

Style Forum Part 1

Contexts & Confessions

**Colin Burnett, Brian Crane,
Adam Rosadiuk, Dr. William Beard**

Editor's Note: Synoptique's Style Forum was conducted on Concordia's MA Film Studies Message Board between January 28th and February 12th, 2005 in an effort to both assess the contents of Synoptique's Style Gallery and ascertain the points of intersection and conflict between the pieces written on style by the three contributors in Synoptique 6. Presented here is the outcome of this exchange in three Parts. These Parts both represent a 'best of' compilation of the postings made on the Board and follow the chronology of these postings as best as possible. Simultaneous postings are acknowledged in these documents and should be considered by the reader. Each Part has a Summary to guide the reader through the Forum's salient points.

William Beard is Professor of Film/Media Studies at the University of Alberta. He is author of *Persistence of Double Vision: Essays on Clint Eastwood and The Artist As Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg*, and editor (with Jerry White) of *North of Everything: English-Canadian Cinema since 1980*.

Brian Crane is a PhD student at Université de Montréal and the author of "On Film Style" and "The Why and the How of Movie Trailers," both for Synoptique.

Adam Rosadiuk completed his B.A. at the University of Alberta with a major in Film Studies and a Minor in English. He is currently finishing his Master's Thesis, at Concordia University, on Political Philosophy and Terrence Malick's *THE THIN RED LINE*. His advisor is Dr. Catherine Russell. He is the author of "Notes on

Style and Design," which appeared in Synoptique 6.

Colin Burnett, who holds his Master's in Film Studies from Concordia University, has written on Bresson for *Offscreen* and *Robert-Bresson.com*. His contributions to Synoptique include "Silence is Golden: The Ferguson- Farber Affair" and "Style as Sample." His essay, "An Eye for the Exemplary: The Film Criticism of Susan Sontag," appears in the current edition of *Offscreen*.

Part I:

Summary: In the first part of the Style Forum, William Beard, the Forum's moderator "engagé," sets the stage by asking each of the three authors who expressed their views on the notion of film style in Synoptique 6 to develop certain aspects of their positions; Brian Crane challenges Colin Burnett to explain why his conception is worth subscribing to; Adam Rosadiuk, in an effort to get to the phenomenological 'core' of style, introduces a personal anecdote; Burnett responds to Crane and Rosadiuk by trying to demonstrate the common ground to the three positions.

William Beard (Jan 28th)

Hello Adam, Brian and Colin.

Having read your respective comments on film style with some care, I have come to the conclusion

that they are, if not mutually exclusive, at least incommensurable. This is not surprising, when the topic is so epistemologically ungrounded (no shared definitions for terms like “style,” “content,” “form,” or—in Adam’s usage—“design”) and so unreasonably complicated by the density and complexity of film in the aggregate. Which is not to suggest we shouldn’t have a conversation!

What I’ve decided to do is to snip a quote from each of your initial comments, and then ask a question or two arising from that quote.

So, for Brian:

You say: “Film is a made thing; it is nothing but style.” And later you use the phrase: “...necessary focus on the matter of the film, on its style.”

Would it then follow that everything in a film is style, because everything is made, or everything is part of the matter of the film? Is simply making something the same as giving it style?

Now for Adam:

“Design is problem solving. Ideal design responds perfectly to the practicalities of the thing existing in the world.”

It is clear that in house-building, design is problem solving. It is clear that the purpose of a house is to provide an enclosed space for living or functioning in, but what is the purpose of a film? What if the design problem a moment of film style is addressing is “how do I get an ‘ooh!’ from the audience”?

And now for Colin:

“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.”

Isn’t textual analysis, or the means used for expressing content, as historically situated as any aspect of style? Is it possible to say that Bresson’s style is Bressonian on account of its historical placement? Also, is it possible to talk about Bresson’s style as a sample, or series of samples, without referring to elements such as transcendence that are only truly visible when viewing the work as a whole?

Brian Crane (Jan 29th)

Thanks for getting us started Bill. And I’ll open by saying you’re now completely on track for this conversation. Our initial impetus for the Style Gallery came when we recognized that our discussions of style were hampered by our various (and generally invisible) assumptions about and definitions of things like “style,” “form” and “film.” Does talking about style mean you have to cite Bordwell? Or accept a notion of the auteur? Or be socially or politically or institutionally conservative? Do you have to be a man? As absurd as some of this may sound, they are all possibilities that in contemporary Film Studies are (at least) implied, in various degrees and with various degrees of openness, by a turn to “style.” The work on the Gallery, etc. has, until now, been largely aimed at getting these hidden factors on the table in all their disorder so that we could restart our initial conversation and try to make headway on or around them. For my part, I do see fairly strong connections between our responses but they may be obscured by the fact that they each take up “style” on such very different scales and each work toward such very different ends. Perhaps this would be something to sort out early on.

Regarding my own response, yes, everything in a film is style. But I’m being disingenuous because I don’t think that means that every made thing has an interesting or worthwhile style.

Pointing out that style is all you get in film thus confuses the issue because it uses style to mean both the matter of the film and the thing that draws us to film. But this confusion is productive because it forces us to admit the difference between the two meanings and that each of us only wants to talk about the small subset of films that merit our attention. We know which films these are even if our individual short lists may vary. We also know (though we recoil I think from the dangerous implications we see, perhaps instinctively, nestled in this knowledge) that there is a lot of agreement between our different lists.

To my mind, a meta-critical discussion of “style”—i.e. a discussion of what style analysis should be and the basis it should rest upon—could choose a worse starting point than an assessment of these areas of agreement over films that merit our close attention and of the distance that separates them from those that do not.

Why? Because these differences and similarities are fundamentally differences and similarities in how the

various films are made and work and to what end: i.e. their style.

Adam and Colin offer ways of conceptualizing and proceeding with this work. Am I wrong?

WB (Jan 29th)

Brian: It certainly is a different thing to say that all films have style than that all films have a different style. You could also say all films have length, and you could probably say also that all films have content. So you're still left with the problem of saying what this style is that all films have. To say that films ARE style, that that's ALL they're made of, is a different assertion again—and again requires some definition and clarification.

I agree with you about the usefulness of having some examples. I think all three initial statements could have used some specific applications for illustration, and maybe it's a good idea to do that now. On the other hand, it only gets you a certain way down the road, since my sense is that the discussion is going to be quite different if we use Ozu as an example than if we use Rossellini—or, in some ways even more useful, a movie where the hack director's style is imperceptible from the noise of all the other hack movies around it.

BC (Jan 29th)

Bill, you make a very good point by calling me to task for playing fast and loose with definitions. They're not easy to give, but I'll work on it.

I can say, however, that I don't think "style" should be defined as "authorial style" because 1) it transforms a discussion of style (which to me means something akin to the close analysis of a film text) into a discussion of an author (function) that is ultimately less interesting than (even if it's a part of) the film; and 2) it limits how we might think about (or even see) style elements that cannot be reasonably or usefully traced to an author.

When I say "all you get is style," I mean that films aren't transparent and to get to culture, or politics, or history, or even an author involves navigating the concrete aspect of the film's style (it's color, montage, framing, story construction, story presentation, costuming, etc., etc.) whether it be conventional, authorial, artistic,

or hackwork. How we do that is not obvious, but we do it. And we do it in ways that become visible in the distinctions we make between a film by Ozu and a film by Eisenstein and a film by director X starring that kid from TV.

I think Colin's discussion of the sample may be helpful here because it suggests a way discussions of style might be developed outside of purely authorial or conventional frameworks. I'm thinking specifically of how he treats the fade to yellow clip from *Age Of Innocence*. I recently realized a similar fade to yellow appears in the opening half of *Lost Highway*. Setting these two moments side-by-side as samples seems like an interesting way to see how a particular style moment works in terms of narrative, temporality, character presentation and audience attention (all aspects mentioned in Colin's commentary on the clip). It allows us to ask what is made possible when a common technical feature of film is transformed into a figural trope? As close analysis of style, this is not primarily an examination of authorial style, even if it seems likely lead to insight into two auteurs' work (a point that might be connected to Adam's interest in design).

Am I making "style" into the means to develop a methodology of close reading? If so, is that a mistake? (A genuine question.) Am I erasing an important distinction between "style" and "form"?

Adam Rosadiuk (Jan 29th)

Bill, your question, which included a quotation from me, is:

"Design is problem solving. Ideal design responds perfectly to the practicalities of the thing existing in the world."

It is clear that in house-building, design is problem solving. It is clear that the purpose of a house is to provide an enclosed space for living or functioning in, but what is the purpose of a film? What if the design problem a moment of film style is addressing is "how do I get an 'ooh!' from the audience"?

This is a good point, and one I tend not to take seriously enough generally. This has something to do with my sense of art as being far from decorative, and in fact, having little sensitivity to or appreciation for what must have been art's origins, and what art is for most people: art as pretty things. I think it comes from

just not growing up with a lot of paintings. Art, for me, exists mainly in discourse, ideas, and in miracles of performance with raw materials: for me, weaned almost entirely on the artforms that lend themselves to narrative fiction, these raw materials are most often genre conventions, the technical possibilities of the medium, and the subtle rhetorical possibilities of an argument communicated metonymically. But let's face it—and this speaks to Brian's point about with "Film style is all you get"—we are drawn to art and film for the spectacle. For the fireworks. For the *trompe l'oeil*. For the sleight of hands. Big magic tricks. We may convince ourselves—and I think we're mostly right—that we can tell the crass-but-guiltily-pleasurable-spectacles from the crass-but-numbing spectacles, and both from the highly refined spectacle that is layer upon layer of subtext; but all-in-all this is all still Spectacle. So is that what art is, what film is: an effects generating device? Special effects by special affects?

So, Bill...we're all friends here, and you don't *have* to account for yourself, but I want to put it out there: how much is 'style', for you, about those *wowza* moments? Thus, how subjective is the study of style, and then, if we're going to talk about style, how much do we have to talk about the evolution of technology and technique?

When I'm talking about 'design' I'm talking about relegating all those wowza moments to the special effects of film. Hitchcock films are perfect examples: they seem like consummately 'designed' films: from wardrobe, to storyboards, to music, to publicity. And Hitchcock is famous for talking about playing the audience like playing an organ: push a button, get a response. This is a film as a machine. It really works; it has that energy. Hitchcock, like Welles, has a showman's—a magician's—urge in him. I then want to talk about 'something else' that is not strictly design, and isn't necessarily present in even the most perfectly designed, most technique-ly advanced film. And this 'something else' is much more sublime than perfect technique, though it is intimately related. You seem to want to get away from that, and get back to the pure experience of wowza moments, which are not ontologically different in a commercial film and an art film. Of course, knowing you, I think we'd agree that the wowza moments are much more wowza, and much more frequent, in our "short list of films" (as Brian calls them) that we harbor, and share, and that include an awful lot of canonical art films. I'd say that this short list is more than just convention, and more than just about a community of discourse.

Which comes back to finally just isolating what style

is. And that's why I think if we're going to talk about examples, we should turn back to the Style Gallery. I mean, people pointed to these moments and said "that's style". Can we go to them, forget about the finger pointing, and say, "oh, I see style there too." Can we be witnesses to these wowza accidents, and agree that we saw something pretty amazing?

WB (Jan 30th)

Brian: Yes, it is certainly possible and maybe desirable to discuss style without discussing authorial style. But I do have the instinct to think of style as coming from somewhere, whether it's from the author or from cinematic conventions or from something even broader and more diffuse like narrative tradition. I still don't quite get the notion that when we do cinematic close readings all we are talking about is style. I probably do still want to make a distinction between style and content, but then to repair that split by insisting that they both work towards the same meaning, and even that style should be subservient to content. In close reading I also want to talk about narrative types, formal strategies and theme—and it seems to me hard to encompass these categories under the word "style."

Adam: I understand very much why you want to distinguish "wowza" stylistic moments from things that are more basic to the "design" of the work. I think it's a good idea to do that, and I also think your "design" idea is a highly promising way to do that if you can resolve the question of what it is that is being designed, and how the design principles fulfill or somehow express the purpose of the work. But again, what is the purpose of a film? When you use the idea of "working", it is daring and provocative of you to take this as literally as you do, but you must be aware of how this status (which is identical to a statement about whether the moment or the film is aesthetically successful or not) is in dispute. You say it's working, I say it's not, and that's the end of the discussion, or threatens to be, because the term is referring to a subjective activity inside the viewer that is not universal. As you can see from my post to Brian, I'd prefer to piggyback style—"wowza" moments AND "design" onto some kind of meaning to which everything in the work is contributing. I am aware that this creates its own problems though, because "meaning" then becomes almost as contentious as "work" (but I'd say it's easier to have a detailed argument about).

In response to your question about how much I like “wowza” moments, I usually like them a lot if they are embedded in something I can see as meaningful. A lot of “wowza” moments in *Sunrise* and *Magnolia* fall into this category, a lot of “wowza” moments in *Metropolis* and *Kill Bill* don’t. Mainstream cinema has never been as “wowza” as it is now—never even been close. But in the action-movie/FX world, “wowza” is all there is: the purpose or meaning of “wowza” is to get people to say “wowza!”, and if you asked the filmmakers what all this “wowza” was in aid of, they literally wouldn’t understand the question. So it’s now getting a lot harder for me to be truly wowed. I am much more responsive to stylistic elements you would classify under “design.”

Colin Burnett (Jan 30th)

I’d like first to respond to the questions Bill directed at me and then (space permitting) I’ll comment on the other developments thus far.

Inevitably, all forms of analysis, as the product of a given individual who belongs to a given era, are historical. This is a given, though it is not a given that one must subscribe to historicism in order to occupy this position. Implied in my statement, however, is a distinction between exegesis and scholarship. An interpretive critic or commentator will approach a work in a manner quite different from the historian of style or scholar. This is the basic tenet of Bordwell’s argument in *Making Meaning*. Before I continue with this line of thought, I’d like to clarify that this distinction is useful only to a point—that it is not absolutely fundamental to a description of the nuances of the practice of studying a work or series of works. Stated otherwise, these are, in practice, cross-pollinating species of inquiry; often exegetes need the findings of scholars in order to offer sound interpretations of a single work and likewise scholars often use the insights and observations of exegetes to fill out their account of patterns in the history of style.

My point is this. A formal reading, as opposed to a stylistic study, is not generally motivated by a need to know how we might be able to identify a work historically. An historian of style, like a Wolfflin or a Bordwell or a Salt, tells the student of art history how he or she can situate a given artwork based on the recognition of certain salient features of the work itself. A banal example of this from sculpture is the body type and posture of the figure. This leads the historian to

consider aspects of a film that may be of little or no interest to the formal analyst. The formal analyst, for her part, is motivated by the desire to grasp the work’s meaning as a unity. Take the blue tint to the images in *Velvet Goldmine* (see Gallery). The stylist (at least the stylist of a certain persuasion) will consider the blue images from the point of view of the filters and color stock (its sensitivity and speed) and the such that made possible the effect itself and its characteristics compared to earlier blue tinting, such as that to be found in Joseph Cornell’s *Rose Hobart*. The formalist will want to read the significance of the blue images, when we see blue, when we don’t, and all this in the grand scheme of *Velvet Goldmine* itself (which may or may not lead to a consideration of the color blue in films by this director or in films of a given genre). While this meaning may not be independent of historical consideration, the exegete has little concern for how and where we might place this piece in the story of art’s history. Broadly speaking, a formal analyst wants to know what a given work can tell us about life and how a correct reading can reveal this significance. Another way of putting this distinction is to say that while those interested in form are concerned with art as a product, those interested in style are interested with process. Formal analysis is a hermeneutical activity concerned with the story and expression of a particular film; stylistic analysis is an activity that writes the story of the art itself.

For all these reasons, Bill, I think that 1) in his post from January 29th, Brian is erasing the distinction between “style” and “form” though by no means in a negative sense, because we all do it (pointing out that color fades in *Age Of Innocence* and *Lost Highway* have affinities leads one in two directions [at least]: i) to a study of the means by which the fades were made [did they require different techniques?] and how and when they were used in the films in question; and ii) the different “meanings” produced by the fades in relation to the narratives in question—the denotative and connotative significance of the effect); and 2) I cannot subscribe to the view that “style should be subservient to content” (your 2nd post from January 29th). What “content” are the staging innovations and complexities subservient to in the restaurant sequence in Tati’s *Playtime*? In the use of the sounds of a man raking during the confrontation between the Countess and the Priest in Bresson’s *Journal D’un Curé De Campagne*? In the use of post-flashing techniques in Altman’s *The Long Goodbye*? In the use of digital intermediate (DI) to adjust color timing in virtually every big-to-medium budget film that’s now made? I am not implying that one cannot interpret these stylistic choices and their effects as they appear in the

final product, but simply that their broader historical significance (and value) remains unacknowledged if all we do is programmatically force every aspect of style to serve some element of content or narrative, or, alternatively, if we dismiss segments of film or entire films for “failing” to make style serve content. These developments may not even be of interest to the most subtle of close, close film interpreters, but they are indeed part of the artistry of film and should be acknowledged.

As far as your Bresson questions go, Bill, I only have space to reply to them briefly. I believe that by now it is clear how I'd respond to the first. Bresson's style is Bressonian because of its historical placement, which is to say, because of the differences between it and the other film styles around; this must be so because style is an historical thing. I've actually been working quite closely on this issue by examining the techniques used to make Bresson's films and then seeking a means for measuring, on practical terms, the advancements in film practice made by himself and his collaborators. My answer to your second question follows from this. Let's use the example of flashing. There is evidence to suggest that cinematographer Pasqualino de Santis used post-flashing techniques in the making of *L'argent* to even out the contrast of the photography—in other words, to flatten the image. A study of this stylistic feature of this Bresson film in no way requires speculating about the “souls” of the characters.

This post is rather long, but justified, I believe. Let me end with a general observation. Style, no matter how one pitches it, seems to be inextricably tied to *value*—although as I have argued, not to “meaning.” Whether one assesses the place of a stylistic feature in relation to the whole that is a singular text, or whether one assesses the place of the same feature in the history of style, an evaluation seems to be tied to the act of pointing that feature out.

BC (Jan 31st)

First, there is a lot of good stuff in what Colin says. One thing I like is the way his discussion points out the process of making as a key difference between texts (an important but unavoidably print-based metaphor in the cinema) and film. Techniques of lighting, possibilities of film stock etc. have no analogue in language use and influence the viewed film in ways that resemble more closely something like under-painting in the visual arts.

So Colin is right to stress the importance of researching and understanding this process and its possibilities at various moments. If style becomes one way to do this, then great.

But, this does not exhaust the practical uses of the term style. These uses (or ad hoc definitions) are far from perfect but I'm not sure it's useful to throw them by the wayside by radically redefining the term down to a highly specific concern that excludes most of its typical uses. My point: we need to talk about definitions and Colin identifies a key but less often acknowledged aspect of what we perceive as style. But this is only a part of what people are pointing toward in their submissions to the Gallery. Defining the term too tightly doesn't make what exceeds Colin's definition (but is evident in the Gallery) go away.

My question back to Colin would be: How would you account for the fact that the blue in *Velvet Goldmine* connects stylistically to a series of intertexts that are traced out by the very particular interweaving of color and emotional tone and content that is every bit as much a part of the story of art as the story of color filters and film stock? You want to name this story of material the boundary between exegesis and scholarship, between hermeneutics and style analysis, but why should I buy that boundary?

BC (Feb 1st)

Or, to restate my question . . .

In the Gallery I see style used in a variety of ways. They are as follows:

Style=authorial signature
(e.g. *Solaris*, *Les 400 Coups*, *Taxi Driver*)

Style=excess or decoration
(e.g. *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Taxi Driver*)

Style=national, genre or industry norms
(e.g. *The Thing*)

Style=stylishness
(e.g. *The Royal Tenenbaums*)

Style=technique
(e.g. *Flowers Of Shanghai*, *The Age Of Innocence*)

Adam's discussion attempts a fusion of the first and fourth meanings in terms of intentionality, which connects it back to the first meaning. Bill's questions (he hasn't offered a statement) have consistently recalled us (or at least me) back to the first meaning, an initial and still important vector for discussing style in Film Studies. My discussion keeps hanging up on the partiality of all of these meanings, offering as an alternative only my sense that questions of style will be worked out film-by-film through a particular kind of engagement with the texts. (i.e. I keep offering an image of the critic's work rather than a definition of style.) Colin's definition takes up only the last meaning, bouncing it perhaps off of the third.

My question, to Colin and Adam, is what are we to make of these differences (which Bill opened this discussion by calling "if not mutually exclusive, at least incommensurable")? And to Colin, how would you account for (or what would you make of) the fact that the meaning of style that you privilege strikes me as the least important to contemporary (and much of historical) Film Studies?

CB (Feb 1st)

Intertextuality is a "technique" (though I use the term here with some reservation) for *making sense* of references in a given text or series of texts. It is therefore concerned with interpretation—with exegesis. Though it might be said that pointing out the fact that two films are related in their use of blue filters could be an instance of intertextuality, there is a key difference between those who wish to point this out in order to stress how filmmakers developed new uses for the technique and those who are interested in decoding the use of blue in a recent work (by inferring that previous uses are being referred to—consciously, unconsciously—by the recent work). In the latter case, we're talking about meaning that is carried over from one text to another. The historian of style is scarcely interested in such things. Therefore the practices overlap slightly but remain distinct because they are each motivated by a different series of questions. The use to which a given feature is put is different for the historian and for the exegete.

I want to end this post by developing an idea I posited in a previous post. This "exegesis" versus "scholarship" distinction is not an ontological one in the sense that it points to fundamental characteristics that one can use to illustrate the different states of being one is in when

engaged in them (whatever that means). It is, rather, an institutional distinction—one that is useful for the film academic in that it might make her reflect upon the bodies of knowledge that her research or interpretive findings are contributing to. No one would argue that, in writing *Film History* or his essay "Intensified Continuity" or *On the History of Film Style* that Bordwell is engaged in exegesis. Likewise, no one would argue that Parker Tyler in his essay on Chaplin and Kafka, or Susan Sontag in her essay on Bergman's *Persona* or Manny Farber in his essay on *Taxi Driver* are primarily interested in developing ways for understanding the history of style. Now, in picking these three critics, I may have shot myself in the foot in the sense that all three write in ways that, as they describe in great detail the "surfaces" and techniques of the filmmakers, is interesting for the Bordwellian historian of style. But no one would argue that their main goal is not the understanding of the work(s) in question. It is. Exegesis and Scholarship.

CB (Feb 1st)

I just finished posting my response to your initial question and then noticed your new posting.

I like the work you've done here, but can find ways to quibble with it (in ways that I believe build on what you've assembled). You say that mine is the least important to contemporary Film Studies. Now, far be it for me to take offense to such a statement, I do have to point out that a style sample can refer to authorial signature (1), national, genre or industry norms (3), and technique (5). These all would/should be of interest to the historian of style. (2) and (4) differ from the others in that they involve subjective (which is not to say, irrelevant) assessments of how any one of the features pointed out in (1), (3) and (5) can work in the context of a given film. An authorial signature (or sample of it) can be "decorative" or "stylish"; a genre norm (or sample of it) can be "excessive"; a technique (or sample of it) can be "decorative," "stylish" or "excessive." (1), (3) and (5) are processes associated with identification; (2) and (4) are processes associated with description and/or interpretation.

A question (in defense of a Bordwellian notion of style—which, as I pointed out, I am in sympathy with but which I do find a little restrictive): how can you say that "style as technique" is the least important to contemporary Film Studies when the majority of

Film Studies undergrads receive their initiation into the discipline by way of *Film Art*? “Least important”? That’s strong ... “Most resented”—yes, that fits.

Let me explain why I ask this question. I think that a large number of contributors to the Gallery would say (at least as far as I can tell from the write-ups) that they contributed moments that they thought to be “stylish.” (I am not one of them; I happen to believe that *looking* for a style moment in the context of a discussion of what is “stylish” in movies is not the same as *looking* for a style moment that would be of value to a discourse like Film Studies. We’re talking about two kinds of looking here.) I therefore think, generally speaking, that the Bordwellian notion of style is a good way to distinguish between style and “stylishness.”

BC (Feb 1st)

RE: your quibble with “least important”: you raise a good point that may indicate the source of part of the confusion over style in Film Studies. What we teach about film to undergraduates (because it is teachable) does not match what is important to or the center of Film Studies as an disciplinary discourse (but highly unteachable). I’m not sure pointing out the problem gets us very far is responding to it, however, and it certainly doesn’t change the status of *Film Art*, etc. in our disciplinary discourse.

AR (Feb 2nd)

If I may interject, let’s ask ourselves the question that started the Gallery, and what started this Forum: What are each of us talking about when we talk about style? I see style as a phenomenon, and as a phenomenon it’ll only be revealed by personal experience and conversation. We have the raw experiences. I therefore believe that we need to suss out the contours of the phenomenon, and then decide if either

- a) ‘Style’ is usefully ambiguous.
- b) ‘Style’ is un-usefully ambiguous and we either need to limit it, or we need to come up with new vocabulary words.

Either way, we have to know what ‘style’ refers to.

My entire sense of style as an interesting topic comes

precisely from its ordinary mutability. While a civilian might come up with their own technical definition, this technical definition would only be relevant to that time they gave the definition, and would not really encompass the concept entirely for them: in fact—and this is the point of the Gallery—to give a definition of something like style is probably going to take the form of an example. As it turned out, that is very tricky—rather, people want to talk about something being ‘stylish’. I think it’s important that it’s easier to talk about the concept of ‘stylishness’ than ‘style’. Most importantly, I think that when most of us talk about style—and this speaks to Colin’s interest in ‘value’—we’re talking about what we love about film. This is where I’m in complete agreement with Brian.

Sounds like a segue for a personal anecdote:

I first became conscious of film style—and I suddenly realize that it’s a big mistake that we don’t have it in the Gallery—while watching Tim Burton’s *Batman*. It was the summer of 1989. The Berlin Wall was starting to crumble, NAFTA was on the books, and a young Prez named George Bush was teaching America how to laugh again. I was twelve. I didn’t see a lot of movies as a kid, nor did I have much sense of what the big movies were. I sort of remember *Ghostbusters* being huge. And *Back To The Future*. And *Et* was always big, though basically before my time. That summer though, I was completely conscious that everyone absolutely everyone was talking about *Batman*. Kids would sit for hours and just recite scenes. When I finally saw *Batman*, near the end of its run, it was, simply, a revelation. This was the first time that I watched a movie with *awareness*. I realized that this movie didn’t *have* to be this way—someone had decided what kind of movie it would be, how it would look, work, feel. It’s important to point out that as ignorant about movies as I was, I totally got the look of the film. This is the beauty of pop culture, of Saturday morning cartoons—I’d never seen a film noir, nor a Hollywood film from 40s, or a Hammer horror film, but I understood *Batman*’s references. And I understood them as communicating something vastly more significant than the story—a story that I found dissatisfying even at 12. There was ‘something’ about the film—I wanted to watch it again to find out what. It was this experience, that drove me deeper into film, into what we study in Film Studies. When I saw *Star Wars* I wanted to read the *Star Wars* novelization. But when I saw *Batman* I wanted to find out who made it, how, why, and what it meant.

Needless to say, I think projects like Bordwell’s

'historical poetics', at their best, give us incredibly useful tools for understanding the technique of a film like *Batman*. At their worse, these sorts of 'scientific' projects of knowledge creation in the humanities are either reactionary—defanging culture studies by accusing it of violating texts—or, worse, are just afraid of ideas that require good writing to express. I hate bad interpretation as much as the next Bordwellian. But it's great interpretations that make me love to study film.

Colin's piece on "Style as Sample" I think is a great piece—and a promising clarification of how to make specific contributions to film knowledge, without making practical film knowledge the whole horizon of Film Studies. To be honest though, I still don't really understand the metaphor—and I think I'd have to wait for Colin's feature length essay to really get at the issue.

My point: Our three pieces are quite different. Brian's piece was meant to be less a 'position' piece, and more a suggestive and enticing introduction to the Gallery; my piece was meant to synthesize my interest in the technical 'design' of a film with my interest in style's 'something more'; while Colin was responding to his discovery of Goodman's 'sample' metaphor and how that might relate to Bordwell. We each imply certain positions on style, but as three pieces speaking at the concept of film style I'm not sure how fairly comparable they are. That said, I think we all agree that each of us have—through our pieces, and through the Gallery—gotten closer to the idea of film style. I think that for the remainder of this forum, we need to make headway in summarizing our realizations. Realizations about the concept of film style, and how it is used.

And you guys may balk, but I'd love to hear if you had similar encounters with film style (or style in general) as wayward youths. Film studies isn't autobiography—with apologies to Jonathan Rosenbaum—but coming to an understanding of what a concept is ordinarily (before we make it extraordinary) is a communal experience.

CB (Feb 4th)

Let me take a brief detour that I think will address a few points you both mention and demonstrate how our separate notions of style are not as incompatible as it might initially appear. This demonstration may fail, but I think it's worth a shot.

All three of us identify separate (but perhaps in some

way(s) related) notions of why style is of value to people (scholars and non-scholars alike)—so this speaks to the value issue. We each bring up contexts of value or of importance: history, beauty and overarching design or the "something else." These contexts are ones in which different people imbue style with value.

I believe that the contributors to the Gallery would be able (if not compelled) to isolate a number of underlying features that while they perhaps contribute to the "construction" (a crude term) of the experience that led them to value and then chose the moment, remained in a number of cases unaccounted for in the write-ups themselves. (This would also go for the ordinary filmgoer, albeit one with an unusually developed sense of why and how films are made. It certainly applies to Jerry White's *Solaris* moment, which is important for what I've said above and will say below.) These features would be the parts that make up the style moments, which incidentally I take to be "wholes" that are greater than the sum of their parts (or Adam's "something else"). But these features retain their separateness—to a degree—as observable, empirically verifiable parts. The features are what I call "samples;" samples that are insufficient on their own to explain away the beauty or design or form of the scene because they merely reveal aspects of themselves. A stylistic feature in this sense might be said to be selfabsorbed—drawing attention to itself because of what it is. Almost out of spite or, conversely, of willing engagement, or, to offer a third possibility, out of some fundamental need to make meaning of this selfabsorption, this gravitational pull, this tendency on the part of the feature to try to seduce the viewer with a salacious wink, we place (another crude term because it implies intentionality) a stylistic feature or a series of them into wider contexts of significance; in this way a feature (or sample) might be said to have two kinds of value: intrinsic and extrinsic. What does this mean, you might ask? Well, let's try to work this out.

The extrinsic value of a sample is the place of the part in the whole—its role; what it contributes to the feeling we get in one of those great style moments; that which we have trouble qualifying and quantifying. As far as intrinsic value goes, in talking about it, I don't think that I'm saying that Goodman or Bordwell or Salt or Burch decodes the riddle of the unqualifiable moment by reducing it (in the spirit of "scientism") to mere totalities (as opposed to wholes) and then by placing the real value in the lap of the features or parts that pass our litmus paper tests for "style." I think we can maintain the extrinsic value (in all its forms: historical, aesthetic, or

that which we call “stylish” or “something more”) even as we talk about and develop means for refining our vocabularies to describe the intrinsic value of features on their own. Otherwise put, I really do think that we’re all playing for the same team—I really do. In fact, Brian, I’d say that these ‘means’ help us develop appreciation for the beauty of the features at both levels—macro and micro. As a kind of preface to my own foray into anecdote, I want to mention that my concern for developing an appreciation of the micro level beauty of a feature or sample is entirely motivated by a deep desire—a drive—to refine and continue to refine my appreciation for macro-level beauty, to develop a more “serious” (*pace* Sontag) sensibility for beauty in film, so that I expressly don’t miss out on the “something more” to be detected in all films or in films of all shapes and sizes. As recently as two years ago, I’d never have been able to see the beauty—micro-level beauty, beauty of the sample or feature—in either unremarkable and unsuccessful films like *Kill Bill*, Disney’s *Black Hole*, *8 Femmes*, *Millennium Mambo*, Mamoulian’s *Dr. Jeckyll And Mr. Hyde* and Frankenheimer’s *The Train*. What these each lack in terms of “success” or macro-level beauty they make up for with a wide range of micro-level, sample beauty. Moreover, I’d never have been able to discover layers of significance (which is not to say “meaning”) in certain Bresson films, or in *Persona* or *Flowers Of Shanghai* or *Age Of Innocence* (each of which exudes macro-level beauty). This really is about finding new ways to be (soberly) responsive to the works I encounter.

Now, the anecdote. Adam first noticed style with the release of *Batman*? I can’t put a precise date on my own “awareness” of asking questions about the why, how, and what; it came slowly as I read critics. I am in Film Studies solely due to my interest in the sensibilities that are attracted to the movies, to my desire to figure out these sensibilities, and to emulate the best parts and jettison the problematic parts—in a word, to develop a sophisticated taste for film. Taste as I see it cannot be reduced to a method or set of rules or a context or a series of guidelines; taste is intuitive, which is not to say that it is not a form of knowledge. It is; it’s a form of user’s knowledge—and filmgoers are users. One particular area of fascination for me is the view—the judgment, or species of judgment—that states that in order for a work of art to be successful, all the parts must fit—must be “necessary” in the eyes of the reader/viewer/listener. In film, this view (and we’re all familiar with it) contends that style must mirror content (which we can take to mean “plot”) or else all those elements that don’t fit are mere “stylization.” (This is

Sontag’s take.)

This view is attractive, very attractive. While I can’t locate when I became aware of style, I can say when I wanted to enter Film Studies, which may be associated to my discovery of style’s importance. The very first book I ordered online was in 1998 and it was Mario Falsetto’s *Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*. That one passage in which he reads the ending of 2001 (pp. 111-118) inspired me instantaneously to consider a career as a film academic. Falsetto makes everything in that scene “fit.” Here, plotting has no significance, no meaning, without form (and style).

Critics with sophisticated taste, from Ferguson to Farber to Sontag (I’m sure there are others), however, have all considered or tinkered with the idea that a stylistic feature need not be plot motivated in order to be of value, in order to “fit.” This is what, to make a long story short (too late!), led me to Burch and Bordwell and Goodman. This not only opens up new opportunities for research in academia, but leads directly to a very rich array of film experiences that would not have otherwise been available to me. I’m currently, for instance, reading back issues of *Cinefex*. People seem to have a sense of when special effects work and when they don’t, but what do the experts, the technicians themselves, say about this? Surely there are other ways of talking about CGI effects than merely to say “that looks real” or “that looks fake.” If I can learn to see the way they see, to talk the way they talk, then my film experiences will be all that more rich. Then I’ll be able to see the intrinsic value of the visual effects sample from a given film that tends to be dismissed by critics as a general failure, which will enrich my broader estimations of value, of beauty.

The forum is continued in Part 2.