

---

## Some Preliminary Remarks

In *Reality Transformed* I sketched a critique of formalist as well as realist theories of film. In the last hundred years they have had many followers among sophisticated writers about cinematic art. The contrasting emphases in these different perspectives have often nourished fruitful controversy. Throughout my book I sought to adjudicate among the varied versions of the two positions while looking for a way of harmonizing them that might preserve the reasonable claims in both. My concluding chapter outlined an alternative theory of film in an attempt to show how realists and formalists can benefit from each other's point of view. What follows here augments that effort without presupposing that the reader has much familiarity with its earlier formulation.

In moving from the earlier book to this one, I apply my speculations about the aesthetics and ontology of film to the work of three of the most renowned practitioners in that art form. I chose them in accordance with several criteria. First, I wanted representative "auteurs," directors whose mind and character retain a discernible identity throughout their output, sometimes to a greater extent, sometimes less so, but usually evident and ongoing. Since films are the product of many

people who collaborate in their making, they can rarely be ascribed to a single auteur who is comparable to an individual poet or painter or composer. Above all in relation to the “studio system” and the invasive, though subtle censorship that distributors and producers impose in the name of the bottom line, no one on the set may possibly have the degree of autonomy that is still available in those other media. Nevertheless, some outstanding filmmakers have managed to mold their creations in ways that make them recognizable as more or less their own.

The auteur question will recur as we proceed, but I confess in advance that I may have prejudiced my case by choosing filmmakers whose achievements are obviously unique and plausibly judged as uniform in their totality. Given the nature of my quest, it is not surprising that the three directors I am studying usually served in several capacities—as screenplay writers or adaptors of literary texts, as directors who could be producers as well, and not infrequently as actors who also participated in the cinematography, the lighting, and the contribution of the art department. With this kind of versatility, they attained a power to show (with variable success) whatever vision of the world they wished to convey. They expressed their personal sense of reality through techniques that were available at the time and that they were especially proficient in deploying. By focusing on the general outlook of these filmmakers, who were also talented theorists, we can see how pervasively their methodologies transcend the disparity between realism and formalism. Or rather, how their transcendence of this disparity is manifest in their separate kinds of harmonization within the parameters they set for themselves.

One might additionally argue that these three are correctly thought to be “great” filmmakers *because* of their preeminent

ability to unify realist and formalist attitudes. They do so in a manner that is idiosyncratic to each; and yet, they are alike in developing from film to film recurrent, though evolving, ideas they cared about as creators and as human beings. By considering what they found meaningful in life as well as the techniques by which such meaning had structural importance in their films, we may be able to detect the philosophical significance in at least a considerable part of the work they did.

Like many other artists, the three filmmakers I have selected would probably recoil at the notion that they had "philosophical" pretensions. Quoting the words of Henry V in Shakespeare's play, they might well exclaim: "We are but warriors for the working-day." That is true, and it is certainly the case that none of them pontificates about eternal verities or the analytical niceties of academic philosophy. They usually think of themselves as storytellers, as dramatists, as technicians in visual imagery, and above all as craftsmen trained to fashion and present cinematic effects. But none of this precludes their also being philosophical inasmuch as they infuse their productions with a profound perception of, and concerted interest in, the human condition as they knew it. As in all creative endeavors, the criterion of ultimate value depends upon the fecundity of their inventive imagination.

Moreover, Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, and Jean Renoir are particularly intriguing because they left behind writings about film that have not been studied much thus far. Collected in recent books, these writings normally purport to deal with their own movies and their involvement in them. As a matter of fact, however, the filmmakers also comment on the nature of film itself, on other art forms, and on civilized as well as natural phenomena in life. Unlike the majority of other great or

near-great filmmakers, they articulate beliefs that reveal the remarkable breadth and depth of their speculative minds. What I find most encouraging, their theorizing is almost always concrete, not abstract, and grounded in their own cumulative history of acquired knowledge within their chosen field.

Beginning with Hitchcock, I argue that he is much more than just a formalist enamored of the technical devices that he employs so effectively. In his hands they attain a meaning, whatever it may be, that lesser filmmakers do not achieve. At the opposite extreme from Hitchcock, I end with Renoir because his use of cinematic artifice constantly furthers his preoccupation with thematic meaning while preventing it from becoming tendentious or prosaically realistic. Welles has a niche somewhere between Hitchcock and Renoir. While being what he called “a man of ideas” like the other two, he arrived on the scene much later than they did and progressively synthesized the film experience of both.<sup>1</sup> I do not mean that Welles sums up or completes their accomplishments, or is a better maker of movies. Despite his coming last, he can be seen as a bridge between them. While remaining an authentic originator in himself, he incorporates the formalist components in Hitchcock as well as the realist elements in Renoir.

Discussing the thinking of these artists, my initial point of departure is what they explicitly maintain on one or another occasion. In view of their influence and undoubted stature, even their casual remarks are worthy of our attention. All the same, I realize that the essays and interviews on which I draw were sometimes written long after these artists finished the movies they are interpreting in later years. Also one can never be sure that their accounts of what they did, or even of what

they thought they were doing in the sometimes distant past, are entirely reliable. I am willing to take that risk because the relevant productions are so engaging and so clearly the offerings of very exceptional, though possibly representative, exemplars of their time and place. Apart from the utility of the filmmakers' statements as windows into their individual existence, these statements function—in one fashion or another—as valuable clues about the content of their films and the culture from which such artworks emanate. For that reason alone, what these three said and allowed to be printed warrants continual investigation.

With this as my basic principle, I analyze aspects of their movies in conjunction with the filmmakers' comments, without any necessary assumption about the validity of these comments. Only occasionally do I give an exhaustive treatment of the films themselves. In relation to most of the movies I discuss, a vast and often detailed critical literature has come into being with that aspiration. My book presents itself as an addendum to the excellent work that has already enriched this ever growing branch of film studies. I cite a few of its important instances in the three middle chapters, and in the family portrait I try to see how my previous discussions can be integrated with some of the suggestive books and articles about Hitchcock, Welles, and Renoir that others have published thus far.