

BORDWELL, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, Massachusetts : Havard University Press, 1989. xvi + 334 p.

Peter Rist

Volume 1, numéro 1-2, automne 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1000999ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1000999ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Cinémas

ISSN

1181-6945 (imprimé)

1705-6500 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Rist, P. (1990). Compte rendu de [BORDWELL, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, Massachusetts : Havard University Press, 1989. xvi + 334 p.] *Cinémas*, 1(1-2), 164–169. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1000999ar>

He defines the former as "a system of propositions that claims to explain the nature and functions of cinema," and ultimately finds that film criticism—"interpretive writing"—differs from theoretical writing in that the critic ordinarily fails to both interrogate his/her "presuppositions" and leave "empirical claims (...) open to counter example".

BORDWELL, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989. xvi + 334 p.

The publication of David Bordwell's new book, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* is yet another landmark for film scholarship. In fact, as interesting as all of his books have been, this one is perhaps more significant than any he has written since his first, *Film Art: An Introduction* (co-authored by Kristin Thompson), which finally provided us with a useful introductory film text for the university.¹

In *Making Meaning*, Bordwell intends no less than to present "a history of film criticism, an analysis of how critics interpret films, and a suggestion for some alternative research programs" (xii). And, for the most part he succeeds admirably. The bulk of the book is devoted to an analysis of the structures of film criticism, the usefulness of which could be extended to other disciplines (particularly the study of literature). In short, we now have an adequate textbook on the subject, though it couldn't be recommended as a primer in "how to" write film criticism since it is mostly negative in its approach. The real interest for me though is found in the "history" and "suggestion" sections which make for exciting reading, but which, unfortunately, are very brief.

Central to Bordwell's thesis is the notion that most film criticism is concerned with "interpretation" rather than "comprehension" (which is more the province of film reviewing). Also crucial—and a bonus of this work—is the distinction he makes between film theory and criticism. He defines the former as "a system of propositions that claims to explain the nature and functions of cinema," (4) and ultimately finds that film criticism—"interpretive writing"—differs from theoretical writing in that the critic ordinarily fails to both interrogate his/her "pre-suppositions" and leave "empirical claims (...) open to counter example" (251). Undoubtedly, Bordwell's point here, which he makes a number of times, will be one of the most contentious ones, especially with film scholars whose interests lie in the direction of contemporary theory. The writer's approach is underscored by a dissatisfaction with the drift of North American film scholarship, wherein, "structuralism and the concept of the contradictory text (...) have devolved into a practical criticism that claims theoretical terrain it has never logically staked out, squeezes film after film into the

same half-dozen molds, and refuses to question its own procedures" (262).

Before reaching this conclusion David Bordwell demonstrates meticulously and methodically that there is very little difference between contemporary, academic film criticism and earlier "schools"—e.g. *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Movie* auteurism—on a structural level, at least. He claims that there are four types of meaning to be found in films, "referential" and "literal, explicit" meanings as well as "implicit" and "symptomatic" ones. For Bordwell, a criticism of comprehension can reveal the explicit while interpretation does the rest. Aristotle is cited as being the source of implicit interpretation, while Freud, of course, is deemed responsible for setting critics off looking for "symptomatic," or, "repressed" meanings. Whatever "meaning" is sought, though, critics of all stripes apparently "map" similar "Semantic Fields" with identical "Schemata" (in Bordwell's terminology). And, after three fairly dry chapters of explanation, complete with flow chart-like "mapping" diagrams, Bordwell presents his "concentric-circle schema" as a diagrammatic representation of the primacy of characters (at the hub) over *mise-en-scène* (where the spokes would be) over cinematic technique and style (on the rim) (170-171). He claims that most critics employ such a schema by their understanding style merely in relation to characters and their actions. He then extends the model to the analysis of how critics interpret film plots—their diachronic "trajectories"—finding a similar homogeneity (of allegory), and revealing a singular simplicity in contemporary "symptomatic" interpretations. Bordwell paraphrases the "symptomatic allegorical heuristic" as follows:

Take male characters to be functioning as father figures or undergoing the (Edipal) trajectory. Take female characters to be playing the role of mother or as posing a castration threat. Then trace the ways in which (1) the male either (a) succeeds his father or (b) loses his identity; and (2) the woman is either (a) transformed into a fetish for male desire, (b) eliminated from the text, or (c) transported into a realm beyond patriarchal definition. (198)

However, it is in the chapter on rhetoric that Bordwell is hardest on contemporary film scholarship. Going back to Aristotle, as he often does, for his terms, he argues that the rhetor's *elocutio* for the critic of the "contradictory text," is composed of "jargon" (217). Further, a dictionary definition of "shibboleth" is called upon to show that the rhetor's language is exclusionary, (218-219) and finally, the author argues that "over the last two decades, an aggressive rhetorical stance has helped win and maintain theory's institutional authority" (222).

One of the less impressive sections of *Making Meaning* is the following chapter, "Rhetoric in Action," in which seven chronologically ordered interpretations of *Psycho* are analyzed along the lines proposed earlier. It was an excellent idea of Bordwell's to choose Hitchcock's film for empirical enquiry and comparison since the shift of critical attention from the work's implicit meaning to symptomatic meaning is evident. *Psycho* is also popular in both academic and popular critical circles and has been discussed more often than almost any other film. Surprisingly, then, given Bordwell's analytical rigor, he devotes more space here to description of critical approach than to fitting the essays into his interpretive frameworks. Also, he clearly displays his own preference for implicit over symptomatic interpretation and for *Movie* auteurism over more recent versions. He singles out V. F. Perkins for being "unusually modest" and "very precise" and praises Perkins' approach as exemplifying "bull's-eye schema" with "character-centred meaning"; an approach which was under attack in the previous chapter (233-34).

The history chapters are unlikely to be as contentious as other parts of the book. The author provides a thorough overview, albeit one that focuses too much on similarity and not enough on difference. He argues that film criticism was "born from reviewing" (21) and that following World War II, the most significant writing focused on European art cinema, ambiguity and authorship. The thrust of such "interpretation as explication," from Bazin through *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Positif*, Andrew Sarris, *Sight and Sound* versus *Movie* to the NYU interest in the American avant-garde, was to find "unity" in films (43-70). Bordwell then makes the important discovery that "symptomatic interpretation" began in America of the 1940's with writers such as Parker Tyler, Siegfried Kracauer, Robert Warshow and Barbara Deming and he traces the unacknowledged influence of their approaches on auteur structuralism's contradictory text (71-99).

The most interesting ideas on film criticism though are revealed in the final chapter of *Making Meaning*, entitled "Why Not to Read a Film." Bordwell concludes his analysis by emphasising the conservative nature of most film criticism in its reaffirmation of existing conventions. He also restates that "contemporary interpretation-centered criticism" is "largely uncontentious and unreflective about its theories and practices" and decides finally that "it has become boring" (261). As an alternative to interpretation he suggests that criticism should pay more attention to the "surfaces" of films, citing Susan Sontag's call for the recovery of "our senses and art's sensuousness" in her seminal essay "Against Interpretation" written in 1964 (264). Manny Farber and Jim Hoberman are

posited as past and present exemplars of sensuous film criticism. Both are deemed to be particularly sensitive to film style. Indeed, Bordwell calls for more attention to be paid to the "pleasing" side of films and for critics to resist being interested in style "only when it underscores a point deemed important on other grounds" (269, 261). He suggests that the search for style should be coupled with a renewed interest in history under the rubric of "a self-conscious historical poetics of cinema," i.e., "the study of how, in determinate circumstances, films are but together, serve specific functions, and achieve specific effects" (266-67).

Unfortunately, it seems to me that here, David Bordwell, having opened up criticism to new or renewed practices, effectively closes it off again. As in the monumental work, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, which he co-authored with Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, one can detect a tendency to de-limit the world of stylistic analysis and to promote his own project.² For instance, once the ideal of "film poetics" has been defined Bordwell refers to his own work in end notes no less than six times (268-74). Thompson gets three mentions and Staiger one, while the only other references to writings on film are single ones to Noel Carroll, Rick Altman, Stuart Liebman and Michèle Lagny/Marie-Claire Ropars/Pierre Sorlin. Though he looks forward to "an open-textured poetics of film" which "might find anything appropriate to illuminate a given film in a particular historical context" (267), Bordwell clearly favours his partner's "neo-formalism" and is primarily interested in "style" inasmuch as it equates either with "art" or (Hollywood) system.³ Thus, while Bordwell recognizes that "in most industrial circumstances filmmaking involves collective work, with choices made by various agents and defined in various ways" (269), he does not promote the investigation of the surfaces (styles) of, say Hollywood studios, art directors and cinematographers. Also, though he recognizes the limitations on the discipline of film study through most of its practitioners emerging from the humanities (especially literature), (17-18) he is reluctant to propose the introduction of scientific methods, such as the statistical analyses conducted by Barry Salt.⁴ Further, while he astutely champions a new approach to history which seeks to understand the "unfamiliar conditions" (273) under which films were made, he fails to extend the horizons geographically to acknowledge the important work that is being done, and which still needs to be done, outside Europe and North America. Finally, it must be noted that we now understand, through the influence of post-structuralism and post-modernism on film theory and criticism, that the scientism that is practiced by the likes of David Bordwell can never explain everything in a film. Indeed,

we should probably be (1), looking towards the open-ended film and written work of "others" such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, who questions all of our assumptions, and (2), following the recent interdisciplinary tendency of film studies to embrace new ideas, at least as much as we focus on "film works" (Bordwell's poetics).⁵

Nevertheless, despite my reservations, I feel that *Making Meaning* stands as a significant work of film scholarship. In it, David Bordwell has revealed the pitfalls of contemporary film criticism, while analyzing the structures of written interpretation. We will no longer be able to discuss films naively, without questioning whether or not we are providing yet another "interpretation."

Peter Rist

Concordia University

ENDNOTES

1 David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Reading, Massachusetts: Adison-Wesley, 1979).

2 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). I contend that, although this book is remarkable in mapping out the key ingredients of the "Hollywood style," it reduces complex works to a monolithic system without regard for their "individual" components. In short, for all its rigour and vigour, it is wrong.

3 See, Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton, New jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988). See also, note 2, above.

4 Initially, Bordwell was interested in Salt's approach, but following the publication of Salt's *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (London: Starword, 1983) and the collective's *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, the two got into a slanging match in the pages of *Film Quarterly*. See, for example, Bordwell's letter dated 15 february 1986, "A Salt and Battery," *Film Quarterly* 40, No. 2 (Winter 1986-1987): 59-62. Bordwell is most perturbed by Salt's reluctance to footnote sources for technical information on cameras, lighting, etc., and the clash seems to have cooled Bordwell on statistics.

5 See, for example, Minh-ha's latest article, "Black Bamboo," *cineACTION!*, No. 18 (Fall 1989): 56-60, and her latest film, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1988).