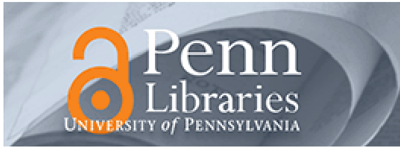

Studies in Visual Communication

Volume 11
Issue 4 *Fall 1985*

Article 2

1985

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Recommended Citation

Gross, L. (1985). Life vs. Art: The Interpretation of Visual Narratives. *11* (4), 2-11. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol11/iss4/2

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Life vs. Art: The Interpretation of Visual Narratives

Larry Gross

In 1974 Sol Worth and I published a paper, "Symbolic Strategies," which presented the outline of a theory of interpretation—the assignment of meaning to objects and events. The questions we focused on in developing that theory centered on the peculiar properties of visual images. Although our paper addressed the general issue of how humans assign meaning, in retrospect it is clear that we were primarily concerned with visual images in general, and film or photographic images in particular. The basic question that we were asking might be put this way: What can we know from these images, and how can we know it? (Worth and Gross 1974).

Interpretive Strategies

We felt that the first step toward an answer was to draw two basic distinctions in describing interpretive processes. We began by making a distinction between those objects and events that do, and those that do not, evoke the use of any strategy to determine their meaning. Most of the objects and events that we encounter in life are interpreted "transparently," in the sense that we "know what they mean" without conscious awareness of any interpretive activity. We generally respond to their presence (or absence) in a way that indicates (analytically) that a process of tacit interpretation has occurred: our behavior has been affected in some fashion by the presence (or absence) of some object/event; we simply have not needed to "think about it." Such tacit interpretations range from our "unthinkingly" extending our hand to open a closed door to our ability to drive a car along a familiar route while absorbed in conversation or reverie.

Worth and I used the term *nonsign-events* to identify the events that we ignore, or code "transparently." The objects and events that do evoke an interpretive process, we called *sign-events*. However, we continued, these are not predetermined or fixed classes. Any event, depending on its context and the context of the observer, may be assigned sign value. By the same token, any event may be disregarded and not treated as a sign.

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This article was prepared as a paper for the U.S.-Hungarian Conference on Social Perception and Interpretation of Interaction in Literature. It was delivered in Budapest, at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in September 1983.

The purpose of this first distinction, therefore, was not to isolate two kinds of objects and events in the world, but to distinguish two ways in which we respond to objects/events (or their absence). Having made this distinction, we turned to the ways in which sign-events are interpreted. Our second distinction was between those sign-events we called *natural* and those we called *symbolic*.

Natural events, as we used the term, are those that we interpret in terms of our knowledge (or belief) about the conditions that caused their occurrence (or nonoccurrence). The meaning of these events for us can be said to derive precisely from those existential conditions. The events are informative about the stable or transient conditions of the physical, biological, or social forces that determined their existence and configuration. The important point here is that, while we assign meanings to such events on the basis of our knowledge (or belief) about the forces that caused them to exist, we do not see them as having been caused (to any important degree) *in order* to convey those meanings to *us*. Therefore, while they inform us about those factors that we assume have caused their occurrence, we do not sense a communicative intent behind them—at least, not an intent to communicate to us as observers.

Natural events may be produced by either human or nonhuman agency. However, the signness of a natural event exists only and solely because, within some context, human beings treat the event as a sign. If I observe a tree bending in the wind, my knowledge of meteorology may lead me to interpret it as a sign of a coming storm; my interpretation would be based on my knowledge of the forces that caused the event to occur.

Similarly, I may decide that a person I observe on the street is a former member of the armed forces because I notice that he has very short hair, very erect posture, and walks with a slight limp. In this case I would be basing my interpretation on stereotypic knowledge of the factors that might result in this configuration. Of course, I could be mistaken. The point is that I would be treating the features I attended to as signs that were informative about stable and/or transient attributes of the person I observe and of their interactions with the situation in which I observe that person.

In contrast, symbolic events are those we assume were *intended* to communicate something to *us*. Further, we assume that these events are articulated by their "author" in accordance with a shared system of rules of implication and inference. That is, they are determined not by physical or psychological "laws" but by semiotic conventions. To assess a sign-event as symbolic is to see it as a "message" intended by its "author" to imply meaning(s) that can be inferred by those who share the appropriate code.

If I were to observe, for example, that the man I saw on the street, in addition to having a crew cut, erect posture, and a slight limp, wore a lapel pin that read "V.F.W." (Veterans of Foreign Wars), I could then draw the inference that he was, in fact, a veteran and, moreover, that he was communicating rather than merely manifesting this attribute (I leave aside the obvious possibility of deception).

Worth and I called the interpretation of natural events *attribution* and the interpretation of symbolic events *inference*. The former term was adapted from the area of attribution theory within the field of social psychology. Originally developed by Fritz Heider in the 1940s and revived in the 1960s by Harold Kelley (1967) and others, attribution theory focuses on the process by which individuals interpret events "as being caused by particular parts of the environment" (Heider 1958:297). However, our use of the term attribution as a label for the interpretation of natural events is narrower than that used in social psychology because we limited it to those interpretations that do not assume authorial intention.

Although I have been speaking as though natural and symbolic events could easily be distinguished from one another, we were aware that this is not always the case and were particularly interested in those events not obviously and easily defined as natural or as symbolic. We were interested, that is, in what we termed ambiguous-meaning situations.

Most of the time there is little difficulty in deciding whether an object or event that we notice is natural or symbolic. Most people who observe the wind bending a tree outside their window and decide to take an umbrella when they go out would not think that the wind or the tree was "telling" them that it might rain. Similarly, if we meet someone who speaks our native language with a distinct accent, we may attribute foreign origin to the person but are unlikely to decide that the accent was intended to communicate the speaker's origin; however, if we find out that the speaker migrated to our country many years before, as a young child, we may wonder about that assessment.

When we encounter a symbolic event, on the other hand, we are likely to see it as intentionally communicative. We usually have little difficulty recognizing such events as communications addressed to us as individuals or as members of a group, provided that we know the code.

One further, important clarification. We were focusing on the perspective of the person who observes the sign-event and interprets it. A sign-event is communicative (in this sense) *only* if it is taken as having been formed (to an important degree) with the intention of telling something to the *observer*. That is, if the observer is watching two people converse and knows that they are unaware that they are being observed, their conversation, while a communicative event for *them,* is a natural event for the observer. It was not intended to tell the observer anything, so it can only be seen as informative about the speakers' stable and/or transient characteristics as revealed in that situation. It is also very important to note that no behavior occurring in public can be taken as totally noncommunicative. For example, certain aspects of the observed event, such as the participants' clothing or hairstyle, might be assessed as being "messages" addressed not just to the other participant but to the "public" at large; these aspects might then be assessed as symbolic vis à vis our observer as a member of that public. All public behavior, in this sense, no matter how noncommunicative in intent (as felt by the actor or assumed by an observer), can be seen as taking place within a framework of symbolic codes governing potentially observable behavior (many of which have been elucidated at length by Erving Goffman).

Visual Mediation

With all of these concepts in mind, we turn to the events we encounter, not through observation, but through photographs or film. Here we find the situation to be more complex, and more interesting. The point of the exercise Sol Worth and I were engaged in, really, was to develop a way of dealing with the interpretation of visually mediated narratives (although mediation also occurs through words and paintings, and so forth, film mediation is the most ambiguously "transparent," therefore the most interesting case).

In our 1974 paper, we made the suggestion (supported by empirical studies) that there is a learning process by which we come to know how to interpret symbolic events such as films. At the simplest level, we merely recognize the existence of persons, objects, and events in the film and make attributions about them based on our stereotypic knowledge of such things in real life. With somewhat more sophistication, we can see relationships between objects and events that are contiguous in time or space: they go together. The crucial step, next, is to see this contiguity as the result of an intention to tell us something—to see it as a sequence or pattern that is ordered for the purpose of implying meaning rather than contiguity to more than one sign-event and having the property of conveying meaning through the order itself as well as through elements in that order.

The final stage of this hierarchical process occurs when we recognize the structure of a sign-event; that is, we become aware of the relations between noncontiguous elements and their implicative possibilities: the beginning and end of a story, variations on a theme, prosodic patterns, and so forth.

When we witness events through the mediation of film, then, the interpretive strategy we adopt will depend upon whether we think the events occurred "naturally" in front of the camera or were made to happen by an "author" who wanted to tell us a story. Between these two "extremes" there are numerous possible assumptions we might make about the origins of the mediated events we encounter. Our knowledge of the mechanics, conventions, and genres of filmmaking will set the limits within which our assessment of a particular set of events will occur, and upon which our interpretation and response will depend.

Table 1 will help us distinguish among the most prominent types of filmic mediation. The upper part of the table summarizes the distinction between directly observed events that in our judgment are not intended to communicate to us, as observers, and those cases in which we do believe that the actor/author(s) did intend to "tell" *us* something, through the articulation of conventional means of signification. The lower part of the table offers a parallel model of the assessment and interpretation of mediated events, but in these instances it becomes necessary to include as a conditioner of our assessment and subsequent interpretation our knowledge (belief) about the mechanics and circumstances of the mediation itself.

Before proceeding to discuss the levels of mediation outlined in Table 1, it might be useful to note that we are accustomed to taking into account other forms of mediation than the mechanical ones involved in film, photography, television, and so on. In the simplest sense, any account of events we did not observe ourselves involves the mediation of a witness. Our dependence upon the verbal mediation of events we did not observe is a foundation of human culture, and we are all accustomed to "seeing through" verbal (and gestural) accounts to the extent of feeling that we know about the form and meaning of much that we will never know directly. Our legal system provides one of the most formal manifestations of our faith in the veracity of verbal mediation: we are willing as a culture to decide the fate of accused persons by depending upon the ability of eyewitnesses to convey through words to others who were not present "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" about events they observed.

Similarly, the institution of journalism derives much of its legitimacy from our willingness to grant to the written or spoken account a degree of transparency that, while easily exposed as a genre of narrative verisimilitude no less conventional than fiction, nonetheless gives us the illusion of knowing "the way it is."

In literature the dominant Western narrative conventions are those of realism and psychologically grounded naturalism. By the end of the nineteenth century readers were accustomed to stories that "informed" them about the ways of the world, and the constancies and vagaries of human nature, by giving them, in Zola's phrase, a "slice of life" as it is really lived.

Table 1

The Interpretation of Sign Events from the Perspective of an Observer

	Observer's Assessment	Status of Event	Interpretive Strategy
Directly observed	Not intentionally communicative	Natural—informative	Attributions about "actors"
	Intentionally communicative	Symbolic—communicative	Inferences about intended meanings
Mediated	"Invisible mediation" Not intentionally communicative	Natural—informative	Attributions about "actors" Inferences about mediator's intentions in recording, editing, exhibiting
	"Unobtrusive mediation" Mostly not intentionally communicative	Natural/symbolic Informative/communicative	Attributions + inferences about "actors" Inferences about mediator's intentions in recording, editing, exhibiting
	"Media events" quasi-intentionally communicative	Natural/symbolic Informative/communicative	Attributions + inferences about "actors" Inferences about mediator's intentions in recording, editing, exhibiting
	Scripted, staged fictional	Symbolic/natural Communicative/informative	Inferences about intended meanings Attributions about author/actors' intentions and abilities (try/can)

Film and television are placed, almost entirely, squarely within this realistic tradition. However contrived their plots may be, their stories appear to take place against a backdrop of the real world. These visual narratives seem to enjoy a privileged status as "objective" representations, often supported by editing and other structural conventions, which give them a persuasive power beyond that of written narrative or live theater. To a marked degree the inherent verisimilitude of film derives from our beliefs about the nature of the technology of photography and film and our generally limited understanding of the mechanisms of filmmaking.

Film Forms

The levels of mediation in Table 1 reflect some of the most familiar genres of filmmaking and can thus be used as a means of illustrating the interpretive strategies with which we assign meanings to filmed events. When we are shown events recorded on film, we need to decide whether they were (among other possibilities) (1) "captured candidly" as they unfolded naturally in front of the camera, with the "actors"—those whose actions we observe—seeming not to know they were being filmed; (2) photographed unobtrusively, so that, although the "actors" knew about it, the filming was done in such a way that they "almost forgot" they were being filmed; (3) filmed "live" as they unfolded in front of, and to a large degree for the sake of, the camera; or (4) scripted, staged, and directed by an "author" working with actors.

If we settle on the first alternative, we are most likely to feel justified in making attributions about the persons in the film (their characteristics, their feelings, their relationships, etc.). We may feel that we are essentially in the position of an unobtrusive, possibly invisible observer of the actual facts, and possessed of most of the information that would be available to such an observer (this feeling would be greatest when viewing sound/color film), watching people "caught in the act of being themselves."

There are of course relatively few occasions on which "invisible" cameras record the behavior of "actors" who are aware that they are being filmed. Among the most typical examples of such recordings are the films taken by ceiling-mounted cameras in banks, department stores, and gambling casinos. Although many of those who enter these establishments presumably are aware that they are being filmed, it is probably safe to say that almost no one who does not have a "professional" interest in the practice (from either side of the law) would take the presence of the cameras into account and modify his or her behavior accordingly. In other words, the camera—and the viewer of the film—is in the position of an observer of events that can be assumed not to have been shaped by any intention of communicating to the observer; that is, natural events that can be informative about the attributes of the "actors."

But the viewer of such a film is not in exactly the same position as the camera that recorded the events; there are other factors in the interpretive equation. If we are shown a length of film taken with an "invisible" camera, while we might reasonably view the behavior of the "actors" as unintentionally informative, we can have no such confidence about the behavior of the mediator. That is, we have reasons to wonder why (1) the film was shot, (2) these particular segments were selected, and (3) they are being shown to us. Even taking an example such as the camera in a bank, where we readily understand why the film was shot, and do not assume that anyone intended to "tell" us anything through the film (other than the identity of a bank robber, should one appear), we are still likely to wonder why *this* particular segment was edited out and why it is being shown *to us*. In other words, while we may believe that people may act completely "naturally" in front of an "invisible" camera, we also know that intentional choices govern the making, editing, and exhibiting of *any* film.

Documentary Styles

We do not often encounter films that fit the exacting criteria of "invisible" mediation and "actors" who are unaware of being filmed. Much more common are films made by visible but unobtrusive filmmakers (camera operators often accompanied by sound recorders), who attempt to fade into the background and thus minimize the impact of their presence. In such situations we will be less confident in making attributions about the "actors" than in the case of "invisible" mediation, since we will feel that the behavior we observe was somewhat constrained by the subjects' knowledge that they were being filmed; that is, their behavior may be less informative because we know it is at least in part "messageful." The "actors" must be presumed to be controlling their "presentation" to the filmmakers (and thus to the viewer of the film) through choices of commission and omission that reflect communicative intent.

The typical practice of documentary filmmakers, particularly in the "direct cinema"/*cinéma vérité* tradition (see Barnouw 1983, for a discussion of these related schools of filmmaking), rests on the belief that "actors" who have become accustomed to the presence of the camera will revert to a state of relatively natural behavior and simply "be themselves." In fact, it has even been suggested that "the presence of the camera [makes] people act in ways truer to their nature than might otherwise be the case" (ibid.: 253).

A pioneer of direct cinema, Robert Drew, described the arrangements for his 1960 film, *Primary:*

> I settled on a young senator, John F. Kennedy, running for President in a Wisconsin primary against another senator, Hubert Humphrey. I told both Senators that for this new form of reporting to work we would have to live with them from morning to night, shooting anything we wanted to shoot, day after day.
>
> They could not know or care when we were shooting, and that was the only way we could capture a true picture of the story. When Kennedy raised an eyebrow I said, "Trust us or it cannot be done." Kennedy agreed. Humphrey agreed. [Drew 1982:19]

This account illuminates several important components of documentary film practice, which are described as follows by video documentarian Julie Gustafson:

> . . . (W)e spend as much time as possible with our subjects so that they will feel as comfortable as possible with us during the taping period. Although we recognize the influence of our presence, we never interfere in the natural flow of events by, for example, asking the subjects to do things over again for the camera. . . .
>
> Finally, to create a powerful and attractive story, we use conventional dramatic techniques of filmmakers and playwrights to finally structure our program to draw our audience in. We structure our shooting around strong individuals and clear action. We also, in editing, use the classic methods of dramatic introduction, exposition of the problem, and denouement. [Gustafson 1982:63ff.]

Gustafson's approach to documentary demonstrates the mixture of presumably natural behavior on the part of "actors" and the obviously communicative intentions of the filmmakers in choosing what to film and how to edit and structure the resulting narrative. Clearly, it will be appropriate to regard the final product as a story we are being told by the filmmakers, based to an indeterminate degree upon the "reality" of the participants' dispositions, motivations, and circumstances. However unobtrusive and sincere the filmmakers may be in their attempt to capture the way things were, we are faced with a narrative constructed within the conventions of dramatic realism.

Some documentary filmmakers respond to the inevitability of participants' "reactance" and their own use of narrative conventions by including "reflexive" devices in order to alert the audience to the fact that they are watching events that are to some degree "unnatural." Gustafson again:

> A . . . distancing device is to include glimpses of the mechanics of the shooting process in the final work, a practice derived from the techniques of both *cinéma vérité* and American direct cinema. We may tape ourselves setting up the lights and thereby see the effects of our presence on the subject's life. We also include shots of the microphone or other equipment so that the viewer occasionally sees the complete reality of the scene. [ibid.: 64]

Other styles of documentary filmmaking avoid the inclusion of explicit reflexive signals and even encourage the participants to collude in maintaining the illusion of invisible mediation. The film *Salesman* by the Maysles brothers can serve as an illustration. Barnouw describes the making of the film:

> The main characters of *Salesman* were four door-to-door Bible salesmen. The principle focus came to center on one—Paul. With approval of the company they represented, the Maysles brothers accompanied them on their selling efforts. The salesmen obtained names of potential customers at community churches. At the time of the home calls, the Maysles sometimes started filming as the salesman knocked. They would shoot and record the opening talk at the front door. Then the salesman would introduce the Maysles, and one of them would explain: "We're doing a human interest story about this gentleman and his three colleagues. And we'd like to film his presentation." (The word "sell" was not used.) Usually the reply would be: "Oh, a human interest story. OK, come in." Very few people declined to be filmed.
>
> Once the Maysles were inside, there was seldom an obstacle to continued filming. Since the salesman was really performing, it was easy for the Maysles to become relatively invisible. Afterwards they would ask the customer to sign a release. Only one refused. [Barnouw 1983: 241]

The film does not, however, include any scenes in which potential customers seem to be aware of the presence of the filmmakers—even when they first answer the door and are confronted with a salesman accompanied by a cameraman and a soundman—and several scenes suggest that the Maysles induced the customers to "reenact" their behavior, as the invitation to the salesman to enter the customer's home is sometimes shot over the customer's shoulder from inside the house. In other words, participants who have not had the opportunity to become accustomed to the presence of the film crew (as stipulated by practitioners of direct cinema) are nonetheless encouraged to "role-play" their "natural" behavior in front of the camera. The basic rule of such filmmaking is to discourage the participants from looking at the camera or speaking to the filmmakers, and to edit out any instances in which they do so.

An interesting exception to this "rule" of documentary filmmaking is the genre of "personal" documentary (often autobiographical, usually family-centered), in which the filmmaker is a major participant in the

real-life events being depicted. A good example is Ira Wohl's *Best Boy,* a film about the filmmaker's retarded cousin in which Wohl's relationship to the participants is a major concern of the film, and in which the "actors" frequently are shown to be interacting with the director and the film crew. Such films might be seen as "professional home movies," in which private lives are presented to public audiences.

Conversely, "amateur home movies" might be categorized as a special genre of documentary filmmaking aimed at private audiences; in them participants are often encouraged to role-play "naturally" in front of the camera. However, as Chalfen (1975) has shown, home movie "actors" rarely obey the injunction not to look into the camera. Instructive manuals on home-movie-making often prescribe strategies much like those adopted by direct cinema documentarians:

> To capture them un-self-conscious and relatively uninhibited, your best bet is to plan your shooting for occasions when your intended subjects are engrossed in some sort of activity. [Quoted in Chalfen 1975: 92]

But Chalfen's analysis of actual home movies revealed a different pattern:

> (1) There is a lot of waving at the camera . . . (2) Very frequently one sees people, especially children, walking directly toward the camera, sometimes directly into the lens . . . (3) There is an extraordinarily large amount of staring into the lens of the camera . . . (4) People will strike a pose or present a "camera-face" for an operating movie camera. [ibid.: 98]

Media Events

While documentary filmmakers tend to focus on dramatic moments in the lives of their subjects, and home-movie-makers are drawn to "special" occasions (holidays, birthday parties, vacations), none of these is properly seen as having occurred *in order to be filmed.* Media events can be described, conversely, as "natural performances" that occur in the real world in large part, if not entirely, in order to be seen (simultaneously or subsequently) by viewers who are not present at the event.

The most frequently seen examples of media events are those produced by individuals and groups engaged in political activities. Those who are in established positions that confer on them the power to command media attention will use conventional forms such as ceremonial events, press conferences, and speeches to reach audiences far beyond those assembled in front of them. Often they will engage in public activities—touring factories, talking on street corners—primarily to attract media attention and gain audience exposure. Those not blessed with "official" status are usually required to engage in "unofficial" but equally conventional means of obtaining such attention: marches, demonstrations, civil disobedience, and so forth. In all of these acts the "actors" are primarily motivated to convey messages to audiences that will only observe the event *if* it is transmitted, and will only know it *as* it is shown to them.

Political ads on American television represent a highly evolved genre of seemingly naturalistic media events in which candidates are filmed on location, in live interaction with "real" people. Many hours of film may yield just the right thirty or sixty seconds of image-enhancing "character revelation."

Fictional Film

It may be only a short step, in many respects, from media events to staged, scripted, truly fictional narratives, but the distance between these levels is significant. For when we are dealing with the interpretation of events that have been "authored" as well as mediated, we have to recognize a different set of opportunities, constraints, and conventions from those we take into account in the case of more or less natural events.

The interpretation of fictional narratives calls upon our knowledge of dramatic conventions. These conventions may be nearly the same as those we use in interpreting documentary narratives (and consequently might lead us to similar interpretations), and this is not surprising. We have seen that documentary filmmakers utilize dramatic conventions drawn from fictional genres. It is equally true that naturalistic conventions in fiction aim precisely at evoking attributional stereotypes in order to convey "lifelikeness" to characters and situations. Culler describes the operation of naturalistic fiction, which grounds its conventions in such attributional stereotypes (although he speaks of novels, the point applies at least as well to film):

> Citing this general social discourse is a way of grounding a work in reality, of establishing a relationship between words and world which serves as a guarantee of intelligibility; but more important are the interpretive operations which it permits. When a character in a novel performs an action, the reader can give it a meaning by drawing upon this fund of human knowledge which establishes connections between action and motive, behavior and personality. Naturalization proceeds on the assumption that action is intelligible, and cultural codes specify the forms of intelligibility. [Culler 1975: 142ff.]

However, the interpretations need not be the same; fiction is not invariably faithful to the naturalism of "general social discourse." We may "know" that the cowboy in the black hat is the villain without also believing that anyone we see in real life wearing a black hat is a bad guy.

> The function of genre conventions is essentially to establish a contract between writer and reader so as to make certain relevant expectations operative and thus to permit both compliance with and deviation from accepted modes of intelligibility. [ibid.: 147]

The parallel between written and visual narratives should not be extended too far; there are significant ways in which film and video must be distinguished from stories we read in books and even from those we see acted onstage. Although there are many important differences among these media, I am here concerned with the fact that films invariably present us with a wealth of potential sign events that we are more likely to see as natural than as symbolic. Image/sound recording presents us with "segments of reality" that include many elements which are not reasonably taken as having been created or articulated by the author(s) for the purpose of conveying meanings to us, but which are taken to be, simply, real. Although there are striking examples of films that utilize unmistakably artificial sets—I am thinking particularly of early, stagey films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Metropolis*—the vast majority of fiction films anchor their verisimilitude in the appearance of real-world settings.

This apparently inescapable aspect of film—the camera throws a net which indiscriminately gathers whatever is before it (or so many viewers believe)—can be discerned in a filmic form of the "general social discourse" Culler describes. In a revealingly naive example of inappropriately attributional interpretation, film critic Roger Angell congratulates the makers of *Kramer vs. Kramer* for their attention to naturalistic detail:

> There are a great many New York vistas and street corners and storefronts in "Kramer vs. Kramer," but instead of our getting that intrusive little thrill of participation we usually feel when we spot something familiar in a movie, we are more subtly and deeply satisfied here, because the places help us know the people in the movie—people we have come to care about. When Billy Kramer cuts himself badly in an accident in a Central Park playground, I instantly thought, What's the nearest hospital—Lenox Hill? Take him to Lenox Hill! And Ted Kramer sweeps the boy into his arms and runs to Lenox Hill Hospital. [Angell 1979: 81]

Although I presume Angell is sophisticated enough about film not to have called out advice to characters on the screen, neither he, nor presumably his editor at *The New Yorker*, realized that the filmmakers would hardly have been directing their work at an audience of upper East Side Manhattan residents who could properly appreciate their skill at "Getting Things Right," as Angell's review is titled.

It is quite possible, of course, that the authors of *Kramer vs. Kramer* were attempting to achieve the sort of detailed verisimilitude Angell so admired. But whether or not they consciously intended to do this, the response to their film evokes the echoes of debates over the nature and scope of realism and naturalism that raged throughout much of the nineteenth century. Although the authors of realistic and naturalistic novels were frequently accused of attempting to mirror the world unselectively, the accusations were bitterly denied.

> A contemptible reproach which they heap upon us naturalistic writers is the desire to be simply photographic. We have in vain declared that we admit the necessity of an artist's possessing an individual temperament and a personal expression; they continue to reply to us with these imbecile arguments about the impossibility of being strictly true, about the necessity of arranging facts to produce a work of art of any kind. . . . We start, indeed, from the true facts, which are our indestructible basis; but to show the mechanism of these facts it is necessary for us to produce and direct the phenomena; this is our share of invention, here is the genius in the book. [Zola 1880]

In his book *What Is Art?,* Tolstoy criticizes the sort of imitation Angell admires:

> The essence of this method consists in rendering the details which accompany that which is described or represented. In the literary art this method consists in describing, down to the minutest details, the appearance, faces, garments, gestures, sounds, apartments of the acting persons, with all those incidents which occur in life. . . . It is just as strange to value the production of art by the degree of its realism and truthfulness of details communicated, as it is to judge the nutritive value of food by its appearance. [Tolstoy 1897]

In defending themselves against the charge of indiscriminate imitation Zola and other novelists were concerned to distinguish the craft of realistic writing from the "mechanical" naturalism of photography. The writer, de Maupassant argues, recognizes the necessity of selection and composition; thus,

> (T)he realist, if he is an artist, will seek to give us not a banal photographic representation of life, but a vision of it that is more vivid and more compellingly truthful than even reality itself. [de Maupassant 1888]

Photography itself, however, was less easily exonerated from the accusation of excessively exhaustive realism. In his famous review of the Salon in 1859, in which photographs were first admitted to the exalted company of officially sanctioned art, Baudelaire denounced the public for its acceptance of photography:

> . . . (T)he current credo of the sophisticated public, . . . is this: "I believe in nature and I believe only in nature. . . . I believe that art is and cannot be other than the exact reproduction of nature. . . . Thus the industry that could give us a result identical with nature would be the absolute form of art." A vengeful God has granted the wishes of this multitude. Daguerre was his messiah. And now the public says to itself: "Since photography gives us all the guarantee of exactitude that we could wish (they believe that, the idiots!), then photography and art are the same thing." [Baudelaire 1859]

Interpretation and Aesthetic Evaluation

As this discussion begins to indicate, the "mechanical naturalism" of film not only influences our interpretation of the narrative but also has consequences for aesthetic appreciation and evaluation. Aesthetic evaluation is greatly influenced by the audience's assessment of the skill and control exerted by the creator(s) over the medium. That is, we appreciate those elements of a work that manifest the artist's successful realization of intentions (see Gross 1973 for a fuller discussion of the relation between competence and aesthetic appreciation). When we encounter elements of a work that deviate from the conventional, we often try to determine whether the deviation results from a successful intention to do something unconventional (and we then will ask whether the innovation is aesthetically pleasing) or whether it reflects the artist's failure to achieve the conventional (in which case we are unlikely to be favorably disposed toward the artist and/or the particular element).

This process of assessment and evaluation parallels the attributional analysis Heider ascribed to the "naive psychology of action":

> . . . (C)an and try are the conditions of action. Thus, our reactions will be different according to whether we think a person failed primarily because he lacked adequate ability or primarily because he did not want to carry out the action. [Heider 1958: 123]

The interpretation and aesthetic evaluation of film narratives thus involve attributions about the authors that consist of our assessment of their intentions and their ability to realize those intentions. But, as I have suggested, the nature of the medium creates particular complexities and ambiguities for such assessments. Because the "raw material" of film includes real people and, often, segments of the real world captured on film, we are less able to determine the boundaries of the artists' control and thus the degree of their aesthetic accountability. This point can be illustrated in the case of actors as well as "authors." Again, a somewhat naive film critic gives us an example; this time it concerns Peter Bogdanovich's film version of *Daisy Miller*:

> I knew that I'd been moved by the film, disarmed by its surprising wit and, particularly, that I'd admired Cybill Shepherd's Daisy. But for all that, I could not honestly tell whether or not Cybill Shepherd could *act*. What she had done in the film to embody Daisy's ingenuousness and enthusiasm had seemed so unconscious, even accidental, that I could with no confidence decide whether I had been responding to Cybill Shepherd's characterization of Daisy's gaucheness or simply to Cybill Shepherd's own gaucheness as an actress.
>
> Was Miss Shepherd a thoughtful performer or merely a shrewdly-selected actress caught, held and defined by a director's camera-eye? . . . We are left not knowing whether she is in control of her performance, whether she knows what she is doing. [Kareda 1974]

When viewing documentaries, we often are worried that the participants' "naturalness" has been contaminated by their desire to present a particular *persona* to the camera. In fictional films, the opposite dilemma faces the viewer who fears that the *persona* depicted may reflect the actor's "real" self rather than a crafted characterization. This dilemma is confounded by the commercial practice of "type casting," in which actors are repeatedly cast in roles that call for similar attributes, thus depriving audiences of the benefit of "control comparisons" across films.

The evaluation of film directors' skill also involves our notions of which elements in the work are attributable to the filmmaker and of the extent of the filmmaker's accountability for all the elements in the film. As we have seen, Peter Bogdanovich may receive credit for choosing an actress who "naturally" embodies the personality required for the character of Daisy Miller, but only, presumably, if we do not give Cybill Shepherd credit for skillful acting. Because films are so often shot on location they tend to include parts of the real world as background. Does the director deserve credit for the scenery? Does John Ford deserve congratulations for the beauty of Monument Valley, the backdrop for many of his westerns, or merely for having chosen the location and photographed it so

dramatically? Reality, in other words, may become an aesthetic component of film art beyond the conventional level of "general social discourse."

The issue of authorial accountability can be briefly illustrated by the example of color. As color came to replace black-and-white as the standard for films, audiences learned to expect and accept it as "truer to life" and thus as part of the "natural background." In this sense color is rarely a "sign element" of film, and directors are not given credit for the successful achievement of transparently realistic color. There are instances, however, in which color has been used as a semiotic component in film. One of the earliest, and still best, examples is the *Wizard of Oz* (directed by Victor Fleming, 1939), in which the opening and closing scenes in Kansas are in drab black-and-white and the central portions of the film—the Land of Oz, with its Yellow Brick Road and Emerald City—are in Glorious Color. The dramatic impact of this symbolic device must have been particularly impressive for audiences as yet unfamiliar with color in films. Although the manipulation of film color has become more common as a framing device (e.g., an opening in sepia under the titles turning to color as the film begins, which tells us we are going from past to present), few directors have attempted to use color as a semiotic component throughout a film. A rare exception is Antonioni, who attempted, unsuccessfully I feel, to use color as a sign vehicle in *Red Desert* and *Blow-up.* In *Blow-up,* Antonioni let it be known, he had the grass painted a brighter shade of green for a crucial scene in a park, thus taking credit, but also becoming accountable for, aspects of the real world not normally included within the scope of authorial control.

Conversely, a filmmaker may be given credit inappropriately when the viewer mistakes the author's skill at invention for one at finding appropriate elements (for a discussion of "making" vs. "finding" as aesthetic criteria, see Shiff 1982). For the last time, a naive film critic will provide us with an example of attributional error; in this instance the critic is praising Fellini's *Amarcord:*

> I can not resist describing the scene that has stayed with me longest: when the insane son climbs to the top of a tree in the early afternoon and starts screaming at the top of his lungs, "I want a woman!" After an entire day of this, the family sends to the asylum for help, and who arrives? A midget nun (where does Fellini find these people?) whose face we never see, who briskly climbs the ladder to the tree and returns with the maniac in tow. [Ledeen 1975: 102]

Ledeen's mistaken belief that Fellini "found" something he undoubtedly "made" (perhaps it should be noted that we have no evidence that the person we see is a nun or even a midget; it could easily have been a young boy wearing a nun's habit) illustrates the point that, although events encountered in "life" and in "art" may look the same, we need to make different assumptions about the forces determining their occurrence and configuration. Because the conventions of art may be drawn from the "general social discourse" of cultural stereotypes, the conclusions reached may be the same. In order to decide whether an interpretation is attributional (the observer is assessing the event as "life"—a natural event) or inferential (the observer is assessing the event as "art"—a symbolic event), one needs to know the grounds on which the conclusions would be justified. If asked *how* we know something we have concluded about an event we have observed, we might say that we have based our conclusions on what we know about the way such things happen (attributional interpretation); or we might say that we know it because we are assuming the event was made to happen that way in order to tell us something (communicational inference).

The tendency to see documentary films, and often fictional films, as objective records of events rather than as a filmmaker's statement about events derives from a confusion of interpretive strategies: the unsophisticated assumption that filmed events can be critically interpreted as "natural." What such viewers fail to understand is that *all* mediated events are to some degree symbolic. The mediating agent always makes decisions—about what to shoot (and, consequently, what not to shoot), and how; and, having shot, about how to edit the footage; and, finally, about when, where, and how to exhibit the edited film. Moreover, the participants in a film are rarely, if ever, just "caught in the act of being themselves."

A sophisticated viewer will recognize that the persons, objects, and events in a film are there, at least in part, because the filmmaker included them intentionally; that the sequence of events in the film has been ordered by the filmmaker's intention to say something by putting them in that order (which may not be the order they actually occurred in); and that the overall structure of the film reflects the filmmaker's intention, and ability, to use implicational conventions in order to communicate to viewers competent to draw the appropriate inferences.

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