

EDITOR'S NOTE

I wish to thank you all again for your kind sentiments to the Adler family and myself, on the death of Mortimer Adler.

His insights, guidance, and wisdom will be sorely missed, but I believe it is incumbent on all of us to help carry on his important work.

Be assured that the Center will continue to carry on its missions:

To help awaken citizens from their moral and intellectual slumbers and to understand why philosophy is everybody's business: the possibility of finding sound and practical answers to questions about the good life and good society. And philosophy's ability to answer the most basic normative questions, What ought we seek in life? and How ought we seek it?

And to promulgate the insights, ideas and ideals embedded in Dr. Adler's lifelong intellectual work in the fields of philosophy, liberal education, ethics and politics. And to continue functioning as **THE** resource for, and access to, the on-going interpretation of his work.

If there is some end of the things we do...will not knowledge of it, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what we should? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is. --ARISTOTLE

This final criterion of good filmic style is, therefore, a proper balance between realism and fantasy. It is not easy to accomplish. If most American films are, on the one hand, lethargically naturalistic in their style, the outstanding foreign films, particularly those of Germany and Russia, are often too radically fanciful. The former try to appear as if they did not employ the technique of montage at all and thereby lose distinction; the latter try to carry the technique of montage too far, and thereby lose clarity.

—Mortimer Adler



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CRITICISM AND TASTE *

As applicable to motion pictures. [5 parts]

by Mortimer Adler

Part 5

2. We now turn to the criteria of goodness in filmic style. Because of the analogy between the elements of linguistic and filmic style, we can profit by a brief review of Aristotle's standards of good writing. His first principle has a generality which has never been surpassed in later criticism. Good writing must have clarity without meanness or, in other words, it must be intelligible without being ordinary. A style is ordinary or mean which lacks elevation and distinction, which is not unusual in its use of words. In order to achieve such elevation, a writer must employ unusual and strange words, invent new idioms and constructions. [1] But with elevation also comes subtlety, and subtlety is in a sense the opposite of clarity. Subtlety at the expense of clarity is bad, as is clarity without subtlety, resulting in meanness. This basic principle can, therefore, be stated as the requirement that language be so used as to preserve a balance between clarity and subtlety, the latter for the sake of sublimity and elevation, the former for the sake of intelligibility. This principle of linguistic style neatly parallels the principle of narrative style which requires a similar balance between unity and complexity.

The principle applies both to vocabulary and to syntax: to the choice of words, and to phrasing, the invention of idioms, sentence and paragraph structure. It is most easily seen in the case of vocabulary. As previously pointed out, there could be no problem of style in the field of vocabulary did not language have the richness of synonyms. Otherwise there could be no choice of words. In any group

of synonyms, two kinds of words can be distinguished: (1) the ordinary words of current popular usage, and (2) unusual, strange words, invented words, or ordinary words somewhat altered by lengthening or shortening. If words of the first sort predominate, the style is to that extent mean and commonplace; if words of the second sort predominate, the style is to that extent lofty and distinguished. But there is the danger in using too many words of the second sort, that the writing will become an unintelligible jargon. There must, therefore, be a proportional use of words of both sorts to achieve both clarity and elevation. The same analysis can be made in the field of syntax. There would be no problem of style here were it not possible to say the same thing in many different ways, that is, if many phrases and sentences were not related in the same way as synonymous words. On the one hand, a writer may use the ordinary constructions and idioms of common speech; on the other hand, a writer may invent new idioms, depart from the usual constructions in the direction of greater brevity or greater explicitness, or employ other sorts of strange and unfamiliar phrasing. If he writes exclusively in the first way, he writes clearly but in a commonplace manner. If he writes exclusively in the second, he is likely to become unintelligible. He must avoid both extremes: the commonplace and jargon too difficult to understand. Only in this way can he write with clarity and distinction.

To this first principle, Aristotle adds a second concerning the use of metaphor, either metaphorical words or metaphorical phrases. [2] He says it is of paramount importance to have command of metaphor: "it is a mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances." The reason why the use of metaphor is so important is not far to seek. Language is here being considered as a medium of imitation. Imitation depends upon similitude and difference. The metaphor is the condensation of an analogy or, perhaps, a whole series of analogies, involving many likenesses and differences. Metaphors are therefore compact units of imitation. In them language is best adapted to the task of imitation. But there is

a danger of excess here as before. A liberal use of metaphor is desirable for enriching the imitative symbolism of language, but a style too metaphorical becomes a riddle, as too many strange words and unusual constructions produce a jargon.

A third principle might be added: the appropriateness of the language to the nature and magnitude of the part of the plot being narrated. Good linguistic style, in other words, must be adapted harmoniously and in a different way to different phases of the narrative. Thus, to give one illustration of such correlation, certain parts of the narrative must move more rapidly, others more slowly. The writing must correspondingly have the same tempo, gaining speed by concentration, the use of suggestion and ellipsis, contrast, and so forth. An earlier question about the relation of narrative and linguistic style is thus in part answered. They should be correlated; the needs of the narrative usually determine the devices employed in language.

It should be noted above all that in this discussion of linguistic style, Aristotle is nowhere concerned with the distinction between verse and prose. Rather he is thinking of good writing, the perfection to be achieved in using the medium of language. The distinction between good and bad writing is a distinction between poetical and prosaic writing. The former is elevated and clear. The latter is clear but commonplace, or may even be commonplace without being clear. For the most part, the trait of elevation is most frequently achieved in verse, the trait of clarity most frequently achieved in prose. This is probably the reason why good writing which is both elevated and clear is called poetical, and writing which is merely clear is called prosaic. There is, of course, nothing analogous to the distinction between prose and verse in filmic style, but as we shall now see there is a clear analogy of good and bad filmic style with poetical and prosaic writing.

The analogy is most easily grasped if we consider, first, the pictorial medium by itself. The further problems of

filmic style which involve the combination of the pictorial sequences with the sound track are more complex than anything in the use of language. Furthermore, the pictorial style of a motion picture is, in a sense, its basic style, first because the pictures usually carry the narrative continuity into which sound and verbal elements are set, and second because it is by means of the pictures that metaphor, suggestion, ellipsis, contrast, condensation are best achieved in the film. It is through its pictures and not through its words that the cinema wins distinction in style.

The analogue of synonyms in vocabulary is the variety of ways in which the camera can be set and operated for shooting the same piece of action or the same object. As we have seen there is as much, if not more, variety in camera settings than there are synonyms for most words. All the possible camera settings fall into two groups: (1) the usual position, distance, angle and speed of ordinary vision and (2) the unusual, strange, and almost impossible position, distance, angle and speed—impossible in the sense that the eye could not see in the way the camera is able to. Shots from above or below, moving shots, certain types of close ups and telescopic shots, slow motion, special focus, are examples of the latter group; the middle distance, motionless, horizontal shot is the best example of the former.

There is similarly in montage the analogue of the different types of verbal syntax. Ordinary idiom and construction are like that cutting and joining of pieces of film which provide a customary sequence. The invented idiom and variant construction, the new metaphorical expression, are like the unusual filmic orderings produced by inventiveness in montage. The first criterion of good linguistic style, therefore, applies perfectly to work in the pictorial medium: the pictorial material must maintain a proper balance of clarity and elevation or subtlety, both in vocabulary and syntax. Some of the better German and Russian films, particularly the early inventive ones, went too far in the direction of the unusual and strange in camera

setting and montage, with a resultant loss of clarity. They were aiming in one right direction, but failed to preserve their balance. Most of the American films which are produced are clear enough, but lack any distinction, subtlety or elevation. They, too, are aiming in one right direction, but unfortunately not in the other. The danger of trying to be poetical without safeguarding clarity is that one becomes “arty”; the converse danger is that one becomes dull and commonplace. Of the two evils, the latter is worse because the former is a sign of invention and originality that needs only to be moderated in order to achieve the proper perfection of pictorial style.

We can also discover an analogy between the use of metaphor in language and the condensation of similitudes that can be obtained in the pictorial medium by the use of the camera and by montage. Thus, to take a simple example, the use of a blurred focus is the pictorial metaphor of something as if seen through a haze. The use of a certain camera mask is the obvious metaphor of something as if seen through a keyhole, and so forth. By cutting and joining two pieces of film that have certain parallel elements, the filmic analogue of metaphorical phrasing is achieved. There are countless other ways in which by a skillful use of pictures, likenesses can be suggested. But here, as in language, metaphorical excess is destructive of clarity. The filmic pieces or sequences can be made unintelligible in the effort to make them too compact of similitudes.

Finally, the third principle of pictorial style is the appropriateness of the pictorial devices to the part of the narrative which they are made to convey. Just as language can be used in such a way that its speed, its gravity, its definiteness or indefiniteness are fitting to the given part of a narrative, so the pictorial elements can be and should be adapted to different narrative purposes.

The criteria of good pictorial style are thus seen to be generally the same as the criteria of good linguistic style. But pictorial style is only one part of filmic style. We must

now consider the other parts, the dialogue and the sound effects, and the ultimate problem of the organization of all of these parts into a filmic unity, which is the last problem of filmic style. With respect to dialogue by itself, there is nothing to add to the criteria of good linguistic style, though, perhaps, the criterion of appropriateness should here be stressed. With respect to the sound effects by themselves, there is little if anything to say. They only present a problem in style when they are considered in relation to the pictures. This is the problem of the total montage of the film: the cutting and joining of the sound track, on the one hand, the pictorial pieces, on the other, and the composition out of these of the finished film. In terms of the task of total montage, it may be asked of particular units of dialogue or particular sound effects whether they are suitable. It is important that they be good in themselves, but this is not enough: they must also be good as parts of a whole. These two requirements some times conflict. When they do, the second should dominate the choice.

The final principle of good filmic style is that the total montage preserve a balance between clarity and variety. Variety is achieved by shifting the basic narrative thread from the pictures to the words and sounds, or from the latter to the pictures. The technique of total montage is still too young to permit an explicit formulation of the rules of parallelism, harmony and counterpoint, governing the correlation of the pictures and the sound track. Yet Pudovkin's insight that there is in this correlation something analogous to the melody and the accompaniment in polyphonic music is at present sufficient to enable us to discriminate distinctive filmic style from what is ordinary and commonplace. His insight can be stated in another way. Simple clarity is achieved to the extent that the montage is realistic or naturalistic. Elevation and variety are achieved to the extent that the montage is imaginative and inventive. This final criterion of good filmic style is, therefore, a proper balance between realism and fantasy. It is not easy to accomplish. If most American films are, on the one hand,

lethargically naturalistic in their style, the outstanding foreign films, particularly those of Germany and Russia, are often too radically fanciful. The former try to appear as if they did not employ the technique of montage at all and thereby lose distinction; the latter try to carry the technique of montage too far, and thereby lose clarity.

This concludes our formulation of the standards of criticism applicable to the cinema.

NOTES

1. *Poetics*, 22, 1458b 1-3: “Nothing contributes more to produce a clearness of diction that is remote from commonness than the lengthening, contraction and alteration of words.”

2. *Poetics*, 21, 1457b 7-9: “Metaphor is the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is, proportion.”

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

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