain set of epistemological or methodological commitments within a given film-theoretical discourse. Rather, it is necessary to demonstrate how those commitments operate to structure the thinking of that theory's objects of study in their entirety. A further example from within extant film-theoretical criticism will perhaps serve to illustrate what I mean by this. In his critique of Bordwell's formalist conception of classical Hollywood cinema, Robert B. Ray thoroughly condemns Bordwell's founding assumptions, diagnosing the methodology and epistemological position of his arguments as falling squarely within the tradition of positivist empirical research.⁴² The critique is an informative and admirable one, but does little to suggest how the logical structure of Bordwell's argumentation in turn structures and produces his conception of the cinematic text itself, i.e., what theoretical objects precisely are prescribed (or are prescribable, or are likewise excluded). Surely the empirical logic of Bordwell's science manifests itself plainly in the very models that it produces and situates, as is apparent from even a cursory

⁴¹ Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 85, 88.

⁴² Robert B. Ray, "The Bordwell Regime and the Stakes of Knowledge."

examination of the internal functionality of the cognitive-narrational model and the categories of text that it serves both to posit and to exclude.

My point here is that it is not sufficient simply to deconstruct the founding assumptions that govern and inform the methodology of theoretical practice. Rather it must also be shown how those assumptions in turn necessarily conceive and shape the very objects of study themselves, as in the case of Bordwell's positing, via the cognitive-narrational model, such an object as the stylistically and narratively unified, self-identical cinematic text—certainly a quintessential projection of empiricist logic. It is a procedural necessity, then, to determine not only the various historical discourses that may inform a theoretical model, but also the various levels at which those discourses may insert and perpetuate themselves. Only in this way may we investigate the contingency of the relationship between theoretical methods and the nature of objects. With this in mind, it is appropriate now to turn to just such an exploration of the functioning of Bordwell's theory.

II. BORDWELL'S TEXT (I): *A PRIORI*

Introduction: Epistemology, Methodology, Ontology

*"All these criteria—broad but not unlimited scope, internal coherence, empirical adequacy, the ability to be disconfirmed—are ones by which a theoretical argument ought to be judged..."*⁴³

Despite its employment of a broadly derivative set of conceptual tools and methodological manoeuvres, David Bordwell's theoretical project adheres rigidly to a fundamentally critical-realist approach to problems of cinematic signification, textuality, and spectatorship. This is, I think, something that is apparent enough from even the most casual of glosses of Bordwell's writing, and something that I hope to make more apparent through close analysis of the way in which the normative cinematic text comes to be conceived. Still, it is worth pointing out Bordwell's stated commitments to this sort of epistemology. We witness, for example, his affirmation first that his constructivist-psychological approach "assumes that it is possible to arrive at inferences which are at least approximately true; it is thus compatible with a critical realist epistemology,"⁴⁴ but then that this psychology "is perfectly compatible with a realist epistemology."⁴⁵ Elsewhere, Bordwell identifies his approach as that of a "constructive realist."⁴⁶ We need not attempt to distinguish the precise sorts of self-identification each of these claims entails. It is worth noting, however, that two of these claims appear in endnotes. While I do not doubt Bordwell's firm commitment to a particular epistemology, we ought to take

⁴³ David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 253.

⁴⁴ *Making Meaning*, 3, n. 9 (pp. 277–8).

⁴⁵ "Adventures in the Highlands of Theory," 86.

⁴⁶ Bordwell, "A Case for Cognitivism," *Iris* 9 (spring 1989): 11–40; see in particular n. 8.

notice of how the suppression of any avowed assertion of that commitment enables an avoidance of any discussion of its particular contingency, and thus implicitly permits Bordwell's method to assume a privileged, quasi-transcendental epistemological status.

For our purposes the significance of the critical-realist approach is twofold. First, critical realism presupposes the stability of an anterior, unified object world having extension in space and time. Second, there is a highly stipulative commitment to the representability of that object world by way of certain configurations of knowledge and representation. Those configurations are in turn subject to rigorous scrutiny and interrogation. What determines the parameters of this interrogation? Quite simply (and tautologically), the arbitrary bounds of self-imposed methodological rigour serve fully to determine the conditions under which knowledge may be obtained.⁴⁷ As the epigrammatic quotation above suggests, this approach is guided by criteria of "empirical adequacy"; as we have seen, this discursive formation is itself radically contingent. It is not my objective to prove or disprove the value of this method, although certain limitations may make themselves apparent as we proceed. Indeed, it is my intention primarily to allow the various connections that hold between epistemology, methodology,

⁴⁷ Here the most elucidating texts are Nelson Goodman, *The Structure of Appearance*; W. V. Quine, *From A Logical Point of View*. Cf., for example, the "self-imposed formality requirement" that restricts Noam Chomsky's linguistic studies to the cataloguing of syntactical and phonological rules, omitting semantics entirely as unverifiable. See Chomsky, *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 18ff, 87–8. Chomsky's methodological work cites Goodman and Quine heavily, but does not seem (as far as I can tell, from a tentative reading of Chomsky) to register the criticisms inherent in their writings. I mention Chomsky because I think there is to be found an important parallel between the way in which Chomsky's and Bordwell's "self-imposed formality requirements" govern their respective apprehensions of the salient features of representational structures.

and object (whether that object be text, theory, etc.) to become clear as we proceed through the various layers of structuration that produce the normative cinematic text.

In the sections that follow, I shall therefore attempt to demonstrate how a certain set of critical-realist commitments enables the introduction of a certain theory of representation, against which is negotiated, yet into which is fully incorporated, a certain notion of cinematic textuality. I will demonstrate that this is achieved, for example, through the naturalization of certain assumptions concerning the translinguistic nature of the signifying process of aesthetic texts, drawn in turn from a profoundly heterogeneous set of conceptual schemata, compiled variously from, for example, formalist and structuralist literary theories, cognitive psychology, and popular discourse. What ultimately results, then, is a conception of the cinema as a normatively operational, language-like signifying system; within that system immanently logical texts are capable of representing, with greater or lesser efficacy, a specific sort of anterior object world, invested with a certain, contingent metaphysical ontology. Let us begin, then, with the broadest of these concentric spheres—the very notion of representation.

1. A Realist Model of Representation

There are several fundamental principles of the nature of representation that are presupposed in Bordwell's work, following strictly from a certain set of critical-realist epistemological commitments, and serving implicitly to inform the logic of normative cinematic signification that is developed. These may be briefly summarized as follows: *first*, that there may exist such an entity as a self-identical text; *second*, that such a text

may refer determinately or truthfully to an anterior object world; *third*, that cinema may constitute such a text; *fourth*, that, because cinema may be seen to operate in accordance with a certain, medium-transcendent logic of signification, a commitment to certain translinguistic or semiotic principles must hold; *fifth*, that normative signification is in turn fully comprehensible via a set of analyzable, normative spectatorial processes, operating independently of and transcending individual subject positions. I maintain firmly that none of these commitments may be presupposed as ontologically given, except within a certain radically contingent discourse of knowledge and signification. Yet it is precisely this set of assumptions that is at work in the production of an abstract category of normative—classical—cinematic signification. Before dealing with the means by which the notion of a classical cinematic model is introduced and described, it is therefore worth exploring briefly how these principles, in their broadest conceptualization, are naturalized within Bordwell's writing.

i. The Bounded Text

First, it is worth observing that the text is, for Bordwell, to be apprehended as a complete, bounded object, standing independently of both a rational, comprehending subject and a complete, anterior object world. That the text may or may not determinately stand for some referent is, at this point, secondary; all that is at issue for the moment is the very notion of the existence of some signifying entity that exists in integral, identifiable form anterior to a spectator. This notion of textuality is, as we have seen, situated in a specific, positivist discourse of the nature of representation. It is, after all,

only upon isolating the text as a discretely bounded entity that it may be subjected to analysis as a knowable object in its own right; specifically, it is this process of isolation that permits a discourse of what may or may not be included within the category of textuality, independently of the vicissitudes of subjective interpretive schemata. Various threads within poststructuralism have famously called into question the very notion of a self-identical, integral text through, for example, discussions of notions of textual framing or outlining.⁴⁸ But it is clear that Bordwell is reluctant even to acknowledge such critiques—consider, for example, the pithy prefatory assertion in *Making Meaning* that “[d]ebates within hermeneutics or Wittgensteinian ruminations on the concept of reading lie only on the fringes of this book.”⁴⁹ Effectively, Bordwell allows the idea of the integral text to stand wholly unquestioned;⁵⁰ this is consistent with his attempts to naturalize his adoption of a realist epistemology.

ii. *Contingency Naturalized*

The assumption of this founding position is markedly evident in the way in which a “thumbnail history” of interpretation, provided early in *Making Meaning*, serves

⁴⁸ See, in particular, Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*. Derrida problematizes the status of the frame as a “decisive structure” that lies “at the invisible limit” between the “interiority of meaning” and “all the empiricisms of the extrinsic” (“Parergon,” in *The Truth in Painting*, 61). Cf. also the brief discussion of parergonality in Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 193–9.

⁴⁹ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, xii.

⁵⁰ E. Ann Kaplan suggests that the broader discipline of film studies is complicit in this failure to problematize the notion of the “text.” Commenting on *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Kaplan observes “that the object was the film—and its related institutions and historical contexts—was not in doubt. Currently, such an assumption about texts as objects of study has, indeed, been questioned in many other fields, producing a whole different level of debate than is going on in film” (Kaplan, “Disorderly Disciplines,” *Film Criticism* 27, no. 2–3 [winter-spring 1993]: 50).

implicitly to naturalize the category of “text” by concentrating entirely on discourses of interpretive *practice*.⁵¹ By presenting, in loose chronology, certain Classical, Judeo-Christian, and modern western approaches to textual interpretation as part of a “remarkably coherent tradition,”⁵² Bordwell assumes as culturally and historically invariable a certain notion of the *text-object itself*, i.e. the fundamental continuity of the very *object* of interpretation.⁵³ That the configuration of the relationship between subject, sign, and object is not historically stable is, of course, clear.⁵⁴ Effectively, then, Bordwell’s “history” works to subsume heterogeneous approaches to the way in which representation is thought within a single, post-Kantian, normative model of textuality.

This is made further apparent via the sorts of interpretive methods that Bordwell incorporates within the “coherent tradition,” such as Derrida’s “symptomatic reading” of the “subversive force of writing.”⁵⁵ Effectively, then, Bordwell initiates a certain model of textuality, in accordance with a certain, radically contingent, empiricist conception of

⁵¹ *Making Meaning*, 14–17.

⁵² *Making Meaning*, 14.

⁵³ Cf., for example, Foucault: “The isolation of different points of emergence does not conform to the successive configurations of an identical meaning” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977], 151).

⁵⁴ Seminal here are the extensive discussions in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, and Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*; also of particular interest, given the conspicuously Classical/Judeo-Christian trajectory of Bordwell’s history, is Northrop Frye’s insistence that the metaphysical role of language itself has evolved historically, and therefore that the nature of Biblical and literary interpretive practice itself must be viewed as operating in relation to an evolution in the predominant conception of the very text itself. See Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982), 3–30. Bordwell’s provision of this history also does much to align current critical interpretive practice within a specific tradition, and implicitly, to subordinate it to a certain practice of textual comprehension; more will be said about this presently.

⁵⁵ *Making Meaning*, 17. While I do not doubt that, in many instances, deconstructivist practice effectively re-initiates the category of the stable text as an interpretable object (cf. Brunette and Wills), I think it is sufficiently clear that Derrida’s work attempts to eradicate the category altogether, retaining it only in the form of an operationally necessary construct.

knowledge structures, and proceeds to naturalize and normalize it, by retroactively reading a limited set of historical interpretive practices as functioning in accordance with the same model. That this technique of naturalization of a specific, “normative” mode is a common technique for Bordwell will become increasingly clear.

iii. A Model of Representation

Second, it is possible to observe how this immanently logical, self-identical text comes to be situated within a certain theory of normative representation that serves to contain, regulate, and normalize the text’s operation. That this model of representation is for Bordwell specifically applicable to cinema and, furthermore, to aesthetic works and fictional narratives (both cinematic and non-cinematic) is clear, but not of primary importance at this point. What is critical here is how a certain medium-transcendent, normative theory of signification and reference comes to be naturalized and adopted.

The model of signification or representation that operates across Bordwell’s work does so for the most part latently, without explicit description. Bordwell does, however, commit explicitly to a certain realist theory of representation in the introductory pages of *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*, and I think that the model that is outlined there can more or less evidently be seen to underlie various other writings.⁵⁶ The ways in which

⁵⁶ Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). It is worth noting the frequently enclitic structure of Bordwell’s writing, with fundamental commitments being borne by citations to passages in earlier works; thus *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* points back, via endnote, to the description of representation offered in *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (Bordwell, “An Excessively Obvious Cinema,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 6, n. 10 [page 416]); *Narration in the Fiction Film* in turn points back to *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* [Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985], 156, n. 1 [page 349]); and *Making Meaning* directs the reader to *Narration in the Fiction Film* (3, n. 8 [page 277]).

this is so will become more apparent once we turn to a specific discussion of the process of the production of a normative model of cinematic representation; indeed, it will soon become clear how the model of classical cinematic narration embodies and is subtended by the fundamental principles of a normative theory of representation. For the moment, we must be concerned only with Bordwell's subscription to *the very notion of a normative theory of representation* in the broadest sense, and in this respect the Dreyer text is most useful.

Again, the ontological commitment that motivates the description in *Dreyer* is not rendered explicitly. There is no interrogation of or reflection on the assumptions that are in play. Consider, specifically, how the model of representation in question is introduced—namely, with the purpose of enabling the formalist argument that Dreyer's films interrogate the very processes of representation themselves.⁵⁷ Thus Bordwell quickly initiates for cinema a certain theory of normative representation—in fact, no less than a certain ontology of cinematic signification and reference—but only for its value to a formalist critical practice. Let us for the moment set aside any investigation of the peculiarities of this,⁵⁸ and observe simply that a certain, normative representational model

⁵⁷ "We shall see," Bordwell writes, "how the art work utilizes representation but also sensitizes us to its limits" (*The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*, 7).

⁵⁸ In this respect, namely in the incorporation of a normative model of representation into a theory of artistic texts—which may in turn be seen fundamentally to play in and against the logic of that model—Bordwell's position falls firmly in line with that of the Russian formalists and the Prague structuralists, among others. On the specific methods associated with this sort of practice see Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), especially 55ff. The debates concerning the structure and function of ordinary language versus poetic language are, of course, extensive (in addition to Culler, see, for example, Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 199–204, where Habermas defends the Jakobson-structuralist "poetic language" formulation against Derrida). I shall not attempt to address this debate here, although I shall have something to say about the implications of the specific sort of formalism that Bordwell initiates in due course. What it is useful to recognize at this point

is introduced and described in a manner that serves in no way to question its foundations, but serves rather as an expedient means of initiating a certain practice of formalist criticism.

In that context, Bordwell offers only the briefest sketch of his adopted normative model of representation; this description is nonetheless worth examining, as its implications are substantial. Consider the claims that “[r]epresentation is least problematic when we pass from displayed token to absent meaning,” and likewise that “[r]epresentation becomes troublesome when the passage is blocked (the meaning is opaque) or when the passage seems endless.” Bordwell further remarks that painting, theatre, literature, and cinema (including Dreyer’s) are representational systems, and that as such they both establish “spectatorial positions” and signify “absent entities (truth, reality).”⁵⁹ From this Bordwell moves immediately on to assert the formalist thesis that Dreyer’s films serve to “challenge...conventional readings of representations.”⁶⁰ Each of these points warrants careful consideration.

That what is presented here is a philosophically realist, semantically referential model of signification is evident enough. It is easy to see, for example, how the

is how the formalist theory of aesthetic texts thus necessitates—is dependent upon—a certain theory of normative representation. Indeed, it is fascinating to observe the extent to which the formalist model reiterates the logic of normative (ordinary, non-artistic) representation even as it strives to distinguish artistic representation from it. For example, Bordwell writes that “[t]he art work does not exist simply to transmit a message; if it did, there would be no difference between art and ordinary informational discourse” (*Dreyer*, 7); this sort of move is fascinating insofar as it at once silently yokes aesthetic texts to—or subsumes them under—the rational logic of signification and reference, while attempting to differentiate them within that very system. See also Terry Eagleton’s discussion of how I. A. Richards’s “positivist fantasy” influenced American New Criticism in *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 46ff.

⁵⁹ *Dreyer*, 7.

⁶⁰ *Dreyer*, 7.

establishment of implicitly exterior “spectatorial positions” and absent “truth” serves to endow the representation with self-identical form and referential capacity. The latter characteristic necessarily entails an immanent operational logic and associated measurability of efficacy; thus we are given the description of, on the one hand, the sort of representation that is “least problematic” and, on the other, the sort that is “troublesome,” a distinction of opposite poles which clearly initiates a discourse of degrees of efficacy of signification. Such a discourse must necessarily originate in the possibility of *ideal* signification, i.e. unmediated access to some presence, truth, or a transcendental object of knowledge; language or a representational system may therefore be considered more or less successful to the extent that it achieves total transparency.⁶¹ And yet the formulation we are provided with here is configured in such a way as not only to avoid the category of ideal representability, but also to invert its polarity. We are

⁶¹ The emergence of the modern, positivist discourse of the very thinking of a *pure signifying operation*, or a *discourse of ideal representability*, as a transcendental notion unto itself, wholly independent of representational scheme, is well documented. Foucault describes how, beginning in the nineteenth century, “everything that had functioned within the dimension of the relation between things (as they are represented) and words (with their representative value) has now been drawn back into language and given the task of providing it with an integral legality.” See *The Order of Things*, 368. Likewise, W. V. Quine remarks that “[m]eaning is what [Aristotelian] essence becomes when it is divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word.” See “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in *From A Logical Point of View*, 22. On this “linguistic turn” in western philosophy see also Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 323ff; Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 257ff; Habermas, “The Horizon of Modernity Is Shifting,” 7; and “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking,” in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 44–48.

Central to this discourse is the thinking of representations in such a way that not only seeks the reduction of the sign by virtue of its own efficacy, but also indirectly permits the qualitative comparison and adjudication of various signs or representational schemata on their own terms; in Anglo-American analytic philosophy this occurs in accordance with a set of rules of “logical form.” See exemplary discussion of the formulation of such a model in C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jonanovich, 1989), 20; and commentary in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 166ff, 268–70. Derrida identifies a similar category of pure meaning, or “intelligible or spiritual *ideality*,” which he in turn describes as referring “to a layer of prelinguistic or presemiotic...meaning whose presence would be conceivable outside and before the work of *différance*, outside and before the process or system of signification” (Derrida, “Semiology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva,” in *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981], 31).

told not of ideal representation but rather that which is “least problematic”; in this manner the founding position of the discourse—ideal representability, unmediated access to presence—is silently displaced by *its own parasitic double*—namely the category of *total problematization*. The very description of the structure thus works deftly to efface the metaphysics of presence—the positivist discourse of rational knowledge—upon which it is founded, and which is still contained within it as its own inverse. This sort of disingenuous denial of the referential status upon which the critical-realist approach to signification is dependent is, I argue, manifest throughout Bordwell’s writing. Other examples are to be found in the determination of narration as structure versus process, of the model text as normative versus ideal, of Bordwell’s own epistemological commitments (or lack thereof) to the status of various structures and processes. I shall explore each of these in due course. What it is important to recognize, from a deconstructivist perspective, is how each of these “blind spots” gives structure to a structurally necessary “hierarchical axiology” that embodies and determines the ambivalence of the critical-realist and formalist commitments to an engagement with the structure of signification, and behind them the fundamental ambivalence of the status of knowledge structures that has characterized western metaphysical thinking in modernity.⁶² In order better to exemplify this I might offer up here one of the more prominent examples in Bordwell’s theory of a structurally necessary conceptual ambivalence that comes to be manifest textually.

⁶² On hierarchical axiologies see, e.g., Derrida, “Limited Inc....,” translated by Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc*, 93.

iv. *Absolutely Fabula*

What is at issue here is the ambivalent status of no less than the very term that comes to bear the weight in Bordwell's writing of the cinematic text's total referential content. This ambivalence, I shall argue, points directly to the fundamental paradox of the critical-realist attitude toward the thinking of representations. Bordwell grafts from Russian formalism the term *fabula*, and employs it to denote the total referential plentitude of the narrative cinematic text.⁶³ The *fabula* is conceived in relation to the *syuzhet*, which for its part comprises no more than the manifest, perceptible content of the text in the temporal order that it is presented, fraught as it may be with lacunae, apparent contradictions, etc.⁶⁴ It is easy to see how the relation between these two objects, *fabula* and *syuzhet*, produces a hierarchical formation, with the absolute referential plentitude of the *fabula* standing in opposition to the threat of incompleteness and absence contained within the *syuzhet*, the contents of which are determined by the vicissitudes of the narrational process.⁶⁵ As symptomatic as this formation may be of Bordwell's broader

⁶³ Cf. especially *Making Meaning*, 8.

⁶⁴ The most comprehensive discussion of *syuzhet*–*fabula* relations occurs in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 48–62.

⁶⁵ Bordwell indicates that “[a]s a distinction, the *fabula*/*syuzhet* pair cuts across media,” and that the *syuzhet* embodies “principles basic to all narrative representation” (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, 51). Barry King complains that Bordwell's deployment of the *syuzhet*–*fabula* distinction “rests on a high level of abstraction,” and that “it is far from clear how exhaustive the *fabula*–*syuzhet* distinction is supposed to be or even if it is actually adequate to bear the elaborative weight that Bordwell gives it” (King, “The Story Continues...,” 62, 68). This configuration corresponds to what Seymour Chatman labels “double time structuring,” a feature that structuralist narratology holds to be a “salient property of narrative” (Chatman, “What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (And Vice Versa),” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 [autumn 1980]: 122). The attribution of this configuration to the autonomous structure of *narrative* specifically has much broader implications for the assumed structure of cinematic signification; see the more detailed discussion of narratology and translinguistics below (§ II, 2).

tendency toward the thematization of the tenuousness of determinate reference,⁶⁶ it is not with the *syuzhet-fabula* opposition itself that I am concerned. Rather, it is with the precise status of the *fabula*, as a term that in Bordwell's writing lies both at the axis and at the anterior limit of two convergent chains of signification (that of the diachronic process of narration; and that of synchronically comprehensible content of the text), and opens out in turn onto the presence of a total referential content.

We may locate in Bordwell's articulation of the notion of the *fabula*—most notably in *Narration in the Fiction Film* but elsewhere, too—a *structurally necessary* slippage in the meaning of the term that is manifest, *pace* Derrida, “through the play of language.”⁶⁷ *Fabula*'s corresponding “chain of signification”⁶⁸ consists in a redoubling of its own denotation, from Bordwell's preferred, avowed usage in referring to a spectator's “mental construct” of the represented story (loosely corresponding, in its evocation of a mental conceptual model, to the “signified,” or middle articulation in the classic semantic-referential triangle), toward a more latent, suppressed, denigrated usage that essentially constitutes it as a transcendental, anterior, stable referent. Repeated usage in contexts where the play of language assigns it the meaning “referent” continually functions to sublate the *fabula*'s deliberately posited status as mentally constructed “signified.”⁶⁹ No matter that Bordwell repeatedly insists that the *fabula* is the spectator's

⁶⁶ Bordwell notes that “in practice we never get ideally maximum access to the *fabula*” (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, 54).

⁶⁷ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 95.

⁶⁸ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 96.

⁶⁹ Bordwell's avowed position conceives of the *fabula* as “mental construct” (Bordwell, “An Excessively Obvious Cinema, in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 12); as “imaginary construct,” a “construction” (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, 49, 53); as what is produced when “an ideal *syuzhet* supplies information in the ‘correct’ amount to permit coherent and steady construction...” (*Narration in the Fiction*

mental construct; its sublation by the force of its denigrated meaning is achieved in accordance with what Derrida describes as the necessity of “citational play,” a phenomenon that is manifest within the text but outside of the arbitrary limits of authorial intention.⁷⁰ Put simply, the effect of citational play is that *fabula* must, in every instance of its utterance, recall both of its meanings, must occupy two signifying positions. This

Film, 54); as an “internally consistent construct into which narration seems to step from the outside,” an “apparently independent profilmic event” (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, 161); as the product of a “process” of “constructive inference,” an “inferential construct,” by “*stipulative definition*,” “a mental construct,” a “signified if ever there was one,” (“Adventures in the Highlands of Theory,” 89, 90, 91, 92; emphasis original). Finally, Kristin Thompson insists that the “*fabula* is the product of the spectator’s active engagement with the *syuzhet* as embodied in the film as viewed” (“Wisconsin Project or King’s Projection?,” 52–53).

Consider, however, the following descriptions of the *fabula*, which work (given certain semantic assumptions about case grammar) to establish the *fabula* as preceding the *syuzhet*, or to negate the spectator’s supposed activity and thus to establish the *fabula* as an always-already preconstituted, stable entity: “the narrative artist does in some sense work ‘on’ the *fabula* as he may assume that the perceiver will construct it...” (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, 344–5, n. 7; emphasis original, but added in all instances hereafter); “...the *syuzhet* presents the *fabula*”; “...the concept of the *syuzhet*’s *distortion* of *fabula* information” (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, 51); “we need to examine how a *syuzhet* may *organize* story material, how it may limit or expand our *access* to *fabula* information” (53); “in practice we never get ideally maximum *access* to the *fabula*” (54); “any *syuzhet* *selects* what *fabula* events to *present*” (54); the *syuzhet*’s “*selections* of *fabula* events shape the constructive activities of the spectator” (55); “Gaps are created by choosing to *present* certain pieces of *fabula* information and to hold back others” (55); narration is knowledgeable “about the *fabula* it *represents*” (57); *fabula* events are “deployed” in, “relayed” by, or subject to “manipulation” by the *syuzhet* (77, 80, 93); classical narration is “a particular configuration of normalized options for *representing the fabula*” (156); style is a vehicle for the *syuzhet*’s “*transmission* of *fabula* information” (162); narrational commentary “interrupts the *transmission* of *fabula* information” (209).

That a similar citational play in usage of the term “*fabula*” occurs throughout the work of the Russian formalists is worth noting, insofar as Bordwell attempts to halt this play. See Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 344, n. 7; consider also how Kristin Thompson characterizes as “inaccurate” Fredric Jameson’s suggestion that the “‘fable’ of the movie is given in advance” (Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972], 61; Thompson, “Wisconsin Project or King’s Projection?,” 52–3).

⁷⁰ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 98. Derrida complains that citational play may be halted (or “neutralized”) in textual translation, as when a translator fails to grasp the ambivalent status of *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus*:

When a word inscribes itself as a citation of another sense of the same word, when the textual center-stage of the word *pharmakon*, even while it means *remedy*, cites, re-cites, and makes legible that which in the same word signifies, in another spot and on a different level of the stage, *poison*...the choice of only one of these renditions by the translator has as its first effect the neutralization of the citational play, of the ‘anagram’, and, in the end, quite simply of the very textuality of the translated text. (98)

textual movement of *fabula* between “signified” and “referent” in turn stands in for a metaphysical one, namely that of a latent *disavowal of the deferral of presence* that is enacted through the *supplementary* movement from absolute “referent” to mentally constructed “signified.”⁷¹

Why, then, *must* the *fabula* occupy both of these positions? Consider that the critical-realist formulation of Bordwell’s model necessitates that he reduce the *fabula* to the status of (normal/ideal) mental construct that stands in place of the absolute referent. Yet in a realist metaphysics the very idea of the signified *necessarily presupposes* and

⁷¹ The status of the “referent” is of course what is ultimately at issue in the self-reflexive thinking of language as adequate representation. On the classic semantic-referential triangle, variations of which famously appear in the writings of such modern Platonists as Frege and, later, C. S. Peirce, see, for exemplary discourse, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 10ff; and, for critical discussion, Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1976), 58ff; John Lyons, *Semantics*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 96; Jacques-Alain Miller, “Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier),” translated by Jacqueline Rose, *Screen* 18, no. 4 (winter 1977–78): 27. See also the overview of formal semantics in Jürgen Habermas, “Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning,” in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 60–1. In what becomes the foundational manoeuvre for structuralist and poststructuralist descriptions of language as constituted by internal difference, Ferdinand de Saussure’s description of the sign famously omits the referent, the final term; for this move is arguably symptomatic of the decentring of language that Derrida famously describes:

Henceforth, it became necessary to think both the law which somehow governed the desire for a center in the constitution of structure, and the process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence—but a central presence which had never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself in its own substitute. The substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it...This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse...The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play,” 280)

On the Saussurean configuration, see further commentary in Julia Kristeva, “The Semiotic Activity,” *Screen* 14, no. 1–2 (spring–summer 1973): especially 30–32; Jacques Derrida, “Semiology and Grammatology,” 18; Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 60; and Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, translated by Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982). It is fascinating to observe, however, how certain strategies of purportedly post-Saussurean structuralism work, bizarrely, to negate this move entirely, and thus to reconstitute a metaphysics of presence by reinstating something like a referent; the key example of this for our purposes might be Metz’s establishment of a “distant signified” that effectively corresponds to the plentitude of an anterior, unified, diegetic object-world and thus also, arguably, to the latent signification of Bordwell’s *fabula*.

ensures the existence of such a thing as the referent, inaccessible as it may be, always-already replaced, “supplemented.”⁷² What is fascinating is how the *fabula*, in its textual deployment in the course of Bordwell’s writing, comes to embody structurally this paradox, always *conceptually* pointing back to, striving to occupy the place of, the impossible object of total presence that it supplants, replaces, supplements. Through its token iterations in the play of language it becomes that which it is not, *stands in for that object of which it is the conceptual double*, effaces the movement of supplementarity—the *signifying term fabula itself reduces its own supplementary role* through the play of language. The deployment of the term therefore assumes a hierarchical structure, an internalized appurtenance, and thus becomes a mark of *différance*.⁷³ In this respect the *fabula* functions in Bordwell’s writing as what Derrida terms a “blind spot,” a point at which meaning is both obscured and multiplied,⁷⁴ in this case working simultaneously to destabilize and to re-inscribe the determinacy and anteriority of the cinematic text’s referential content.

v. Representation and Form

This concealment within the representational model of the operation of the category of ideal reference to some empirically accessible, determinate truth is surely disingenuous, considering that the structuring role that is played by this category is absolutely fundamental at so many levels to Bordwell’s entire program, and indeed to

⁷² Again, cf. Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play,” 281.

⁷³ Cf. Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” lxxvi–lxxvii; Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 144–5, 163.

⁷⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 163.

formalism in general. Regardless of any explicit or implicit denigration of a positivist discourse of ideal referentiality (of which we shall likely encounter much more), such a category serves at the very least to structure the very notion of classical narrative in its entirety, and, in doing so, to determine the parameters of determinate cinematic meaning. On the one hand, it therefore enables a poetics of cinematic functionality, and, on the other hand, it permits the limitation of acceptable practices of spectatorial comprehension, and furthermore of acceptable theoretical practice. Indeed, I intend soon to make clear exactly how each of these follows from—has its very conditions of existence enabled by—this initial adoption of a certain model of signification and reference.

I have already suggested one additional assumption that is implicit in this formulation, and that is the applicability of a normative referential model to aesthetic texts. I shall have more to say about how specifically the referential model structures and operates within the theory of aesthetic texts in due course. Meanwhile, however, it is worth returning to the representational model as presented here in order to examine a further, arguably broader commitment contained within it—namely, an implicit semiological or translinguistic ontology. Consider again the claim made in *Dreyer* that painting, theatre, literature, and cinema each constitute representational systems, sharing equivalent functionality. A commitment such as this requires, on the one hand, a broader affirmation of such a concept as a neutral, anterior, transcendental object world, and, on the other, a structure of translation or analogy that governs the relation of sign systems to each other and to absolute presence. Indeed, as Derrida has argued, the very structure of

the translinguistic analogy itself is founded upon the re-doubling exteriorization of the analogical properties of language, a move that serves doubly to reaffirm language's privileged status within the semiological system.⁷⁵

What is therefore of greatest interest here is the implication in Bordwell that cinema is capable of signifying the world of representable objects, with greater or lesser efficacy, alongside other systems such as language; indeed, in Bordwell, cinema is swiftly and unproblematically bestowed with the capacity to signify and refer in the same general manner as language or painting. We ought not allow the sort of manoeuvring that enables this to go unnoticed; for such an assertion has tremendous implications for the very way in which we are able to conceive of what cinema is, what it does, with what properties or qualities we are permitted to invest it, and likewise what sorts of qualities we might or ought to exclude. It is therefore worth spending some time examining the various textual threads that serve to establish Bordwell's conception of cinematic textuality within a broader semiology or translinguistics.

⁷⁵ Derrida writes, "The analogical process is also a reflux toward the *logos*. The origin is the *logos*. The origin of analogy, that from which analogy proceeds and that toward which it returns, is the *logos*, reason and word, the source as a mouth and as an outlet [*embouchure*]." He adds that "analogy is produced by language which therefore puts everything in relation to itself, as both the reason for the relation and the ultimate term of the relation" (Derrida, "Economimesis," translated by Richard Klein, *Diacritics* 11, no. 2 [summer 1981]: 13, 17).

2. Translinguistics

*"Ideally, the fabula can be embodied in a verbal synopsis, as general or as detailed as circumstances require."*⁷⁶

It is possible to locate in Bordwell two competing commitments to the notion of a translinguistic or semiological ontology of signification. On the one hand, we may witness the repeated denigration of certain structuralist, translinguistic theories of cinematic signification; this ultimately leads to an active attempt to reject notions of cinema as a language-like signifying system. On the other hand, we may locate a rich discourse operating throughout Bordwell's writing to establish and negotiate the position of cinematic textuality in relation to the signifying processes of language and other putatively representational media; this occurs both in explicit attempts to describe cinematic signification through comparison to language, and in the production, through critical readings of certain films, of a translinguistically themed object-textual discourse of cinematic representability. Ultimately, then, Bordwell's avowed dismissals of the value of specific translinguistic theories are undermined by a more integral series of attempts at negotiating the representational ability of cinema through direct comparisons to language, some of which come veiled as thematic criticism.

i. *"The Vicissitudes of Continental Structuralism"*

It is clear that Bordwell's denigration of linguistically derived models of cinematic signification, most of which occurs in a chapter of *Narration in the Fiction*

⁷⁶ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 49.

Film addressing “diegetic theories of narration,” is intended primarily as a response to certain strains of semiotics-oriented film theory, namely those “tied to the vicissitudes of continental structuralism.”⁷⁷ It appears that Benveniste-inspired enunciative theories are a particularly vulnerable target.⁷⁸ Bordwell’s insistence on distancing himself from that work, with which his dissatisfaction is more than apparent, results in his outright rejection of any comparisons of film and language. “It will come as no surprise,” he remarks, “that I do not treat the spectator’s operations as necessarily modeled upon linguistic activities.”⁷⁹ Because the act of viewing a film is, for Bordwell, “synoptic” and “literal,” “it does not require translation into verbal terms.”⁸⁰ But it seems that this outright dismissal of linguistics-inspired film theory is merely driven by Bordwell’s frustration with the specificity of the comparisons to posited categories of linguistic structure that film-semiotic theories are prone to make. Indeed, Barry King remarks that Bordwell’s critique of enunciative theories is “unsupportably literal.”⁸¹ Arguably, then, Bordwell’s dissatisfaction with enunciative and other linguistics-derived semiotic models is not grounded in any ability to disprove their conceptual fecundity, but rather, simply, with the empirical unverifiability of the precise analogy of specific terms. Thus Bordwell observes that “[w]hat is perhaps most striking about enunciation theories of film narration

⁷⁷ *Narration and the Fiction Film*, 17.

⁷⁸ For an exemplary application of Emile Benvenistes’s linguistic theory to film see Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford, 1983), especially 43–53.

⁷⁹ *Narration and the Fiction Film*, 40.

⁸⁰ *Narration and the Fiction Film*, 40. Here vocabulary seems to interfere with the spirit of the assertion. First, the term “literal” should, presumably, not itself be taken too literally; for a contestation of the supposedly “literal” meaning of “literal meaning,” however, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 76–7. Second, “verbal” ostensibly means “grammatical” or “linguistic,” since Bordwell later claims that “[i]deally, the fabula can be embodied in a *verbal* synopsis...” (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, 49; emphasis added).

is the *absence of justification* for applying linguistic categories.”⁸² Elsewhere, Bordwell remarks that “[d]espite three decades of work in film semiotics...those who claim that cinema is an ensemble of ‘codes’ or ‘discourses’ have not yet provided a defense of why we should consider the film medium, let alone perception and thought, as plausibly analogous to language.”⁸³ These attacks are not initiated on pragmatic or ontological grounds but rather on purely methodological ones; consequently, the theories’ use value is summarily dismissed on account of their failing to meet a certain methodological standard.

This argument—so keenly oriented toward criticizing the particularities of a certain strain of enunciative theory and its relevance to the modelling of film signification—places Bordwell in the awkward position of having disavowed any ontological similarity between language and cinema. And yet, as we have seen, it is upon exactly such an association that Bordwell’s broader conception of cinematic textuality is necessarily established. We have already seen how Bordwell’s formalist project, taking its cues from the *literary* theories supplied by Russian formalism and Prague structuralism, establishes cinema within a discourse of realist representation and spectator positioning that is derived from fundamentally linguistic models. In short, Bordwell’s entire project constitutes precisely an attempt to develop normative models of cinematic

⁸¹ King, “The Story Continues...,” 59.

⁸² *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 23; emphasis added.

⁸³ Bordwell, “Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 18.

textuality as though cinema functioned, in its most fundamental capacity as a representational system, according to a certain positivist theory of language.

ii. Translinguistics Naturalized

What is more, this fundamental adherence to the idea of cinema as aspiring to operate like a language-like signifying system is repeatedly re-affirmed through the negotiation of cinematic textuality relative to language and other putatively signifying media, a negotiation that is, not surprisingly, oriented toward achieving the legitimizing of cinematic representability in decidedly linguistic terms. As I have suggested, this evaluation and negotiation of cinema's representational ability assumes several forms, including historical analysis and the production of an object-textual thematic discourse. I have already pointed out how Bordwell's introductory discussion of representation in *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* works to naturalize the idea that cinema shares with language and other media the ability to refer determinately, with some degree of efficacy, to some common, anterior object world. This is further suggested in more specific discussions of the process of narrative signification in *Narration and the Fiction Film*. It is worth exploring how that model works to naturalize both the functional and structural homogeneity of language and cinema.

Bordwell first asserts that his model "treats narration as a process which is not in its basic aims specific to any medium." Thus the represented content of a given instance

of cinematic narration “might have been conveyed in many other ways,”⁸⁴ such that “[a]t a gross level, the same fabula could be inferred from a novel, a film, a painting, or a play.”⁸⁵ By isolating both a generic narrational process and signified content from the specific operations of the medium, Bordwell here situates himself firmly within the structuralist narratological tradition, and thus generates a structural discourse of signification decidedly evocative, at a general level, of the linguistic analyses of Roland Barthes and Christian Metz.⁸⁶ But Bordwell further asserts that “[i]deally, *the fabula can be embodied in a verbal synopsis*, as general or as detailed as circumstances require.”⁸⁷ We may, I think, safely suppose that the “verbal synopsis” described here must itself be limited to a certain kind of descriptive language, namely some constative, truth-

⁸⁴ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 49.

⁸⁵ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 51.

⁸⁶ Cf. Barthes: “Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed among different substances—as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comic, news item, conversation” (Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” in *Image–Music–Text*, translated by Stephen Heath [New York: Hill and Wang, 1977], 79).

And Metz: “There is no signified which is peculiar to literature or on the contrary to the cinema, no ‘great global signified’ that might be attributed to painting itself, for example... Each means of expression allows everything to be said: by ‘everything’ I mean an indefinite number of ‘things’ (?), very broadly coinciding from one language to another [sic]” (Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 36–7).

Indeed, Seymour Chatman notes that “[o]ne of the most important observations to come out of narratology is that narrative itself is a deep structure quite independent of its medium...in theory at least, any narrative can be actualized by any medium which can communicate the two time orders” (Chatman, “What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (And Vice Versa),” 121–2). The effect of this broader move to isolate narration seems to be no less than the transcendentalization, within certain circles, of narrative itself. Thus Hayden White claims that “narrative is a metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted” (White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 [autumn 1980]: 6); and Fredric Jameson writes of “the all informing process of *narrative*, which I take to be...the central function or *instance* of the human mind” (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981], 13; emphasis original). Cf. also the valorization, within the context of feminist cinematic expression, of the representational capacity of narrative in Teresa de Lauretis, “Strategies of Coherence: Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics, and Yvonne Rainer,” in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

propositional, or fact-stating discourse.⁸⁸ This claim has enormous implications, insofar as it both circumscribes the limits of the normal referential content of cinematic texts by imposing the criterion of linguistic translatability, and implicitly subordinates cinema to language by establishing descriptive language as the “primary modelling system” for any such content.⁸⁹ Essentially, since the referential content of a cinematic text may not exceed that which is describable in language, the very function of a cinematic text as representational system is necessarily limited by the arbitrary parameters that determine the permissible uses of constative or descriptive language.

⁸⁷ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 49; emphasis added.

⁸⁸ Although, in strictly narratological terms, cf. Chatman’s problematization of the capacity for “assertion” versus “depiction” in language and film, respectively, in “What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (And Vice Versa),” 128.

⁸⁹ Again, this is arguably a product of Bordwell’s insistent privileging of the structure of causally determined *narrative* as the primary content (fabula) of normal cinematic texts, and the consequent subordination to it of non-narrative content, i.e. the pure representation of space and time. Consider, in contrast, the hierarchy of signifying systems that Kristin Thompson seems to suggest in her discussion of continuity editing: “The filmmaker juxtaposes a series of disparate spaces, building from them an overall narrative space. That space is *concrete*, not the *verbal construction* of the novelist” (Kristin Thompson, “The Continuity System,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 194; emphasis added). Thompson here seems to hint at an indexical relationship between the cinematic image and represented space.

For a general discussion of the privileging of language as “primary modelling system,” see Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 172–4; Roland Barthes, inverting the Saussurean plan for a generalized semiology in which language comprises but one system, claims that “to perceive what a substance signifies is inevitably to fall back on the individuation of a language: there is no meaning which is not designated, and the world of signifieds is none other than that of language” (Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith [New York: Hill and Wang, 1973], 10). For an example of advocacy of the translinguistic application of the semantic model within the context of an explicitly positivist discourse, see Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 21ff. On the ontological non-value of the translinguistic sign see, for example, Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 4, 10.

iii. “More Faithful Reproduction”

To this operation we may add a similar negotiation that Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson undertake in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, where the capacity of cinema to signify *in a certain way* is affirmed through a discussion of the historical development of normative cinematic narrational modes. These discussions work continually to establish the terms of normative cinematic narration on what are, I think, essentially semiological grounds, primarily through the perpetuation of popular and industrial discourses of the adaptability of theatrical and literary works. Staiger and Thompson, echoing the claims of popular and trade literature, establish and negotiate the fundamental adaptability into cinema of both general (medium-transcendent) narrative structures and specific literary and theatrical texts.⁹⁰ And so when, for example, Staiger speaks of the obscure objective of “more faithful reproduction” in cinematic adaptation,⁹¹ the network of assumptions being collapsed into the single abstract category of *fidelity of adaptation* is astonishingly complex.⁹² That this discussion occurs within the context of a

⁹⁰ See, e.g., Janet Staiger, “The Central Producer System: Centralized Management After 1914,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 130–1; and Kristin Thompson, “From Primitive to Classical,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 157, 161, 165, 167–8.

⁹¹ Staiger, “The Central Producer System,” 131.

⁹² Here Staiger apparently reproduces uncritically the “discourse of fidelity” that dominates critical engagement with cinematic adaptations of literary texts. Once again, this appears to be a consequence of the privileging of narrative itself as the primary referential content of both cinematic and literary texts, a privileging itself symptomatic of the influence of the narratological approach of certain versions of structuralism. The way in which this constitutes both the possibility and the scope of so-called adaptation studies is clear enough. See an exemplary narratological approach in Chatman, “What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (And Vice Versa).” A limited critique of the fidelity thesis appears in Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 96–106. A more thorough historicizing and problematization of the fidelity thesis is presented in Robert B. Ray, “The Field of ‘Literature and Film,’” in *Film Adaptation*, edited by James Naremore (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 38–53; observing that “the formation of the field of film and literature is overdetermined” (39), Ray proceeds to graft and to extend Andrew’s critique (47–8), concluding with the advocacy of a search for novel approaches to the issue (49). An outright rejection of “The Chimera of Fidelity” appears in Robert

description of the historical emergence of a normative cinematic text only complicates matters further, as it elides a great many contemporary assumptions, manifest across a variety of discourses, concerning the nature of cinema as a putatively representational medium.

iv. Internal Discourses

We may also note, finally, Bordwell's own propensity for producing what we might term an *internal textual discourse of translanguistics*; in this way, the sorts of commitments that go unsaid elsewhere are manifest within textual analysis.⁹³ Effectively, Bordwell produces thematic readings of selected films that show the *films themselves* to be active in negotiating cinema's status as a representational mode. Consider, for example, his claim that certain of Dreyer's films rely on "the use of the symbol of the book to signify the authority behind narrative representation," such that written language "provides an authority for the impersonal causality" that Bordwell argues structures those films.⁹⁴ Bordwell draws on Derrida's *Of Grammatology* in order to construct a metaphysical hierarchy in which, essentially, writing enjoys greater proximity to God than does cinema; and so Bordwell suggests that with Dreyer's "use of the symbol of the

Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in *Film Adaptation*, 54–76; Stam proclaims that fidelity in adaptation is "virtually impossible" (56) and advocates instead a move toward "Adaptation as Intertextual Dialogism" (64).

⁹³ My claim here probably constitutes something like the deconstructive technique that Jonathan Culler calls the "inversion of a previous interpretive graft," which is achieved as follows: "Where one text claims to analyze and elucidate another, it may be possible to show that in fact the relationship should be inverted: that the analyzing text is elucidated by the analyzed text, which already contains an implicit account of and reflection upon the analyst's moves" (Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 139).

⁹⁴ Bordwell, *Dreyer*, 35–6.

book” the anterior authority of writing works to authenticate cinema by bestowing upon it credibility as a narrational mode.

This sort of thematic analysis proves more enlightening when we consider Bordwell’s more banal claim elsewhere that cinematic narration may rely on “impersonal sources of information” such as newspaper headlines to structure narrative comprehension.⁹⁵ Within a film, a diegetic representation of a newspaper containing a printed account of some putatively diegetic event therefore serves, by this account, to legitimize that event. The operation here is the same one that Bordwell attributes to Dreyer: to validate cinema by demonstrating that it represents the same truths that printed matter does, but at the same time rendering cinema appurtenant to writing according to some assumed metaphysical hierarchy. In short, it is easy to see how an entire metaphysics—in which is negotiated the relative ability of various representational modes to afford access to some anterior, transcendental truth—is admitted into Bordwell’s argument through the selection of and engagement with texts that yield amenable thematic interpretations.⁹⁶ It is not at all surprising, but nevertheless crucial to recognize, that whenever some cinematic text is asserted to demonstrate some sort of engagement with problems of representation themselves—and in Bordwell’s formalism this is rather frequently—some sort of commitment to the very notion of representation, however implicit, must precede it.

⁹⁵ Bordwell, “Classical Narration,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 30.

⁹⁶ Here we may say that Bordwell’s own claims in *Making Meaning* concerning interpretive schemata and heuristics equally apply (*Making Meaning*, 129–145); a distinction between deconstructivist “inversion” and the critical-realist’s schemata exists only insofar as the critical realist denigrates schemata only in order to salvage the *right* one, the empirically rigorous one, i.e. that which yields or refers to Truth.

Now that each of these general principles concerning the nature of textuality and representation has been laid out, it is time to see how they are combined with a cache of methodological manoeuvres to enable the production of a classical or normative cinematic textuality. This normative textuality is then complemented by a theory of normative spectatorship designed both to establish and to regulate proper comprehension of determinate meaning. Furthermore, we shall see how the model that is posited as *normative* within a specific framework, namely that suggested by the sorts of assumptions about representation presented here quickly becomes, through the play of language, granted even further abstract status, as the zero-degree or *ideal* model of cinematic representation. What it will be crucial to establish first, however, is how a particular set of assumptions operates concentrically to permit the categories of normative cinematic text and normative spectatorship, along with the very methods by which the measure of those categories may be determined.

3. Formula for a Normative Cinematic Text

We have already seen how the very idea that representations necessarily refer, with greater or lesser efficacy, to some stable, knowable anterior object world enables the production of discourses of ideal representation. Specifically, the nature of representations themselves, and the relationships that hold between them, and thus the ability *to submit those representations to analysis*, only makes sense when they are viewed as structured in relation to the effective transmission of some absent Truth. The idea of submitting representations to empirical analysis is thus the product of a peculiar

post-Kantian milieu in which representations become measurable by the very tools conceived of to investigate a certain Truth about the universe (a knowable, unified, measurable object world). Bordwell's work, engaged with the production of the category of a *normative* cinematic text, must be seen as emergent from the same positivist discourse.

Indeed, what it is absolutely essential to recognize is how Bordwell's normative text, that epitomizing the values of the so-named "classical Hollywood cinema," itself initially produced empirically as a "theoretical construct,"⁹⁷ as an abstracted average of a certain group style, of a certain mode of production, within a certain historical context, effectively becomes hypostatized in the course of Bordwell's writing first into a *universally normative model* of cinematic signification, and then into a *universally ideal model* of cinematic signification, embodying the same metaphysical principles of ideal representation we have already encountered. And so a certain text, abstracted via the implementation of certain epistemologically contingent methods, comes to occupy, through the play of language, a variety of positions from specific to general, and from norm to ideal. With this production of the category of *ideal cinematic signification* out of a specifically determined empirical construct, we witness precisely how the very nature of the knowable object, in its idealized totality, is entirely a product of the discourse that thinks it. How, exactly, does this occur?

⁹⁷Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, "Preface," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, xv.

i. The Contingency of the Norm

First, it is worth considering Bordwell's initial justification of the very notion of the category of the norm, a category the existence of which must be seen as serving a specific set of epistemological goals. Indeed, the emergence within the human sciences of the very notion of empirically determinable norms must, as has been well documented, be seen as part of a broader scientific project oriented toward the containment of statistically measurable difference. Mary Ann Doane, for example, has demonstrated the importance of the production of the epistemological category of statistically abstracted normativity in order to mitigate the threat of contingency and deviation in the mass culture (and mass representations) of modernity. With statistical analysis, an abstracted norm or average is itself granted status as a "real quality," such that the "presumption of the classification and its unity confers intelligibility upon the statistical figuration."⁹⁸ Thus the very idea of the production of the norm itself must be seen as one oriented toward the suppression of deviant meaning, in service to a positivist agenda of attaining a total, non-contradictory knowledge.

Needless to say, the very sort of norm that may be produced is necessarily limited by the very nature of the process, restricted to properties and attributes that are empirically measurable and verifiable. The practice of the production of norms is therefore amenable to the isolation and rationalization of only certain kinds of knowledges. The empirical verifiability of certain arbitrarily determined stylistic formations, for example, makes them fruitful objects of study for formalist poetics.

Conversely, semantics and meaning have famously been neglected for lack of an empirically viable method of analyzing them. Indeed, it is remarkable to witness the extent to which the boundaries of knowledge have come to be determined by the very limits of empiricism as a method.⁹⁹

As I have suggested, Bordwell's stated commitment to the concept of normativity, particularly in the context of a formalist poetics of style-as-deviation, is clear. Indeed, the category of the norm is of tremendous value to Bordwell insofar as it constitutes a point of departure for the production of a formalist poetics.¹⁰⁰ Thus we have Bordwell's assertions that "before there are deviations, there are norms,"¹⁰¹ and that theoretical poetics necessarily conceives of the very idea of a "normal cinema' as intuitively given."¹⁰² Furthermore, the norms that are produced become the very criteria by which all aesthetic texts may be measured, both in critical practice and in normal conditions of spectatorship, such that we may "treat sets of norms as supplying concrete historical bases for the acts of viewing and filmmaking," and thus "we are left with the possibility that a

⁹⁸ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 126-7.

⁹⁹ Again, see, e.g., Noam Chomsky, *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, 18, 87-8.

¹⁰⁰ Bordwell notes in *Dreyer* that that book "examines Dreyer's work as a set of deviations from some historically defined norm within the same medium," namely "the classical Hollywood cinema" (4); thus "[i]f we construct a model of narrative structure in classical Hollywood filmmaking, salient aspects of Dreyer's early work stand out sharply" (25). In *Narration and the Fiction Film*, Bordwell asserts that "any film can be seen as seeking to meet or not to meet a coherent standard established by fiat or by previous practice" (150); that art cinema "has become a coherent mode partly by defining itself as a deviation from classical narrative" (228); and that historical-materialist narration is characterized by "principles and devices opposed to Hollywood norms" (235). On the importance of the idea of the norm in formalism, see also Rick Altman, "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today," 340-6; Altman writes that "[h]istorically, the notion of the dominant appears to have served the primary purpose of allowing the formalists to justify theoretically the notion of the aesthetic text" (340).

¹⁰¹ Bordwell, "An Excessively Obvious Cinema," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 4.

¹⁰² Bordwell, *Narration and the Fiction Film*, xiii.

film may be analyzed as norm-breaking, norm-affirming, or both.”¹⁰³ For Bordwell, the empirically producible norm constitutes not simply an average or aggregate set of features, but becomes hypostatized in order to occupy the quasi-transcendental position of centring or structuring mechanism for an entire system.

Bordwell takes the ultimate normative cinema to be Hollywood’s, so that “[i]t is not too much to say that our conception of any film (or television show), fictional or not, rests chiefly upon assumptions derived from the classical Hollywood cinema,” and thus, in an ostensibly tautological formulation, “[t]he historical and aesthetic importance of the classical Hollywood cinema lies in the fact that to go beyond it we must go through it.”¹⁰⁴ The normative text is important, apparently, insofar as it is always-already the normative text.

In understanding the normative text not to be intuitively or ontologically given, but rather radically contingent in both its identification and its empirically established, specific determination, we ought to consider the various discourses that serve, in Bordwell, to construct this abstracted text and the ways in which they come to be justified. It is readily apparent that the abstracted, normative cinematic text does not constitute an analytical or ontological given in any conceivable way (as a group style, as naturally comprehensible, etc.), but constitutes rather a category that Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* produce entirely and then proceed, through a variety of manoeuvres, to naturalize, first as a norm, then as a mode-specific

¹⁰³ Bordwell, *Narration and the Fiction Film*, 150.

¹⁰⁴ Bordwell and Staiger, “Alternative Modes of Film Practice,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 379, 385.

ideal, and finally as the zero-degree term of cinematic textuality. It lies beyond the scope of this project to provide a comprehensive, critical reading of the method employed in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, but there are a number of aspects of it that are worth considering in greater detail.

ii. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: "Hollywood's Own Discourse"*

Stated very briefly, empirical methods are employed to derive a set of characteristics from an "unbiased" sample of Hollywood films. Those very characteristics, however, are already predetermined by certain assumptions about the nature of cinematic representation, and are supported by evidence derived from certain discourses manifest in contemporary advertisements, popular press articles, and trade publications. The development of various textual features and strategies is organized as a history, integrated with accounts of industrial production practice; this aids in rationalizing the emergence of normative textual features within a narrative that stresses its industrial and economical contingency, thus minimizing any appearance of teleology. The purported scientific merit of this process is not at issue here.¹⁰⁵ What I am interested in is the way in which the methodology and supplementary discourses that are employed

¹⁰⁵ See especially Andrew Britton, "The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole," for an excellent indictment. Britton remarks that the use of the unbiased sample is "obviously inappropriate," derived from the methodology of "bourgeois sociology." He notes that "[t]he idea that there is an ideal 'normal', 'typical', or 'representative' film which could be constituted by this or that method is illusory; and it is equally an illusion to suppose that what the unbiased sample gives us is the normal work...the more assiduously the authors claim that they are in the business of ascertaining an objectively verifiable standard of the 'ordinary', the more blatantly obvious does it come to seem that the 'ordinary film' is *their* construction" (51–2; emphasis original). Barry King, meanwhile, in one of several baffling statements in his two-part review of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, complains that the unbiased sample suffers from not being unbiased enough (King, "The Classical Hollywood Cinema," 84).

to produce the normative classical Hollywood text are each complicit in a certain, common set of assumptions.¹⁰⁶

In particular, consider how the very criteria by which films come to be evaluated are shown to draw upon “Hollywood’s own discourse,” or at least from the specific aspects of it that Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson deem relevant.¹⁰⁷ That discourse, which includes the popular press, advertisements, and trade journals, is presented as valorizing the very same features that come not only to be apprehended as positively discernible attributes of the Hollywood cinema itself, but of a discourse of ideal cinematic representability.¹⁰⁸ Because “Hollywood’s own discourse” supplies the terms from which the principles of the normative text are derived, it is worth considering what precisely that discourse entails.

¹⁰⁶ In addition to the extensive discussion in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, see also the brief discussion of the process of constructing “narrational norms” by “drawing upon several bodies of data” in Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 154.

¹⁰⁷ Bordwell, “An Excessively Obvious Cinema,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Here it is worth quoting Bordwell’s introductory remarks at length:

We could start with a description of the Hollywood style derived from Hollywood’s own discourse, that enormous body of statements and assumptions to be found in trade journals, technical manuals, memoirs, and publicity handouts. We would find that the Hollywood cinema sees itself as bound by rules that set stringent limits on individual innovation; that telling a story is the basic formal concern, which makes the film studio resemble the monastery’s *scriptorium*, the site of the transcription and transmission of countless narratives; that unity is a basic attribute of film form; that the Hollywood film purports to be ‘realistic’ in both an Aristotelian sense (truth to the probable) and a naturalistic one (truth to historical fact); that the Hollywood film strives to conceal its artifice through techniques of continuity and ‘invisible’ storytelling; that the film should be comprehensible and unambiguous; and that it possesses a fundamental emotional appeal that transcends class and nation. Reiterated tirelessly for at least seventy years, such precepts suggest that Hollywood practitioners recognized themselves as creating a distinct approach to film form and technique that we can justly label ‘classical.’ (“An Excessively Obvious Cinema,” 3)

iii. *A Rhetoric of Ideal Cinema*

The most important thing to consider is how popular and trade writing is necessarily complicit in the production of a *rhetoric of ideal cinema*, that is, in negotiating cinema's emergence, within a certain epistemological and cultural context, as a novel technology and, more specifically, as an ideal representational medium. Much has been written about the implication of cinematic technology within late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century discourses of epistemology, science, and mass culture. Suffice it to say that the emergence of cinematic technology cannot be apprehended independently of the very ways of thinking of knowledge and representation within which cinema comes, through popular and scientific discourse, to be held as the best exemplar.¹⁰⁹

The advertisements and press articles may therefore be seen to constitute a particular discursive phenomenon in themselves, as a controlled, mass-circulated

¹⁰⁹ The existing literature here is obviously quite extensive. On the general realignment of representational ideals and practices in the nineteenth century, see Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clio* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984). The gendered scopophilic evocation of its founding metaphor notwithstanding, Bann's work effectively adapts the Foucauldian epistemic framework to an analysis of internal functionality of specific modes of representation in nineteenth-century Britain and France; he diagnoses the opening of a representational space "in which techniques were explicitly devoted to securing an overpowering illusion of presence" (30). Bann's thesis is in turn grafted by Philip Rosen, who in *Change Mummified* identifies the role of "the cultural ambit of the indexical trace" in the negotiation of a "sociocultural ideal" of "what films are supposed to do" (Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001], xii, 57). On the discourse of cinema as always-already a site of privileged representation (versus being *complicit* in the production or negotiation of a certain epistemology of representability) see, for example, Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*. Doane observes that "the early cinema was quickly embraced as the site of an ideal storage, a medium capable of recording images that would be impervious to the passage of time" (62). Miriam Hansen remarks on the marketing of early cinema as a "new universal language" (Hansen, "Early Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?," in *Early Cinema: Space – Frame – Narrative*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker [London: BFI, 1990], 228); Anne Friedberg, meanwhile, demonstrates the relationship of cinema to a tradition of "apparatuses," including various optical toys, that "produced an illusion of unmediated referentiality" (Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], 23). On the negotiation of early audience attitudes toward cinema, one in which a "fundamental presupposition" was "a mass desire for sights of the real," see, e.g., Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 166.

extratextual discourse that functions to limit the conditions of cinema's reception, namely, to negotiate a homogenized mass audience, transcending class, gender, and ethnicity, compelled to consume cinema *in a certain way*, in accordance with a prescribed set of ideals having broader cultural and epistemological import.¹¹⁰ Advertisements and the popular press thus must be seen to function as a legitimate extratextual supplement or frame to the films themselves—a sanctioned *parergon*—serving to negotiate cinematic texts as sites of idealized production and reception of a certain kind of presence.¹¹¹ Effectively, they constitute the thematization of a certain abstracted metaphysical centre for cinematic representability, one which functions simultaneously as norm and as ideal, and around which is structured a logic of cinematic textuality that is knowable and measurable in relation to that centre.

Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson effectively treat these extratextual discourses as being privileged with positive, performative agency not only in guiding the mode of production, but in determining the very ontology of the texts that both embody and are structured by this ideal. Thus Staiger claims, for example, that “[a]dvertising as a

¹¹⁰ Again, Friedberg offers a detailed discussion of the cinema's integration into a market of similar, consumable “virtual” knowledges, observing that “the cinema developed as an apparatus that combined the mobile with the virtual gaze and turned it into a commodifiable experience” (Friedberg, *Window Shopping*, 110). Miriam Hansen emphasizes how the “the democratic appeal of the new medium was attributed to the power of moving images to speak to everyone.” She elaborates: “As haphazard speculation grew into a full-fledged mythology, this notion of film as a new universal language became one of the key metaphors in public discourse on the cinema, drawing legitimacy from its lower-class distinction which the figuration itself functioned to mask and deny” (Hansen, “Early Cinema,” 228).

¹¹¹ Recall that Derrida characterizes the *parergon* as a scene of contestation at the outer limits of immanent textuality, one which is subject to “pathology” or a form of ideal regulation, with only some arbitrary amount of its contents being deemed legitimate or “normal,” and thus serving transparently to supplement the “beautiful form” of the work that it frames. In contrast, illegitimate or parasitic parergonality is characterized as “adornment,” and should be viewed as detrimental to the work. See Derrida, “Parergon,” especially 64ff.

discourse created standards and exploited innovations. It established the grounds on which competition would occur and set up prescriptive values *which became requirements for film practice* in the United States.”¹¹² In short, we witness the textual internalization—a folding back into the ontology of the text itself—of a constructed extratextual discourse that serves to normalize a set of ideal conditions of cinematic production and reception.

The specific qualities upon which Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson generally seize are those that are complicit in implicating cinema within a metaphysics of presence by producing a discourse of cinema as an ideally transparent, even transcendental mode of representation. As I have suggested, this is further naturalized through the integration of the stated objectives of “Hollywood’s own discourse” with certain formalist commitments to the nature of aesthetic texts as structurally and functionally similar to a translinguistically determined model of representational systems, albeit mobilized for “nonpractical ends.”¹¹³ At any rate, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson present and reiterate these discourses in a manner that leaves the conditions of their possibility *as positive descriptive terms for cinema* fundamentally unquestioned, and so implicitly naturalizing their ontological status. Thus we are directed toward the “prescriptive” advertising claim about cinema that “life itself is no more real”;¹¹⁴ we are likewise informed of the focussing of “critics’ and public’s attention to details of accuracy

¹¹² Staiger, “Standardization and Differentiation: The Reinforcement and Dispersion of Hollywood’s Practices,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 102; emphasis added.

¹¹³ See Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, especially 32–4.

¹¹⁴ Staiger, “Standardization and Differentiation: The Reinforcement and Dispersion of Hollywood’s Practices,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 100.

(induced in part by the company's advertising)."¹¹⁵ A similar discourse is ostensibly manifest in professional trade literature; Bordwell and Staiger indicate the stated goal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers as being "the production of an acceptance [sic] semblance of reality."¹¹⁶ Remarkably, however, these claims are introduced with minimal consideration of the broader discourses governing these historically contingent ideals of representation, or of the conditions of extratextually mediated mass reception that served to legitimize their acceptance; they are passed on simply as examples of the sorts of ideals that served, historically, to determine the mode of production.¹¹⁷ In this way, the very criteria by which classical Hollywood cinema comes to be produced as a category are derived from a set of discourses that serve specifically to structure and negotiate its reception as an ideal, transcendental mode of representation.

It is easy to see the way in which the model of the Hollywood classical-normative cinematic text presents a fundamentally modern incarnation of the metaphysics of presence, insofar as its logic as such is predicated upon the total knowledge, through analyzable representation, of some absent truth. Not surprisingly, this is reiterated in Bordwell's positive descriptions. Thus, for example, we have Bordwell's claims

¹¹⁵ Staiger, "The Division and Order of Production: The Subdivision of the Work from the First Years through the 1920s," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 147.

¹¹⁶ Bordwell and Staiger, "Technology, Style, and Mode of Production," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 258.

¹¹⁷ Staiger, for example, observes that there are "shifts in meaning" in the advertising claim of "realism," namely that it could variously mean that a film offered the best "views," that it depicted "real life," or that it boasted historical "authenticity." Each of these is outlined in some detail, and yet there is no discussion at all of the sort of broader context permitting any of these qualities to be attributable to cinema, or, for that matter, of why, within a certain discursive economy, each could plausibly be subsumed under the claim of "realism" (Staiger, "Standardization and Differentiation," 100).

concerning “the tendency of the classical syuzhet to develop toward full and adequate knowledge,” and the assertion that “the classical film moves steadily toward a growing awareness of absolute truth.”¹¹⁸ Furthermore, Bordwell observes that the “priority of causality within an integral fabula world commits classical narration to unambiguous presentation.”¹¹⁹ The internal hierarchy of systems that for Bordwell renders causality as the primary guarantor of total signification will be discussed at length shortly; indeed, that specific configuration of the text’s internal logic does much to prescribe the limits of what precisely is deemed to be representable. In the meantime, however, it is sufficient to recognize the sort of *discourse of adequation* that functions in Bordwell to link the basic goals of the classical-normative cinematic text with the promise of total representability of ideal signification.¹²⁰

iv. The Invocation of the “Classical”

I have argued that a theory of realist representation is the central, structuring formation in Bordwell’s apprehension of cinema. Formalist aesthetics and the scientific logic of representability are mutually affirming discourses, each generated as responses to

¹¹⁸ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 158, 159. Bordwell does remark on the occasional “arbitrary” imposition of a “closure effect,” which he terms “pseudoclosure,” and which for him seems to undermine the guarantee of total closure that classical endings generally assure. On this see also Bordwell, “The Bounds of Difference,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 83. Of course, the production of the category of “pseudoclosure” ultimately serves to affirm the idea of some legitimate form of narrative closure. This is a disingenuous move, insofar as all cause-and-effect relationships must be viewed as radically contingent, regardless of whether a text might lend to them the appearance of structure; quite simply, all “closure” is “pseudoclosure.” See, for example, Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 86ff; for a more colourful account of the “radical contingency of the enchainment of narration,” see Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 69–71.

¹¹⁹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 162.

the subjection of representation to self-critical reflection, and each structured by economies of ideal regulation and normativity.¹²¹ That the normative text, or the “group style” from which it is derived, furthermore comes to be labelled as “classical,” however, does call our attention to the imbrication within Bordwell’s model of another set of problems entirely. What are the implications that arise when the Hollywood cinema comes to be called “classical?” Given the enormity of this problem, I am able to offer here only the most cursory of observations.

I suspect that, if we are to make any sense of this move at all—this nomination of the Hollywood cinema as “classical”—we ought to recognize a distinction between the complexity of the web of discourses that the notion of such a thing as a classical aesthetic evokes, and the function that this attribution serves in Bordwell’s production of the normative cinematic text. Bordwell’s engagement with classicism is brief; he enumerates among its measures “decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver’s response,” and proceeds swiftly to impute adequation between the normative Hollywood text and the

¹²⁰ On the “value of adequation,” see Derrida, “Parergon,” 110.

¹²¹ Certain, contingent means of thinking of aesthetic beauty may themselves be apprehended as a product of the same economy that structures the thinking of serious, practical, or scientific representations in relation to presence; a particular *aesthetic* economy may be shown as functioning according to a similar logic to that which simultaneously governs the economy of practical representation. Derrida, for example, demonstrates how, in Kant’s critique of aesthetic judgement, the “value of full presence guarantees both the truth and the morality of the poetic,” insofar as it “*resembles* most closely divine productivity.” And so while the labour of the poet “merely proposes an entertaining play of the imagination,” it in fact “proceeds as if he were handling the business of the understanding”; in other words, “the poet promises play with the imagination while he nurtures the understanding and gives life to concepts.” Poetic productivity is therefore apprehended in relation to the productivity of divine nature; that relationship is conceived within an economy of adequation that is itself structured—just as is the thinking of practical representation—by the thinking of an absolute presence (Derrida, “Economimesis,” 17–18; emphasis original).

classical.¹²² Once again, in this respect, Bordwell transparently reproduces “Hollywood’s own discourse,” in this case with the legitimizing of popular cinema as art; Miriam Hansen has shown, for example, how the marketing of commercial cinema toward its coveted middle-class audiences was founded upon a “bid for cultural respectability.”¹²³

Bordwell’s consequent attribution of this sort of value to cinematic texts hypostatizes the “classical” as positive, quasi-transcendental, always-already identifiable trait and summarily collapses a complex network of discursive problems concerning, on the one hand, the status and function of the so-called work of art in a context of mass production, mass reproducibility, class-based consumer society, and so on, and, on the other hand, the inclusion of cinema as aesthetic artwork in the tradition of literature or painting.¹²⁴ Bordwell tellingly engages none of these issues, except to suggest that the film’s mode of production and its orientation toward mass audiences need not preclude its status as art.¹²⁵ These latter claims surely constitute a substantial intervention in the very thinking of the “classical,” whether it is intended or not. Bordwell’s move may therefore, I think, be read in either of two ways: either as willful intervention within the context of

¹²² Bordwell, “An Excessively Obvious Cinema,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 3–4.

¹²³ Miriam Hansen, “Early Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?,” 229.

¹²⁴ It is surely the Frankfurt School and its legacy that have most significantly shaped the means by which such problems are thought, and indeed, the very fact that they be thought at all. On the peculiarity of the means by which film comes to be legitimized as art, see, most famously, Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–251. Remarking on the “insensitive and forced character of early theories of film,” Benjamin notes “how their desire to class the film among the ‘arts’ forces these theoreticians to read ritual elements into it—with a striking lack of discretion” (227).

¹²⁵ Even here, Bordwell’s strategy is simply to impute identity between the patronage system of the Renaissance and the business model of commercial cinematic production. See, e.g., Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2–3.

extant problematizations of classicism and the status of art, and thus, perhaps, as a postmodernist celebration of mass tastes; or as merely symptomatic of a broader labour to naturalize the Hollywood text on the terms of its own idealized parergonality, namely through the imputation of a series of adequations with various extant notions of ideality.

4. The Object's Subject: A Model for Comprehension

For Bordwell, one of the key components in the formulation of a normative cinematic text that determinately, ideally represents some anterior truth is the complementing of the normative text itself with a theory of normative spectatorship. In a similar manner to that in which Bordwell produces the category of normative-ideal cinematic *text*, he is able to produce the reciprocal category of ideal *spectator*. It is important to emphasize the extent to which the categories of spectator and text, and their respective normative characteristics, are mutually and inextricably reaffirming. The normative content of spectatorship, for example, by prescribing the limits of acceptable spectator behaviour (characterized as the “spectator’s goal”), actually functions entirely to affirm the logic of determinately referring cinematic representation. Thus it is apparent how Bordwell’s model of *normative-ideal spectator comprehension* necessarily presupposes the existence of a stable, determinately referring, effectively functioning text, and vice versa. What is more, the precise sort of comprehension that is deemed permissible actually serves to limit and to give positive structure to the normative content of the cinematic text.

The placement of limitations on normative textual content is possible, for example, with the production of categories of *deficient* or *pathologized* spectatorship. Indeed, these parasitic categories, while serving to initiate a criticism of supposedly inappropriate spectatorial activity, are most useful in the critical-realist project of salvaging the textual integrity and determinate content of the ideal representation. By pathologizing and expelling from the normative model any spectatorial activity that is not explicitly oriented toward the location of that which has been prescribed as the text's determinate, referential meaning, the theory of comprehension works fundamentally not only to complement the theory of a determinately signifying text, but also to re-double the limitations on precisely what may be considered representable in the cinema. What logic informs the production of such categories, and how are they related to broader discourses of the cinema spectator as subject?

i. Knowable, Knowledgeable Spectators

Bordwell's act of introducing into his descriptions of cinematic textuality a normative behavioral model for a comprehending, active spectator effectively works to redouble the critical-realist situation of his film-theoretical model. In addition to providing an analyzable logic of textual signification, Bordwell, with the cognitive model, invokes a broader, well-established set of discourses that re-negotiate the role of perceivers and spectators as subjects, rendering them, too, capable of being subject to analysis. This rendering is surely consistent with the modern proliferation of the human sciences, and their investigation and interrogation of knowledge systems in order to

preserve access to a stable, transcendental object. But it also suggests more specific relevance, namely in the negotiation of the subjectivity of the cinema audience, and thus, effectively, in the negotiation of a certain social and cultural role for cinematic technology in mass culture.¹²⁶ These intersecting issues of epistemology, technology, and subjectivity may, I think, be apprehended epistemically, as part of the same discursive formation. They are, in various ways, complicit in the discursively negotiated reconfiguration of the relationship between spectator and representation so that, unlike the stable, rational, eternal presence traditionally attributed to, for example, the Albertian-perspectival model of visual representation, the modern, cinematic spectator's role is, in many accounts, renegotiated as active, attentive, and engaged, but at the same time persistently homogenized and normalized, and as such necessarily fallible and subject to pathologization.

What it is important to stress is that this discursive reconfiguration, rather than constituting an irresolvable crisis of knowledge and representation in modernity, ultimately works to salvage, to preserve the notion of a transcendental object of

¹²⁶ It would be an understatement to suggest that the literature on the subject-spectator of cinema is extensive. On the relationship between the pathologized, modern subject and the cinema spectatorship of the mass audience see, in particular, Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping*; Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 99 and *passim*; Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999).

The broader discourse of a pathologizable, normative, modern subjectivity has obviously had considerable influence on film theory, several prominent strains of which have in turn produced theories of normative cinematic spectatorship. What is fascinating to witness is how so many of these theories describe various subjectivities produced entirely as *effects* of cinema. I am thinking here in particular of Althusserian-Marxist influenced apparatus theory, but several versions of psychoanalytic and semiotic film theory also seem to produce the (gendered) spectator wholly as an extension of cinema's signifying processes. I will say nothing further about such theories here, except simply to point out how the apprehension of spectator subjectivity as an effect of the apparatus, text, etc. works to apotheosize the status of the category of the representational medium itself, granting it quasi-transcendental status, while generally either undermining or binarizing subjective difference along gender lines.

knowledge by regulating processes of spectatorship and knowledge-production at the initial expense of the stability of the subject. This is a point that I think much of the extant literature on subjectivity and spectatorship fails to emphasize adequately. The transcendental object that serves to centre or to structure knowledge and signification remains intact, but is merely supplemented by a discourse that serves to interrogate those very structures and the subjectivities upon which those knowledges are contingent. Yet this, in turn, initiates a new discourse of a transcendental *a priori*; after all, such an undertaking only makes sense when it is itself motivated by the idea of the possibility of a total knowledge of signification, that is, of the location of the means of ideal representation. And so, paradoxically underlying the *pathologization* of the interaction between spectator and text lies, ultimately, the promise of ideal signification, total knowledge, and a transcendental subject. It is to this end that the critical realist labours.¹²⁷

ii. Cognitive Psychology

Bordwell's primary tools for the production of a normative, active spectator are drawn from his reading of cognitive psychology. The role of psychology in negotiating a specifically modern, western, configuration of subjectivity is well known.¹²⁸ Suffice it to

¹²⁷ Recall Derrida's insistence that "the metaphysical reduction of the sign needed the opposition it was reducing. The opposition is systematic with the reduction" (Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," 281).

¹²⁸ See, for example, Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 23ff and *passim*; Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 213ff. Rorty maintains that "[t]he rise of the notion of knowledge as a matter of rightly ordered inner representations—an unclouded and undistorting Mirror of Nature—was due to the notion that the difference between the man whose beliefs were true and the man whose beliefs were false was a matter of 'how their minds worked'" (248).

say that no ontological weight can be granted to the categories of supposedly transcultural or human mental processes that various psychologies attempt to universalize; such categories may be seen as fruitful only insofar as they offer a productive tool for description within certain, culturally specific contexts. What sort of attitude toward cognitive psychology, then, is manifest in Bordwell's writing?

Although we witness Bordwell promising the advent of a "cognitive revolution,"¹²⁹ and vigorously defending cognitivist theory against its critics,¹³⁰ his commitment to the transcendental status of cognitive psychology and the spectatorial processes derived from it is nevertheless fraught, at the level of writing, with some ambivalence. The "citational play" that this ambivalence permits is not insignificant. Mirroring that of his commitment to the status of the normative-ideal cinematic text itself, Bordwell's ambivalent commitment to the ontology of certain cognitive processes permits a similar structuring contradiction to emerge. Specifically, it allows a set of specialized, culturally and historically contingent cognitive behaviours and practices to come to stand for, to supplement within the chain of signification, a set of normative or ideal behaviours, re-doubling within the play of signification precisely the sort of universalization that the production of psychological categories achieves in the first place.¹³¹ This is a useful move; indeed, we shall see shortly how this implicit

¹²⁹ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, xv.

¹³⁰ See, for example, Bordwell, "Film Interpretation Revisited," *Film Criticism* 27, no. 2–3 (winter–spring 1993): 98–100. A less polemical account appears in "A Case for Cognitivism"; but see also "A Case for Cognitivism: Further Reflections," *Iris* 11 (summer 1990): 107–112.

¹³¹ For an interesting but limited discussion of this universalization see Slavoj Žižek's response to "cognitivist antidialectician" critiques of "deconstructionist" work in Cultural Studies in "*Da Capo senza Fine*," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 241; and in *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory*, 17.

commitment to the universal ontological value of certain spectatorial activities serves to naturalize certain kinds of cinematic signification as privileged or ideal. For the moment it is worth concentrating on Bordwell's positioning of the universal, transcultural status of certain cognitive processes themselves.

The play in the chain of signification that permits this is dependent on a gentle shift in the focus of discussion from the specificity of certain cognitive processes to the universal applicability of the principles of cognitive psychology that underlie those processes. On the one hand, Bordwell cautions that the principles of cinema and narrative comprehension dependent on certain cognitive processes are applicable only to "schooled perceivers in contemporary western culture."¹³² On the other hand, Bordwell insists, more broadly, that a "[c]onstruivist psychology could argue that our construction of perceptual reality is not conventional, in the sense that all people in all societies automatically draw perceptual inferences in the same way," and thus that psychology cannot be seen as "reducible to an epistemology."¹³³ Bordwell further claims that the notion of the cognitive "carries no doctrinal weight,"¹³⁴ and that "practical inductive reasoning is a fundamental feature of human thought."¹³⁵ Consider the play that is permitted here. While specific spectatorial activities are denigrated as being culturally specific, the cognitive principles that enable and determine them are situated as universal,

¹³² Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 34.

¹³³ Bordwell, "Adventures in the Highlands of Theory," 86.

¹³⁴ Bordwell, "Film Interpretation Revisited," 98. Bordwell continues by asserting that "[cognitive] demarcates certain kinds of mental activities: information-gathering, argument-framing, deliberation, reasoning, inference, judgment, debate, and comparable activities. You can grant that these are cognitive without subscribing to any particular theoretical explanation of them."

¹³⁵ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 137.

transcendent categories. Implicitly, then, what are claimed to be contingent spectatorial behaviors are in fact modelled exactly upon already-abstracted, universal, normative-ideal ones.¹³⁶

iii. Rational, Empirical Spectatorship

I have already suggested that the effect of this resonates, paradoxically, within the cinematic text itself, with the perceptible normative content of that text obviously being constrained by the limits of the viewing activity of the normative spectator. The self-referential logic underlying this reciprocal, double movement, to regulate simultaneously the conditions of spectatorship and with them the very limits of the text, is evident, implicitly, at least, in Bordwell's statement that "the question to be answered is how spectators intersubjectively arrive at essentially the same 'story' when presented with a film."¹³⁷ We may, borrowing from Derrida, observe that "[t]he form of the question to which he responded thus entailed the response."¹³⁸ What sort of response does the form of this question entail?

¹³⁶ Likewise, we have Bordwell's mention of Lakoff's "useful" distinction between "neurophysiological processes," "universal cognitive processes," and "culturally variable processes." This clearly produces a hierarchical formation with neurophysiological processes constituting the zero-degree term. As examples of "universal cognitive processes" Bordwell suggests "the identification of human agents on the visual track, the parsing of musical meter and rhythm." What I think is worth pointing out is the nature of the implicit hierarchy to which these categories conform, with a transcendental cognitive *a priori* as the structuring centre. See Bordwell, "A Case for Cognitivism"; and the production of a similar continuum in Bordwell, "Convention, Construction, and Cinematic Vision," in *Post-Theory*, 87–107.

¹³⁷ Bordwell, "Adventures in the Highlands of Theory," 89.

¹³⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 31. Derrida is speaking about Saussure's decision to exclude writing from his general linguistics.

First, we may observe that the structuring role that is played by such a category as determinate textual meaning (presented here as “essentially the same ‘story’”) necessarily assumes a corresponding subject capable of observing that meaning. The effect of this configuration is to produce a transcendent or ideal model spectator who, when confronted with a cinematic representation, operates in accordance with a narrowly prescribed set of goals, goals determined by certain principles governing the activity of the normative subject of cognitive psychology. Bordwell’s “organism” (or spectator) therefore constitutes a transcendental embodiment of an impossibly ideal set of skills, a “hypothetical spectator endowed with aspects of human perceptual and cognitive capacities,”¹³⁹ situated in an impossibly ideal viewing context, presented with an impossibly ideal text, or “a hypothetical entity executing the operations relevant to constructing a story out of the film’s representation.”¹⁴⁰ Put simply, the cinema spectator is apprehended to be both *rational*—capable of determining and executing appropriate activities when confronted with a representation—and *complicit, obedient, or self-disciplining*—willing to comprehend representational texts in the appropriate, prescribed way. The immense problems with this impossible model of an ideal spectator are clear enough;¹⁴¹ it hardly helps matters that this model is presented to us as *normative*—i.e., realistically attainable—rather than impossible-ideal. What is more, we shall soon have

¹³⁹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 39.

¹⁴⁰ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 30.

¹⁴¹ Bill Nichols, for example, shows how the model “regards the viewer as a sexless, genderless, classless, stateless ‘hypothetical entity’” (Nichols, “Form Wars: The Political Unconscious of Formalist Theory,” 502). Andrew Britton, meanwhile, suggests that “Mr. Bordwell imagines that Hollywood’s audiences consist of a series of miniature clones of himself” (Britton, “The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole,” 51).

an opportunity to see that this model of spectator-subjectivity has great implications not only for cinematic spectators, but also for the very means of organization of the normative content of the cinematic text itself. At any rate, what is remarkable to witness is its construction in service to the salvaging of determinate representational meaning and the eradication of the threat of polysemy.

To be specific, this occurs primarily through the limitation of the duties of the spectator to the *comprehension* of a certain kind of explicitly *referential* textual meaning, the very limits—and structure—of which are necessarily and reciprocally determined by the limits of comprehension itself.¹⁴² Specifically, Bordwell insists, following E. H. Gombrich, that cognitive activity “depends upon the search for meaning, the drive to make coherent sense of the material represented.”¹⁴³ Thus, the spectator of the fiction film, according to Bordwell, “must take as a central cognitive goal the construction of a more or less intelligible story.”¹⁴⁴ The implications of this are great. First, a prior disposition toward performing a particular activity, namely a certain kind of comprehension, is posited as the normative state for any spectator encountering a given text; all other activities are implicitly construed as secondary to—as parasitic upon—comprehension. Second, and more importantly, comprehension as an activity is established as enjoying a privileged relationship with the material of the text itself.

¹⁴² On referential content as that which is *comprehensible*, see Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 8. On the reading of textual structure itself—the location of narrational “gaps,” for example—being a product of the orientation of cognitive activity, see Stanley Fish’s remarks quoted in Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 75.

¹⁴³ Bordwell, “Time in the Classical Film,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 43.

¹⁴⁴ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 33; cf. also “Time in the Classical Film,” 47, and *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 30.

Specifically, the process of comprehension is dependent on the viewer's capable recognition of a given amount of empirically verifiable, anterior, determinately referring content.

Bordwell's subjects are granted a limited set of skills corresponding to what Jürgen Habermas, for example, has identified as object-purposive or subject-centred reason. Habermas's description of the limitations of construing reason in this way is worth quoting:

Ontologically, the world is reduced to the world of entities as a whole (as the totality of objects that can be represented and of existing states of affairs); epistemologically, our relationship to that world is reduced to the capacity to know existing states of affairs or to bring them about in a purposive-rational fashion; semantically, it is reduced to fact-stating discourse in which assertoric sentences are used—and no validity claim is admitted besides propositional truth, which is available *in foro interno*.¹⁴⁵

We need not concern ourselves with assessing the merit of the motivation behind Habermas's critique, namely his advocacy of a normal theory of "communicative action." It is sufficient for us to observe the way in which his account produces a concentric relationship between certain, limited configurations of subjective knowledge (epistemology), representations (reduced here, tellingly, to semantics), and the objective world (ontology).

Returning to our model spectator and model cinematic text, it is easy to see how, within the relationship between the referential text and the anterior object world, there will necessarily be reproduced precisely the same sort of relationship that exists between

¹⁴⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 311.

viewer and text. That is to say, in precisely the same way that the very nature of the object world is contingent on the categories of knowledge within which it comes to be thought, so the signifying content of the normative text comes to be limited by the boundaries of what is deemed comprehensible according to a certain set of prescribed, normative viewer activities. In summary, the arbitrarily prescribed normative metaphysical content structuring the scene of the spectatorial encounter determines that of the representation (presuming it to be an ideal one), and is thus re-inscribed as that of the object world to which it refers. We shall see very shortly, in our discussion of the ontology of the normative text, precisely how this is so.

Because of the nature of this configuration, the same *metaphysics of presence* that structures the relationship between object world and representation also structures the relationship between representation and spectator. Specifically, we witness the imposition upon the normative text of the requirement of the attribute of ideal *comprehensibility*, which supplements the anterior category of ideal *representability*—effectively establishing a further articulation, imposing a further category of deferral from unmediated presence that may in turn be subject to thought and thus to reduction. And so, in a similar manner to that which determines the normative content of the cinematic text, Bordwell produces a set of practices that comprise legitimate comprehension. These practices are modelled on “template schemata,” *a priori* categories that guide the

spectator's search for referential meaning in the text.¹⁴⁶ These schemata are, ostensibly, a combination of those oriented toward general, everyday perceptual activity and those oriented toward the comprehension of specific narrational norms. Bordwell proposes a hierarchical ordering of various classes of these schemata, corresponding to the hierarchy of systems that he posits as internal to the normative text itself. Thus, for example, recourse to schemata treating textual material as motivated by the *compositional unity* of the text should occur before recourse to schemata dealing with "realistic" motivation.¹⁴⁷ More will be said about the reasons for this sort of hierarchical organization of schemata when we arrive at a discussion of the internal logic of the normative text.

For the moment it is sufficient to recognize that Bordwell's complicit, comprehending spectator is expected to govern his or her own activity in a way that works consistently *to constrain* the possible meaning of the text. As an example of this process of reduction we have Bordwell's vague insistence that the schemata applied to the comprehension of cinematic narration be limited to those that are "norm-derived."¹⁴⁸ What is meant by this? Bordwell continues: "We must limit ourselves, as I have from the outset, to those schemata which are historically intersubjective and characteristic of the formal process of narrative comprehension."¹⁴⁹ The latter of these two criteria is easy

¹⁴⁶ The extent to which schemata regulate the spectator's engagement with normative textual content seems to depend on the context in which they are being discussed. In *Making Meaning*, schemata are largely denigrated as the categories that enable critics to produce errant interpretations, but in *Narration in the Fiction Film* they are cited as fundamental to the process of narrative comprehension. That schemata function as a major "blind spot" in Bordwell—comprising a category with effectively indeterminate positive content—is not at all surprising. They are an absolutely necessary and yet parasitic category for the critical realist, who must recognize the existence of the subjective *a priori* but at the same time labour to reduce it.

¹⁴⁷ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 36.

¹⁴⁸ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 151.

¹⁴⁹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 151–2.

enough to account for; essentially, the spectator's activity must be regulated by the very norms of representation that the normative textual model itself prescribes. The determination of what qualifies as "historically intersubjective" is much harder to pinpoint, for reasons that take us back to the founding contradictions of the representational model. The difficulty presented by the admissibility of various schemata governing *a priori* or extratextual knowledge will, I think, become clearer once we turn to a specific discussion of the normative content of the cinematic text.

The trouble in cataloguing what may be considered to be the determinately correct schemata or procedures for apprehending the determinate content of a cinematic text—the apparent arbitrariness of Bordwell's procedures for "ideal regulation" of such a category¹⁵⁰—should not concern us at this point, for precisely this reason: the very idea that there are such categories as correct or incorrect procedures—the very idea that there need be some form of ideal regulation at all—ultimately necessitates the idea of some normative, determinate content to structure them. It is, for the most part, sufficient to demonstrate the existence of *some* acceptable practices for comprehension and likewise *some* unacceptable ones. We are cautioned, for example, not to apply schemata that are not "norm-derived" or "historically intersubjective," as impossible a notion as that may seem.¹⁵¹ This is, of course, in addition to the various other possible ways in which

¹⁵⁰ On "ideal regulation," see Derrida, "Signature Event Content," in *Limited Inc*, 15.

¹⁵¹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 151. In what I can only infer, based on context, to be an example of an inappropriate schema, Bordwell muses: "My expectations about what a fictional dog will do may be based on a schema derived from the behavior of my faithful dog Shep." Consider the utterly impossible spectatorship that is being described here, devoid, it would seem, of all but some "historically intersubjective" data on normative canine activity.

spectators may be pathologized insofar as they fail to apprehend determinate referential content. Indeed, Bordwell asks us to consider “the extent to which empirical spectators can err in comprehending a film”; he catalogues such problems as fatigue, “misunderstandings” provoked by the use of “inappropriate” schemata, “inadequate knowledge of narrational norms,” and spectators who “deliberately misconstrue the story.”¹⁵² Again, I think that the important thing to recognize here is not the usefulness or validity of the various, specific categories of error, but rather the structuring role of the exteriorized, parasitic category of “error” in itself, insofar as it works implicitly to reaffirm via exclusion the existence of stable, referential content.¹⁵³ Error always necessarily presupposes some absolutely correct, ideal reading, even if the precise nature of that reading is impossible to locate or to achieve.

Furthermore, it is worth noting, once again, the extent to which the theory of normative-ideal spectatorship, grounded in a discourse of normative-ideal comprehension, operates reciprocally to privilege the status of the classical Hollywood text as transcendental ideal. We have already seen how the classical Hollywood text, that which comes to occupy the position of normative and ultimately ideal cinematic text, is, through a discourse of adequation, shown to correspond best to the principles of ideal signification embodied within a certain representational model. Likewise, the features of

¹⁵² Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 39.

¹⁵³ On “parasitism” and its function with discourses of ideal regulation see Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 15.

comprehensibility that best reconcile with the cognitive activity of the spectator are shown conveniently to reside in that same text.

This putatively positive feature of the classical text is naturalized with a narrative of historical development of the classical model in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* that privileges comprehensibility as a fundamental goal. We therefore encounter Thompson's claims of a "growing emphasis on calculating how a film could be understood,"¹⁵⁴ an emphasis which in turn produces classical devices that seek to "present information clearly,"¹⁵⁵ and to "narrate causal information as clearly as possible."¹⁵⁶ Again, it is important to recognize how the discourse of comprehensibility works to supplement the underlying discourse of representability, relying, effectively, on the same principles of ideal signification and the same metaphysics of presence, merely doing so in a manner that both implicates the viewer and, in doing so, produces new, supplementary categories that serve to limit the normative content of the text.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Thompson, "The Continuity System," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 194.

¹⁵⁵ Thompson, "The Formulation of the Classical Narrative," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 177.

¹⁵⁶ Thompson, "The Formulation of the Classical Narrative," 174.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Barry King, "The Story Continues...", 57.

III. BORDWELL'S TEXT (II): *A POSTERIORI*

Introduction: The Logical Structure of the Normative Cinematic Text

It is now appropriate to turn to a discussion of the constitution of the normative cinematic text in its specificity. As I have suggested, this text is consistent with a certain representational model, already outlined, insofar as it is determinately referring and possesses an analyzable immanent logic. Beyond this basic fidelity to the representational model, Bordwell attributes certain supplementary characteristics; these are largely drawn, as we have seen, from certain discourses of the classical Hollywood cinema, such that an idealized abstraction of that cinema itself comes to fill, through a discourse of adequation, the position of exemplary model. Thus the normative cinematic text is identified as a *coherent fictional narrative*, a fundamentally *aesthetic* work with a corresponding limited functional autonomy; the consequences of this latter commitment include, for example, the inclusion within the ontology of the text of a *hierarchy of systems* that privileges principles of internal textual unity over those of realistic representation. In spite of this, I insist, in what is the founding argument of this project, that these sorts of modifications ultimately do not impede, but rather only serve to underscore, the centrality of basic empirical principles of determinate signification and reference to Bordwell's normative-ideal cinematic text.

In examining how the principles of determinate signification and reference underlie the normative-ideal cinematic text, there are a number of properties that are worth careful consideration. Specifically, I shall, in the sections that follow, proceed to address (1) the sorts of boundaries that serve to constitute the text as a *coherent, integral*

object, (2) the normative *functional structure* of the text, a configuration that is necessarily governed by an *economy of representation*; and (3) the *normative ontological content* of the text, which both incorporates and is governed by a certain metaphysical structure. Some aspects of these elements we have encountered already in discussions of the logic of self-identical textuality and ideal representation; what it is necessary to examine now is how precisely the normative cinematic text, namely that abstracted from the idealized discourses of the classical Hollywood cinema, effectively adopts and reconfigures these basic premises.

My description must not be viewed as a comprehensive presentation of any actual, positive object that may be determinately located in Bordwell (or elsewhere, for that matter), but rather as a generalized rendering of the sort of structure that is manifest through the play of signification that comprises Bordwell's writing on cinematic signification and textuality. I should also note that, for better or for worse, I have produced this rendering in such a way as to emphasize a *structural* constitution, necessitating, for example, a re-reading as structures of those relevant components of cinematic representation that Bordwell has elected to describe as processes.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ On narrative "process," "structure," and "representation" as simultaneously comprising the "total order of the text," see Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, xi; and clarification in "Adventures in the Highlands of Theory," 76. An engagement with the "paradox of structure and event" necessarily (and unfortunately) lies beyond the conceptual horizon of this project. The problems here, including those bearing on my own work, are obviously enormous and the discussion of them has consumed many pages elsewhere. See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 219–232. For a very brief discussion, see also Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 95ff.

1. The Shape of the Text

The normative cinematic text—derived as it is by way of various interrelated discourses from a certain representational model—is characterized most basically by two fundamental principles, namely internal coherence and determinate reference.

Understanding these principles to inform profoundly both the representational economy and the ontic content of the text, I shall commence my description of the ontology of the text by commenting on each of these briefly.

First, I think it is important to make a distinction between the *boundedness* of a text and its *internal coherence*. Although the two properties might intuitively suggest some mutual relationship,¹⁵⁹ it is nevertheless possible to imagine, for example, a text that is discretely bounded but that nevertheless presents internal contradictions (the inverse—an unbounded yet unified text—is perhaps harder to picture). We have already seen how the *bounded* text comes to be naturalized in Bordwell.¹⁶⁰ The notion of internal coherence or *unity* as a normative attribute of the text is another matter. For Bordwell, the category of textual unity *apparently* represents the conflation of certain, well-known aesthetic values of “organic unity,” found in Aristotle, New Criticism, etc., with a commitment to the basic empirical principle of the simplification of the discourse of knowable objects through the imputation of object-identity.¹⁶¹ What is remarkable in light of this is that Bordwell establishes no categorical distinction (or relationship)

¹⁵⁹ See, e.g., Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 199.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. above (§ II, 1, ii).

¹⁶¹ See, in particular, Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 133–4; for a limited critique of “organic unity” see Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 199ff.

between *stylistic* unity on the one hand and *semantic* or *referential* unity on the other.¹⁶² I

think that we may confidently read much of Bordwell's discussion of unity as pertaining to *referential* coherence.

i. Unity and Necessity

There are, of course, myriad means by which to collapse the very idea of object identity, or to deconstruct specific token instances of its recognition. It would be foolish even to begin to examine those means here.¹⁶³ I think it is instead better to begin by considering how the conflation of literary-critical and cognitivist approaches to "unity" produces a further structuring contradiction in Bordwell. We witness how, in the play of signification, *the very conditions enabling the category of textual unity* are posited and denigrated as contingent, its currency among critics shown to be "historically variable,"¹⁶⁴ but then those same enabling conditions are explained in terms of transcendental

¹⁶² The hypothesis of stylistic coherence enables Bordwell's "parametric" narrational mode, for example. "In order for style to come forward across the whole film," Bordwell writes, "it must possess internal coherence. This coherence depends on establishing a distinctive, often unique intrinsic stylistic norm" (Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 285).

¹⁶³ See, among others, Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 82ff. From the point of view of analytic logic, we might say that the normative content of the text is subject, via posited spectatorial activities, to an empirical "imputation of identity" of the object that necessarily eliminates certain of its contradictions in the name of some *a priori* standard of "conceptual economy" (W. V. Quine, "Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis," in *From a Logical Point of View*, 66, 79). We have already seen how the boundary between analytic and synthetic that serves to legitimize such a configuration itself collapses when pushed to its limit. The purported unity of any object is entirely the projection of the conceptual scheme that enables it. Thus, when Bordwell demonstrates how a critic, in the process of producing a thematic interpretation, may map semantic fields onto a film in a manner that serves to "recast the film along certain lines, throwing particular cues into relief and downplaying others," he is giving us an example of precisely the same "imputation of identity" at work (*Making Meaning*, 142); for, as Quine has shown, the same operation lies behind the imputation of spatial and temporal identity as lies behind conceptual identity ("Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis," 69). We shall see shortly what the implications of this collapse of the distinction between "comprehension" and "interpretation" are for Bordwell's theoretical project. For now it is sufficient to observe problems that arise from the imputation of the identity of the text on purely cognitive grounds.

cognitive categories—the subject’s search for unity as cognitive process; next, finally—inevitably—unity itself is implicitly imputed as a normative textual property. “Unity” oscillates between *a priori* category and ontic property of cinematic texts. Why must this be so?

Let us consider a key passage on the “unity hypothesis” in *Making Meaning*.

First, rhetorical work ensures that the concept of unity appear as preceding both spectator and text, and thus, implicitly, grants it status as a quasi-transcendental category.

Bordwell begins by stating that “[s]ome presumption of unity is essential for the construction of referential and explicit meanings.”¹⁶⁵ The claim gives no indication of where, precisely, this imperative originates; unity is established as always-already preceding the encounter between spectator and text. Next, however, we witness the metarepresentational vertigo of Bordwell’s grafting, bereft of context or explanation, of Northrop Frye, who in turn grafts William Blake’s assertion of the necessity of “perfect unity” in “every poem.”¹⁶⁶ Bordwell’s quotation of Frye may be read as a meta-staging of this problem of originary unity. Here I quote Bordwell:

Northrop Frye remarks: “‘Every poem must necessarily be a perfect unity’, says Blake; this, as the wording implies, is not a statement of fact about all existing poems, but a statement of the hypothesis which every reader adopts in first trying to comprehend even the most chaotic poem ever written.”¹⁶⁷

Precisely what commitment to the unity of the cinematic text is Bordwell permitting this dialogue between Frye and Blake to make on his behalf? Never mind that they are each

¹⁶⁴ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 133.

¹⁶⁵ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 133.

¹⁶⁶ Bordwell quotes from Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 77.

¹⁶⁷ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 133.

discussing poems and not movies;¹⁶⁸ let us simply attend to the quotation as it stands.

Consider that we here witness Frye's reading, his grafting of Blake *in a certain way*, exploiting semantic ambiguity, i.e. in a manner that—seemingly counter-intuitively—has Blake disavowing the ontic unity of the text. “*Every poem must necessarily be a perfect unity*” comes to stand, for Frye, to mean something quite contrary to itself.

For us to attempt to justify Frye's move here would be difficult without some recourse to psychologism, yoked in turn to the imputed presupposition of some post-Wittgensteinian theory of semantics or speech acts,¹⁶⁹ and to do so would also be to miss the larger point, which is this: simply in the rhetorical gesture of casting a (preferred/correct) “reader-hypothetical” conceptualization of unity *against* the

¹⁶⁸ I have already attempted to outline Bordwell's implicit translinguistic commitments; see above (§ II, 2).

¹⁶⁹ The central problem, as I see it, is that a certain attitude of all readers of all poems is being abstracted from what is, at first blush, a statement about the poems themselves: “perfect unity” is predicated of “[e]very poem.” Frye, however, indicates that the “wording implies” that the statement concerns *readers* and not *poems*. We are left to contemplate the modal auxiliary verb phrase “must necessarily,” which, as John Lyons notes, most theories of semantics would take to be inherently ambivalent. This ambivalence is not a product of the re-doubling (“must,” “necessarily”), which is by grammatical necessity “modally harmonic,” with the adverb “necessarily” simply strengthening the auxiliary verb “must.” Rather, the ambivalence consists in interpreting “must necessarily” either in terms of *logical* (or “*alethic*”) *necessity* or in terms of *subjective epistemic modality*. The former reading posits an analytic truth; the latter contains a performative element expressing the epistemic attitude or inclination of the speaker (as in the utterance, “Surely, there *must* be a solution to this problem!”). We can infer that Frye, applying informal rules of *epistemic warrant*, accepts the latter interpretation. It is, therefore, crucially, the performative attitude of the statement that Frye exploits in making the issue one of readership-attitude and not predication: “*unity*” *becomes an effect of Blake's attitude toward poems*. Frye may be seen, in Derridean terms, to have effected a “neutralization” of the “citational play” of the inherently ambivalent status of “unity” manifest in the text—as either the quasi-transcendental positive property of “every poem,” or as the projection of some *a priori* spectator hypothesis. It is surely within the very conditions enabling this ambivalence—in the metaphysical *thinking* of a constative/performative binary—that lies the mark of *différance*. By quoting Frye, Bordwell neatly re-doubles Frye's neutralization (but it is nevertheless re-inscribed; see below). On ambiguous modal verbs, alethic and epistemic modality, modal harmony, and epistemic warrant, see John Lyons, *Semantics*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 791, 798, 807, 808. On the neutralization of citational play, see Derrida, *Dissemination*, 98. For a self-deconstruction of a similar performative/constative ambivalence in Derrida's own utterance “Genres are not to be mixed,” see Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” translated by Avital Ronell, in *Glyph 7* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980) 203ff.

(denigrated/incorrect) “text-ontological” conceptualization (“*is not a statement of fact...but is a statement of the hypothesis...*”), Frye thematizes the very *possibility* of such a distinction, stages an enabling of both possible meanings, only to reject the former.

What is more, the two meanings present a distinction founded upon a hierarchical opposition between analytic truth and subjective *a priori*; and, as we have seen time and again, it is not the privileging of one term over the other that is at issue, but rather simply that *the very distinction be thought at all*. Thus the vertigo of the meta-quotational scene enacts—gives structure to—the chain of deferral of the original category that enables the distinction—the positive content of the object text itself (here occupied by Blake’s quotation, in which Frye identifies its possibility only to deny it, to *supplement* it).

Bordwell’s quotation of this particular excerpt from Frye serves to re-inscribe, to reiterate, to *re-narrate* this deferral of presence and enabling of difference, beginning his quotation with Blake’s statement-as-Origin and then moving beyond it. This is a necessary move because, after all, “[t]he opposition is systematic with the reduction.”¹⁷⁰

ii. Unity and Presence

At any rate, Bordwell’s latent commitment to the fundamental self-identity of the normative cinematic text has two mutually affirming and important consequences, as follows: first, to suggest that the referential content of the normative text is, in essence, stable, determinate, and non-contradictory; second, to produce a set of sanctioned spectator activities that regulates textual comprehension in a manner serving to re-double

¹⁷⁰ Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play,” 281.

this textual stability. This re-doubling function is masked in Bordwell's descriptions. I already indicated how Bordwell introduces unity as an "essential" category, doing so in a manner that allows it to precede the spectator-text encounter. Elsewhere, however, Bordwell indicates that "[n]arratives are composed in order to reward, modify, frustrate, or defeat the perceiver's search for coherence,"¹⁷¹ and, likewise, that the location of a unified text is ultimately rewarding because "the organism enjoys creating unity."¹⁷² Thus the notion of a determinate representation of a unified, non-contradictory object world is stabilized through its accompaniment by a theory of spectatorship that naturalizes the search for precisely such unity.

This assumed unity of the represented world of a given cinematic text has great implications, both in terms of the limits it places on the possible contents of the text—which from the outset must be apprehended as identical and non-contradictory—and in terms of the means by which the contents of the text necessarily come to be organized, namely in the prioritization of character causality, as we shall see shortly. What it is worth pointing out here is how the assertion that the normative cinematic text ultimately rewards reading as unified and non-contradictory underscores its ideal status as fundamentally and ideally *representational* of a certain, transcendental object. For it is only the apprehension of some such object as a unified Truth or presence that could produce a supplementary discourse in which ideal representations themselves also reward a search for (a certain kind of) unity.

¹⁷¹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 38.

¹⁷² Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 39.

Even if we were to accept tentatively the existence of that Truth, such an acceptance would only serve to show us how the potential of the cinematic text as non-practical, aesthetic representation, oriented toward *obscuring that truth*, goes largely unfulfilled, precisely because all the rules governing spectatorship work in such a way as to enable the text, no matter how challenging, to be read as non-contradictory and truthful. After all, the principle of the imputation of identity, foremost among these, “essential for the construction of referential and explicit meanings,” necessarily functions in such a manner as to rationalize or minimize any conceivable difference in order to restore the text’s non-contradictory referential status. The formalist-aesthetic notion that all literary texts confound the search for unity is therefore always-already structured by its own negation, insofar as the zero-degree formulation, the norm that determines all possible deviations, and furthermore that to which all normative spectatorial activity is shown to be oriented, is precisely that of the *good, comprehensible representation*. All of this merely serves to underscore the fact that, in spite of various and persistent claims to the contrary—of the non-practical signification of fictional narratives, of the autonomy of poetic speech, etc.—*the ontological kernel of the cinematic text always remains truthful representability*.

2. The Limits of Representability

What, then, is the normative cinematic text actually capable of representing determinately? In other words, what is the ontology of the world to which a cinematic text refers? As we shall see, it is clear on the one hand that for Bordwell normative

cinematic texts *do* refer determinately to putatively real object-worlds populated with various entities and states, but on the other hand that there are strict limitations to what sorts of things there may be, and how they may be organized. In this sense Bordwell is prescribing for cinema the very limits of its representability; if we were to think of cinema as capable of *ideal* representation of some object world, then that object world must be seen to conform to a very specific ontological composition. Indeed, I think it is appropriate to suggest that the object-world of the normative text, in its composition, manifests a certain *metaphysics*. The status of this metaphysics as positive content is that of both genus and species, insofar as it both organizes the text's referential content and simultaneously may itself be enumerated as content. We shall soon see the sorts of ways in which the ontic content of the normative cinematic text conforms to a very specific and contingent way of thinking the ontology of objects and the means by which they may be represented.

As much as Bordwell's writing works to constrain the normative content of the cinematic text in a specific and deliberative way, the very means by which such constraint is imposed necessarily and paradoxically works to structure into the textual ontology a certain porosity, one that undermines the text's prescribed ontological limits and, in a sense, works to open it up from the inside. Driven by certain ambivalences, both in the play of language and in the constitutive features of certain categories themselves, this porosity is in turn manifest in the ambiguous limits both of certain positive contents (such as character motivation) and of the principles governing such features as extratextual reference. Ultimately, then, Bordwell's normative text-ontology, designed in the service

of the containment of determinate content, is structured by a set of fundamental instabilities. How exactly this is so I intend to make clear soon enough; first, some discussion of how Bordwell establishes the very determinate referentiality of the text is in order.

i. The Structure of Reference

I have already attempted to show how the category of representation is neatly supplemented and reciprocated by a theory of comprehension; quite simply, that which is represented in a cinematic text is strictly coextensive with what is comprehensible according to a certain theory of comprehension. Bearing this in mind, as well as recalling the general theory of representation I outlined earlier, we can probe more closely exactly what sorts of representations are at stake. Indeed, Bordwell has been very clear in establishing precisely what may be determinately represented in the normative cinematic text. We get a hint of this in the introduction to *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*, where Bordwell, discussing how Dreyer's films can be seen as "intermittently but systematically posing problems for representation," makes mention of the consideration of "explicit meanings—the narratively significant, the obviously symbolic." No elaboration is given on what these entail, whether narrative significance and the "obviously symbolic" constitute the totality of possible "explicit meaning," or whether explicit meaning itself constitutes the limit of representation. But it is worth considering what sort of privilege these categories enjoy. Witness how this contemplation of "explicit meaning" is directly juxtaposed, in a single paragraph, first with that of

“ambiguities” and then that of “moments when representation falters.”¹⁷³ Keeping in mind that the context of discussion is one of the problematization of representation, we might say that “explicit meaning” anomalously assumes the zero-degree position in what appears to be an informal hierarchical categorization of *degrees of representational efficacy*. The “meaning” itself comes to occupy, within the hierarchy, the position of the putative category of *that which transparently signifies it*—namely an effective or ideal representation, thus re-inscribing, through the play of signification, the mark of *différance*, of a certain metaphysics of presence.

The status of this “meaning” is clarified considerably in *Making Meaning*, where the totality of discernible “meanings” of films is reduced, in what will be a crucial move for Bordwell, to “only four possible types”: *referential, explicit, implicit, and symptomatic*.¹⁷⁴ The real distinction being made here is not among these four subcategories, but two broader ones: “literal” meanings—those which are innately *comprehensible*—on the one hand, and spectator-positing *interpretations* on the other. Of the four subcategories, then, “referential” and “explicit” meanings are established as *comprehensible* and thus legitimate, while “implicit” and “symptomatic” meanings are marked as the products of interpretation, and thus illegitimate. I will have occasion later, during a more detailed discussion of Bordwell’s production of the category of “interpretation,” to demonstrate the extent to which his writing emphasizes this distinction in a manner that denigrates and exteriorizes interpretation while nonetheless

¹⁷³ Dreyer, 7.

¹⁷⁴ *Making Meaning*, 8–10. Bordwell proceeds to moderate this claim by adding that “these four categories of meaning-construction are *functional* and *heuristic*, not substantive” (emphasis original).

yoking to comprehension. Quite simply, that which is comprehensible is described in ways that emphasize the issuing of comprehensible meaning *from within* the anterior, stable text; interpretation, however, is produced *independently of the text* by spectators who supplement the retrieved comprehensible meaning.¹⁷⁵ In this way, the four categories of meaning constitute a hierarchical formation that posits “referential” meaning as the zero-degree term, followed by “explicit meaning,” and then finally the two categories of meaning produced by interpretation; we might again identify this procedure of exteriorization of interpretive practice as one of “ideal regulation.”¹⁷⁶ The privileged “referential” and “explicit” meanings being isolated in this manner, they provide us with a very good idea of exactly what sorts of things Bordwell accepts as comprising the normative content of the cinematic text.

Let us first briefly address the second comprehension-based category, that of “explicit” meaning. Explicit meaning consists of a “conceptual meaning or ‘point’ to the referential meaning, one produced in an instance where, ostensibly, a film “‘intentionally’ indicates how it is to be taken,” and can be seen to “‘speak directly’.” Bordwell gives the example of “There’s no place like home” for *The Wizard of Oz*, and suggests that explicit meaning may be derived from a “verbal indication” or a “stereotyped visual image.”¹⁷⁷

What is worth noting here is that the object-world of the normative text may be seen to

¹⁷⁵ Comprehension “grasps the meanings denoted by the text and its world”; interpretation “ascribes *abstract* and non-literal meanings to the film and its world.” (Bordwell, “Film Interpretation Revisited,” 95–6; emphasis original). Simply consider—with or without recourse to a theory of case grammar—the two very different sorts of agent–object relationships between spectator and text that are established in the respective uses of the verbs “grasp” and “ascribe” (on theories of case grammar and semantic presuppositions see, e.g., Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990], 203–221).

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 15.

include some very limited form of abstract disposition toward its own states of affairs.

This constitutes a substantial commitment to the ontology of the text; what is less clear from Bordwell's description is where precisely lies the outer boundary of determinately comprehensible explicit meaning.

ii. *The Orders of Reference*

Of considerably greater interest is the description of "referential" meaning. This includes, on the one hand, "nonnarrative forms,"¹⁷⁸ and, on the other, a "concrete 'world', be it avowedly fictional or putatively real." Bordwell distinguishes between the *diegesis*, the "spatio-temporal world," and the *fabula*, the "story...occurring within it." This distinction—between an object world conceived in terms of spatio-temporal contiguity and the "story" that plays out within it—hints at a fundamental attitude toward the ontological structure of the object-world. This peculiar organization of the referential content aside, Bordwell furthermore indicates that *reference* may be both "intratextual" and "extratextual"; the film's referential content may include entities that exist outside the film's representation itself (such as "Kansas" in *The Wizard of Oz*). This casually posited

¹⁷⁷ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 8.

¹⁷⁸ "Nonnarrative forms" seem, as the name suggests, to comprise an indefinitely expansive, parasitic category. *Making Meaning* does not attempt to delimit its boundaries, deferring instead to a chapter in David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction*, Second Edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986). Bordwell and Thompson advise that, because "not all films are like *The Wizard of Oz*," it is necessary to acknowledge, in addition to narrative form, "four broad types of nonnarrative form," namely "categorical," "rhetorical," "abstract," and "associational" (44). Interestingly, the Second Edition of *Film Art* manifests a considerable broadening of discussion of nonnarrative forms in comparison to the first, insofar as, in the Second Edition, "[t]ypes of nonnarrative form are now discussed in a separate chapter" (v). Cf. the four pages devoted to "the very interesting problem of nonnarrative versus narrative form" in David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 47–50.

distinction (mitigated by conflation under the single term “reference”) of intratextual and extratextual reference is a troublesome one for any model of textuality that both accepts the notion of *fiction* and conceives of fiction as signifying or referring in the same manner as putatively non-fictional texts. As I see it, the difficulties that it produces for any such model of fictional representation really serve to call into question the very limits of those models, and of the very notion of fiction itself. Obviously such issues are moot in any post-Derridean conception of textuality, truth, reference, etc., but they persist here and we ought to attend to them. Bordwell, it should be noted, does not linger over the matter, but does deploy an endnote to justify the use of “referential meaning” to include both putatively intratextual and extratextual meaning; he suggests that the usage “conforms to current thinking in linguistics and literary semantics.”¹⁷⁹ I think the matter is important enough to warrant a short detour, following which I shall return to a discussion of the ontic content of the normative text.

3. Parergonality

It hardly need be mentioned that any discourse regulating extratextual material implicitly serves to affirm the notion of the self-identical text against which that material stands. Ignoring for the moment any problems we may have with the very idea of this, we may recognize a substantial consequence of this individuation of the text to be the creation of what we might call a *transtextual economy*, and, with it, a possible *regulative discourse of the transtextual economy*. Obviously, without any clear boundary to the text,

¹⁷⁹ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 8, n. 22 (p. 278).

there is no way of limiting what sorts of things might be considered to be an actual part of that text. The creation of a textual boundary, however (exactly as we witness in Bordwell's positing a distinction between comprehended and interpretive meaning), both quantifies the normative content of the text *and* produces the possibility of a discourse of textual supplementarity, what we might call the possibility of legitimate or illegitimate trafficking of extratextual material into the text itself. The boundaries of the text established, we may now have, on the one hand, the positive content of the text, and, on the other, extratextual material that may or may not, in accordance with some arbitrary legitimizing discourse, be permitted to function in some supplementary role that affects the positive textual content.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ I recognize that the categories named in this discussion (transtextuality, paratextuality) will likely be viewed as echoing those itemized in the "open structuralism" of Gérard Genette. However, insofar as this resemblance is merely (in)felicitous, I suspect that the pursuit of anything more than the vaguest of formal correspondences between Genette's and my categories would likely prove disappointing. See Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 1–5. In addition to Genette's, there are of course other formalized means of conceptualizing the relationship of a text to other texts. The syntagm–system (or syntagm–paradigm) relationship central to Saussure-influenced structuralism comes to mind, if only because of its familiarity. One example of the implementation of a structuralist approach to how a text "stands in relation to other texts" is offered in Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clio*, 34ff (emphasis original). See also, of course, the principles established in Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, translated by Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 1986), 121–5; and the elaboration upon these in Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 58–88. The most famed of attempts to adapt the system to cinema may be that of Christian Metz; on the paradigmatic axis (clearly the less important of the two for Metz) see "The Cinema: Language or Language System?" in *Film Language*, 68–72; Metz, inspired by Hjelmslev's form–substance distinction, proceeds to complicate matters further still in "Methodological Propositions for the Analysis of Film," translated by Diana Matias, *Screen* 14, no. 1–2 (spring–summer 1973): 89–101. A modification of the "paradigm" paradigm is suggested by Barthes's system of codes in *S/Z*; for our purposes we might consider in particular the functioning of "cultural codes." See Barthes, *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 18–21, 97–8; see also more general discussion of *vraisemblance* in Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 141–3.

i. The Paradox of the Parergon

Indeed, the status of putatively legitimate extratextual material in relation to the positive content of the text is actually rather peculiar; it may be apprehended distinctly as extratextual knowledge but also as referential content of the text itself. Once admitted into the text, legitimate extratextual material is re-doubled—mirrored back to the spectator—as *always-already encoded positive content*, re-establishing and affirming the mediating or supplementary position of the text between spectator and external, anterior reality. Thus, if we are to maintain the idea that the normative text is determinately referring, we must accept, on one hand, that the regulative discourses are both rigidly established and universally known and applied, and, on the other, that *all necessary extratextual material* is available as cultural capital to the spectators of a given text. The implications of this for spectatorship are surely awesome; here again we see the importance of a normative theory of complicit spectator comprehension in sustaining the determinate content of the text itself.

Needless to say, any regulative discourse governing the admission of extratextual material is entirely arbitrary, and must be seen as established in service to the salvaging of a specifically and contingently formulated ontic content of the normative text. Despite this, Bordwell's various commitments and descriptions regulating the transtextual economy often render its status ambiguous or its limitations subject to internal contradiction. This contradiction ultimately works to destabilize the very notions of the bounded text and, likewise, of the stable, anterior, object world to which it putatively refers.

There are, as I see it, two principal sorts of extratextual material that can be deemed to be subject to regulative discourse in Bordwell. I think it will become clear that the distinction between these two categories is a fairly arbitrary one, and we ought not to apprehend it as in any way substantive. The first of these we might term *paratextual discourse*, and consists of documentary and other forms of discourse *immediately relevant to a given film* that Bordwell holds as legitimate sources of information to assist in ascertaining referential meaning. The second category is significantly broader and certainly more problematic, and consists of any other sort of extratextual knowledge, however general, that is necessary in the comprehension of referential meaning. Let us now address, in turn, the regulative discourses governing each of these.

ii. Paratextual Discourses

Among paratextual discourses we may count a number of different sorts of extratextual “evidence,” both direct and indirect, that may be seen, for various reasons, legitimately to supplement the positive content of the text. These include the sorts of secondary materials sought out in the process of what Bordwell calls “historical” criticism,¹⁸¹ a process clearly not undertaken by spectators encountering films in “normal” viewing contexts. We may, I think, assume that the sorts of materials accessible via historical scholarship are not required in the course of normative-ideal spectator comprehension of individual texts, although this is not entirely clear in Bordwell. This sort of practice is therefore useful for the recovery of referential meaning

that would otherwise be available in normal-ideal viewing contexts, but which has been somehow concealed (e.g., by the passage of time). Bordwell's orientation toward a critique of critical interpretation early in *Making Meaning* leads him necessarily to approach this sort of critical practice with scepticism, cautioning that "seeking out extratextual information" may not "inevitably yield firm results" when done in order to clarify ambiguity in referential meaning.¹⁸² Later, however, he seems to confirm that, in fact, "historical scholarship can disclose referential and explicit meanings."¹⁸³ The claim here seems to be that certain, sanctioned research methods may yield information that permits the recovery of the determinate referential content of a given text. This is, of course, in addition to what Bordwell ostensibly sees as the immense value of historical scholarship for formalist interpretive practice.¹⁸⁴ The implications of this are considerable; Bordwell legitimizes a *certain practice*, and, more specifically, a *certain mode of historical enquiry*, as a means by which to recover the determinate content of texts when normative spectatorial practice is insufficient. Bordwell's caveat that this line of enquiry may not necessarily "yield firm results" is therefore of minor consequence; the primary problem of *legitimacy* is neatly occluded by the secondary dispute over *efficacy*. Historical scholarship is established as a legitimate avenue to pursue in search of referential meaning, implicitly in opposition to any number of unsanctioned spectatorial

¹⁸¹ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 12–13.

¹⁸² Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 12.

¹⁸³ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 271.

¹⁸⁴ Thus we have, for example, the recovery of "Dreyer's biographical legend"; Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*, 8, 9–24.

or critical practices.¹⁸⁵ In this manner, a certain regulative discourse of transtextual economy sanctions the supplementing of the empirical activity of normative spectatorship with the empirical activity of a certain mode of historical scholarship, in service to the production of an ideal, total knowledge of the text's referential content.¹⁸⁶

Other sorts of paratextual discourse are more readily incorporated into referential content. Such discourses as those of *genre convention* and the *Hollywood star system* appear to serve not a supplementary but rather a *required* function in structuring the referential meaning of individual texts.¹⁸⁷ Bordwell suggests, for example, that the studio star system works to supplement films' rendering of character "traits," the comprehension of which is needed in turn to comprehend the fabula's character-driven causality.¹⁸⁸ I will not attempt to engage in any detail with this widely recognized functioning of the star system in overdetermining individual film characters as putative (agentive, gendered,

¹⁸⁵ On the contingency of "historicity" itself and of the specific historiographical practices it produces, see general discussion in Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified*.

¹⁸⁶ Again, we witness the production of a "pathology of the *parergon*," "the forms of which," Derrida observes, "must be named and classified...the criterion of exclusion is here a formality" (Derrida, "Parergon," 64). The paratextual frame of historical enquiry is established as a site of contestation, itself subject to interrogation in a manner that permits the folding of certain, sanctioned paratextual information back into the text itself.

¹⁸⁷ "Generic motivation" on its own comprises one of Bordwell's prototype schemata, albeit one subordinate to "realistic motivation" (and either subsumable or interchangeable, it would seem, with "transtextual motivation"). See especially Bordwell, "Story Causality and Motivation," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 19; *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 36. The logic of this status of genre as a sort of motivation is seriously troubled, however, insofar as it presupposes stable generic boundaries, universal audience awareness, etc. In fact, it is clear that for Bordwell "genre" encompasses a decidedly limited range of possible configurations, determined in turn by a certain arbitrarily defined recognition of a "distinct entity." See Bordwell's explanation of why the critic-produced category of *film noir* is "[n]ot a genre" in "The Bounds of Difference," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 75–6. See also Andrew Britton's response to this, in which film noir's injury is documented thus: "Its vile pedigree laid bare, and its promiscuous history of critical gang-bangs and one-night-stands held up for all to see, film noir falls to the ground in agony, clutching its bleeding ontologicals" (Britton, "The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole," 58). A somewhat related discussion has Slavoj Žižek contemplating Marc Vernet's denial of the generic status of *film noir*. See Žižek, "Da Capo senza Fine," 242–4. See also Derrida's deconstruction of the boundaries of genre (in the broader literary sense) in "The Law of Genre."

etc.) subjects. I might simply point out, however, how the apparently integral status of these paratextual supplementary discourses presupposes the normal spectator's access to them, and, to a certain extent, the spectator's complicity in their circulation.

iii. Extratextual Discourses

A much more troublesome issue is that of extratextual reference in general. The parergonal category of "text-world relations" in Bordwell is a broad and problematic one, encompassing a whole spectrum of aspects of the cinematic text that come to be justified within the prototype schema of "realistic motivation." Despite its integral role in Bordwell's textual system, it for the most part constitutes an empty category, framed by a set of vague limitations. It is worth exploring further this heterogeneous conception of external reference, which posits a category that is shown at once to be necessary, vacuous, and restricted.

Bordwell variously points to such operations as "realistic motivation" and "text-world relations" as integral to the effective signification of the normative cinematic text, but in a manner that simultaneously works to denigrate them. This is not surprising, given that external reference, as necessary site of intensified textual porosity—of a rich transtextual economy—will be apprehended as a likely site of the entry into the text of polysemy, as the catalyst effecting the destabilization of determinate reference. Consequently, we witness Bordwell on the one hand insisting on the absolute necessity of extratextual reference, but on the other hand discussing it in a manner that implicitly

¹⁸⁸ Bordwell, "Story Causality and Motivation," 14; *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 164.

locates this particular transtextual economy as the treacherous scene of critics' trafficking in interpretive meanings. Let us explore how this is achieved.

Bordwell repeatedly insists that some conception of realistic motivation is required for the comprehension of the normative cinematic text.¹⁸⁹ Thus in *Making Meaning* he observes that "[i]n making referential meaning, the ordinary perceiver brings into play real-world assumptions about space, time, causality, identity, and so forth. She also makes use of vast bodies of 'encyclopedic' knowledge...The film's diegesis cannot be *wholly* other than the world we know."¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, Bordwell states that the notion of the text's referring to some degree to the "external world" functions as "regulative" or founding hypothesis for the normative spectator.¹⁹¹ Despite these insistences, however, Bordwell's writing works simultaneously to undermine seriously his commitment to it, rendering the status of the category ambiguous. Consider, for example, how his remark that "my formulation is indifferent as to theories of what the 'external world' is like" actually functions to empty the category of positive content, and thus to destabilize it.¹⁹² This undermining of the category is also effected through its association with critical interpretation. Bordwell observes, for example, that "in making meaning, all critics, whatever their philosophical or ideological commitments, hypothesize particular text-world correspondences." Given that Bordwell has already shown how "text-world relations" comprise the referential content of all normal films, and likewise how *every*

¹⁸⁹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 32, 47, 164.

¹⁹⁰ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 134; emphasis original.

¹⁹¹ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 135.

¹⁹² Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 135. Andrew Britton also remarks on the deficiency of the category of "realistic motivation"; see "The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole," 57.

normal spectator (“the ordinary perceiver”) must necessarily hypothesize such relations in order to achieve comprehension, a statement that accuses “all critics” of being compelled to “hypothesize particular text-world correspondences” is redundant; its only effect is to denigrate such correspondence through its association with critical interpretation. Consider how, in a similar manner, the following passage—resuming the one initially quoted above—starts with the necessary fact of text–world relations and then progresses in a manner that identifies it as a source of critical error:

The film’s diegesis cannot be *wholly* other than the world we know. [cf. above] It should thus come as no surprise that the critic must posit some text–world relations in the course of building an interpretation. More specifically, these relations are taken—under a regulative hypothesis—to be verisimilar. In the course of problem-solving the critic often faces a ‘mimetic moment’: the need to posit some correspondence between a textual entity and some other construct derived from prior traffic with the realms of experience attributed to an intersubjective external world.¹⁹³

The effect of this discussion is to render extratextual reference as a necessary but highly dangerous category, one in which the spectator’s tenuous engagement is fraught with the threat of transgression from comprehension to interpretation.

Furthermore, Bordwell’s attempts to police the boundaries of the category offer little assistance to the normative spectator. We have already seen how spectators are cautioned to limit the application of schemata to those that are “historically intersubjective and characteristic of the formal process of narrative comprehension.”¹⁹⁴ They should also be aware that realistic motivation in the normative text “consists of making connections recognized as plausible by common opinion. (A man like this would

¹⁹³ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 134; emphasis original.

¹⁹⁴ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 151–2.

naturally...)"¹⁹⁵ It is, I think, fairly apparent that such admonitions are utterly inconsequential except when spectatorship, and the very intersubjective networks that precede and contextualize it, are apprehended as utterly homogenous. For this reason, the very boundaries of the category of extratextual reference are drawn in such a way that they are utterly impossible to locate.

I have suggested that the category of extratextual reference is effectively an empty one. This obviously poses a problem concerning both the scope and nature of its applicability to the normative text—what sorts of objects, events, and so on may be legitimately related to some (ill-formed, empty) conception of some anterior, stable source of motivation called the real world. We see the problems that this causes in the blurring of the distinction between realistic motivation and *compositional motivation*, the dominant textual system to which realistic motivation is subordinated.¹⁹⁶ Compositional motivation, in what is one of the fundamental tenets of the organization of the normative text, consists in the causal chain exacted by a rational, purposive, desiring agent, i.e. the protagonist of a narrative.¹⁹⁷ Bordwell, as we shall soon see, is adamant that realistic motivation serves merely to supplement the primacy of the causal chain. The effect of this is to suggest the always-already sovereign status of causality, its independence from extratextual discourses, its determination by no logic or motivation other than its own internal momentum. The immense effect of this configuration is evident enough—namely to occlude, or at least to naturalize entirely, the very contingency of that causality.

¹⁹⁵ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 164.

¹⁹⁶ See especially Bordwell, "Story Causality and Motivation," 19.

¹⁹⁷ See in particular Bordwell, "Story Causality and Motivation," 13–18.

And yet causality itself does seem to be subject to realistic motivation. Bordwell offers as an example of realistic motivation the spectator “rationale” that “‘He is the sort of man who would do that’.” Likewise, we have Kristin Thompson’s acknowledgement of the contingent motivations of certain sorts of approaches to character development and psychology.¹⁹⁸ The implications of this sort of ambivalent commitment to the arbitrary but firm distinction between what within the text constitutes, on the one hand, legitimate extratextual reference and what, on the other, constitutes immanent causal logic has enormous implications for the way in which we may apprehend the ontology of referential content in the normative text. It is appropriate now, confronted as we may be with these sorts of immense problems, to turn to a discussion of that content.

4. The World in the Text

Whereabouts, precisely, is the kernel of referential content located within the broader functioning of the text? For Bordwell, the variable components of the cinematic text may readily be divided into “three levels” of “generality” or “abstraction,” namely *devices*, *systems*, and *relations of systems*.¹⁹⁹ Stated very briefly, *devices* constitute components of the signifying fabric of the text, “technical elements” that help to convey, but do not alter, its representational content. *Systems* are the means of representing certain elements of the normative content that in combination comprise the referential content of the text. Thus “cinematic time,” “cinematic space,” and “narrative logic” are

¹⁹⁸ Thompson, “From Primitive to Classical,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 170.

¹⁹⁹ Bordwell, “An Excessively Obvious Cinema,” 6. The discussion that follows is a reading of the description as it is offered here.

apprehended as comprising distinct representational systems. The interrelations between these systems are in turn governed by the *relations of systems*, which, as we shall soon see, usually entail the subordination of time and space to narrative logic or causality. We should not ignore the presuppositions about the representational functionality of cinema that this structure—comprising devices, systems, and relations of systems—embodies. A couple of points therefore seem necessary concerning these “levels of generality.”

First, we should observe that the structure of the “levels of generality” is *hierarchical*, insofar as *relations between systems* govern the deployment of *systems* that in turn govern the deployment of *devices*. I will return to the relationship between the first two terms momentarily. The relationship between devices and systems effectively corresponds to that between signifier and signified in most referential sign systems, insofar as the operation of devices normatively constitutes an invisible style that “strives for utmost denotative clarity,”²⁰⁰ with devices furthermore substitutable in accordance with principles of “functional equivalence.” We need not say more about devices at this point other than to suggest that isolation of the very category itself serves to privilege the representational function of the normative text.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 163.

²⁰¹ The construction of the category of devices operates in such a way as to affirm the primacy of the text’s referential content by subordinating the play of such devices within the logic of determinate signification. Thus such devices as the cut-in and the track-in are deemed to be “functional equivalents,” insofar as “each device fulfills the same role” in the denotation of referential content (Bordwell, “An Excessively Obvious Cinema,” 5). The positing of such equivalence necessarily presupposes the anteriority of a total, representable object world and a corresponding discourse of representational analogy. Consequently, novel devices are quickly contained by this representational imperative. Not surprisingly, then, devices are subject to perpetual evolution in the Hollywood mode of production, while systems and hierarchy of systems remain relatively constant. Cf. Bordwell and Staiger, “Technology, Style, and Mode of Production,” 248; Bordwell, “The Introduction of Sound,” 304; Bordwell, *Narration and the Fiction Film*, 151, 163; *Making Meaning*, 170, 174. Bordwell’s category of “functional equivalents” in this way

The relation that holds between the top two terms in the hierarchy suggests a different set of problems. In fact, it soon becomes clear from looking at the relationship here that the structuration of the broader formation of “levels of generality” is itself founded upon a curious anomaly. Consider how the top term in the formation, “relations of systems,” itself at first glance has *no positive content* other than a logic governing the relationships of the three systems that constitute the second level of the broader system. Whereas, for example, the second level, that of systems, has positive content, namely representational function, in addition to governing the deployment of devices (the third level), the top level of the hierarchy, that of “relations between systems,” is itself no more than a *rule* governing the internal economy—itsself hierarchically structured—of the sub-categories at the second level. Quite simply, the top category of the broader hierarchy *exists simply to maintain, to give structure to, the hierarchy itself*: the first level governs the ordering of elements at the second level (into a further hierarchical structure, no less), an ordering which in turn governs the organization of elements at the third level (devices). The top level comprises both genus and species, governing the operation of the whole structure but also existing as a category within it. The question that demands answering, then, is surely this: what, in turn, gives structure to the single *rule* in which the top level of the formation consists? The answer to this question may be found within the very organization of the referential content of the normative cinematic text itself.

corresponds to the category known in analytic logic as *cognitive synonymy*, according to which the truth value of a given representation is determined by its causal relationship to an external, transcendental object of reference, and not to the form of the representation itself. This move necessarily anchors the contingency of meaning in the transcendental object and not in the vicissitudes of signs or representational schemata themselves. Cf. W. V. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” 28ff.

i. Hierarchy of Systems

The hierarchy that is instituted here, at the level of systems, is central to Bordwell's apprehension of the representational logic of the text, and therefore of the ordering of its positive, referential content. Indeed, Bordwell's commitment to this hierarchy (causality, space, time) is clear enough.²⁰² The formulation that posits it, and which renders it as the normative standard of cinematic representability, appears to combine the Russian-formalist notion of a "dominant system" with empirical evidence from the history of the Hollywood mode of production.²⁰³ What it is essential to emphasize is how, despite the contingency of the mode of production within which this sort of organization of the referential content of the text is negotiated, this configuration becomes abstracted in a way that determines the organization of the normative content of cinematic texts in general. Given that this is so, we ought to examine the assumptions that underlie this hierarchy of systems.

There are two points to be made here. The first concerns the very division of representational systems *in this way*, namely into three discrete categories—time, space,

²⁰² See assertions of and references to the priority of causality over space and time in *Dreyer*, 5–6; Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 6, 12–13, 193, 196, 367; Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 51; "Adventures in the Highlands of Theory," 76; *Making Meaning*, 170.

²⁰³ Bordwell writes: "The Russian Formalist critics suggested that in any text or tradition, a certain component—the dominant—subordinates others...In Hollywood cinema, a specific sort of narrative causality operates as the dominant, making temporal and spatial systems vehicles for it. These systems do not always rest quietly under the sway of narrative logic, but in general the causal dominant creates a marked hierarchy of systems in the classical film" ("Story Causality and Motivation," 12). See Rick Altman's criticism of this use of the formalist "dominant" in "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today," 340–6. I shall not attempt here to give a detailed account of how the Hollywood "mode of production" is shown to be responsible for this hierarchy. Stated very briefly, Kristin Thompson argues that the primacy of causality in Hollywood cinema is a product, in part, of a demand for more and longer films; causality was introduced in response to a need "to find a means of unifying an extensive series of disparate spatial and temporal events in the plot *in such a way that the spectator could grasp the story events*" (Thompson, "The Formulation of the Classical Narrative," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 175; emphasis added).

and narrative logic. That the logic of cinematic representability entails handling each of these individually presupposes something about the very ontology of the referential content of cinema. Quite simply, the implication seems to be that cinema as a medium is capable of representing such an entity as “causality.” We need not attend, for the moment, to the precise *sort* of causality that is being deemed representable here. It is sufficient to point out that the structure of the categories of systems suggests that such a thing exists, and furthermore that it exists independently (from the point of view of *representability*, at minimum) of extension in both space and time.

Second, and surely more importantly, we must consider the organization—in accordance with the *rule* that determines the “relations between systems”—of these three systems into a hierarchy. We have just seen how the Russian formalist notion of a “dominant” system enables this. But there are far greater issues at stake than the simple enabling of such a thing as a dominant category. Quite simply, that cinematic time and space are, in accordance with this rule, subordinated to “narrative logic” constitutes perhaps the most fundamental commitment that Bordwell’s writing makes to the nature of the referential content of the normative text. We witness, in accordance with a certain *rule*, the subordination of time and space to the always-already operating cause–effect agency of a certain *causality*. What is instituted as a means of accounting formally for certain, contingent narrational procedures in fact has profound effects in the negotiation of cinematic representability itself; quite simply, this constitutes the initiation of no less than a certain *metaphysics of the ontology of the normative content of the text*. The implications of this cannot be underestimated, insofar as it serves fundamentally to

govern the limits of precisely what sorts of things may be deemed to be in the text and how they may be organized in relation to each other; furthermore, this hierarchy has great implications for the sort of normative spectatorial practice that is necessary in order to achieve comprehension, insofar as the limits of comprehension are, as we have seen, utterly determined by the limits of the text's referential content.

Quite simply, the normative cinematic text is apprehended to refer to a certain, putatively unified object world in which space and time are subordinated to some form of causality. There is, as I have suggested, within this configuration an underlying assumption about the fundamental representational properties of cinema. Setting aside for a moment the notion of causality as a dominant system, in the service of which cinematic space and time are deployed, we are left with the pure representability of space and time itself. That cinema is deemed capable of referring determinately to some putatively complete and unified space and time should not, I think, be taken for granted. Indeed, it will soon become apparent that the normative model necessarily thinks space and time each in a certain way, according to certain, contingent notions of spatiotemporal extension, and therefore determines the conditions of its representability accordingly. Let us therefore explore each component of this configuration in greater detail.

ii. Space

Bordwell's component system of "cinematic space" presupposes that the cinematic medium is capable of referring, via a series of normalized conventions, determinately to some complete and anterior, unified spatial field that may, in turn, be

subordinated to some causality.²⁰⁴ We ought not to take for granted what is at issue here, namely the very notion that, on the one hand, there may exist objective, three-dimensional spatial extension, and, on the other, that that space be somehow determinately knowable and representable via some means and with greater or lesser efficacy. What occurs in Bordwell, then, is the staging of a problematic in which is judged the effective visual representation of spatial extension in accordance with certain criteria that are contingent on a certain discourse of space itself.²⁰⁵ Effectively, Bordwell posits a particular convention of spatial representation as conventional, but then implicitly works to naturalize it as an *ideal means of spatial representation* through a discourse of adequation that necessarily naturalizes certain assumptions about the nature of knowable space itself. It is therefore worth exploring how this is so, namely how certain representational conventions are naturalized as capable of denoting a putatively unified, real, anterior spatially extensive object world.

At least two sets of conventions are apparently at work in the structure of determinate cinematic reference to a single, unified, spatially extensive referent: on the one hand, the visual rendering of spatial extension on the two-dimensional surface of the frame (*mise-en-scène*); and, on the other, the suggestion of spatial identity between the putative referents of a finite number of disparate, two-dimensional shots (continuity

²⁰⁴ “Once grasped as three-dimensional and furnished with recognizable objects,” Bordwell writes, “cinematic space is typically subordinated to narrational ends” (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, 128); likewise Bordwell comments that “[i]n making narrative causality the dominant system in the film’s total form, the classical Hollywood cinema chooses to subordinate space” and that “[s]pace will signify chiefly in relation to psychological causality” (“Space in the Classical Film,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 50, 54).

²⁰⁵ Conventions also exist, of course, for the representation of space acoustically, as Bordwell points out (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, 113).

editing or montage). Obviously this distinction has come to be heavily overdetermined and consequently bears a considerable amount of symbolic weight in film-theoretical discourse beyond the simple problem of the representation of space. I am not concerned in engaging with this configuration; frankly, I am not convinced that it is really a helpful distinction to make at all, much less one to be read as some mythic, originary bifurcation of cinematic practice itself.²⁰⁶ What I am concerned with, as I have been from the outset, is the very discourse that engages these conventions, and comes to know them only in terms of determinate reference to a certain kind of knowable spatial totality. In short, we ought to take notice of how the very thinking of the plentitude of determinate reference—of an anterior spatial totality that threatens to *exceed* cinematic representability—always-already precedes and structures the very way in which thinking about these conventions comes to be subsumed within a discourse of representational efficacy.

Consider, first, how Bordwell initiates a distinction between two types of space, namely nonrepresentational, two-dimensional “graphic aspects” and a represented “scenographic space.” Bordwell on the one hand notes that “we can treat [graphic] space as *nonrepresentational matter*, analyzing it as compositional design and acoustical form and texture,” while on the other distinguishing “the imaginary space of fiction, the ‘world’ in which the narration suggests that fabula events occur.”²⁰⁷ The positing of this distinction is a critical move, insofar as it establishes the putatively conventional nature of cinematic representation, while simultaneously opening up the possibility of a complete,

²⁰⁶ See problematization of this distinction in Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 136; and Tom Gunning, “‘Primitive’ Cinema: A Frame-Up? Or, The Trick’s on Us,” in *Early Cinema*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker, 95–103.

unified, spatially extensive object world that the conventions merely serve to signify with some degree of efficacy, and thus producing, in the gap between them, *a discourse of ideal representability* that the normative cinematic text may come, according to a certain rationalization, a certain discourse of adequation, to fill.²⁰⁸

Thus each move to denigrate the conventionality of the representational fabric simply works to reaffirm the idea of a referent that it might be capable of fully signifying. More importantly, this works to elide any engagement with the very terms on which space itself may be apprehended or known, namely with the very discourse of the *knowability and representability of space*, a discourse in the particularity of which the contingent configuration of cinematic technology is surely complicit. And so what we witness in Bordwell is the assertion of the conventionality of a certain system for the visual representation of three-dimensional space, alongside the deployment of a set of strategies nonetheless designed to venerate the Classical system of the representation of putatively total space, not only as norm, but also as transcultural ideal.

The tautology of this process of judging the efficacy of a certain means of representing space is perhaps best evident in Bordwell's highly confusing engagement in *Narration in the Fiction Film* with the system of "scientific perspective."²⁰⁹ The discussion creates a false debate in which scientific perspective is shown to be highly

²⁰⁷ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 113; emphasis added.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Žižek's "empiricist problematic"—the "opposition between the infinite wealth of reality and the abstract poverty of the categories by means of which we try to grasp reality." See Slavoj Žižek, "*De Capo senza Fine*," 216.

²⁰⁹ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 104–7.

conventional and yet also the best means of representing space, and in which the cinema image's reliance on scientific perspective is both denied and implicitly affirmed.²¹⁰

Bordwell begins by insisting that scientific perspective is only one of a great number of means of producing in two dimensions an illusion of three-dimensional spatial extension. And yet this is followed by a condemnation of the "relativistic position" that scientific perspective "has no claim to truth"; Bordwell argues that the critical nature of cultural-historical accounts of perspective's emergence "does not invalidate scientific perspective's claim to superior accuracy," and draws an analogy between perspective and the "objective power" of the microscope and telescope. He adds that it "seems evident that the ability to comprehend 'scientific' perspectival images is much more easily acquired than, say, the ability to read a language. Perhaps perspectival cues build upon some natural skills, such as the organism's ability to detect surfaces and edges." He further asserts that "if you want your picture to convey information about the relative locations, sizes, and dimensions of objects in a measurable space as seen from one spot, then scientific perspective is not as 'arbitrary' as other systems. For this purpose, scientific perspective yields the most and the most accurate information about what can be seen and, just as important, it yields no false information."²¹¹

What we witness is the veneration of scientific perspective as representational device in accordance with certain assumptions about what spatial information ought to be

²¹⁰ I suspect that Bordwell's discussion here may be read as a rejection of the familiar treatment of perspective that occurs in apparatus theory. See, e.g., Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus," translated by Alan Williams, *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (winter 1974-1975): 39-47; see especially 42ff.

²¹¹ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 106-7.

knowable and representable, and furthermore according to assumptions about the very *convention* of representability, namely the visual rendering of the relative locations and sizes of objects furnishing a unified and objectively quantifiable spatial field. In this way, space is reduced to a *rationalized, knowable geometry*, to a group of data indicating the relative, static locations of visually discernible, singular, positive contents. Not surprisingly, this is reciprocated by the theory of comprehension, which emphasizes, for example, the “priority of object perception.”²¹² The very criteria of spatial representability are determined in accordance with the apprehension of a certain sort of masterful relationship between a sentient agent and a spatial field populated with salient positive contents.²¹³ This manoeuvre works to naturalize a certain determination of spatial extension, one in the representation of which cinema becomes doubly complicit.²¹⁴

²¹² Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 102.

²¹³ The limited and contingent utility of Euclidean–Newtonian spatial geometry is apparent enough. Stephen Kern offers an excellent review of the terms of its contestation within various discourses of science and art; see Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), especially 131–9. Henri Bergson famously rejected the notion of external, objective spatiotemporality, insisting, for example, that “[h]omogenous space and homogeneous time are then neither properties of things nor essential conditions of our faculty of knowing them: they express, in an abstract form, the double work of solidification and of division which we effect on the moving continuity of the real in order to obtain there a fulcrum for our action, in order to fix within it starting points for our operation, in short, to introduce into it real changes...Concrete extensity, that is to say, the diversity of sensible qualities, is not within space; rather it is space that we thrust into extensity. Space is not a ground on which real motion is posited; rather is it real motion that deposits space beneath itself” (Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, translated by N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer [New York: Zone Books, 1991], 211–217). That spatiotemporal extension is a product of language is the famous assertion of the linguistic-relativist theory of Benjamin Lee Whorf. “Newtonian space, time, and matter,” Whorf writes, “are no intuitions. They are receipts from culture and language. That is where Newton got them.” See Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, edited by John B. Carroll (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1956), especially 58–9, 152–3.

²¹⁴ A similar manoeuvre occurs in Bordwell, “Convention, Construction, and Cinematic Vision,” where the claim is that “the situation portrayed in shot/reverse shot [editing] is instantly recognizable across cultures and time periods” (94). Bordwell argues that “it is less arbitrary [sic] to show [individuals] looking *at* each other than to show them, say, looking *away* from each other or at the moon” (90; emphasis original). This baffling claim is founded upon the assumption that shot/reverse shot always-already depicts two individuals looking “*at*” each other, i.e. an adequation of representation is posited at the outset. It is not at all clear to me why temporally successive shots of individuals putatively facing opposite directions

For what is implicit, but by no means clear, in Bordwell's argument is that cinema benefits from scientific perspective's ability to render "the most accurate information" concerning some anterior, spatially extensive referent.²¹⁵ And yet consider the contradiction that necessarily structures this assertion; the "imaginary space of fiction" is, it seems, best represented by a system oriented toward a certain mode of total representability that "yields no false information." The normative content of cinematic representation is invested with a knowable and discernable totality and a plentitude, on the very basis of a commitment to historical and cultural currency of *the conventions by which it is supposedly represented*. Thus we have the assertion that "classical narration uses image composition and editing to create a powerful representation of three-dimensional space,"²¹⁶ a representation of the "apparently independent profilmic event, which becomes the tangible story world framed and recorded from without."²¹⁷

What is more, this posited capability of cinema to refer determinately to an anterior, unified spatial extension is assumed as the zero-degree of cinematic

necessarily denotes that those individuals are in fact facing each other in extensive space, and not, "say, looking *away* from each other."

²¹⁵ Bordwell seems eager to denounce the "conclusion" that film cameras "repeat the single spatial schema, and thus the 'positionality', of Albertian linear perspective" as "utterly unwarranted." But consider the points with which Bordwell strives to differentiate cinema; these include the cinema camera operator's prerogatives in selecting "variations in lens lengths," which "*can override Albertian schemata*," and in "arranging the objects to be filmed," a "procedure" that "*can counter the perspective effect*" (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, 107; emphasis added). It soon becomes evident that Bordwell is, to say the least, overstating his objection to the association of perspective with the cinema image; it is apparent on the one hand that what is "utterly unwarranted" is the "conclusion" that *every shot* of cinema must be filmed in scientific perspective, but on the other that *perspective is nonetheless the zero-degree cinematic representational convention*, one which may be "overridden" or "countered" at the discretion of the filmmaker. In the interest of impossibly reconciling conventionality with ideal representability, the arguments thus accumulate as follows: (1) Scientific perspective is merely conventional; (2) Anyway, cinema is not confined by it; (3) Even if cinema were confined by it, it would still be the best system. On Freud's "kettle-logic" and the multiplication of contradictory claims, see Derrida, *Dissemination*, 111.

²¹⁶ Bordwell, "Space in the Classical Film," 50.

representability. Thus Bordwell suggests, for example, that the spectator of so-called historical-materialist narrational films “will infer a unified space based on assumptions about real spaces and about *the sort of space that films usually present*.”²¹⁸ The assumption of unified spatial extension therefore is made to govern not only the apprehension of how the normative cinematic text signifies, but all manner of putatively fictional cinematic texts. The ontology of the referential content of the cinematic text is determined to include total and non-contradictory spatial extension, and the theory of normative comprehension serves to re-double this.

iii. Time

Bordwell’s apprehension of the system for representing cinematic time mirrors that for cinematic space insofar as its representation is likewise deemed to be subordinate to causality, and yet to consist in total, objective, external extension.²¹⁹ That is to say, simply because the *representation* of time is deployed in the service of the representation of causality, it does not entail that the underlying *structure of time* that is represented is somehow distorted by causal agency. Rather, the *time* that the normative cinematic text is apprehended as representing is homogenous, linear, irreversible, and quantifiable, populated with singular events. “Within the classical scene,” Bordwell writes, “the viewer assumes durational continuity unless signals say otherwise.”²²⁰ It is worth noting

²¹⁷ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 161.

²¹⁸ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 243.

²¹⁹ “Time in the classical film is a vehicle for causality,” Bordwell notes, “not a process to be investigated on its own” (“Time in the Classical Film,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 47).

²²⁰ “Time in the Classical Film,” 46.

that this assertion does not deny the existence of cinematic conventions for representing subjective or reversible time, etc., but simply operates to posit homogenous, objective time as the *normative* object of cinematic representation. In this way, Bordwell's model at once presupposes both a certain, contingent theory of the very nature of time as external and objective, and furthermore renders cinema complicit in its representability. Agents, objects, and events simply *occupy* or populate the external temporal field.

This notion of time as rationalized, external and measurable is obviously a contentious one, indeed an *impossible-ideal* one, and furthermore one in which cinema as a representational medium is decidedly complicit. I will not review the familiar debate here, as much as it is surely worth exploring the extent to which cinema technology is itself complicit in the thinking of time in a certain way.²²¹ For our purposes, I simply wish to point out the contingency of Bordwell's insistence on naturalizing a certain *structure of time* as the zero-degree referential content of the normative cinematic text.

²²¹ Again, see Stephen Kern on how Newtonian time is that which comes to be rationalized as objective, "public time" in capitalist modernity. See *The Culture of Time and Space*, especially 18–20, 33–35. Mary Ann Doane writes that "developing classical conventions structure time and contingency in ways consonant with the broader rationalization and abstraction of time in an industrialized modernity" (*The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 32). The most famous rejection of objective, public time of course comes from Bergson, who writes, for example, that "imaginary homogenous time is...an idol of language, a fiction." See, e.g., *Matter and Memory*, 207, 211. Again, Benjamin Whorf's linguistic-relativist hypothesis applies; on the thinking of rationalized public time see *Language, Thought, and Reality*, 57–9, 152–4. Cf. also Teshome H. Gabriel's discussion of western versus non-western conceptions of time, and in particular of the implications of the distinction for conventions of cinematic representation (Gabriel, "Towards A Critical Theory of Third World Films," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, edited by Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen [London: BFI, 1989], 44ff). For his part, Philip Rosen argues in fact that "cinema manifests a special relation to modern time awareness first as a matter of distribution through its status as mass medium, and only second as a matter of representation" (Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 99).

iv. *Causality*

Bordwell's "relations between systems," as we have seen, dictate not only that cinema be viewed as capable of referring determinately to an objective, anterior, spatiotemporal field, but that the representation of that field be subordinated to some "narrative logic." This logic may consist either of "causality" or "parallelism";²²² the latter receives little consideration in Bordwell's writing, while the former utterly dominates it. Indeed, it is clear that for Bordwell the principle of causality as textual and narrative structuring mechanism is the most remarkable feature of the normative text, serving both to unify it and to govern its deployment of spatiotemporal representation. For Bordwell, it is precisely this reliance on causal logic that grants the normative text its privileged status as ideal cinematic representation—as most amenable to both determinate reference and comprehensibility in accordance with the model of normative spectatorship.

The implications of this are surely great. Because the logic of causality functions as dominant system in the normative text, causality necessarily becomes the dominant criterion by which the representational logic of *all* cinematic texts comes to be measured. Within the normative text itself, the role of causality must be apprehended not only in terms of the specific *signifying structures* or textual configuration that it enables, but also in terms of the very *ontological configuration* of the referential content of the text. It is with the consequences of the latter that I am most concerned. Specifically, the admission

²²² *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 51; "Adventures in the Highlands of Theory," 76. In *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* Bordwell seems to suggest that parallelism itself could be indicative of causality, stating that "[t]he viewer infers abstract orders of narrative causality partly because [Dreyer's early] films put such emphasis on parallel situations" (*Dreyer*, 28).

of causality as a representational “system” necessarily presupposes that *causality itself may be somehow determinately represented* within the cinematic medium. As with the purported representability of space and time, we ought to attend to the precise formulation of this causality, and furthermore to how and why cinema might be apprehended as capable of depicting it.²²³

Causality is most commonly manifest in the normative cinematic text as the actions of a rational, goal-oriented protagonist who acts within and occupies a unified spatiotemporal field that itself comprises part of the text’s referential content. That the causality of *rational, goal-oriented character agency* is for Bordwell the primary unifying feature of the normative text is clear enough.²²⁴ The ways in which the construction of the classical text is held to emphasize the agency of these characters within the very fabric of the text—that is to say, *formally*—is not my concern here, as fascinating as the consequences of this may be.²²⁵ Rather, what I think it is essential to investigate is the

²²³ The discussion here incorporates a largely pre-theoretical usage of “causality,” corresponding loosely to some rational-purposive, self-knowing agency and its effects. The implications of this configuration are clear enough. For a problematization of the Althusserian distinction between mechanistic, expressive, and structural causality, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 23ff.

²²⁴ Character-centred, psychological causality is, Bordwell writes, “the armature of the classical story” (“Story Causality and Motivation,” 13).

²²⁵ Kristin Thompson provides one description of this:

The classical cinema’s dependence upon POV [point-of-view] shots, eyeline matches, and SRS [shot-reverse-shot] patterns reflects its general orientation toward character psychology...most classical narration arises from within the story itself, often by binding our knowledge to shifts in the characters’ attention: we notice or concentrate on elements to which the characters’ glances direct us. In the construction of contiguous spaces, POV, the eyeline match, and SRS do not work as isolated devices; rather, they operate together within the larger systems of logic, time, and space, guaranteeing that psychological motivation will govern even the mechanics of joining one shot to another. As a result, the system of logic remains dominant. (Thompson, “The Continuity System,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 211)

limits of the *ontological commitments manifest within the referential content of the text* as the theory of narrative causality apprehends them.

Indeed, the positing of causal agency as the dominant system serving to structure the representation of time and space sheds much light on the precise ontologies of time and space as they are deemed to be representable as normal content. We have just seen how each of these is posited as rationalized, homogenous, and knowable; this configuration of the spatiotemporal field must now, with the addition of human causal agency to the mix, be viewed as standing as an external plentitude before the rational, objective-purposive experiential capacity embodied in the causal agent. In combination, this total configuration suggests as the normative referential content of the cinematic text no less than a certain metaphysics, for which the determinate representation of a rational, self-identical agent provides structure.²²⁶

And yet the very category of *character-causal agency*, as utterly central as it is to this configuration, is one that is in Bordwell's writing by no means unproblematic; rather, it is a category to which Bordwell's commitment is ambivalent, the boundaries of which are porous, and the contents of which are indeterminate. That is to say, the very category that serves to structure the determinacy of the content of the normative cinematic text is itself fraught with indeterminacy, destabilized from within by a structuring contradiction rooted in the radical contingency of an impossible-ideal notion of subjectivity upon which it is founded. Let us, then, explore the constitution of this category in detail.

The primacy of character-motivated causality in structuring both the representational economy of the normative text and its comprehension is not in doubt. “In classical fabula construction,” Bordwell asserts, “causality is the prime unifying principle.” Furthermore, “[t]he principal causal agency is...the character, a discriminated individual endowed with a consistent batch of traits, qualities, and behaviors”;²²⁷ thus, “[o]nce defined as an individual through traits and motifs, the character assumes a causal role because of his or her desires.”²²⁸ We may return to this definition of the character imbued with causal agency—and, *apparently*, “desires”—in a moment. First, however, we should recognize how the yoking of causality to character agency is insistently naturalized in Bordwell in terms of adequation to the parameters of ideal spectator comprehension. Bordwell asserts: “The priority of causality within an integral fabula world commits classical narration to *unambiguous presentation*.”²²⁹ This is ostensibly because the normative spectator is, on the one hand, capable of comprehending causal logic,²³⁰ and, on the other, equipped *a priori* to recognize human agents in representations. Bordwell thus claims:

It is evident that constructing characters on the model of the person is fundamental to comprehension. The simplest ‘referential’ construal gets nowhere if it does not identify persons or personlike agents in the film. In fact, this process would seem to be a *culturally universal feature* of humans’ ways of making sense of texts...Humans are predisposed, *biologically and culturally*, to attend to

²²⁶ Cf., for example, the discussion of the relationship between space, time, and individual agency in “Third Cinema” in Teshome H. Gabriel, “Towards A Critical Theory of Third World Films,” 44ff.

²²⁷ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 157.

²²⁸ “Story Causality and Motivation,” 16.

²²⁹ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 162; emphasis added.

²³⁰ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 164.

humanlike agents in representations. The character-as-person schema seems obvious because it is ours; it is us [sic].²³¹

We may set aside any contestation of the sorts of claims that are being made here, and simply observe that a fundamental connection is being established between the practice of spectator comprehension and the constitution of the positive contents of the text.

So, we have established character-causal agency as central to the representational logic of the normative text, and as occupying a privileged position within the ontological configuration of its positive contents, and as readily comprehensible to the normative spectator. But what, exactly, comprise the possible positive contents of character agency itself? What sorts of attributes of characters may be deemed determinately representable, and thus apprehended as positive referential content? It is when we attempt to answer these questions that problems arise. Indeed, it is apparent that the category of character causality, as much as it plays a crucial structuring function in both the constitution of the text and in the metaphysical world of its positive content, constitutes a fundamental blind spot in Bordwell's writing. Again, that there must be such determinate content as character causality is not in doubt. But what precisely consists in that content certainly is.

Consider the ambivalence that is implicit in Bordwell's approach to the "ideal regulation" of this causality as it is manifest in the representable traits of characters. The final effect is, quite simply, both to denigrate the category and simultaneously to empty it of positive content. First, we witness "characters' motives" being listed among the sorts of referential content that normal viewers might dispute (along with "concrete actions"

²³¹ *Making Meaning*, 153; emphasis added.

and “the definiteness of the resolution”);²³² this serves to isolate these “motives” in a manner that affirms them as positive content, but also dejects them into the liminal space of referential determinacy. Next, we witness a persistent attempt to associate the attribution of positive attributes to characters with the practice of interpretive critics. We have already seen how, with the category of extratextual reference, the fragility or indeterminacy of the boundaries of the comprehensible is manifest through the association of certain practices with interpretation.²³³ Such is also the case with the comprehension of character traits. Once again, the recognition of determinate character traits is first posited as essential to textual comprehension, and then attributed to critics in particular. “Critics rank cues hierarchically,” Bordwell writes in *Making Meaning*, “and at the top of the list are human agents performing actions. Moreover, it seems likely that such a ranking is *justified as a case of interpretation’s shadowing of comprehension*.”²³⁴ What is the point of a statement like this, if not to throw into peril the very category of comprehensible character agency itself? The suspicion seems to be affirmed when we encounter a passage further along in *Making Meaning* in which Bordwell bemoans various attempts at the “abstruse” personification of film characters by critics.²³⁵ Given the treacherousness of the limits of the category of determinate character attributes, the immediacy of the threat of transgression of those limits, we ought to consider why they are being so closely policed.

²³² *Making Meaning*, 12.

²³³ Cf. above (§ III, 3, iii).

²³⁴ *Making Meaning*, 153; emphasis added.

²³⁵ *Making Meaning*, 155–6.

It is not because Bordwell's normative textual model precludes the existence of determinate character traits and desires. Indeed, Bordwell's affirmation of the existence of such traits occurs frequently and in service to a variety of arguments. What, specifically, is he affirming? In *Making Meaning*, Bordwell itemizes the "folk-psychological features" of the "person schema," which include "[t]houghts, including beliefs," "[f]eelings or emotions," "[t]raits, or persisting dispositional qualities," and "capacity for self-impelled actions, such as communication, goal-formation and-achievement, and so on."²³⁶ Although this is presented as a "schema" and not a definitive inventory of possible content, there is ample indication elsewhere in Bordwell that such abstract entities as "beliefs" and "desires" may constitute determinate referential meaning.²³⁷ But there is little indication of *what sorts* of beliefs, desires, etc. these actually entail. What we are left with, then, is a category of determinate content, absolutely essential to the functioning of the text's "causal logic," the very contents of which are only negatively determined, that is, through a cataloguing of prohibited "interpretations."

We may only emerge from this dead end, however temporarily, by revisiting the relationship between the category of character-causal motivations and spectator

²³⁶ *Making Meaning*, 152.

²³⁷ Bordwell notes that "the classical scene must immediately reveal two things about the characters: their relative spatial positions and their states of mind" (Bordwell, "Shot and Scene," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 63); likewise "character's beliefs, dispositions, and personality" are "'referential' meanings" ("Film Interpretation Revisited," 105); viewers must comprehend "why" events occur (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, 34); a character's "desire" determines his or her "causal role" ("Story Causality and Motivation," 16). See also various discussions of character traits and mental states in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 13, 170, 179, 180, 181; and, finally, in David Bordwell, "Jump Cuts and Blind Spots," *Wide Angle* 6, no. 1 (1984): 9.

comprehension. We recall, after all, Bordwell's assertion that "[h]umans are predisposed, biologically and culturally, to attend to humanlike agents in representations. The character-as-person schema seems obvious because it is ours; *it is us*."²³⁸ What is clearly imputed is some equivalence between the behaviour of the normative, comprehending spectator and the positive content of the text.²³⁹ The capacity of cinematic representations is affirmed through no less than the assertion of this equivalence. This is surely confirmed by Bordwell's suggestion that the characters in *Rear Window* "can be used to exhibit the full complexity of the viewing activity," insofar as "the process whereby [the protagonist] Jeff pursues the mystery displays quite beautifully the activity of the film spectator."²⁴⁰ We are provided with a reading of the film in which the various characters are shown to perform viewing activities *in precisely the same manner as the normal-ideal comprehending spectator*. This formulation is not without problems, as we shall soon discover. Nevertheless, in order to attempt to resolve the aporia presented by the seemingly empty category of character traits, let us investigate what sort of equivalences Bordwell establishes between the characters of *Rear Window* and the normative spectator.

²³⁸ *Making Meaning*, 153; emphasis added.

²³⁹ I do not suppose that it is *identity* that is being imputed here, although the significance of this predicative ambiguity is well established. On the predication of *identity* versus *equivalence* see, e.g., Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 149–50; Quine, "Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis," in *From A Logical Point of View*, 74–77.

²⁴⁰ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 40–1.

v. *Lisa Freemont's Incomprehensible Desires*

We ought not to allow the significance of Bordwell's choice of film to go unremarked. As Bordwell himself points out, *Rear Window* has been heavily overdetermined by film-theoretical discourses establishing the film's narrative as the definitive allegory of cinematic spectatorship. Bordwell's choice here is therefore doubly determined, as, in addition to providing a narrative trajectory that makes his point rather effectively, it permits him no less than a parodic rereading of the extant discourse.²⁴¹ Bordwell's reclamation of *Rear Window* in this manner is undoubtedly underscored by the incorporation of a still from the film on *Narration in the Fiction Film's* front cover. Parodic mode aside, Bordwell's point is clear enough. According to his reading, Jefferies, Lisa, et al. are "prepared to perceive" "sensory cues," deploy appropriate

²⁴¹ Indeed, *Rear Window* has long served as a screen onto which are projected various theories of cinema-spectator subjectivity, and for that reason these readings themselves serve as windows affording views of the history of film theory; the film is a subsequently an allegory of authorship, the apparatus, spectatorship, *gendered* spectatorship, and so on. What is more, a certain self-consciousness concerning the legacy of this use of the film seems to pervade the discourse, so that various interventions inevitably reiterate and then displace earlier versions. That the number of claims of *Rear Window's* metarepresentational capacity has subsided in recent years should, I think, be read as symptomatic of a reorientation of the relationship between theory and text, or at least a rethinking of the possibility of self-reflexive metarepresentation as positive textual content.

The primordial account seems to be, by broad consensus, Jean Douchet's "Hitch et son public," in the November 1960 issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma* (no. 113); see Jean Douchet, "Hitch and His Audience," translated by David Wilson, in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Vol. 2, edited by Jim Hillier (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 150–7. Douchet asserts that it is in *Rear Window* "that Hitchcock exposes his conception of cinema (which is cinema within cinema), reveals his secrets, unveils his intentions. In the film James Stewart, reporter photographer, is first and foremost a spectator" (150). See subsequent variations in, e.g., Paul Mayersberg, "The Testament of Vincente Minnelli," *Movie*, no. 3 (October 1962): 10; François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 216; Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (autumn 1975): 15–16; Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 101–3, 377–9; Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1988), 73–85; Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 43–55. See also recent attempts at revival in John Belton, "Introduction: Spectacle and Narrative" in *Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window*, edited by John Belton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11–12; and John Fawell, *Hitchcock's Rear Window: The Well-Made Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 123–134.

“procedural schemata,” and make hypotheses, in addition to demonstrating self-identical rationality by expressing desires, goal-orientation, mastery over a unified and external spatiotemporal field, etc.²⁴² They are exemplary normative-ideal spectators.

In this way, with this positing of spectator–character equivalence, Bordwell not only makes what appears to be a substantial commitment to the positive content of the text, but also does so by permitting his seemingly empty category of positive character traits to derive structure from, to be occupied by, *another impossible-empty category*, namely that of the sanctioned activities of the impossible normal-ideal spectator. Recall that we have already seen how the comprehending spectator consists only in the impossible set of rational activities that enable the ideal comprehension of a determinately referring cinematic text, and how that set of activities is defined primarily through exclusion. Now we are shown that the causal logic of the text itself is in turn dependent on the causal agency of characters that act just like normal-ideal spectators, and thus *mirrors ideally that which is already itself*. The only way out of this vertiginous circularity is to posit a radical contingency that serves to grant structure to this configuration in its totality, namely the logic of a certain metaphysical relationship between subjects, purportedly ideal representation, and transcendental knowledge.²⁴³ In this way, the bounded, formalized *structure* of the narrative cinematic text serves to grant the illusion of *ontological* structure—that of a transcendental, determining causal logic—

²⁴² *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 41.

²⁴³ Therein also lies, I imagine, both the *answer to* and the *conditions of possibility of the asking of* “the question to be answered...how spectators intersubjectively arrive at essentially the same ‘story’ when presented with a film” (“Adventures in the Highlands of Theory,” 89). Cf. above (§ II, 4, iii).

to what is in fact an utterly empty category that the text nevertheless purports to represent ideally.

The implications of this for the determinate content of the text—and in particular for the characters whose agency purportedly motivates causality—are enormous. Quite simply, what may be considered identifiable character attributes are, in fact, *only those manifest in service to narrative causality*. This is apparent enough from Bordwell's descriptions of what motivates the characters' activities throughout the film, but it is made patently clear in his analysis of *Rear Window*'s final scene. That Bordwell devotes considerable attention to this scene in particular should not be taken for granted. At any rate, we may recall that while the recently re-injured Jeff dozes, Lisa foregoes reading *Beyond the High Himalayas* in favour of *Harper's Bazaar*, suggesting, perhaps, a return to her former, fashion-obsessed self after her brief excursion across the courtyard and into adventure. Bordwell advises:

The spectator can draw either of two conclusions: Lisa has bridged the gap between the two worlds, or she has reinstated the old opposition by revealing that her concession to the rugged life is superficial and provisional. *It is not a question here of interpreting the film one way or the other. The throwaway nature of this last shot reiterates the game of visual information and alternative hypotheses that has informed the whole film. After all the demands on the spectator to draw conclusions about murder and romance, the film ends with information that calls up exclusive and equally probable hypotheses about the stability of the couple without firmly backing either one.*²⁴⁴

Bordwell thus insists that *Rear Window*'s conclusion *fails* to indicate a determinate state of mind for Lisa. What is more, her state of mind here is in fact inconsequential (the “throwaway nature of this last shot”); and furthermore, even if it were of consequence, it

would necessarily be reducible, in accordance with the imposed rationale of some impossible binary logic, to one of two “exclusive and equally probable hypotheses.” Lisa’s state of mind is not, then, simply *indeterminate*; it is *one of two determinate states, of which the correct state is itself indeterminate*. The effect, paradoxically, is both to delimit and to constrain according to binarism the limits of the *possible* content of the text—of Lisa’s mindset—but also to disavow utterly its status as *actual, determinate*, referential content. The narrative’s causal chain having already been concluded, there is no means by which to rationalize determinately Lisa’s actions here, nor is there any need to do so.

Put simply, the radical contingency of the causal chain determines retroactively the status of positive referential content, namely the identifiable character traits. And so, character attributes cannot exist as positive contents independently of the narrative’s causal chain, as part of some referential plentitude, along with space, time, etc. Rather, such attributes must be seen *to be located and identified only retroactively*, through a procedure of causal inversion. In this way, the dominance of causality, in combination with the requisite imputation of textual self-identity, works forcefully to suppress the representability of difference, indecision, or contradiction. And so the *ideal* of the *representability* of a unified, causally structured object world—the very possibility of which gives structure to an impossible-ideal presence—functions to empty out any apparent character attributes of positive value other than their role in motivating *causality itself*, and thus *to identify and to structure the very contents of the object world on its own*

²⁴⁴ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 44; emphasis added.

terms. Consequently, causality is in turn further transcendentalized as the single, always-already impossibly constituted category of determinate content, that which alone produces and structures referential meaning. With this in mind, we ought to wonder what could possibly be the purpose behind Bordwell's analysis of this final scene of *Rear Window*, if not to demonstrate, quite simply, that Lisa Freemont's desires, were she to have any, *are meaningless*—that is, they are already outside or beyond comprehension—except to the extent that they might motivate narrative causality.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Cf. Tania Modleski's remarkable reading of the same scene:

That 'difference is necessary' for cinema to live and therefore can never be destroyed, but only continually negated, is implied by the ending of *Rear Window*. Jeff is once again asleep, in the same position as he was at the film's opening, and Lisa, after assuring herself that he is *not* watching her (in contrast to the former times when she had worked so hard to attract his gaze), puts away his book and picks up her own magazine. As important as this gesture is, even more important is the fact that the film gives her the last look. This is, after all, the conclusion of a movie that all critics agree is about the power the man attempts to wield through exercising the gaze. We are left with the suspicion (a preview, perhaps, of coming attractions) that while men sleep and dream their dreams of omnipotence over a safely reduced world, women are not what they appear to be, locking into male 'views' of them, imprisoned in their master's dollhouse." (*The Women Who Knew Too Much*, 85; emphasis original)

IV. *EX POST FACTO* (I): FROM NORMATIVE TO IDEAL

Introduction: An 'Ordinary Film'

The implications of this configuration—within which a normative textual model, referring determinately to a normative referential content, is abstracted from the discourse of the classical Hollywood cinema—extend well beyond the way in which film-theoretical discourse apprehends Hollywood films. For, as I have already suggested, Bordwell's writing, drawing together elements of cognitive psychology and certain discourses concerning cinematic representability, works to naturalize this specific mode of cinematic text as the ideal model of cinematic textuality. A certain contingent, putatively representational, putatively non-practical textual configuration therefore furnishes the criteria by which *all modes of cinematic expression* come to be apprehended. In this way, modes of expression subject to direct comparison with the posited normative model come simply to re-establish the hegemony of the dominant mode; this applies both historically and transculturally, diachronically and synchronically. Insofar as this process works to reestablish and to re-naturalize the normative parameters of the dominant text, it is worth exploring briefly how this is so. First, however, I might very briefly review the sort of discourse of adequation that stabilizes the status of the normative text as ideal representation, serving in effect both to initiate and to justify its dominance.

The normative-classical text is elevated to transcultural, ideal representation by a number of means, many of which we have already encountered. Foremost among these is by way of an appeal to the cognitive capacities of spectators to comprehend represented

meaning in a certain way, one which assumes an impossible-ideal spectatorial position demanding rationality, complicity in applying a certain, profoundly and impossibly constrained set of comprehension skills, ideal extratextual knowledge, ideal viewing conditions, and so on. These comprehension skills are, not coincidentally, shown to be precisely those engaged during an impossible-ideal encounter with the normative text; that is to say, Bordwell produces a *discourse of adequation* between normative spectatorial capacity and the comprehensibility of the normative cinematic text. In this way, Bordwell is able to claim, for example, that “we intuitively recognize an ordinary, easily comprehensible movie when we see it,”²⁴⁶ and that “[a]s a narrational mode, classicism clearly corresponds to the idea of an ‘ordinary film’ in most cinema-consuming countries of the world.”²⁴⁷ This naturalization of the normative text extends, on the one hand, to the specificity of the signifying procedures (shot-reverse-shot editing, by virtue of its being part of the classical style, “is readily graspable and thus well suited for *the neutral transmission of story information*”)²⁴⁸ and, on the other, to the positive referential content (the classical narrative “conforms most closely to the ‘canonic story’ which story-comprehension researchers posit as normal for our culture”).²⁴⁹ Setting aside an engagement with the sorts of assumptions about both spectatorship and textuality that underlie these statements (and I have attempted to point out a number of these already),

²⁴⁶ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 156.

²⁴⁷ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 166.

²⁴⁸ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 293; emphasis added. Cf. also the discussion of shot/reverse-shot editing as “instantly recognizable across cultures and time periods” in “Convention, Construction, and Cinematic Vision,” 94.

²⁴⁹ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 157.

we might consider the sorts of ways in which the status of marginal texts works to renegotiate this hegemony.

The historical narrative that *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* provides to account for the establishment of the conventions of the normative text is an informative one, from our perspective, insofar as it operates in a number of ways teleologically to rationalize the configuration of the Hollywood film as always-already ideally comprehensible representation, while paradoxically asserting its contingency within the context of the economic demands, for example, of the “mode of production.” What is more, the logic of this account is dependent on the drawing of comparisons *ex post facto* between the established criteria of the normative text—the conventions of which, we are told, were in place by the year 1917—and the so-called “primitive cinema” that antedated it. The fecundity of this comparison is largely—and, I think, rather paradoxically—substantiated by the claim that the primitive cinema is radically heterogeneous, both in its form and representational objectives, to classical cinema. Regardless of the sort of thinking that underlies it, this comparison helps to elucidate certain central principles governing the normal content of the so-called classical text.

The primary innovation with which the classical cinema is credited is, perhaps not surprisingly, that of narrative causality, along with a corresponding set of formal conventions—the continuity system—for representing it. The development of this representational strategy is shown to be a product of economic demands for longer and greater numbers of films; the classical narrative is therefore, the argument goes, the result of a requirement for a robust means of producing lengthy but nevertheless

spatiotemporally and thematically unified texts.²⁵⁰ What the descriptions of this innovation suggest is that the classical text, in its incorporation of some logic of narrative causality, embodies a reconfiguration of the normative practices of spectator comprehension. Kristin Thompson proposes that “the classical cinema resulted from a major shift in assumptions about the relation of spectator to film and the relation of a film’s form to its style.”²⁵¹ What this account seems to neglect, however, is an engagement with the extent to which this shift also entails the supplementation of the apprehended representational capacity of the cinematic medium itself. The classical narrative’s admission of causal logic to its representational system may play a primarily *functional* role in terms of the logic of signification, insofar as it works to stabilize longer texts, but it also comprises substantive *content* in its own right, namely causal logic as positive, referential content of the cinematic representation. In fact, the implications of this reconfiguration for positive content are twofold: first, to admit the representability of abstract entities within the cinematic medium, namely the beliefs, desires, etc. of goal-oriented casual agents; second, to submit the positive contents of the text, including character causality, to a certain metaphysical hierarchy in which space and time are subordinated. It is, we may recall, precisely this hierarchy that comes to constitute the positive content of the normative cinematic text.

²⁵⁰ Janet Staiger remarks of the shift to 1000-foot length films that “the producers found themselves pressured to provide a narrative with the requisite beginning, middle, and end” (Staiger, “The Director-Unit System: Management and Multiple-Unit Companies After 1909,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 126). Kristin Thompson asserts that “[t]he spatio-temporal problems innate in the construction of the multiple-shot film helped guide the filmmakers’ formulation of a classical narrative model,” and likewise that “what the psychological character was in the unification of the longer narrative, the continuity rules were in the unification of time and space” (Thompson, “From Primitive to Classical,” 162).

²⁵¹ Thompson, “From Primitive to Classical,” 162.

This suggests no less than a fundamental investment in the very capacity of representations, and of cinematic representation in particular. And yet any engagement with the implications of this—of this supplementation of *the very representational capacity of the cinematic medium*—is avoided. How is it possible that cinema as a representational medium might come to be naturalized as capable of representing ideally abstract entities such as causality and character dispositions? *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* seems to achieve this in a couple of ways. These include, primarily, accounts of popular and industrial discourses of adaptation of literary and theatrical works. Janet Staiger, for example, asserts that “evidence overwhelmingly supports a connection between the famous play, novel, and story adapted into film and the increasing length of the product,” and that “[t]he longer film enabled *a more faithful reproduction*” of such works.²⁵² Here, again, we witness the naturalization of the representational capacity of cinema via what is essentially an implicit discourse of translanguistics; cinema is assumed to bear an equivalent representational capacity to both literature and the theatre. That cinema might or might not be capable of this never seems to warrant discussion.

Bordwell and Staiger, meanwhile, perform a similar naturalization with the production of an internal discourse of medium-specific representability, one that is furthermore intended to demonstrate the continuity of Hollywood’s representational strategies into the 1970s, and thus to assert their historical stability. We have already seen on a couple of occasions how the positing of internal textual discourses works in

²⁵² Staiger, “The Central Producer System: Centralized Management After 1914,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 131; emphasis original.

Bordwell to naturalize certain assumptions. Here, Bordwell and Staiger perform a reading of *The China Syndrome* in which they propose that the film's narrative stages a certain myth of cinematic representability by drawing a contrast with television. The film's narrative, they claim, shows that "television is limited, contained, and manipulated...distanced and artificial," whereas cinema is "immediate" and "makes the event completely readable simply by recording it." *The China Syndrome*'s internal discourse therefore shows that "cinema can not only record the event, but also reveal the human truth of the event," thus "perpetuating seventy-year-old assumptions about what a film is and does."²⁵³ In this way, Bordwell and Staiger enable the naturalization of a certain discourse of ideal cinematic representability by positing it as an internal discourse of a particular object text. This permits the elision of broader historical conditions that enabled the thinking of such representability at all.

1. "Primitive" Cinema

*"The move to narrative was a key factor in encouraging a shift from primitive cinema to classical filmmaking."*²⁵⁴

This intense focussing on cinema's ability to represent causal agency and "human truth" comes with the consequence of a significant denigration of the ostensibly lesser systems and corresponding content within the broader mode of representation, namely those of space and time. That cinema might be capable of bearing homogenous,

²⁵³ Bordwell and Staiger, "Since 1960: The Persistence of a Mode of Film Practice," 371–2. It is not clear whether these claims constitute the film's "explicit meaning" or an interpretation.

²⁵⁴ Kristin Thompson, "From Primitive to Classical," 161.

extensive space and time as its positive contents remains, as we have seen, fundamentally unquestioned. This representational capacity is also shown to be of little consequence, operating fully within the classical-normative system but utterly sublated by causal logic.²⁵⁵ It is this denigration of extensive space and time as the possible positive contents of cinematic representation that provides the means by which *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* may draw a contrast between so-called “primitive” cinema, for which pure spatiotemporal representation provides the normative content, and “classical” cinema. The outcome of this comparison is doubtless apparent enough from the very names of the two modes of representation between which the comparison is drawn, but it is probably worth reviewing nonetheless.

The classical-normative cinematic text is posited as ideal representation by way of a contrast with primitive cinema, a contrast that occurs on those terms of representability ostensibly associated with the classical cinema. Foremost among these terms is narrative causality. Thus we encounter such claims about early cinematic texts as the following, from Thompson: “*Time, space, and logic* did not fit together unproblematically at this

²⁵⁵ Here it is worth mentioning Philip Rosen’s compelling theory concerning the subsumption of the discourses of indexicality associated with actuality-based texts into classical spectatorship. Rosen suggests that it is “likely that the transition to fictional narrative as a dominant of commercial cinema partook of broader cultural tendencies with respect to capturing reality,” producing “a simultaneity or oscillation of differing registers of referentiality.” This leads Rosen to conclude: “It is as if the ontogeny of viewing an individual film recapitulates the historical phylogeny of classical cinema. Phylogenetically, commercial cinema passed through a brief period when its status as document was dominant, and then stabilized to make the status of the image as explicit diegesis the mark of dominant filmmaking. Ontogenetically, there is also a kind of passage or play between document and diegesis, but with a kind of residue, as if the diegeticized film attempts to retain something of the factual convincingness of the document” (Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 166, 179, 183). Mary Ann Doane likewise suggests that “while the notion that film as a record of time as a sufficient rationale for its existence and dissemination disappeared fairly rapidly, the concept of the filmability of the contingent without limit persists and subtends/supports mainstream classical narrative” (Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 25).

early point. The relationships among these systems were *probably the same* in the primitive period as in the classical—that is, *narrative was the dominant consideration*, with time and space subordinate to it.”²⁵⁶ Thompson therefore asserts that “[t]he main changes that occurred in the shift from primitive to classical cinema took place *within* the individual systems of causality, time, and space.”²⁵⁷ Despite the claim of fundamental heterogeneity between primitive and classical cinema (“a major shift in assumptions...”; see above), we witness the drawing of explicit evaluative comparisons between the two in accordance with the representational criteria of the latter. It is this judgement of early cinema according to the criteria derived from the classical that enables, for example, the exasperating assertion that pre-1903 actualities are “of minimal interest today.”²⁵⁸

This stabilization of the classical-normative text as ideal representation by way of its contrast with early cinema is furthered through a similar application of the limited parameters of *comprehensibility* furnished by the normative model of spectatorship. Quite simply, early films fail to meet the specific standards of comprehensibility that the normative model demands. Thus Thompson muses that “it is remarkable that one must go back very far to find films which are so fundamentally different as to be *incomprehensible* today,”²⁵⁹ and remarks that “[d]uring the primitive period (1894–1908), films tended to present narratives in such a way that they were *minimally intelligible*.”²⁶⁰ She hails the development of the classical narration, “which could present information

²⁵⁶ Thompson, “From Primitive to Classical,” 162; emphasis added.

²⁵⁷ Thompson, “From Primitive to Classical,” 162; emphasis original.

²⁵⁸ Thompson, “From Primitive to Classical,” 159.

²⁵⁹ Thompson, “From Primitive to Classical,” 157.

²⁶⁰ Thompson, “From Primitive to Classical,” 174; emphasis added.

clearly,” in contrast to primitive films, “which are *virtually unintelligible*.”²⁶¹ The classical-normative text is effortlessly elevated to ideal cinematic representation by comparison with other modes of representation on its own terms.

2. “Art” Cinema

Bordwell’s descriptions of films that he categorizes as “art cinema” work similarly to re-establish the status of the normative text as ideal cinematic representation. This is so quite simply because the “theoretical categories” according to which Bordwell analyzes examples of art cinema—categories mainly concerned with the ways in which effective signification is impeded or otherwise problematized—necessarily presuppose the possibility of such a thing as ideal representation, which in turn the normative text comes to exemplify. In this way, art-cinema texts serve as marginal cases that reenforce the stability of the norm; the reading strategy here is markedly similar to that which evaluates primitive cinema retroactively according to the standards of the classical.

The marginal status of the “art” text is furthermore redoubled insofar as its perceived deficiencies in signification and comprehensibility, in addition to impeding signification, are also themselves taken to constitute a *thematic* concern. This move is a predictable one within a formalist heuristic, namely one that apprehends “poetic” texts as self-reflexively flaunting their own representational non-practicality, but doing so nevertheless within and against the established parameters of normative signification. I think it cannot be underestimated the extent to which this assumption about the operation

²⁶¹ Thompson, “From Primitive to Classical,” 177; emphasis added.

of so-called poetic texts works fetishistically, as it were, to reconstitute and to affirm such a category as normative or ideal signification. Bordwell and Staiger explain: “In the art film, the puzzle is one of *narration*: who is telling this story? how is this story being told? why tell the story in this way?”²⁶² Bordwell advises that, in art cinema, “construction of narration becomes the object of spectator hypotheses,”²⁶³ and so suggests that we ought to consider Dreyer’s work, for example, “as *problems* of order and *problems* of interpretation”; as working to “sensitize” us to the “limits” of representation; as challenging “conventional readings of representations.”²⁶⁴ He therefore counsels that “[i]n every instance, the strategy will be to go straight for the *problems* posed by the films not in an attempt to solve them or dispel them but in order to see them as a result of the film’s dynamic activity.”²⁶⁵

It ought not to be forgotten that it is only because art cinema texts are subject to investigation in accordance with the criteria of the dominant mode—specifically, according to certain contingent criteria of effective signification and comprehensibility—that such analysis is possible at all. The strategy in a sense advocates a reading against the imputed grain of the problematic text; the text purportedly confounds signification, and yet we are advised to comprehend it as though it were ideal representation. It is only in this manner that the text’s putatively ambiguous or otherwise deficient signifying strategies may manifest themselves. Bordwell’s sanctioned spectator schemata for “art”

²⁶² Bordwell and Staiger, “Since 1960,” 374; emphasis added.

²⁶³ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 210.

²⁶⁴ *Dreyer*, 3, 7; emphasis original.

²⁶⁵ *Dreyer*, 65; emphasis original.

cinema are therefore ranked hierarchically in a manner that assumes pure denotative reference as the zero degree. The normative spectator of the art film ought, Bordwell suggests, to read the film as referring objectively when possible, and, failing that, to read material as “subjective” or as “narrational commentary,” in turn, in order to produce reconcilable meaning.²⁶⁶ Paradoxically, this strategy for comprehending the art film works in a way that obdurately strives to retain the kernel of determinate, objective reference within it by isolating irreconcilable or contradictory material not as positive content but as commentary. Thus Bordwell claims: “The marked self-consciousness of art-cinema narration creates both a coherent fabula world and an intermittently present but highly noticeable external authority through which we gain access to it...The result is that a highly self-conscious narration weaves through the film, stressing the act of presenting this fabula in just this way. Deviations from classical norms can be grasped as commentary upon the story action.”²⁶⁷ As much as the interpretation of so-called art cinema does not lie within the scope of this work, I feel compelled to point how this mandated reading of texts—in a manner that *disingenuously* assumes their ideal representability—profoundly limits the sorts of ways in which so-called “art” films may be apprehended and read.

²⁶⁶ See *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 205ff.

²⁶⁷ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 209–11. Bill Nichols remarks: “This schema very neatly isolates the narrational process from reference to anything beyond itself: subjectivity and commentary fold back into the narrational process rather than inflect the fabula world with meaning or significance such that the narrative becomes about something other than itself” (Nichols, “Form Wars,” 504).

3. “Hong Kong Cinema” as “Popular Cinema”

The curious implications of the positing of a particular, normative textual model as zero-degree are further apparent in Bordwell’s recent study of Hong Kong cinema.²⁶⁸ It is not possible to undertake here a comprehensive analysis of the way in which this study produces “Hong Kong cinema” as its object. But it is worth considering very briefly the manner in which a body of popular Hong Kong films is broadly assimilated to the normative textual model, producing in turn an array of limited, measurable deviations from that model. What is worth noting for our purposes here is the marked ambivalence of Bordwell’s attitude toward the various sorts of deviation that are produced; on the one hand, such deviations come to be isolated and celebrated as salient features of Hong Kong style; on the other, they are subject to relentless qualitative comparison with the stylistic and narrative systems that comprise the normative textual model, necessarily producing a discourse of adequation that must, by virtue of its founding logic, teleologically presuppose of Hong Kong cinema its orientation toward total assimilability and eradication of difference.

The very possibility of this comparative discourse necessarily presupposes some minimal measure of identity between Hong Kong cinema and the normative text. The establishment of this identity is achieved in Bordwell’s *Planet Hong Kong* through a number of concurrent strategies, all of which are contingent on the establishment of Hong Kong cinema as “popular cinema”; for it is precisely this category that is neatly invoked by the study in order to enable the description of Hollywood and Hong Kong cinema in

accordance with a common set of characteristics. Quite simply, what makes Hong Kong cinema reconcilable with the normative model is precisely the fact that both have been determined to constitute “popular” cinema. What is this basis of this imputation of identity?

We are informed, on the one hand, that the possible positive referential content of Hong Kong films is itself fundamentally reconcilable with that found in the normative textual model, and, on the other, that that content is both representable via conventional cinematic means and comprehensible by the normative spectator. And so we are informed, for example, that Hong Kong filmmaking is, like the normative text, dependent on the continuity system of editing.²⁶⁹ This in fact constitutes a double assertion, positing both a common ontology of the representable object world *and* a common spectatorial practice, namely that which is deployed in order to comprehend the continuity-based representational system. Not surprisingly, this in turn necessitates Bordwell’s minimization of the threat posed by cultural difference. We need not attend to the impossible task of evaluating the legitimacy of such a manoeuvre; rather, we ought to consider simply the very necessity that such a manoeuvre be made at all.

Bordwell assures us that “there are more commonalities than differences in human cultures: universal physical, social, and psychological predispositions and the facial expressions of many emotions will be quickly understood in a film, whatever its country of origin.”²⁷⁰ It is sufficient to observe two things here: first, that this attempt to establish

²⁶⁸ Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*.

²⁶⁹ *Planet Hong Kong*, 160–2.

²⁷⁰ *Planet Hong Kong*, xi. I will not attempt to speculate on why “facial expressions” in particular

a common standard of comprehensibility functions implicitly to inscribe the boundaries of possible referential content along what are presented as universal, transcultural lines; second, that, insofar as the very representability and comprehensibility of this content constitutes “the transcultural power of popular cinema”²⁷¹ a corresponding *transcultural* normative spectatorial practice is implicitly inaugurated.

Most revealing here is an extensive discussion of North American audience reception, a discussion that effectively serves to demonstrate both the “transcultural appeals” and universal comprehensibility of Hong Kong cinema.²⁷² This attention to North American spectatorial practice not only affirms the universal comprehensibility of Hong Kong cinema in accordance with the normative model, but also works to assimilate potentially divergent spectatorial activities within the universal practice of comprehension. Consider Bordwell’s utterly inexplicable invocation of the “famous example” of “resistant reading” in which “Australian aboriginal viewers watching a TV western are reported to cheer for the Indians rather than the cowboys.”²⁷³ What could possibly be the point of mentioning this? We ought not to take for granted that the anecdote in question does not involve Hong Kong cinema. Quite simply, this example is useful for Bordwell insofar as it demonstrates that “differences in interpretation build upon convergences in comprehension.”²⁷⁴ Effectively, Bordwell evokes “resistant reading”—a category the peculiar constitution of which we cannot begin to address

warrant special attention here, alongside “universal physical, social, and psychological predispositions.”

²⁷¹ *Planet Hong Kong*, xii.

²⁷² *Planet Hong Kong*, 87–97.

²⁷³ *Planet Hong Kong*, 97.

²⁷⁴ *Planet Hong Kong*, 97.

here—in order to assimilate such readings as proof of the universal comprehensibility of popular cinema. And in employing an example the very formation of which produces a conspicuous Othering of a particular, ostensibly unrelated group of spectators—“Australian aboriginal viewers”—Bordwell’s effort is to maximize utterly the universal applicability of the normative spectatorial practice of comprehension. In short, Bordwell produces a category of spectatorial practice involving the production of “resistant readings,” and employs it to demonstrate the universal comprehensibility of the normative cinematic model. This represents a double assimilation—first, to categorize qualitatively various spectatorial practices as “interpretations” that constitute “resistant reading”; and second, to deploy those practices thus reconfigured in service to the dominant theory of comprehension.

Cultural difference sufficiently minimized and the universality of “popular cinema” established by means of this force, Bordwell is able to proceed with identifying points of difference in Hong Kong cinema on non-cultural grounds. We may attend briefly to Bordwell’s descriptions of some of these, insofar as they demonstrate the sort of ambivalent attitude that is necessarily manifest in the very positing of alternative textual practices wholly in accordance with the criteria of a dominant mode. The structure of this ambivalence is itself revealing. Consider Bordwell’s characterization of what he apprehends as style. On the one hand, we witness a celebration of various stylistic deviations, such as a preponderance of “striking images,” a “delight in expressive

technique,” and a reliance on formulas and conventions that is “rich” in its “artifice”;²⁷⁵ we are told of action films’ “sheer physical extravagance” and their “strategy of expressive amplification.”²⁷⁶ It hardly need be stated that these descriptions rely on the production of an implicit qualitative comparison with the stylistic norms of Hollywood; what is worth noting is the establishment of this deviance in such a manner that serves to constitute it as creative stylistic innovation in its own right. On the other hand, however, such differences are shown to be frequently excessive in their very excess; Bordwell proceeds to itemize a number of “faults,” namely that there is often “too much facetious music during comic scenes,” “a lot of visual bombast,” and that Hong Kong cinema generally is “often overbusy.” Effectively, then, Bordwell produces a regulative discourse in which are constituted, relative to the normative model, the acceptable limits of stylistic deviance itself.

The implications of this sort of regulative discourse are surely even greater within Bordwell’s evaluation of Hong Kong films’ procedures of narrative signification, insofar as any such evaluation will necessarily be dependent entirely on producing reconciliation with the extant discourse of ideal signification. “Hong Kong plots,” Bordwell notes, “tend to be organized around vivid moments, fights or chases or comic turns or melodramatic catastrophes.”²⁷⁷ The consequence of this, we are told, is a weak causal structure, resulting in “embarrassingly straightforward, even slapdash storytelling.”²⁷⁸ Bordwell thus concludes that “most Hong Kong cinema *has yet to achieve* Hollywood’s

²⁷⁵ *Planet Hong Kong*, 7, 8, 11.

²⁷⁶ *Planet Hong Kong*, 217, 232.

²⁷⁷ *Planet Hong Kong*, 11.

degree of craft cleverness at the level of plotting.”²⁷⁹ Ostensibly a judgement about narrative structure, this actually works to attribute a normative positive content. For such a judgement only makes sense when Hong Kong cinema is evaluated according to the hierarchy of systems that organizes the referential content of the normative text, namely that which posits causality not only as organizing structure of the text’s representational system, but as positive content in its own right. More importantly, however, the very idea that this sort of judgement might even be made is itself symptomatic of the ambivalent logic that the prior positing of a normative-ideal text necessitates; specifically, the production of difference is founded on the positing within all cinematic texts of a kernel of ideal representability, and thus of an economy of adequation that itself serves to constitute difference in its entirety.

²⁷⁸ *Planet Hong Kong*, 178.

²⁷⁹ *Planet Hong Kong*, 179; emphasis added.

V. *EX POST FACTO* (II): PRESCRIPTION FOR A NORMATIVE THEORY

1. The Hierarchical Axiology of Film-Theoretical Practice

Bordwell's production of the category of normative-ideal representational cinematic text leads him to propose, as we have seen, a means for apprehending all manner of cinematic texts in relation to the properties of the normative model. I have tried to give some indication, for example, of the way in which the very notion of a normative text in turn enables such a category as "art cinema," namely a set of broad and profoundly heterogeneous films that demonstrate a certain, common mode of deviation from the criteria of normativity that the dominant text embodies. The production of a dominant mode, achieved by means of the sorts of procedures it has been the ambition of this project to investigate, both enables the category of deviance and constitutes its terms. Within the formalist heuristic, any such deviation is itself not only measurable, but also worthy of analysis in its own right, constituting a sort of *style* that may be attributed to a particular filmmaker, historical period, national cinema, etc. It is this type of investigation that for Bordwell is considered fruitful film-theoretical work.²⁸⁰

What is most astounding is how Bordwell advocates this sort of formalist work—the banal procedure of producing norms, calculating deviations from them, and then nominating such deviations as styles—at the expense of myriad alternative film-theoretical pursuits. It is not my intention here to review the terms of the kinds of debates that this sort of claim is liable to aggravate.²⁸¹ All that I might propose here is to survey

²⁸⁰ Cf., e.g., *Dreyer*, 1–4; *Making Meaning*, 263ff; "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory," 26ff.

²⁸¹ E. Ann Kaplan points out, for example, how Bordwell's "'poetics of film' repeats a western

the terms on which Bordwell works to discredit film-theoretical discourses that aspire to read texts in a manner that accomplishes more than purely formalist investigation.

Simply stated, I wish to show how the sorts of distinctions that Bordwell makes in order to denigrate certain critical reading practices are themselves structured by radically contingent configurations of signification and textuality, configurations initiated explicitly in service to the critical-realist project of constraining polysemy and salvaging determinate textual meaning. My goal here, then, is to provide a reading of how Bordwell constructs the category of interpretive criticism and proceeds to disparage it, employing a host of strategies dictated by radical contingencies.

In effect, Bordwell's primary aim—which is articulated most candidly in the pages of *Making Meaning*, but elsewhere, too²⁸²—seems to be to fashion a *hierarchical axiology of film-theoretical practice*, in which formalist and aesthetic research enjoys privileged status and in which so-called interpretive criticism is denigrated. This procedure effects the swift reduction and containment of most critical-theory-oriented film-theoretical practice, rendering it assimilable to and perversely reconcilable as parasitic category within Bordwell's own fabricated model of the logical structure of film-theoretical discourse. Consider the utter reduction of “two large-scale trends of thought,” namely “subject-position theory” and “culturalism”—themselves Bordwell's

aesthetic orientation that has long encouraged scholars to ignore minority texts and minority artists” (Kaplan, “Disorderly Disciplines,” 49). Barry King suggests that the formalist procedure “makes style the ‘Logos’ of an expressive totality,” suppressing and marginalizing various contradictions (King, “The Classical Hollywood Cinema,” 88). The broader debate underlying the division here seems to have assumed the structure of an opposition between social sciences and humanities research methods in film studies; see, e.g., Kaplan, “Disorderly Disciplines,” 50; Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 17.

²⁸² See, in particular, “Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory.”

own reductive categories—through the assertion of “deep continuities of doctrine and practice”; such “grand theory” is then situated against the “more modest trend” of “‘middle-level’ research.”²⁸³ Bordwell gives further structure to this hierarchy by suggesting that the strategies and assumptions of interpretive practice are largely reliant on—and indebted to—the productive research carried out by formalists. Bordwell structures film-theoretical discourse, then, in a manner that reduces it to two terms, in which one—interpretive criticism—is appurtenant to and simply functions as a *supplement* to the other—formalist aesthetics. This structure neatly established, Bordwell then proceeds to lament that “one is hard pressed to isolate any film technique discovered by the symptomatic tradition. The interpretation of film as ‘discourse’ has derived virtually all its categories from the work of the classical film aestheticians.”²⁸⁴ More to the point, Bordwell states that “most of the basic concepts for understanding the resources of the film medium have not issued from contemporary interpretive projects. Arnheim, Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Bazin, Burch, and others defined the parameters of film style and structure with which all critics still work....Film interpretation charges its debts to the account of classical aesthetics, but it pays very little back.”²⁸⁵ This fiscal imbalance having been diagnosed, Bordwell next sets out to obliterate the credit rating of interpretive criticism. As I have suggested, this process requires a great deal of presupposition about what, precisely, interpretive criticism aims to accomplish. The procedure, then, is threefold: first, to produce a homogeneous category of film “critics”;

²⁸³ “Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory,” 3, 12–13.

²⁸⁴ *Making Meaning*, 99.

²⁸⁵ *Making Meaning*, 261.

second, to characterize their goal as the production of something called *interpretation*; third, to denigrate interpretation as illegitimate practice.²⁸⁶ It is with the labour involved in the last of these moves in particular that I am most concerned.

Bordwell's attacks on interpretation seem to adhere to two distinct but related strategies. On the one hand, he demonstrates various ways in which the methodology of interpretation is unsatisfactory or based on incorrect assumptions about the nature of cinematic signification and textuality; on the other, he insists that the sorts of conclusions that interpretive strategies produce are of negligible value to film studies. I do not think it necessary to point out that in Bordwell there seems to be an innate connection between the perceived rigour of a given method and the apprehended currency of the conclusions that may arise from it. At any rate, Bordwell complains that interpretive practices are methodologically suspect, and as such they are "imprecise," "unspecific," and they "discriminate too little." This is because they employ "associational reasoning," the conclusions of which "meet no canons of reasonable inference";²⁸⁷ specifically, Bordwell laments that "subject-position theorists and culturalists tend to shy away from inductive, deductive, and abductive reasoning," and furthermore that they are guilty of something called the "error of 'enumerative inductivism'."²⁸⁸ Consequently, the findings of this

²⁸⁶ Cf. *Making Meaning*, xiii. Bordwell declares that film interpretation involves to some degree of the production of either explicatory or symptomatic meaning, or both (*Making Meaning*, 43, 73).

²⁸⁷ Dreyer, 3; *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 280; "Contemporary Film Studies," 23.

²⁸⁸ "Contemporary Film Studies," 23; *Making Meaning*, 5. See also *Making Meaning*, 29ff, for a patronizing analysis of interpretation as a scientific method. It need not be mentioned that the assumption that lies behind such an analysis—namely that all thinking in a given discipline ought to conform to a single standard of methodological rigour—might be considered to constitute a "grand theory." Similarly, Edward Branigan observes that "the *concept* of a 'middle-level' theory is not itself middle-level, but must instead be posed through some higher-level theory" (Branigan, "On the Analysis of Interpretive Language (Part I)," 18).

interpretive pseudoscience are “banal” and even “desperate,” producing “thematization” that “tends to rely on the clichés of sophomore literary criticism.”²⁸⁹ It is worth examining in greater detail the structure of the categorizations of interpretive practice that permits this sort of disparagement to occur.

In essence, Bordwell accuses “critics” of producing too much textual meaning with too little justification. There are two ways in which this may come about. First, critics may attempt to comprehend elements of texts that are quite simply not intended for comprehension, such as stylistic patterning. Bordwell suggests that films with distinct stylistic systems, such as those that exemplify the so-called “parametric” mode of narration, are especially vulnerable to this sort of misreading. Bordwell observes: “Granted that these stylistic patterns are present and important, the critic is tempted to ‘read’ them, to assign them thematic meanings...The urge to read stylistic effects in this way must also be traced to a broader tendency, that of assuming that everything in any film (or any good film) must be interpretable thematically. Thematization of this sort typically loses the specificity of a film’s narrational work.”²⁹⁰ Such error is apparently the result of wayward application of spectatorial schemata; stylistic patterning evokes “elusive phantoms of connotation” because “[t]he recognition of order triggers a search for meaning.”²⁹¹ Consider the sort of logic of signification that is at work here. Bordwell’s complaint is that the distinctiveness of style is being misread as determinate content. And yet the positing of such a category of autonomous style—the move on

²⁸⁹ Dreyer, 3; *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 280, 282.

²⁹⁰ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 282.

²⁹¹ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 289.

which the entire category of parametric narration is based—is itself a contingent one, dependent on the manufacturing of such a category as stylistic patterning, and in turn upon such a notion as stylistic devices functioning independently of stable referential content, as with the Prague-structuralist category of “poetic” language. In other words, it is only the very production of such a “mode of narration” as “parametric” that permits the isolation of style in this way to begin with, and thus enables the prohibition of the reading of style as anything other than autonomously functioning order, patterning, etc.

2. Interpretation: “...That Dangerous Supplement...”²⁹²

Something similar is at work in Bordwell’s manufacturing of the second means by which critics read too much meaning, namely through the production of *interpretations*; it is this activity that provokes Bordwell’s main line of commentary in *Making Meaning*. We have already seen how Bordwell draws a distinction between textual readings that constitute *comprehension*, on the one hand, and *interpretation*, on the other.²⁹³ The structural formation here is a hierarchical one in which the comprehension of determinate, referential meaning is implicitly established as the zero-degree term, with all legitimate spectatorial activity—in accordance with the normative spectatorial model—oriented toward the comprehension of the cinematic text’s positive referential content; any other form of spectatorial practice is deemed illegitimate, removed from the pure, unmediated access to determinate content of the text that comprehension affords. The structure here is undeniably one in which total comprehension of the text constitutes no less than a form

of *presence*, with the split between immediate comprehension and mediated interpretation functioning as a distancing, a spacing—the Derridean *brisure* or mark of *différance*. Insofar as it is solely on the basis of this configuration that so-called interpretative criticism is denigrated, we ought to explore it in some detail.

It hardly need be restated that such a configuration is only enabled by the presupposition of some determinate and stable positive referential content in the text. The parameters of comprehension are entirely determined by the limits of this content and the precise ontology that it entails. More important to observe is the necessary assumption that *all viewing activity necessarily comprises some sort of investment in the apprehension of this referential content*, in a desire for the unmediated presence of determinate textual meaning. Thus Bordwell hints that interpretive critics err in presenting their findings as though they were determinate content.²⁹⁴ Interpretation or any other unsanctioned spectatorial activity is therefore simply a parasitic supplement to legitimate comprehension; interpretation's processes are modelled upon and contingent upon the possibility of ideal, total comprehension. Never mind that the boundary between comprehension and interpretation is wholly arbitrary, contingent on the limits of sanctioned spectator schemata, the boundaries of which are, as we have discovered, impossible and indeterminate, applicable only retroactively and paradoxically according to the always-already established determinate meaning of the text.²⁹⁵ This subsumption

²⁹² Cf. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 141–164, and especially 144–152.

²⁹³ *Making Meaning*, 8; see discussion above (§ III, 2, i).

²⁹⁴ See *Making Meaning*, 2; “Film Interpretation Revisited,” 94.

²⁹⁵ Edward Branigan observes of this model that the limits of what constitutes referential meaning are “fuzzy and permeable” (Branigan, “On the Analysis of Interpretive Language (Part I),” 11).

of interpretive practice within the dominant configuration constitutes a crucial manoeuvre, insofar as it works utterly to reconcile all critical practice within the terms of the dominant. This effectively empties out interpretation of any positive value other than that associated with wayward comprehension.²⁹⁶

What is more, Bordwell works to legitimize this hierarchical axiology, to grant it legitimacy and establish its precedence through recourse to various historical textual practices. He draws a comparison to the “classic hermeneutic division” between “*ars intelligendi*” and “*ars explicandi*,” a comparison that helps to assert a distinction between the derivation of always-already positive content from the text (*intelligere*) and the attribution of meaning to the text (*explicare*). Similar reference is made to the Augustinian Biblical hermeneutic framework, within which, Bordwell suggests, only the first “sense” constitutes referential meaning.²⁹⁷ Once again, an historically contingent formulation is buttressed with comparisons to radically heterogeneous textual practices. This works utterly to elide any epistemic reconfigurations of the very way in which representation comes to be thought and interrogated as a category.²⁹⁸

With this structuration firmly established, Bordwell may proceed to demonstrate the ways in which interpretation is dependent on—indebted to, as it were—the strategies of comprehension. The effect is neatly to re-double within the specificity of this model the similar dependence Bordwell holds to obtain more broadly between critical theory and

²⁹⁶ Barry King observes that the comprehension–interpretation comparison is a false one, and that “the real contrast is between different kinds of readings with different kinds of competencies” (King, “The Story Continues...,” 68). Andrew Britton also offers a defense of interpretive practice that reinstates it on independent terms. See Britton, “The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole,” 47.

²⁹⁷ *Making Meaning*, 2, 14.

formalism. It hardly need be stated that to purport the reliance of interpretation on comprehension is a wholly disingenuous game—concocted simply to lend the appearance of casting interpretation even further into perdition—insofar as *the very logic of the posited structure itself, as fabricated by Bordwell, already necessarily incorporates interpretation as a flawed or parasitic version of comprehension.*²⁹⁹ Nevertheless, Bordwell never misses an opportunity to point out the “dependence of interpretation upon comprehension.”³⁰⁰

Naturally it is not sufficient simply to establish this structuring dependency; it is also necessary to assert the radical alterity of the degraded term. Again, never mind that the boundary between comprehension and interpretation is utterly indeterminate, or that the very structure of comprehension itself is marked necessarily by the same instabilities that are shown to stain interpretation. What is interesting to observe is how a structuration marked by *différance*, maintained by the radical contingency of a posited accessibility to the *presence* of ideal textual comprehension, is cast in the process of its description as determinately re-doubled and polarized. The deployment of choice terminology produces something more like a binary configuration, describing two very different—opposite, even—sorts of relationship between spectator and text. I already

²⁹⁸ Again, cf., e.g., Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 151.

²⁹⁹ On structurally necessary “parasitism” (or “perdition”) see Derrida’s legendary discussion of J. L. Austin’s speech act theory in “Signature Event Context,” especially 15–17.

³⁰⁰ *Making Meaning*, 132. Cf.: “interpretation claims to shadow comprehension” (126); “The critic takes as given, at least initially, a posited ‘ordinary’ viewing that makes referential sense of the film” (132–3); “[genre-schematic] categories...allow the critic to establish referential or explicit meaning (guaranteed by genre conventions) as a point of departure” (149); “interpretation plows more deeply the grounds first broken by comprehension” (153); “Comprehension, it seems, can often get along without interpretation, but interpretation must appeal to comprehension, especially when it hopes to surpass it” (148); see also *Making Meaning*, 170, 257.

pointed out the invocation of “*ars intelligendi*” and “*ars explicandi*”; likewise, comprehension “*grasps the meanings denoted by the text and its world*” while interpretation “*ascribes abstract and nonliteral meanings to the film and its world.*”³⁰¹ And once again, Bordwell asserts that “we can preserve a useful and habitual distinction between, say, *following the story* and *ascribing* an abstract, implicit or symptomatic, meaning *to* that story.”³⁰² Every movement to posit interpretation as exterior to and removed from the kernel of textual determinacy therefore works to affirm the unmediated presence of normal comprehension.

³⁰¹ Bordwell, “Film Interpretation Revisited,” 95, 96; emphasis added (except “*abstract*”; emphasis original).

³⁰² “Film Interpretation Revisited,” 96; emphasis added.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to demonstrate how the epistemological assumptions upon which any theory and its methodology are founded will necessarily be reproduced in the very conception of its objects. Specifically, I have tried to show how critical realism, including its fundamental, structuring contradictions, comes to be re-inscribed throughout the film-theoretical writing of David Bordwell. This re-inscription is manifest in the abstraction of such a category as the normative, bounded, unified, representational cinematic text; in the production of a set of conditions for normative spectatorship that implicitly initiates a corresponding, normative subjectivity; in the hypostatization of such an object as a normative-ideal cinematic text that is foremost structured as though it were a mode of determinate representation; and, finally, in the set of criteria that establish the parameters for a prescriptive critical and theoretical practice. Insofar as we have been able to diagnose such “uncanny repetition” between, on the one hand, the founding position of a theory and, on the other, the very objects of its study, we now find ourselves in the position of having to admit that even film-theoretical writing aspiring to positive description is, in a sense, *performative*.

That we ought to view film-theoretical writing in precisely this way is, again, evident enough from our discovery that film theory itself—uncannily alongside the so-called cinematic object that it purports to describe—has contingency in the confluence of a set of already contingent discourses, which it merely serves to perpetuate and resituate by means of a *citational force*. These discourses serve to produce a knowable, analyzable cinematic object—an object the very technological emergence of which is *in itself* already

symptomatic of the discourses that frame it—as bearing the ontological kernel of a capacity for determinate representation. That this kernel be thought in this way, or that it be thought at all, should be attributed to nothing other than the iteration of a given discursive formation.

To grant that theoretical writing might be performative is to free it from the metaphysically determined pretense of the positive description of some pre-formed and pre-existing object, and to grant to that writing what Derrida calls “the value of force.” Recall Derrida’s observation, for example, that “[t]he performative is a ‘communication’ which is not limited strictly to the transference of a semantic content that is already constituted and dominated by an orientation toward truth.”³⁰³ Theoretical writing is, in this way, necessarily released from the illusion of determination within a structure that is bestowed upon it by the dual chimeras of intentionality on the one hand and positive description on the other. It is granted instead the traits of a “general writing,” such that “the effects of semantic communication can be determined as effects that are particular, secondary, inscribed, and supplementary.”³⁰⁴

It would not be in the spirit of such a general writing of film theory-as-performance to speak of the implications of such writing for the conception of the cinematic object as such, insofar as performativity necessarily entails the thinking—the writing—of a reconfiguration of the relationship between discourse and object, a metaphysical relationship that apprehends discourse itself as somehow a privileged

representation of the truth of its object, an object existing outside of and anterior to it.

But insofar as it might be possible to perform a reading of “cinema” that serves to deconstruct it—to invert and to displace the metaphysical hierarchy of adequate representation and ideally represented presence that lies within it—it is easy to imagine the sorts of configurations that are liable to be produced.

The very discourses that serve to frame and give structure to such an object as a representational text that is supplementary to and detached from the presence of anterior reality are themselves subject to rethinking. Insofar as the cinematic text itself (if there be such a thing, and if it be constituted as having the structure of a general writing—and we ought not to assume straightaway that it ought to be³⁰⁵) might be subject to iterability, citability, and framing—and thus to contamination that itself is structural—in a variety of contingent and always-already contaminated reading contexts, the reading of the cinematic text might comprise a double movement to posit the text, to inscribe its boundaries, and thus to produce its contents. For the representational capacity of the text is only that which is granted to it in the economy of its writing; that economy may or may not opt to naturalize representational capacity through recourse to the conjured specificity of immanent structure, or through the bestowal of some sanctioned, external history (establishing context or intentionality)—and thus, ultimately, through the granting of an inside and an outside which serves to stabilize the inside. Even to the extent that such a writing might produce a text structured as though by a certain metaphysical economy or

³⁰³ Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 13.

³⁰⁴ Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 3.

³⁰⁵ Cf. Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 61.

ontology of signs, such activity would nevertheless comprise a *performance* serving to reiterate and to rewrite the text but also exert a *force* and thus to reposition it. We have, I hope, already seen how this is so.

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