

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

---

June '01

Center for the Study of The Great Ideas

# 135

The artist is a creator, not an analyst. Nor is the audience, excepting the critic, analytical. The judgment of taste is an appreciation of the work of art as a whole because it is as a whole that it is enjoyed. But a critic must pay attention to the parts and the elements. It is for this reason that an over-developed critical faculty often hampers an artist or spoils enjoyment.

—Mortimer Adler



---

---

## CRITICISM AND TASTE \*

**As applicable to motion pictures, in 5 parts.**

*by Mortimer Adler*

### **Part 1**

Two general questions remain for discussion: (1) what is a *good* motion picture? and (2) what is a *likable* motion picture? The first states the problem of criticism; the second the problem of taste. A critical judgment differs from an expression of taste in that it considers a work of art in terms of its nature and technique; it says whether the work is well done. The judgment of taste says merely that we do or do not like the work, that we do or do not prefer it to some other. It refers the work to our capacity for enjoyment. Criticism is evaluative in terms of standards of technical accomplishment. Taste is appreciative in terms of the quantity of aesthetic pleasure. The two judgments are capable of being made independently, yet they are obviously related [1]. What we mean by good taste is taste critically cultivated. A person has good taste if he gets pleasure in proportion to the objective goodness of the work. The discussion of taste properly follows, therefore, an analysis of the principles of criticism. In the case of a popular art, such as the motion picture, there is the problem of popular taste, which may or may not be the same as good taste. To the extent that these two are not the same, the problem of the relation of an art to considerations of taste is independent of aesthetic criticism.

The principles of criticism are, however, not independent of the preceding analysis of the specific nature and technique of the motion picture. Our prior discussion has, for the most part, been analytical rather than evaluative, but there have been unavoidable anticipations of the critical problem, indications that the analysis inevitably

leads to the discrimination of good from bad workmanship. Thus, in the discussion of pictorial technique, the elements of the medium were isolated in such a way that it is now possible for us to distinguish good from bad style. Similarly, in the discussion of cinematic narration, what is proper in the handling of plot, character and thought was suggested. The task now is to make such indications and suggestions explicit in an effort to formulate systematically the canons of criticism applicable to motion pictures.

One general insight explains the implications which the prior analysis has for criticism, the insight that an artist should not try to do more than he can with the elements of his medium, and should not be willing to do less. This is a critical insight. It is the most general principle of technical criticism. It marks the goal of workmanship in any field of art. And it explains why it is necessary to understand the specific nature and technique of a particular art in order to formulate critical standards specifically applicable to it. The rules of an art express the mature artist's discipline and are prescriptive for the novice, forming his habits. These rules can become norms and it is through this transformation of requirements into standards that we pass from technique to criticism.

We are first concerned with the type of criticism which we have called technical, to distinguish it from (1) extrinsic or political criticism, and (2) the sort of intrinsic moral criticism which is the other part of aesthetic criticism. Here as before we are considering the work of the primary artist, the director, and perhaps also the work of one of his subordinates, the scenarist, with whom he must be closely united. If they are not the same person, it is the motion picture as their collaborative work which is to be criticized. To the extent that the director should control the contributions of all the other auxiliary artists, their work is indirectly criticized through holding him responsible for it.

The critical problem is divisible into two subordinate questions of style. "Style" is probably the best word to

name all of the technical accomplishments of an artist. The work of any artist has style, but the style is not always good. When we say that work lacks style, we do so because we have identified style and good style. I shall make this distinction between two separable questions of style in terms of the arts of fiction. Analogous distinctions can probably be made for arts having other objects of imitation. And I shall consider, first, the literary arts of fiction, which imitate action in the medium of language, because in this field the distinction is generally recognized between (1) narrative style and (2) linguistic style. The poet as a story teller is both a maker *of* plots and a maker *in* language. If there is any priority of the former to the latter sense in which he is a maker, it is because the object of imitation is prior to the medium. In any case, relative to these two respects in which he is a maker, he may be more or less technically accomplished. Whether these two styles are independent, whether the poet who has great narrative gifts may nevertheless write badly, is a difficult question. But the criteria of good style are, at least, analytically separable into these two dimensions. The elements of narrative style are those elements of *any art* of fiction determined by the object of imitation: plot, character, thought. The elements of linguistic style are those elements of the *literary* arts of fiction determined by the medium of imitation: the elements of language. All of these elements are referred to by Aristotle's single word "diction." Diction is common to all literature. The elements of spectacle and song are peculiar to dramatic literature, not as literature but as produced theatrically. It may be asked whether there is any dimension of style determined by the manner of imitation. The answer is that the manner of imitation is involved in both narrative and linguistic style. The difference between the dramatic and the epic manner is not only a difference in the use of language but a difference in the treatment of plot and character.

If there is anyone for whom this analytical separation of narrative and linguistic style is not clear, he can be aided by the following consideration. Let us suppose a bilingual

writer, a writer who has equal mastery of English and French. Such a writer must first decide whether he is going to write a novel or a play, after which he can conceive his narrative in terms of plot, character and thought, starting with a rough sketch of these elements and gradually increasing the detail. His conception may be relatively complete before he starts writing, and to this extent his narrative style is determined. But he cannot start writing without choosing his language. It is this choice which determines the appropriate problems of linguistic style, just as his decision to write a novel or a play previously determined the appropriate problems of narrative style. To whatever extent the choice of language and the actual writing alters the preconceived narrative, the two dimensions of style are not independent. It may even be that the preconception of the narrative influences to some extent his choice of the language in which to write. It is not being maintained that these two sorts of style are absolutely independent, but only that they are actually somewhat independent, as well as analytically separable.

The distinction made in terms of the literary arts of fiction holds perfectly for the motion picture as a non-literary member of this group of arts. The director is subject to criticism on two separate counts of style. Like any other worker in the field of fiction, he has a narrative style, good or bad. He must handle plot, character and thought in the cinematic manner. But he is not only a maker *of* plots, but a maker *in* the complex medium of pictures, words and sounds. Treating this manifold medium as integrated, we shall speak of filmic style as the analogue of linguistic style. Film is here understood as including both the photographic record and the sound track. The analysis of filmic style is more complicated than that of linguistic style because of the complexity of the medium. We must distinguish pictorial style from the style of the sound track; each has its elements and its *montage*. Furthermore, filmic style involves the problem of *total montage*, the organization of the different components of the complex medium into the single continuity which is the motion picture. There is

nothing analogous to this complexity in linguistic style. We do not, for instance, consider the dramatist's linguistic style and the producer's theatrical style as integrated parts of the same effort.

It is necessary to repeat once more the warning already given, that all of these separations are analytical only. The work of art is a unity of all its constituent elements, both those determined by the object of imitation and those determined by the medium. The writer, who is not our supposititious master of different tongues, does not actually separate his making of plot and his making in language. The director must think of the problems of storytelling and the problems of film-making at the same time. The minimum condition of good style in all the arts of fiction is, therefore, to make good narrative sense, and this means a proper handling *together* of all of the elements which now, for the purposes of analysis, we shall separate. It is only the critic who is an analyst and therefore makes such separations. The artist is a creator, not an analyst. Nor is the audience, excepting the critic, analytical. The judgment of taste is an appreciation of the work of art as a whole because it is as a whole that it is enjoyed. But a critic must pay attention to the parts and the elements. It is for this reason that an over-developed critical faculty often hampers an artist or spoils enjoyment.

1. Both the critical judgment and the judgment of taste are casuistical; hence uncertain, disputable and never conclusively established by any appeal to norms and principles. Criticism, "though it can always derive inspiration from philosophical principles—always a good thing, but risky—remains on the same plane as the work and the particular" —Jacques Maritain

\* Excerpted from his book *Art and Prudence*.

=====

**WELCOME NEW MEMBER**

**Rob Friedman**

---

---

**We welcome your comments and questions.**

---

---

**THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE** is published  
by the Center for the Study of The Great Ideas  
Founded by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann  
E-mail: [TGIdeas@speedsite.com](mailto:TGIdeas@speedsite.com)  
Homepage: [TheGreatIdeas.org](http://TheGreatIdeas.org)  
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) organization.