

AESTHETICS AND POSTMODERN CINEMA

Frank Burke

The essays in this section all place themselves within contemporary post-essentialist discourse. In addressing contemporary film, they turn up yet more evidence of the disappearance of history, politics, art, narrative (grand and otherwise), significance, causality, the subject, and even gender. At the same time the films they address tend, in their anti-essentialism, to reverse an oft-cited postmodern maxim. In his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard talks of postmodernism presenting the unrepresentable ("put[ting] forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself").¹ In contradistinction, many of the films discussed in this section "unpresent the presentable" — a strategy which, I would argue, not only asserts the impossibility of representation in a post-essentialist context but also frees the spectator from presentation, hence from the domination of the text.

Much of what follows cannot be defined solely as postmodern. "Multiple coding" techniques such as montage, collage, citation, etc. are modernist. What I call "othering" can undoubtedly be found in literature of earlier periods. And much of what is said of counterfeiting in *To Live and Die in L.A.* may also apply to André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1926). However, the proliferation of strategies whose effect is to efface presence in the very method of presentation can indeed be characterized as post-modern.

Similarly, what follows is only a small piece of an enormous picture: one that includes, for instance, Derrida's entire deconstructive project and the formidable critical apparatus that has developed around it.² In fact, self-conscious strategies of "unpresenting" are found throughout modern and

AESTHETICS AND POSTMODERNISM

contemporary literature (philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literary criticism now included), drawing attention to the fact that language is by its very nature a form of unrepresenting.

So of course is film, but it tries vehemently not to be. In fact, a major lure of film, as a recording medium, has always been the seeming authenticity of its presentations. So self-conscious unrepresenting — defying the seeming nature of the medium — comes harder to filmmakers, especially those working in an entertainment system solidly committed to an ideology of Representation and the Real.

The struggle of film “against itself” makes for an interesting postmodern issue, particularly as movies begin to assert themselves as a vital part of the contemporary deconstructive enterprise.

One final qualification. The following remarks are preliminary and tentative. If there is validity to their general drift, there is also great need not only for amplification but for the refinement of terms, categories, and definitions.

The above having been said, allow me to hypothesize “unpresentation” in three manifestations: “multiple coding,” “othering,” and “presentation under erasure.”

Multiple Coding

By this I mean all the ways in which a text is coded “beyond itself”: allusion, citation, collage, pastiche, etc. (The term “intertextuality” might be used, but its implications are much broader than the topic at hand.) This consummately modernist strategy, evident in most of the films mentioned in the following essays, unrepresents in a variety of ways. For one thing, it defeats the fetishism of unitary coding (collapsing all codes within a work into a master code: the “meaning of the work”) — fetishism which locks the consumer of the text into the presentation itself. Moreover, it gives and takes away at the same time. The text is there but not there because it is always pointing somewhere else. Moreover, the multiply coded text does not re-present the “elsewhere” (the original context), it only refers to it. Since both the current text and the original sources are decontextualized, one is left somewhere in between, faced with the challenge of creating one’s own context or of suspending the need for one altogether.

Time itself is unrepresented. The present isn’t present but a series of references to a past, which itself fails to materialize. Simultaneously, this a-present and a-past, by being juxtaposed, are in effect spatialized and denied both their temporal nature and their linear or “narrative” comprehensibility.

Finally, referentiality (the very technique that multiple coding employs) is unrepresented — at the same time used and denied because the referent(s) cannot be recovered.

“Othering”

To illustrate what I mean by this term, I'll begin with an oft-quoted piece of writing by Foucault:

Transgression, then, is not limited to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust. Perhaps it is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night which it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity.³

What concerns me here is not so much Foucault's topic as his intellectual methodology, which consists of effacing identity in the very mode of presenting it — by turning the thing identified into its (or an) other. Foucault starts by giving us a term, “transgression,” as part of a binary opposition (transgression/limit). This appears to be standard structuralist procedure in which each term maintains its own identity, in strict juxtaposition with its opposite. However, Foucault immediately begins to dissolve identity by denying the opposition (“transgression, then, is not limited to the limit as black to white”). Then, using simile, he defines the one thing in terms of (not in opposition to) the other. Transgression is like a lightning flash which “owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation” and whose very light “gives a dense and black intensity to the night which it denies.” Finally, the originating term (as simile) disappears altogether into the other: “the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it is has given a name to obscurity.”

Most important, what Foucault describes is not a single event culminating in closure. (That would be mere metamorphosis: one thing turning into another.) Instead, as his use of the phrase “a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust” makes clear, he is positing a never-ending process in which one thing is always turning into, without permanently becoming, an other. (The act of disappearance at the end of the quotation thus becomes provisional rather than final.) As was the case with multiple coding, we are presented with something that never is, in fact, “itself.”

This is also the strategy of René Magritte's *The False Mirror* — as well as Arthur Kroker's strategy in discussing the artwork in a recent issue of the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*. Magritte's painting presents an eye which reflects the sky it presumably observes. Eye is sky and vice versa. The identity of seer and seen is always that of the other, but without the original identity ever completely dissolving. As Kroker

AESTHETICS AND POSTMODERNISM

puts it: "Always the site of the sky is disturbed and mediated by the inner horizon of the disembodied eye: all a matter of *resemblance* and nonidentity. A perfect refraction takes place in which the object viewed (signified) circles back and, in an instantaneous shift of perspective, becomes the locus . . . of signification itself."⁴

Turning to film, a complex example of "othering" is provided by William Friedkin's *To Live and Die in L.A.* (later treated at length by Christopher Sharrett). Here the opposite terms involved are artist and criminal. The antagonist, Masters, is a painter turned counterfeiter. The moment he appears on screen, so does the assertion "directed by William Friedkin," identifying the artist *in* the film with the artist *of* the film. The identification is at least twofold. As an "creator" involved in the mechanical reproduction of images Friedkin is a counterfeiter. As a maker of violent movies, who often "murders" the human images he presents, Friedkin is anti-social and destructive, not merely a counterfeiter. Counterfeiting and violence unite at the film's end when Friedkin, having killed off his protagonist, Chance, replaces him with the duplicate or counterfeit Vukovich. (Chance's former sidekick, Vukovich begins doing the very things Chance did earlier.) Then Friedkin goes one step further and ends the film with a completely unmotivated image (the duplicate or counterfeit) of Chance himself. (The very arbitrariness of Friedkin's abrupt narrative shifts from Chance to Vukovich to image-of-Chance derives from Friedkin's license not just as artist but as killer and counterfeiter.)

Of course the artist-as-criminal is not an uncommon 20th-century metaphor (and in instances such as Jean Genet, both metaphor and fact). A very recent manifestation is the Quebecois film *Une zoo la nuit* (which, incidentally, cites the work of Friedkin throughout). However, metaphor tends to maintain its two terms in a relationship that preserves the identity of each. I would argue that Friedkin, by introducing the issue of counterfeiting, and thus incorporating his own role as moviemaker into his configuration, creates a dynamic slide in which one term can't be held separate from the other and always is, in fact, its other. In watching his movie we are witnessing the criminality of art and the artistry of crime always sliding into one another without the process of transformation ever becoming complete.⁵

Presentation Under Erasure

Perhaps the most distinctly postmodern strategy for unrepresenting the presentable is offering the artwork/text/movie "under erasure," to borrow a notion used extensively by Derrida.⁶ The films discussed in the following essays provide numerous examples. Yvonne Rainer's *The Man Who Envied Women* is, as Peggy Phelan demonstrates, a film of "evacuation" — one which refuses to fill its narrative space with substantial presences (as conventional cinema tends to do), but instead continually empties itself

out. Characterization occurs almost entirely as unpresentation. Trisha, the female protagonist, remains visually absent. The identity of the main male character, Jack, is effaced by doubling: he is played by two different actors, he has a girl friend named Jack-ie, he speaks lines that are mere quotations from other sources (Raymond Chandler, Foucault), he has "visions" that are scenes from films.⁷

The most profound instance of presenting "under erasure" is contained in Trisha's concluding thoughts as she seeks to redefine herself in relation/opposition to gender: "Not a new woman, not non-woman, or misanthropist, or anti-woman, and not non-practicing lesbian. Maybe un-woman is also the wrong term. A-woman is closer. A-womanly. A-womanliness." Here, with the use of the letter "a" we have both an article that designates ("a woman") and a prefix that negates ("a-woman"). Or, perhaps more accurately, the very act of defining is an act of erasing, the very mode of presentation defeats presentation.

(Having discussed the complex suitability of "a" — we will now follow Trisha's example and shift to "a-presentation" from "unpresentation." Only the awkwardness of the former, without an explanatory context, prevented its earlier use.)

Just as *The Man Who Envied Women* tells its story under erasure by thematizing evacuation, doubling characterization, and "a-defining" woman, *To Live and Die in L.A.* effaces its narrative in the very act of presentation by insisting that everything is counterfeit. All value, all enduring substance, disappear once story, filmmaker, and medium are reduced to a process of mere fraudulence and replication. (The film enters Baudrillard's simulacrum, which is contemporary hyperreality entirely under the sign of erasure.)⁸

Insignificance, the recent Nicholas Roeg film, performs a similar act of effacement, beginning with its title and continuing with its recreation of historical figures (Marilyn Monroe, Albert Einstein, Joe Dimaggio, Joe McCarthy, Roy Cohn), under the erasure of total fictionalization. (See Sharrett's more extensive discussion.)

Finally, we cite Fellini, whose recent work is a virtual celebration of a-presentation. The title of *Amarcord* means (according to Fellini himself) "I remember," but there is no "I," no Fellini, in the film. In fact there is no main character or narrator — just a succession of vastly different narrators whose partial and fragmented "story" denies the possibility of coherent memory on the part of a unified subject or "I." (This is in deliberate contrast to Fellini's two preceding films, *The Clowns* and *Roma*, in which Fellini was indeed the main character and narrator.)

Casanova is a film made entirely under erasure. It is, in Fellini's words, "A film on nothingness A total absence of everything . . . rendered without emotion — there are only forms that are outlined in masses, perspectives articulated in a frigid and hysterical repetition It is nonlife with its empty forms which are composed and decomposed, the charm

AESTHETICS AND POSTMODERNISM

of an aquarium, an absentmindedness of sealike profundity, where everything is completely hidden and unknown because there is no human penetration or intimacy."⁹ With its deliberate mannerist excesses, its debasement of its own signifiers (oceans constructed out of garbage bags), its thematizing of pose and artifice, *Casanova* counterfeits itself, its story, and its "hero" from start to finish.

And the Ship Sails On effaces politics and history by simulating the outbreak of World War I but fictionalizing beyond recognition the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and the sinking of the Lusitania. This is identical to the method of historical fictionalization in *Insignificance* and is not so much an erasure of the film itself as presentation of the historical referent under erasure. (Both Fellini and Roeg are working in the realm of multiple coding as well.) Again we can cite Baudrillard's simulacrum of pure presentation without referentiality.

* * * * *

The phenomenon of a-presentation I've been seeking to address lends itself to several responses. On the level of content, divisions might be made between "positive" and "negative" forms. For instance, Trisha's concept of "a-womanliness" in *The Man Who Envied Women* appears to be constructive: a way of thematizing an escape from gender formulations (and binary opposition) rooted in logocentrism. (Her visual absence in the film also frees her from filmic objectification, if we assume that the gaze is inherently male.) Friedkin's, Roeg's, and Fellini's versions of erasure, on the other hand, seem to reflect a paralyzing sense of futility with regard to both art and history.

As methodology, however, a-presentation can, in all its forms, be seen as a useful tool for de-substantializing the artwork and our responses to it. By denying identity in the very means of presenting it, by forcing one beyond the given to the realm of erasure (the excluded, the suppressed, the ideologically determining), a-presentation defeats the kind of closure upon which traditional narrative has depended. By tuning one in both to the presentation and its denial, it promotes the kind of both-and, multirelational, thinking that is struggling to replace linear, binary thought.

Viewed in its most flattering light, a-presentation accords with the earliest, most utopian strains of postmodernism, which envisioned an expansion of consciousness promoted by revolutions in media and information systems. Viewed in less but still flattering light, a-presentation offers a method of resistance and opposition, as well as a means of recovering the erased. Viewed neutrally, it comprises a methodology of free play "just for the fun of it." Seen at its worst, it becomes part of late capitalism's campaign to divorce the individual from meaning, causality, and history and fuel the kind of schizophrenia (all signifying chains ruptured) on which late capitalism depends.¹⁰

FRANK BURKE

Returning to the realm of film, let's just conclude by saying that, all other things aside, a-presentation allows movies to disengage themselves from "all the Real's big numbers" (Baudrillard) and to more fully assert themselves as a medium not of representation but of the "post" or (to take our lead again from Rainer) the "a"-real.

Notes

1. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81. It should be emphasized that Lyotard is not advocating a return to presence or substantiality. The postmodern "searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (Ibid.).
2. My use of "erasure" is, as I acknowledge in the body of my text, derived from Derrida. However, other Derridean strategies such as the marking of supplements, the production of differences and undecidables, and the overrunning of borders and margins are equally relevant examples of "unpresenting" — as are the methods of "mis-reading" developed by American deconstructionists such as Paul de Man and Harold Bloom.
3. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 35.
4. Arthur Kroker, "The Disembodied Eye: Ideology and Power in the Age of Nihilism," the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 7, no. 1 (Winter/Spring, 1983), p. 200, 202. Reprinted in Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1986).
5. What I call "othering" has much in common with Baudrillardian "reversibility." However, much of Baudrillard's thought tends not toward the dynamism and relative "difference" of reversibility, but toward the collapse of things, through implosion, into an undifferentiated state. See "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media and the Information of the Social in the Masses," in Kathleen Woodward, ed., *Myths of Information: Technology and Post-Industrial Culture* (Madison: Coda Press, 1980), pp. 137-148. See also J. Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York: Semiotext(e) and Jean Baudrillard, 1983). ("The Implosion of Meaning . . ." is reprinted in *In the Shadow . . .*)
For a critique of Baudrillard's elimination of difference through implosion see James Collins, "Postmodernism and Cultural Practice: Redefining the Parameters," *Screen*, 28, no. 2 (Spring, 1987), 12-13.
6. See especially his discussion of the supplement and Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
7. Rainer's disfigurement of the visual image — her "optically degenerated shots," to use her own term, is not inconsistent with the notion of "unpresenting." However, disfiguring what is presented is somewhat different from presenting "under erasure" — i.e., giving and at the same time taking away.
8. One should not, however, confuse the wholesale contamination of counterfeiting in *To Live and Die in L.A.* with Baudrillard's much more restricted use of the term in *Simulations*, trans. Paul Patton, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e) and Jean Baudrillard, 1983), pp. 83 ff.
9. "Casanova: An Interview with Aldo Tassone," in Peter Bondanella, ed. *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 28.

AESTHETICS AND POSTMODERNISM

10. Ihab Hassan still tends to represent postmodernism in its utopian mode (*The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* — Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987). Andreas Huyssen represents a middle ground of both political engagement and appreciation of postmodernism (*After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* — Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). Frederic Jameson is, of course, the most strident critic of postmodernism from a political point of view ("Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 146 (July-August, 1984), 57).