

Style As Sample

Colin Burnett

In this brief reflection, Colin Burnett argues that the most appropriate metaphor for film style is Harvard philosopher Nelson Goodman's image of the sample, which not only evades some of the conceptual shortcomings of available theories of film style, but draws attention to the strengths of these theories as well. Goodman's notion of style in the arts has the virtue of being friendly both to historical poetics and philosophy of art.

This essay is one of three published in this edition on the concept of style. It was inspired by the Synoptique Style Gallery (founded in November of 2004), which was the beginning of an ongoing project investigating ways to discuss the concept of film style. These essays will provide some of the groundwork for a Forum on Film Style to be published in in Synoptique 7 (February of 2005).

If I were bullied into a dodgy alleyway and told at gunpoint that I have three measly words to explain what "film style" means, I'd reply post haste: "Bordwell, Burch, Goodman." Depending on the erudition of the goon, I might just get off scot-free.

While the first two of the triad hold positions of eminence in such matters and hardly need me to defend them, the third is decidedly 'left-field.' I should add before I proceed that I slightly prefer Burch's term "parameters" to Bordwell's filed-down conception of "style" and believe that using "parameters" might have saved the latter from a good deal of grief from his

detractors. It also would have obviated the somewhat awkward and knotty view, expounded in *Film Art*, that a film's *form* is subdivided into two systems: (narrative) *form* and (cinematic) *style* (355). The reason I bring the Harvard professor of philosophy Nelson Goodman (1906-1998) into the fray is that I believe that his work on style might be used to untangle knots of this kind.

Susan Sontag's famous and perennially useful study "On Style" is another source worth considering here. I'm particularly taken by the section that addresses misleading style metaphors. Naturally she does not dismiss metaphors altogether, but sets her sights on refuting those that distort the phenomena. Three in particular—style as a curtain (style reduced to a "decorative encumbrance"), style as transparent (style reduced to a matter of quantity, "more or less," "thick or thin"), and style as surface (style relegated to the outside while content constitutes the inside of the artwork)—fail to account for the place of style in the totality of the artwork. Sontag's answer is simply to reverse the last one, making style the core, a work's "soul" (17). As she provocatively phrases it, relating artistic style to how we 'hold' ourselves in public, "our manner of appearing is our manner of being. The mask is the face" (18).

Whereas Sontag's 'style as soul' metaphor is a useful rhetorical tool, I prefer another (one that manages to wiggle past Sontag's minefield): Goodman's "style as sample." The reason (which, by the by, is the same reason I am fond of the work of Bordwell and Burch) is that style in Goodman's hands remains something resolutely verifiable, which has the side benefit of

making statements about a given work's style governable by the principle of falsifiability. In other words, they can be proven false either by the simple standards of logic or by plain observation.

Goodman's discussion of "exemplification" in "Routes of Reference" (from *Of Mind and Other Matters* [1984]) examines style in the context of its place in the overall significance of an artwork—how a work exemplifies a style. After defining denotation ("where a word or string of words applies to one thing, event, and so on, or to each of many" [55]), Goodman distinguishes "verbal" from "pictorial" denotation, in which a symbol functions in a "dense" and "replete" symbol-system, marking the minute variations in the qualities of the symbol as more significant than they'd otherwise be. A regular straight line functions 'less' pictorially in a line graph than in a painting of a landscape because fewer qualities of the line (thickness, shade, and so on) are significant in the former than in the latter.

Not all forms of reference are denotational ("description," "notation" and "depiction" are denotative); "exemplification" is an instance of "nondenotational" reference. Something that exemplifies, rather than describes or depicts, is a "sample" that *refers to a feature of the sample, and nothing more*. Goodman's exemplifying symbol (or sample) applies to the world of art in a manner significant to style; I cite him at length:

Sometimes abstract paintings and musical works that neither represent nor express anything are extolled as "pure", as not referential. What matters is claimed to be the work itself, its own features, not anything beyond and referred to by it. But plainly not all countless features of the work matter (not for example, the painting's weighing four points or the symphony's being performed during a rainstorm) but only those qualities and relationships of color and sound, those spatial and temporal patterns, and so on that the work exemplifies and thus *selectively refers to ...*" (60; emphasis added)

By exposing as false the idea that non-representational artworks do not refer, Goodman comes to an important point about style. A stylistic characteristic is not just any characteristic that one can list (in film terms, the combined weight of the canisters that hold the reels of a film is of no concern to style); it is a characteristic that the work advertises, selects or "heightens in our consciousness" by organizing it into discernible patterns

(65). Goodman bluntly states, in a later section of the book, "On Being in Style," that "[a] stylistic feature [...] is a feature that is *exemplified* by the work and that contributes to the placing of the work in one among certain significant bodies of work" (131; emphasis also added). Style refers without denoting, and based on this kind of reference, comparisons can be made with other works.

A much simpler example brings Goodman's notion of style as sample into clearer focus, and it pertains to Goodman's oft-used image of a swatch of cloth. The seat of the chair that the reader is currently seated upon is most likely covered by some sort of cloth or fabric. This cloth has certain features—colors, patterns, texture. If a small piece or sample of this fabric were cut from the seat of the chair, then that sample would continue to retain its ability to refer to some things or features, but lose its ability to refer to others. Given that it is merely a sample, it would be insufficient to denote the chair from whence it came; that is not its function. Thus, a sample of cloth, like a visual strategy of a film, exhibits certain features of itself and little more. One could speculate about the place of the sample in a given totality, of its 'meaning' vis-à-vis the whole, but this species of speculation has little to do with style. To offer a twist on Sontag's thought, style is neither the mask nor the face, but a chip off the mask itself that epitomizes either some feature or other of the mask or of the face behind it.

Carrying this notion of sample into the realm of film, certain kinds of film exemplify the technical choices that go into their making. All films, it would seem, at some moment or another, exemplify these choices, even as these moments may be extremely fleeting. Goodman's description of exemplifying reference, of a work's ability to refer to order rather than to denote a given meaning, calls to mind Bordwell's description of parametric narration in Chapter Twelve of *Narration in the Fiction Film*, a chapter that devotes considerable attention to the intersection, in a species of film narration, between a film's plot-elucidating and stylistic systems. Assuming a somewhat combative tone, but nevertheless making a persuasive point, he illustrates the tendency to overlook this intersection:

Possessed of a *horror vacui*, the interpretive critic clings to theme in order to avoid falling into the abyss of "arbitrary" style and structure. The critic assumes that everything in the film should contribute to meaning. If style is not decoration, it must be motivated compositionally or realistically

or, best of all, as narrational commentary. It is important to recall that in any film, [plot] structure—the selection and organization of story events—does not unequivocally determine a single stylistic presentation. [...] There is always a degree of arbitrariness [...] (282-3)

Bordwell's aim in this section of his book is to demonstrate how a parametric narrational order is identifiable by its references to technical features and their rhythms; narratives of this kind do not merely *possess* these features, but *exemplify* them.

Taken together, the models of Bordwell and Goodman suggest that style, epitomizing film as a technical process beyond being just a dramatic or narrative one, need not denote, need not be motivated by or dependent on the plot, in order to be significant, or to refer. When representational meaning, or in Goodman's idiom, denotative reference, is played down in a work of art, the remaining 'exemplifying,' or decorative, characteristics ("style") take center stage.

I believe that Goodman's broad notion of style sets us on our way to teasing out more sophisticated notions of and categories that address the various ways in which plot organization interacts with intelligible patterns of style. Goodman's "style as sample" metaphor runs to the core of relationships crucial both to the perceivable patterns of a singular artwork and to the historical links between the patterns of many.

If Goodman is correct these patterns of exemplified features do not limit themselves merely to film-specific techniques. The properties that a given film stands as a sample of exceed the range of considerations that fall into the category of film parameters. As a result, Goodman's conception forces us to reconsider the commonly held assumption that style is equivalent to 'form.' Goodman here aligns himself with art historians. The kind of property sampled in a work, which is to say, those characteristics that a work exemplifies, may be either 'formal' or those that belong to the work's 'content;' they may participate either in its 'manner' or 'matter.' A given sample of cloth is a sample of certain colors or textures. A given film may be a sample of certain photographic or staging or editing techniques, but it may also exemplify certain kinds of character, of speech or performance, of land- or cityscape, of genres, of fashion from a given era, and so on and so forth.

While this certainly does not mean that everything is 'style,' it does mean that anything depicted on screen

could potentially be a stylistic feature depending on the context and circumstances in which the film displays it and in which the feature is taken up for discussion. A film that is significant for a given attribute *erves* that attribute, singles it out. *Touch of Evil*, in its first shot, exhibits the aesthetic of the long take; Bresson's *Pickpocket*, by virtue of the neutered inflection that the actors are coached to adopt, displays a unique acting style; the latest Bond film, *Die Another Day*, singles out the distinctiveness of its credit sequence—the first among Bond films to include narrative information; Hitchcock's *Rear Window* exemplifies the opulence Grace Kelly's wardrobe, while scarcely calling attention to the nondescript attire worn by Raymond Burr, for instance. What's clear from these examples is that while they represent features that are highlighted (in very different ways) by the films themselves, as samples of the peculiarities in question they are significant not for the way they express what the film is about, but for the ways they call attention to aspects of themselves and create the conditions for comparison with other films.

Goodman's sample metaphor suggests that the questions that lead to an examination of a work's style are not the same as those that lead to an examination of its form. Whereas consideration of form has roots in textual analysis, or the study of a work's means for expressing its content, deliberation about style stands as a product of historical analysis. A feature of a film may be both formally and stylistically significant, but it may also be significant for one of these reasons alone. The possibility that a feature that is stylistically significant may be formally insignificant (or vice versa) suggests to me that while these categories of study often overlap, they are not one and the same. Consider my submission to the *Synoptique* Style Gallery from Bergman's *Persona* (1966). With its silent film staging, the segment is stylistically significant in its echo of early film practice, but its formal significance remains a question. If the formal questions I ask in the write-up for this style moment, pertaining to the significance of Bergman's staging to the overall meaning of the segment in relation to the rest of the film, can be answered, then without doubt these strategies would be noteworthy stylistically *and* formally. But what if it was revealed in scholarship on the film's technical make-up that cinematographer Sven Nykvist used a new kind of light bulb to achieve certain fill light effects in the segment? The use of this new bulb, which the segment would stand as a sample of, would be formally insignificant while being of considerable interest to the historian of film style.

What requires distinguishing are the practices developed

for interpreting a text and those developed by scholars to study the salient properties that situate a text historically. These are two divergent modes of analysis and the basis for a conceptual distinction between style on the one hand and form on the other.

I bring this discussion to a head with a working definition of a “style moment.” The term stands for a moment in a film that is worth sampling as an instance of a property or series of properties. What the properties are depends on the larger frame of reference or simply the vantage point from which this specific property or set of properties is being considered. Usually such properties will help designate what films are like in a given era. Despite the fact that many of the style moments thus far compiled by the editors of *Synoptique* betray a tendency on the part of the contributor to either confound style with form (as in the case of my own example from *Persona*) or to work with a more casual conception of style, the findings of this inquiry should at least give future contributors a moment of pause as they consider the properties that make their particular moment of choice significant in the history of film style.

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