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If there were no objective differences which made works of art more or less beautiful, it would be impossible to say that anyone has good or bad taste or that it is worth making a great effort to improve one's taste.

—Mortimer Adler



CRITICISM AND TASTE *

As applicable to motion pictures. [5 parts]

by Mortimer Adler

Part 4

(4) *The structure of the plot.* This locus of criticism has a number of subordinate topics. *First*, the simplicity or complexity of the plot. In one sense of complexity, the more complex plot is better; it not only contains a great number of incidents, both internal to the action and extraneous, but requires greater subtlety on the part of the narrator in ordering the incidents to bring about a progressive complication and a more striking climax. The aesthetic principle here applies to all arts and not only to fiction: the artist must achieve a unity, and his skill is greater according as there is a greater multiplicity of parts out of which he makes the whole. But in another sense of complexity, the less complex plot is sometimes better and sometimes worse. Here we are concerned with the problem of subordinate plots of the sort which occur in Shakespearean tragedy, or with the double thread of plot which issues in a double denouement: prosperity or success for one person, and defeat or misfortune for another. The critical standard must be differently applied to works that seek tragic effects, on the one hand, or comic and melodramatic effects, on the other. Simplicity of plot heightens the tragic effect. It concentrates all attention upon one protagonist; it makes his ultimate fate the single consequence of the action. It is questionable, therefore, whether the subordinate and often parallel plots in Shakespearean tragedy are not blemishes on their plot structure, despite the position of certain modern critics that the tragedy is thereby enriched. But in comedy and melodrama in which a happy ending is appropriate, it is no less appropriate to have the villain defeated or end

ignominiously. Here happiness of the ending is increased by the inclusion of misfortune for the antagonist along with prosperity for the protagonist. Aristotle's comment on the story which has a double thread of plot is worth noting here. "It is accounted the best," he says, "because of the weakness of the spectators, for the poet is guided in what he writes by the wishes of his audience. The pleasure, however, thence derived is not the true tragic pleasure. It is proper rather to comedy" and, I would add, melodrama. That most motion pictures are either comedies or melodramas may be due to the wishes of the audience, their preference for the double thread of plot. We shall return to this point later in a discussion of the problem of taste. It has no significance for criticism.

There is another distinction which Aristotle makes between simple and complex plots in tragedy; in the former the change of fortune takes place without reversal of situation and without recognition or realization. Reversal of situation occurs when an event suddenly produces the opposite effect to that which it at first portends; recognition or realization is a change from ignorance to knowledge about some matter that is crucially relevant to the motives and passions of the person involved. Both reversal and recognition involve the factor of surprise. It is clear, therefore, why the more skillful narrative, whether tragedy, comedy or melodrama, will have a complex plot in this last sense.

Second, the magnitude of the plot. This point is closely related to the preceding one. It differs in that the critical problem turns not upon whether the story seeks a tragic, a comic, or a melodramatic effect, but upon the manner of narration. Thus, the plot of any story must imitate an action having sufficient magnitude to permit a turn of fortune, which means that it must be large enough to have a beginning, a middle and an end as separate parts, but not so large that these parts cannot be viewed as a single continuity. But, as we have seen, the magnitude of an epic can be greater than that of a drama. It can involve more

persons, more incidents, each of these parts having its proper magnitude. In other words, a novel can, and should, have a more complex unity than a play, more complex in the first two senses: having more parts, and having subordinate and parallel plots. The cinematic manner of narration combines the features of both the novel and the play. The rule of magnitude for the motion picture must, therefore, be stated as follows. The magnitude of the plot must be thought of in two dimensions: (1) extensity, or the number of persons, incidents, parallel actions, etc., involved, and (2) intensity, or the amount of detail in the development of a single incident. The epic magnitude is primarily in the dimension of extensity, although it may develop some of its more important incidents with dramatic intensity. The dramatic magnitude is primarily in the dimension of intensity. A motion picture must combine epic extensity with dramatic intensity. To do this, it cannot achieve the magnitude of either in its primary dimension. Its proper magnitude, therefore, is a proportion between something less than the largeness of the epic in extensity and something less than the definiteness of the drama in detail. The narrative style of a motion picture is obviously bad if it transgresses this rule. It either becomes diluted as a succession of episodes which are thin because they lack dramatic definiteness, or it becomes cramped and motionless because it has overindulged the dramatic depiction of a few of its incidents. In short, just as Aristotle said that the plot of a poem must either be epic or dramatic in structure and not both at once, so we must say that the plot of a motion picture must be *both* epic and dramatic in structure, and *not either exclusively*. In other words, it must be cinematic. A motion picture is bad in narrative style if its plot is taken either from a play or a novel without the transforming work of adaptation.

All of these points of criticism can now be summarized in the single principle that good narrative style has unity, clarity and coherence. A story is a whole made up of parts. It must be sufficiently complex and subtle to engage attention, achieve suspense and surprise, and excite emotion,

but not so complex and subtle that the unity, clarity and coherence of its parts are lost. If anything, most motion pictures are too simple and obvious in their narrative style. The achievement of unity, clarity and coherence is not a mark of skill unless it is accomplished by a mastery of complexity and subtlety. This general principle of criticism applies to all works of fiction. Anyone who can judge good narrative in a novel, can do so also in a drama and a motion picture, provided only that he is sensitive to their essential differences as well as their essential sameness.

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

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DIFFERENCES IN TASTE *

by Mortimer Adler

That people differ in their tastes is itself an indisputable fact. It is also true that there is no point in arguing with a man about what he likes or dislikes. But it is still quite possible to tell a man that he has poor taste and that what he likes is in itself not excellent or beautiful. Here there is plenty of room for argument.

Those who say that there is no disputing about tastes usually mean more than they say. In my judgment they are wrong not in what they say but in what they mean. They start from the fact that people differ in taste, in what they like and dislike, and conclude that that is all there is to it. They conclude, in other words, that in talking about works of art or things of beauty, the only opinions which people can express must take the familiar form of "I don't know whether it's beautiful or not, but I know what I like."

This conclusion makes beauty entirely subjective or, as the saying goes, entirely a matter of individual taste. People sometimes take the same position about truth and goodness. The truth, they say, is merely what seems true to me. The good is merely what I regard as desirable.

They thus reduce truth and goodness to matters of taste about which there can be no argument.

Let me illustrate the mistake they make. If a man says to you, "That object looks red to me," you would be foolish to argue with him about how it looks. The fact that it looks gray to you has no bearing on how it looks to him. Nevertheless, you may be able to show him that he is deceived by the reddish glow from a light shining on the object and that, in fact, the object is gray, not red. Even after you have proved this to him by physical tests, the object may still look red to him, but he will be able to recognize the difference between the appearance and the reality.

This simple illustration shows that while there is no point in arguing about how things look, there is good reason to argue about what things are. Similarly, if a person insists upon telling you what he likes or dislikes in works of art, he is expressing purely subjective opinions which cannot be disputed. But good critics try to express objective judgments about the excellences or defects of a work itself. They are talking about the object, not about themselves.

Most of us know the difference between good and bad workmanship. If we hire a carpenter to make a table for us and he does a bad job, we point out to him that the table is unsteady. What is true of carpentry is true of all the other arts. Like tables, works of fine art can be well made or poorly made. Well-made things have certain objective qualities which can be recognized by those who know what is involved in good or bad workmanship in the particular field of art.

To recognize excellence in a piece of music, one must have some knowledge of the art of composing music. If a man lacks such knowledge, of course, all he can say is that he likes or dislikes the music. The man who insists that that is all he or anyone else can say is simply confessing his own ignorance about music. He should

not, in his ignorance, deny others the right to make objective judgments.

The question to ask anyone who insists that the beauty in works of art is entirely a matter of personal taste is whether some people have better taste than others. Is it possible for a person to improve his taste?

An affirmative answer to these questions amounts to an admission that there are objective standards for making critical judgments about works of art. Having good taste consists in preferring that which is objectively more excellent. Acquiring good taste in some field of art depends on acquiring knowledge about that art and learning to recognize excellence in workmanship.

If there were no objective differences which made works of art more or less beautiful, it would be impossible to say that anyone has good or bad taste or that it is worth making a great effort to improve one's taste.

* From his book *Great Ideas from the Great Books*.

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