

The Obviousness of Cinema

Rosalind Galt

“The image, clear and distinct is something obvious and evident. It is the obviousness of the distinct, its very distinction.”

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*¹

“Obviousness is the mark of Howard Hawks’s genius.”

—Jacques Rivette, “The Genius of Howard Hawks”²

The iconoclastic suspicion of the image, which has haunted film scholarship as much as it has devalued film as a “serious” medium in the public sphere, derives from the supposed obviousness of the image as much as from its deceptive qualities. The image deals in surfaces: it is superficial and hence lacking conceptual depth, so whatever meanings it does produce are overly simplistic, immediate, and intellectually substandard. In Platonic terms, the image is inadequate to the task of articulating reason, and in the language of film criticism, the film is just not as good as the book. Moreover, since the surface of the image engages ideas of the cosmetic, sparkly, and fake, this obvious meaning runs the risk of not even being true. Appearances can be deceptive, the image conceals an ugly truth, and so on. A contradiction, to be sure (the image is both too direct in its meaning and untrustworthy in its meaning), but one that secures the obviousness of the image in a doubled rhetoric of suspicion. If the image means as it obviously seems to, then that meaning is inadequate. If it doesn’t mean what it obviously seems to, then, even worse, its obviousness is a veil for deception. Cinema inherits this rhetorical structure and philosophical impasse, but it also embarks upon a transvaluation of the obvious.

David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson invoke the obvious as the opening salvo in their seminal analysis *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*: the first chapter is entitled “An excessively obvious cinema.”³ There is an immediate ambiguity in this phrasing: Is classical Hollywood too obvious to be good, or too obvious to be true? The reader might think the former but of course the answer turns out to be the latter. Classical Hollywood has been underestimated because people think it obvious in the sense of being simplistic, but, as Bordwell, et al, argue, it is actually too obvious for its own good; its systematic transparency so effective that nobody realizes how complex it actually is. For them, the beauty of the classical style is its smoothness and economy, the way that everything from shot duration to character motivation can be placed within a detailed paradigmatic structure that nonetheless functions both to ensure the clarity (obviousness) of narrative meaning and to install a regime of naturalness (obviousness) about the system. This claim, which has become so canonical in our understanding of classical cinema, begins to redeem obviousness by locating it as the source of cinema’s meaning and structure.

In this rehabilitation of obviousness, there is a defensive undertone. Film might *seem* unsophisticated, but if one looks as closely as Bordwell, et al do, the mechanics of complexity

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can be observed beneath the surface. “Excessively obvious” names a disjuncture between appearances and reality. For Bordwell, et al, classical Hollywood only seems obvious: “We all have a notion of the typical Hollywood film. The very label carries a set of expectations, often *apparently obvious*, about cinematic form and style.”⁴ Apparently obvious. Not actually deep down obvious, but obvious in initial appearance. And we know how deceptive appearances can be. Here, we see a shift from a conception of the image as obvious (and obviously lacking value) to a claim on an occluded level of meaning. There’s a double edge to this claim. On the one hand, it attempts to rescue the image from the limitations of its surface qualities; on the other hand, it achieves this transvaluation by proposing that the image deceives. Bordwell’s account attempts to rescue the image from one iconoclastic critique, but can only do so by invoking another. Obviousness moves from being the sign of critical exclusion to becoming a figure of classical narrative economy, but only on the condition that it simultaneously mask its own value.

A more radical gesture is that of Raymond Bellour, for whom the obviousness of classical Hollywood does not enclose its complexity but forms its very substance. In “The Obvious and the Code,” his essay on *The Big Sleep* (Hawks, 1946), Bellour outlines a dialogic structure that informs all of his writing on classical signification.⁵ He cites Jacques Rivette’s claim that “obviousness is the mark of Howard Hawks’s genius.”⁶ Bellour glosses, “No doubt—provided we recognize the extent to which that obviousness only comes to the fore insofar as it is coded.” Classical cinema’s obviousness is again underwritten by a complicated work of codification, but here the relationship is not a surface/depth structure but one of mutual dependence and support. Bellour’s language constantly reiterates this balance. *The Big Sleep* segment is “elementary but subtle,” its “poverty...is exemplary.”⁷ Likewise, in “To Alternate/To Narrate,” we see the binary again: “imbricating, through both obvious and subtle interlocking, the two alternating movements.”⁸ For Bellour, it is not enough to say that cinema seems obvious but is actually complicated. Rather, the obvious must be part of its valuation. Classical cinema’s genius—its theoretical value—derives from its obviousness. Within the obvious, we can discover the kernel of the code.

If the obvious is an integral part of (at least classical) cinema’s codification, then analysis of the workings of the obvious might give access to the cinematic itself. We catch a glimpse of this logic in “The Obvious and the Code,” where Bellour draws conclusions about classical cinema in general based on his analysis of twelve brief and purposefully inconsequential shots from *The Big Sleep*. Christian Metz makes an equally grand rhetorical move in *The Imaginary Signifier*:

One of the most obvious characteristics of film (and in this it differs from the other arts) is that it combines words and images (visual images), “representations of words” and “representations of things,” material which is directly perceived and relational orderings, so that one might expect it, in advance, to be connected centrally, and as it were via multiple points of attachment, to the most vital of the “meshings” of the primary and secondary, and therefore to raise the central problem, or at least one of the central problems, of all semiology.⁹

In this typically complex formulation, we move from (and through) the obvious characteristics of film to the central problems of all semiology. Thinking about the cinematic requires thinking the obvious: words and images, the visual and other channels, perception and identification. What becomes obvious is that it is not at all simple to define or analyze film, and yet film itself

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seems such an obvious thing. Metz and Bellour use this paradox to open up the cinematic. Bellour makes the case for the cinematic relevance of the obvious most clearly in “The Unattainable Text,” which opens thus: “That the film is a text, in the sense in which Barthes uses the word, is obvious enough. That as such it might, or should, receive the same kind of attention as has been devoted to the literary text is also obvious. But it is already not quite so obvious.”¹⁰ Cinema is a question of things that seem obvious and indeed are obvious, but that obviousness is rich and charged with difficulty.

There is another element to this critical transvaluation of the obvious, one that might be brought to the surface by my choice of examples. The intense labor of taxonomizing, analyzing and structuring that we find in Bordwell, Metz and most of all Bellour surely bespeaks a staging of critical desire as much as it forms any objective account of film texts. The more apparently obvious the text, the more gratifying the work of teasing out its complexities. In “The Obvious and the Code” Bellour extrapolates from a brief and rather dull sequence of two people in a car the entire structure of classical Hollywood. The sequence offers little significance or pleasure for most spectators. Insofar as there is fascination, desire, cathexis here, it is entirely on the side of the theorist. As Constance Penley says in her introduction to the English edition of *The Analysis of Film*, “[Bellour] has always been self-reflective about the madness in his method, in recognizing from early on the film analyst’s desire to touch the body of the film, to embrace it by enumerating, transcribing, and charting its every signifying element, a desire whose crazy brilliance most revealed itself in ‘Symbolic Blockage.’”¹¹ The excessive qualities of Bellour’s analysis, its rigorous transformation of film’s obvious material into complex structures, can prompt frustration in students disposed to think of criticism as “reading too much into films,” but this very excess renders visible the location of cinema’s desire. For the theorist and the spectator, a film promises both obviousness and its opposite.

It might not be irrelevant that this mixing of immediacy and occlusion is shared by the cinematic image and the logic of femininity. We can certainly trace a gendering to classical ideas of the image as cosmetic, mysterious, seductive and deceptive, and in “The Obvious and the Code,” Bellour’s conclusions point to the mythologization of women in classical cinema. Moreover, his case study is a director known not only for his obviousness, but for his gender politics: Bellour refers to Hawks’s reputation for having unbalanced Hollywood’s traditional logic of gender with his films’ representations of independent women and reciprocal relationships.¹² The fine balance of the obvious and the code can be staged best by the on-screen desire of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Of the critics I have mentioned, only Constance Penley is closely associated with feminist theory, but the imbrication of obviousness and desire is always a political question. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, “The image is desirable or it is not an image.” He goes on to explain the alternative as, “rather a chromo, an ornament, a vision or representation—although differentiating between the attraction of desire and the solicitation of the spectacle is not as easy as some would like to think.”¹³ The desire of the spectator (whether film theorist or Bogart fan) is a desire for obviousness, the obviousness that defines and envelops the film image, as much—and at the same time—as it is a desire for bodies, complexity, meaning or narrative.

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Jean-Luc Nancy's separation of the desirable image from mere decoration or representation opens up a final moment in the transvaluation of the obvious. We might characterize this moment as a shift (though not necessarily a temporal one) from the obvious as a quality of cinema's signficatory systems to the obvious as a quality of the image or the cinematic itself. Bordwell, Metz and Bellour read the obviousness of classical Hollywood largely through the structures of narration and meaning production. Likewise, in Roland Barthes's analysis of Eisenstein stills, the "obvious meaning" of symbolism and signification are contrasted with the poetic, elusive "obtuse meaning."¹⁴ For Barthes, "[o]bvious means *which comes ahead* and this is exactly the case with this meaning, which comes to seek me out."¹⁵ No matter how rigorous one's semiotic analysis, he suggests, it remains in the critic's own symbolic space.

For Nancy, by contrast, the image's obviousness is precisely that which separates it from the world of meanings and things. For him, "The image, clear and distinct is something obvious and evident. It is the obviousness of the distinct, its very distinction. There is an *image* only when there is this obviousness: otherwise, there is decoration or illustration, that is, the support of a signification."¹⁶ Here, the image is obvious because it is distinct—sacred even—separate from the quotidian world of meanings and pleasures. The complexity that Bordwell finds in the Hollywood mode of production and that Bellour and Metz locate in cinema's codification of language and subjectivity are, in this analysis, what's left when you take away the image. Cinema's transformative obviousness for Nancy does not consist in its historically-located forms but in its potential energies, what he calls "the passion of the image, the power of its stigma or of its distraction."¹⁷

This appeal to the image's ontological status echoes with the turn in contemporary film theory to re-examine the work of André Bazin on the cinematic image. In sympathy with Bazin's writing, Nancy addresses the nature of the cinematic image; its intimate materiality and even sacred nature. The sacred means something quite different for Nancy than for Bazin, but nonetheless, Nancy's distinct image has values similar to the purity of Bazin's *objectif*, stripping the image free of the dust and grime of earthly perception.¹⁸ For post-Bazinian scholarship, the specificity of cinema can be located partly in its evidentiary status, and we might recall that the obvious, in French, is commonly rendered as *l'evidence*. Thus, Bellour's article is originally titled "L'Evidence et le code," just as the English term "self-evident" is a synonym for obvious.¹⁹ The obvious is the evident and also the evidence: if cinema is defined by its material trace of the profilmic world, then it is necessarily defined, also, by the problems and potentials of its obviousness.

This shift in the location of the obvious, then, mirrors a shift in contemporary thought: from the systematizing, linguistic accounts of post-classical film theory to the philosophical turn of recent film and image theories. Nancy's ontology of the image demands, also, a distinct epistemology: "The image is the obviousness of the invisible. It does not render it visible as an object: it accedes to a knowledge of it. Knowledge of the obvious is not a science, it is the knowledge of the whole as a whole. In a single stroke, which is what makes it striking, the image delivers a totality of sense or a truth."²⁰ Nancy refuses any Platonic suspicion of image-making in favor of a Heideggerian concern for how the image stages existence, being in the world. Obviousness has been transformed into *the* cinematic mode of experience and knowledge.

I'd like to close with a film that most viewers might think of as not obvious at all. Claire Denis' *L'Intrus* (2004) was partly inspired by Jean-Luc Nancy's memoir of the same title, recounting his experience of a heart transplant.²¹ The film centers on a man who receives a heart transplant and who journeys to the South Seas to find his illegitimate son. But the film does not cleave to a classical narrative structure, and indeed Denis recounts stories of hostile reviewers who demanded to know what this obscure film was "about."²² A close analysis of the film might speak of its structures of intimacy and distance, its elaboration of community and the self, or its figuration of the intruder. For now, though, I simply want to suggest that *L'Intrus* produces for the spectator an experience of cinematic obviousness. (We might note that Denis began her career as an assistant to Jacques Rivette, advocate of Hawks's genius of obviousness.) But Denis' images are precisely not realist, rational or analytical: they exceed classical economy and clarity of meaning. As Nancy proposes, the images of *L'Intrus* are grounded in force, experience, the obviousness of what is not visible.

A heart lies purple and obscene on the ground. Hundreds of brightly-colored streamers explode across the screen as a boat is christened. A woman rides a dog-sled joyously through a wintry forest. Whose desire is this? Whose jouissance? On the relationship of Denis and Nancy, Anja Streiter writes, "They expose themselves as well as the reader and viewer to pain they cannot soothe, to beauty that makes no sense and to a pleasure of writing and filming that never comes to terms with what it explores."²³ In this image of incommensurability, we can locate the valuable obviousness of the image.

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¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), 12.

² Jacques Rivette, "The Genius of Howard Hawks," in Jim Hillier (ed), *Cahiers du Cinéma Vol. 1, The 1950s: neo-realism, Hollywood, new wave* (London: Routledge, 1985), 126-131. First published as "Genie de Howard Hawks" in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 23 (1953): 16.

³ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1988).

⁴ *Ibid*, 11 (emphasis mine).

⁵ Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 69-76.

⁶ *Ibid*, 72.

⁷ *Ibid*, 72.

⁸ *Ibid*, 267.

⁹ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 231.

¹⁰ Bellour, 21.

¹¹ Constance Penley, "Preface," in Bellour, xiii.

¹² Bellour, 74-75.

¹³ Nancy, 6.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 52-68.

¹⁵ Ibid, 54.

¹⁶ Nancy, 12.

¹⁷ Ibid, 3.

¹⁸ André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 15.

¹⁹ Raymond Bellour, "L'Evidence et le code," in *Cinema: theories, lectures*, (ed.) Dominique Noguez (Paris: Klincksieck, 1973).

²⁰ Nancy, 12.

²¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Intrus* (Paris: Galilée, 2000).

²² Damon Smith, "L'Intrus: an Interview with Claire Denis," *Senses of Cinema* 35 (April-June 2005), http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/05/35/claire_denis_interview.html.

²³ Anja Streiter, "The Community according to Jean-Luc Nancy and Claire Denis," *Film-Philosophy* 12/1 (2008): 53.