

"Art Cinema" Narration: Breaking Down a Wayward Paradigm

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The term "art cinema" is one of the fuzziest and yet least controversial concepts in film studies; scholars tend to nod compliantly whenever it is used to characterize cinematic practices outside Hollywood and feel at ease with the sense of ambiguity that surrounds the concept of the "art film." To make matters worse, the emergence of the term "world cinema" over the past few years threatens to blur the situation further, taking over some of the foreign territories previously occupied by "art cinema" without restoring any conceptual borderlines. Both the prevalent uses of "art cinema," on the one hand, and the increasing popularity of "world cinema," on the other, pose a threat to contemporary scholarly work. They jeopardize our ability as well as our obligation as theoreticians to carry out meaningful conceptual work and produce rigorous academic analyses. To resist this current trend of easy tags and catch-phrases, I would like to instigate a critical reevaluation of "art cinema" and test its theoretical clout in the contemporary cinematic setting.

The discourses on art cinema have revolved around two key poles: art cinema as a mode of narration and art cinema as an institution. The two seminal essays that offered a systematic approach to each of these two dimensions are David Bordwell's article "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," which appeared in *Film Criticism* in 1979, and Steve Neale's "Art Cinema as Institution" published in *Screen* in 1981. Both writers sought to register in a consistent manner -- unparalleled to this date -- the workings of a film practice in Europe from the late 1950s till the 1970s that entailed a complex web of cultural, formal, industrial, and political parameters. Nowadays, even though very few of these parameters apply, the deployment of "art cinema" is far from being obsolete; on the contrary, it keeps on spreading across the globe, encompassing more and more films, and overriding significant distinctions and nuances. Despite being slippery almost by definition, the term "art cinema" today has reached such a problematic level of bluntness that the only way to rectify the situation is to go back to the aforementioned essays and carefully reexamine their central premises. Deciding whether "art cinema" is something we need to keep or dispense with altogether is not an easy task and, without a doubt, it is a decision bound to be met with reservation or even hostility. My article is not meant to give one final, definitive answer; it is meant to initiate a theoretical discussion around a wayward concept that has traditionally resisted a solid definition.

Given the breadth and width of this enterprise as well as the need for a clear and consistent conceptual scrutiny, I would like to narrow my scope here to Bordwell's side and the narrational principles that he ascribed to art cinema [\[1\]](#). My argument will be twofold; first, I want to critically engage with his canonical account in order to underline a number of weaknesses that undermine the applicability of art cinema as a cohesive paradigm of narration. Secondly, I will highlight a number of areas in current film production across the globe that offer opportunities for new formal categories and challenge the narratologists to reconsider their existing schematas and taxonomies.

Reconsidering the Narrative Criteria

"Art cinema" as a distinct model of narration was first formulated by Bordwell in the aforementioned article but took full shape some years later in the book *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985), where art cinema was placed among three other "historical modes of narration" and was offered a very specific position in the poetic history of cinema. According to Bordwell, art cinema developed as an alternative paradigm mainly in Europe after World War Two, partly as a result of the decline of Hollywood dominance. The emergence of this type of narration is largely connected to the flowering of the national cinemas and the various New Waves all over the European continent in the late 1950s and the 1960s and is epitomized in the works of great European auteurs, such as Resnais, Fellini, Antonioni, and Bergman, among others (Bordwell, 1985: 230).

More specifically, the three main characteristics that regulate the narration of art films are objective realism, subjective realism and authorial presence. The first refers to a realistic construction of the story world with the loosening of the cause-and-effect logic, the episodic construction of the plot, and the open-ended resolution. The desire for verisimilitude in the construction of time and space was often translated into a preference for location shooting, natural lighting, and temps mort in the action, striving to offer the viewers a more realistic experience than the one found in the fantasy world of a Hollywood film. Secondly, subjective realism refers to the depiction of characters with an emphasis on their psychological state. Art-film protagonists lack the clear-cut traits, motives, and goals that their Hollywood equivalents possess, and thus we often see them drift aimlessly from one situation to another. Their psychological fluctuations are usually expressed by certain *mise-en-scène* techniques like covert glances, static postures, or smiles that fade, whereas mental states are represented with subjective images like dreams, hallucinations, and fantasies (Ibid: 208). The third element, the authorial presence, is manifested through a narrational commentary that makes the act of narration overt and self-conscious. Instead of being subordinate to a causal logic, the stylistic devices in art films occasionally gain prominence and function as the commentary of the auteur on the action. For instance, an odd camera angle or a mismatched cut or any strange manipulation of the spatiotemporal coordinates can be attributed to an extratextual authority, the filmmaker. Overall, the stylistic and narrative options in art cinema can be complementarily motivated by these three principles, but a clear balance is rarely achieved; whenever the two types of realism clash with the interventions of the auteur, the art film seeks "to solve the problem in a sophisticated way: through ambiguity" (Ibid: 212).

Even though Bordwell's account of art cinema rightfully reached a canonical status soon after its publication thanks to the well-known thoroughness that guides all his "historical poetics" projects [2], I would like to examine a number of problematic assumptions that derive from this particular work and could be held responsible for the long-lasting use and abuse of the term "art cinema" ever since. First and foremost, when we discuss this type of cinema as a "mode of narration," we should be able to distinguish it clearly from art cinema as "an institution." The confusion of these two diverse concepts, or even worse the deliberate equivalence between the two, can cause several misleading observations. To explain; a historical mode of narration signifies "a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension" that can be detected in a body of films of a certain period (Ibid: 150). The narrational norms of art cinema that are extracted from the works of Antonioni and Bergman, for instance, are solely textual features that determine the way their films tell their stories, and more specifically, the way they handle the qualities of causality, time and space. Whether these films were exhibited in art-house theatres in the United States

or whether they received state funding at home is not unproblematically related to their narrative structure. These issues, instead, pertain to a considerably wider concept, the art cinema "as institution" that consists of certain production, distribution and exhibition practices. To assume that every film that circulates in film festivals or is produced by non-profit organizations features by definition an art cinema narration is severely misleading. Even though Bordwell would hardly encourage such an assumption, he deliberately plays down the autonomy of the mode of narration from the institutional practices because in his scheme there is a necessary causality between the two [3]; however, this line of argument often obscures the significant heterogeneity found in the narrational construction of "art films," i.e. of films that are branded as such by the institution of art cinema that supposedly serves the purposes of High Art in contrast to the commercial goals of Hollywood cinema. As Steve Neale insightfully notes:

The discourses of Art and Culture are hostile to Hollywood on a variety of grounds and for a variety of reasons. Hence the variety of Art films themselves: from Neorealism to Felliniesque fantasy, from the austerity of Dreyer and Bergman to the plush visual spectacles of Bertolucci and Chabrol, from the relatively radical narrative experimentation of Antonioni, Godard and Resnais to the conventional storytelling of Visconti, De Sica and Truffaut ... *Even where the marks of enunciation themselves are heterogeneous, they tend to be unified and stabilised within the space of an institution which reads and locates them in a homogeneous way.* (Neale, 1981: 15; emphasis mine)

Although the institution of art cinema needs to encompass a wide range of films from diverse filmmakers and national origins in order to mount its attack against the powerful Hollywood tradition, and thus mark its own turf in the overall cinematic production, the task of the poetician remains to carry out the research of historical poetics in formal terms with minute precision [4]. Whether there is a causal link between a formal element and a production or exhibition practice is certainly a matter worth investigating but it forms part of a different and certainly more compound research program that focuses on cultural interactions well beyond the scope of formalism. For the purposes of poetics, which is Bordwell's main agenda, art cinema narration should be regarded as a specific model of narrative construction with a limited number of narrational choices, which can be found in some, but not all, of the films that travel in the art cinema circuit. Without a doubt, it is fairly demanding to differentiate between the two realms and avoid the common but erroneous conclusions, such as "this is a foreign title that shows in an art theatre; therefore it has an art cinema narration." [5] However, one needs to be as precise as possible, if they are to produce historically and theoretically meaningful observations. The following quote from Thomas Elsaesser's book on New German Cinema is indicative of the fine distinctions one has to draw when using the term "art cinema." As he notes:

Thus, in economic terms (state-funded, anti-formula, promoted as national) the New German Cinema belongs to the art cinema as opposed to genre cinema. But as an art cinema it is far less self-conscious about its film-historical place than the cinema of Bresson or Bergman, Rivette or Truffaut and, instead, much more aware of a (film-) political role and social issues (quite untypical for an art cinema). (Elsaesser, 1989: 41)

Aside from the essential narrational/institutional distinction that evades Bordwell's account, I would like to address a second problem that pertains to the way he conceptualized the

narrative paradigm of art cinema as an "alternative" mode vis-à-vis the classical narration exemplified in the American films produced in the Hollywood studios from 1917 to 1960 and beyond. The classical paradigm of narration was thoroughly substantiated in the monumental study that Bordwell co-authored with Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (1985), and the same year it was presented once more in a chapter in *Narration in the Fiction Film* as the first of the four historical modes that appeared in the history of the fiction film. The construction of the classical norms of narration in both cases is impressively systematic and consistent, containing very analytical and concise descriptions of the devices that classical filmmakers deployed in their narratives, and, more specifically, in the creation of the classical story causality as well as the classical spatiotemporal system. Nevertheless, the same consistency is not found in the description of the other three historical modes laid out in the book. The underlying assumption that generates this lack of consistency is that the classical narration should be regarded as the single dominant paradigm, the one that reached a universal status, and everything else is a deviation or variation from the norm. Towards the end of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, they write:

It would be tempting to mount an exhaustive typology of all possible alternatives to the classical Hollywood style – a paradigm of paradigms, so to speak. Is there a middle course between simply calling hundreds of films non-classical (each in its own way) and mechanically deducing possible variants? (Bordwell et al., 1985: 381)

His own middle-course solution was the formulation of the three alternative modes; art cinema, historical-materialist and parametric narration [6]. These are the paradigms that try to accommodate the "non-classical," mapping some of the continuities that exist in the films outside the classical boundaries. But this premise is problematic on several counts, the least of which is the narratological one [7]. How can one classify deviation? It is undoubtedly an arduous task and one is bound to allow plenty of leeway for multiple variations within the deviant mode and this is particularly evident in the art cinema narration. The following extract is fairly illustrative: "The art film plays among several tendencies: deviation from classical norms, adherence to art-cinema norms, creation of innovative intrinsic norms, and the greater or lesser foregrounding of deviations from those intrinsic norms" (Bordwell, 1985: 213).

Throughout the description of this paradigm, Bordwell offers several possibilities for handling the narrative elements in the art film, using a fairly tenuous vocabulary in delineating the axes of causality, time, and space. The paradigm has to be spacious enough to contain *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Persona* (1966) at the same time, so the criteria cannot be as strict and precise as the ones that defined the classical model. For instance, continuity editing consists of four or five techniques, whereas discontinuity editing can take on countless forms. Similarly, the classical hero has specific traits and goals, while the art film protagonist is defined by the lack of traits and goals, which practically means he could be anything *other than* a goal-oriented person, and this, evidently, is broad enough. This trail of thought, however, not only generates a very assorted and, on occasions inconsistent, classification of the formal elements, but is also symptomatic of the problem I identified earlier, namely the inadvertent confusion between the mode of narration and the institution of art cinema. In other words, the strategy to define art cinema in opposition to the classical formula establishes a framework that cannot refrain from taking into consideration factors

other than the formal ones, thus incorporating, albeit in a subliminal fashion, the influence of the institutional discourse around art cinema.

The side effects of this line of reasoning become even more evident as we look closer into the narrative elements of art cinema. As I mentioned above, Bordwell attributes to art cinema narration three major traits: objective realism, subjective realism and authorial commentary. The formal elements of the art film are justified either because they are realistic to the outer or the inner world, or because they amount to the presence of an extratextual figure, the author. Here we can identify two weak spots; firstly, the issue of ambiguity, which supposedly solves the tension between realism and artistic intervention, and secondly, the role of the auteur in the textual construction.

As far as ambiguity is concerned, Bordwell claims that it is an aesthetic strategy, which allows the three main norms to co-exist in the art film, promoting a relativistic notion of truth. A flashback, for instance, can be attributed to the personal memory of a character or to the narrational commentary of the auteur. An odd angle might be motivated by the warped state of the protagonist's mood or it might be a non-diegetic authorial intervention. Whenever we cannot figure out something in the plot of an art film, Bordwell urges us to "interpret this film, and interpret it so as to maximize ambiguity" (Bordwell, 1985: 212). The concept of ambiguity becomes thus a handy tool that, on the one hand, relieves us of the obligation to find determinate answers and explanations regarding the function of the formal devices, while, on the other, it helps us unite under the same umbrella term, the art cinema, a very wide range of narrational possibilities that would otherwise seem endless and chaotic [8]. Even though Bordwell's decision to use "ambiguity" as a distinctive quality of the art cinema narration allowed him to collate several incoherent elements into one single narrative scheme, it is the same decision, nonetheless, that generates the ambiguity of the theoretical discourse itself when it comes to analyzing and classifying films that are produced outside the Hollywood system to this day.

The second source of problematic thinking is situated in the role assigned to the author of a film. According to Robert Burgoyne:

One of the most daunting problems for film narrative theory centers on the status of the cinematic narrator, understood as the illocutionary source or instance of emission of the narrative discourse. Because film is a visual rather than a verbal medium, and does not imply a literal speaker or hearer, some theorists argue that the need to designate a narratological source for the representation of the fictional world is obviated: the events of the fictional world simply "tell themselves," in the words of Emile Benveniste. (Burgoyne, 1990: 4)

Bordwell's position in this debate is rather inconsistent since he uses the cinematic narrator simply as another aspect of differentiation between the classical and the art cinema narration. On one occasion, he argues that the need to identify a narrative voice is merely an "anthropomorphic fiction." The following statements extracted from the chapter on "Principles of Narration" are unequivocal:

I suggest, however, that narration is better understood as the organization of a set of cues for the construction of a story. This presupposes a perceiver, but not any sender, of a message. ... Most films do not provide anything like such

a definable narrator, and there is no reason to expect they will. ... I need only signal that we need not build the narrator in on the ground floor of our theory. No purpose is served by assigning every film to a *deus absconditis*. (Bordwell, 1985: 62)

On the other hand, the presence of an authorial figure seems to be essential in the case of art cinema where the filmmaker comes forward as the creator who wants to communicate a message or express a personal vision. In the chapter on art cinema narration, he notes emphatically:

I argued that there was no good reason to identify the narrational process with a fictive narrator. In the art cinema, however, the overt self-consciousness of the narration is often paralleled by an extratextual emphasis on the filmmaker as source. Within the art cinema's mode of production and reception, the concept of the author has a formal function it did not possess in the Hollywood studio system. (Ibid: 211)

The idea that a narrator should be identified only when the filmmaker possesses a well-established artistic persona that intervenes in the filmic text has been rightfully faced with fierce criticism from theorists who underlined that the concept of the narrator was logically and pragmatically indispensable for all fiction films, regardless of their production values or their institutional setting (Burgoyne, 1990; Chatman, 1990) [9]. However, Bordwell once more does not prevent the conditions of production and reception from infiltrating into his narrative analysis, identifying a formal function for the author that is highly disputable. The use of double standards for classical and art cinema narratives becomes even more disturbing when we look at the parametric mode of narration, where the author fades out again and is replaced by an "impersonal stylistic system" (Bordwell, 1985: 310). In parametric films, the style becomes prominent and functions autonomously from the plot, establishing various regular patterns that are motivated neither realistically nor compositionally nor transtextually. These patterns do not serve the needs of the plot but they do not amount to an authorial commentary either; they should be regarded as a rich texture that resists interpretation. This type of narration is found in "isolated filmmakers and fugitive films" (Ibid: 275), most of the examples of which are drawn from the works of Bresson, Dreyer, Ozu, and Mizoguchi. Then, the question that naturally arises is: how can one distinguish between a stylistic pattern that is an authorial commentary and, by an extension a connotation, from the one that defies interpretation and remains at the denotative level? Even if we accept that there is such thing as a mere denotation -- ignoring Barthes' claims that everything is a connotation, including the illusion of denotation (Barthes, 2000:9) -- why would Antonioni and Resnais' styles function as an authorial intervention and Bresson or Godard's not? Could anyone draw such a divide based on formal analysis? I believe not and, what is more, I believe that the presence of the parametric mode of narration, despite its heuristic value, does nothing but to underscore the weaknesses of art cinema and its three guiding principles.

Overall, my critical overview of art cinema so far has traced some of the problematic issues that arise from Bordwell's canonical account, starting from the highest level of generality, which concerns the tricky distinction between the mode of narration and the institution of art cinema, before moving on to more specific narratological concerns that address the way this mode of narration is conceptualized and delineated in relation to the classical Hollywood cinema. In the next section, I will indicate a series of narrative developments in contemporary filmmaking worldwide that constitute potential candidates in the "art cinema" category in the

critical discourse, while, at the same time, they pose significant challenges to this already ambiguous label. Hopefully, the discussion of some current trends in world film production will bring to the surface some of the theoretical cul-de-sacs that are in store for us if we continue using the term as a safe and ready-made designation for anything that deviates from the classical norms.

Art Cinema Today: Beyond the Shadow of Ambiguity

Unlike the lengthy discussions about the status of classical cinema in contemporary filmmaking practices and the existence of a postmodern/post-classical turn (Bordwell, 2006; Kramer, 1998; Neale and Smith, 1998), the category of "art cinema" has not attracted a similar critical interest and has barely invited scholars to rethink and refine the concepts that were established in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the 1990s there was only one notable book-length study dedicated to this topic, authored by Peter Lev and entitled *The Euro-American Cinema* (1993). Unfortunately, instead of being refined, the theorization of the "art cinema" in Lev's work reaches an even higher level of nebulosity. Lev defines the art film as a term referring "specifically to feature films made in the post-World War II period (and continuing to the present) which display new ideas of form and content and which are aimed at a high-culture audience." And, further on, he adds, "At the risk of tautology, one could say that art films are what is shown in art theatres" (Lev, 1993: 4). From these brief quotes, it becomes easily manifest how the mesh of the institutional and the formal parameters can only perpetuate some of the widespread generalizations and even block the theorizing process altogether through the use of tautological definitions.

In other publications the label "art film" is regularly attached to various contexts and diverse methodological agendas, designating films that come from all corners of the earth and exhibit very diverse narrative principles as well as production values. From Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) to Whit Stillman's *The Last Days of Disco* (1998) and from Edgar Reitz's *Die Zweite Heimat* (1993) to Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), the concept of the "art film" is considered an apt description that easily fits into a wide range of research concerns, including diasporic cinema, gender politics or historical nostalgia (Klein, 2004; Perkins, 2008; Von Moltke, 2003; Weese, 2002).

An invaluable exception to this conceptual muddle appeared only recently in András Kovács' book *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980* (2007), which pays meticulous attention to the formal aspects of the European films of that era. Kovács examines the style of a large number of well-known art films and identifies the following four stylistic trends: minimalism, naturalism, ornamentalism and theatricality. Each of these categories is further distinguished into a few other subdivisions that strive to contain the wide range of stylistic choices that were manifested in the cinema of that period and to do justice to the creative idiosyncrasies of a significant range of European auteurs. Even though Kovács does not seek to debunk Bordwell's work, his search for more specific formal categories constitutes an oblique answer to the latter's oversimplified categorization of the formal qualities of art films. But ironically enough, on the final note, Kovács fails where Bordwell had succeeded; he cannot refrain from reuniting all those diverse formal manifestations under the rubric of "modernism," a gesture that Bordwell had deemed rather unnecessary (Bordwell, 1985: 310). The problem that arises from the use of an expansive term such as "modernism" becomes particularly evident when Kovács is forced to address the issue of contemporary art films. He argues that "art cinema" styles persist and, yet, they are no longer modern but postmodern (Kovács, 2007: 207). At that point, the specificity and the

meticulousness of his formal categories is severely jeopardized as we are forced to enter another ambiguous and often tautological debate regarding the nature of postmodernism and its defining qualities vis-à-vis modernism and classicism.

Instead of taking that direction, however, I consider it more apt to look at contemporary films from across the world and begin to map their formal properties in a bottom-up manner unconstrained by the overarching frameworks of either modernism or postmodernism. The terrain is undoubtedly vast. Thus, I would like to limit myself here to three strands of filmmaking that gained significant critical capital from the 90s onwards and lend themselves well to the demands of formal analysis.

The first strand was identified by Jeffrey Sconce in the article "Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'Smart' Film," published in *Screen* in 2002. There, Sconce traced a new sensibility in the films of a young generation of American and international filmmakers who work in the United States but resist the aesthetics and the problematics of the Hollywood industry. The new sensibility of what he calls "smart cinema" amounts to a series of thematic and stylistic similarities that exude an increased sense of irony, black humour, and nihilism. Some typical examples include Todd Solondz's *Happiness* (1998) and *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), Neil LaBute's *Friends and Neighbours* (1998), Hal Hartley's *Henry Fool* (1998), Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* (1997) and Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), to mention only a few.

What is invaluable in Sconce's account of "smart cinema" is his emphasis on drawing distinctions between the classical European art cinema and this new type of filmmaking, despite their seeming similarities. As he notes:

American smart cinema has displaced the more activist emphasis on the 'social politics' of power, institutions, representation and subjectivity so central to 1960s and 1970s art cinema (especially in its 'political' wing), and replaced it by concentrating, often with ironic disdain, on the 'personal politics' of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture. (Sconce, 2002: 352)

In terms of formal composition, these films are distinguished by a "blank style" that relies on a still *mise-en-scène*, exceptionally long shots and long takes as well as a new sort of "de-emphasized" continuity that connects a series of static tableaux. The filming of the action strives to achieve a dampening effect and present a clinical representation of the events, which is often contradicted by incongruous voice-over narrators who seek to increase the tension between the unobtrusiveness of the style and the intensity of the story. Moreover, the causal links in the narrative logic are overwhelmed by the forces of coincidence and random fate, while the causal agents multiply and break the plot into several episodes. And yet, Sconce is not tempted to equate these elements with the traditional art cinema conventions. Instead, he insists on spelling out their differences. As he writes:

The favoured narrative structure is no longer the passive observer of an absurd world who eventually experiences some form of epiphany, but rather a range of characters subjected to increasing despair and/or humiliation captured in a rotating series of interlocking scenes in which some endure while others are crushed. ... the move to an episodic cast rather than a lone protagonist presents a shift in emphasis from 'coincidence' to 'synchronicity'; that is, the

narrative (and philosophical investment) in the "accident" yields to a narrative (and philosophical) belief in the logic of the random. (Ibid: 362-4)

The trend of "smart cinema," despite containing art cinema in its label, constitutes a significant departure from the norms of that mode and constitutes a case of contemporary filmmaking that deserves a separate position in the poetic history of cinema. Similarly, another distinct place should be reserved for the Dogme 95 movement that appeared across the Atlantic in the mid-90s. A group of Danish filmmakers composed the ten commandments of a "vow of chastity" for the Dogme 95 members in order to create a cinema of no illusions that would achieve what the European New Waves had failed to deliver in the 1960s. Whether their goal was accomplished or not is highly disputable, yet it is undeniable that they steered a large amount of critical discussion and proposed an aesthetics that was embraced fully or partially by various European or international filmmakers. Two Danish films, Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* (1998) and Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998) were the pioneers of the movement and were soon followed by others, among which I should mention an American and an Argentinean, Harmony Korine's *Julien Donkey-boy* (1999) and Jose Luis Marques' *Fuckland* (2000). The ten Dogme rules aimed at shattering the cinematic illusion with the exclusive use of location shooting, hand-held camera movements and natural sounds and lighting, while they prohibited the use of optical work, superficial action, genres and the accreditation of the filmmaker. A number of these elements, such as real locations and natural lighting were also part and parcel of the objective realism found in the European art films but the Dogme directors rejected in the most passionate and outspoken manner the other two poles of art cinema, namely the subjective realism and the authorial presence. Thus, despite their avowed opposition to the Hollywood practices and their wide exposure to the festival circuit, Dogme films bear important differences from the art films of the 1960s and 1970s, and it is precisely these critical differences, which risk being undermined or overlooked altogether when grouped under the broad label of "art cinema."

Finally, a third case of contemporary filmmaking that often qualifies for this label is the New Iranian Cinema, which regularly invites comparisons with Italian neorealism as well as other naturalistic trends. And yet, the Iranian films from the mid-1980s and early 1990s bear a significant number of distinctive qualities that should not be neglected by the Western gaze, as Bill Nichols rightfully observes in his article "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival Circuit" published in *Film Quarterly* in 1994. In that work, Nichols conducts an ethnographic reading of several Iranian films, including Mohsen Makmalbaf's *The Peddler* (1987), Rakhshan Bani-Etemed's *Nargess* (1991), Alizera Davudnezhad's *The Need* (1991), Abbas Kiarostami's *Life and Nothing More* (1992), and Amir Naderi's *The Runner* (1985). His goal is to carve a separate space for those films in our poetic schemes and to map a new pattern that differs considerably from Bordwell's four well-established modes of narration.

More specifically, Nichols identifies an austere, economic style that simply records what happens without passing any judgement. The Iranian filmmakers do not seek to come forward nor make any social or artistic commentaries but rather let reality unfold in front of their cameras in the simplest manner. Their effort to prevent any authorial intervention results in an "inferential form of storytelling" that moves without comment from one situation to a later consequence (Nichols, 1994: 25). Thus, these narratives sidestep causality with indirection and create a paradoxical mixture of complexity and subtleness in what goes unsaid or understated.

Most of the Iranian films that became famous in international festivals around the world entail domestic issues, which we might also encounter in Western cinema, but their lack of dramatic intensity is rather monumental. Iranian filmmakers treat their themes with a restricted utilization of irony, suspense and character identification, downplaying the goal-seeking charge of the story and avoiding the individualistic spin we find in a Hollywood or a European film. The type of narration in these cases rejects both the tight character-centered causality of the classical model and the existential ambiguities of the traditional European art cinema. As Nichols compares these films to Bordwell's established narrative paradigms, he notes:

This deflection of drama -- from its individual bearers (characters) to a more contemplative realm -- also operates in terms of visual style. This is a cinema of long shots and long takes. Close-ups are rare, music amplifying the emotional tone of scenes is unusual, editing to establish psychological realism or the effects of montage hardly exists, expressive uses of lighting, gesture, posture, *mise-en-scène*, camera angle, or camera movement are equally rare. (Nichols, 1994: 23)

Unfortunately, Nichols' minute precision in the handling of the formal concepts as well as his thorough knowledge of the history of film style is rather exceptional. Most critics and theorists are eager to identify in the New Iranian Cinema a renaissance of art cinema, most likely misled by the objective realism of these films (location shooting, natural sound and lighting etc.) as well as the lack of dialogue that can easily pass off as "ambiguity." Thus, we return to the initial argument regarding the broadness of the narrative criteria that Bordwell deployed in his art cinema account. "Objective realism," "subjective realism" and "authorial commentary" are three concepts wide enough to include copious formal permutations that are not classical. Therefore, it is fairly possible to stretch their boundaries and recruit the notion of "ambiguity" to include in the same narrative mode not only "smart films," but also Dogme films and, of course, the entire new Iranian cinema.

But what is the heuristic value of a narrative category that casts such wide a net? The key aim of constructing typologies is to arrange a set of continuities in a systematic and meaningful way. When a category like "art cinema" becomes so diluted over the years that it can contain practically everything, then, it is inevitably dried of any theoretical edge that it might have possessed in the past.

Conclusion

The crisis of "art cinema" as a coherent mode of narration in contemporary cinema is partly due to the inherent deficiencies of this paradigm and partly to the transformations of the entire cinematic terrain over the past two decades. Even though mapping the narrational options in cinema is by nature a laborious undertaking, the stakes are raised even higher today when the forces of globalization have complicated the exchange and circulation of modes and forms to an unprecedented degree. The mechanisms of film production, distribution and consumption in a globalized and interconnected world continually erode the traditional notions, on which we previously relied for heuristic purposes, such as the "national cinema" or the "auteur," while the decentering of the cinematic practices across the world invites us to reconsider the long-standing hierarchies between the center and the periphery of the global system or between the dominant forms and the deviations. In order to be able to monitor and process the latest developments of a cinematic universe in a state of flux, we

need to focus on the meticulous conceptualization of the phenomena in hand and the constant sharpening of the terms and concepts in our theoretical artillery.

The case of "art cinema" as I have presented it here is quite emblematic of the dangers that loom large if we continue to apply the traditional categories to contemporary cinema in a top-down manner, ignoring the discrepancies and the contradictions that arise from including in the same category narratives from a wide range of cinemas, from the independent "smart cinema" to the Dogme 95 movement and the new Iranian cinema. David Bordwell's construction of the "art cinema" mode of narration right from the start was subtended by the binary opposition between the classical model of Hollywood films and the alternative or deviant norms of European cinema. The flaws of this underlying principle were subsequently evident in the formulation of the principles of the art cinema, which had to be inclusive enough to contain a large sum of "deviations." Even though the premise was quite problematic to begin with -- as I extensively argued -- it could reflect the overall "Hollywood versus Europe" rhetoric that was opportune at the time and, therefore, it was bound to have a considerable impact on a wide range of academic debates. Such premise, however, can no longer be sustained. Given the enormous changes in the institutional setting of global cinema, the need to update our paradigms is more critical than ever.

Updating the paradigms, however, does not signify embracing new blanket terms, such as "world cinema," without clearly demarcating the territories that we wish to chart each time. So far, "world cinema" has had an extensive array of applications, one of which is to substitute for the title "foreign art film" in the various course syllabi (Andrew, 2004). Such equation can be highly misleading. What one has to keep in mind is that "world cinema" should be regarded as a considerably broader category that works on several layers of generality and requires multiple levels of analysis that are by no means reducible to the problematics of art cinema [\[10\]](#). Replacing "art cinema" with "world cinema," or even using them interchangeably, is without a doubt the wrong answer to a question that was wrongly posed in the first place.

When it comes to contemporary poetics, which is my main concern in this article, the important thing is to return to the key question of historical poetics that Bordwell himself formulated: "what are the principles according to which films are constructed and by means of which they achieve particular effects" (Bordwell, 1989: 371). The answer to this question and the search for continuities among the constructional principles, however, needs to adhere to two imperative rules; firstly, it is the minute analysis of the formal elements that should lead to the creation of the narrational modes, and, secondly, these modes are not ontological entities but historical formations that are open to constant reworking and change. In this light, the three main schemata of the art cinema narration -- objective realism, subjective realism and authorial commentary -- need to be further refined in order to do justice to the rich nuances of the cinematic language and to generate rigorous and consistent classifications, even if that gradually leads us to several smaller-scale narrative models or even if it convinces us in the end to abandon the idea of "art cinema" as a grand narrative paradigm once and for all.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) Steve Neale's account needs to be equally reexamined, given the enormous changes that have taken place in the global cinematic terrain from the late 80s till today. Yet, the

institutional side of this debate is far more complex and exceeds both my research capacity and the length of this article.

[2] David Bordwell has been a prolific writer who has almost exclusively worked within the tradition of "historical poetics," a research area that he was the first to carve out in film studies. Some of his major books include *French Impressionist Cinema: Film Culture, Film Theory and Film Style* (1980), *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (1981), *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (1993), *On the History of Film Style* (1997), *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (1998) and *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (2000).

[3] One of Bordwell's standard theses is that a mode of narration results from specific institutional, economic and technological factors. The classical mode of narration was nurtured by the serial and standardized mode of production in the Hollywood studios during the classical era from 1917 to 1960, whereas the appearance of art cinema narration could be attributed to an alternative model of European filmmaking practices (Bordwell et. al., 1985: 383-4).

[4] Bordwell's tendency to mesh the poetic elements with the institutional practices is also quite evident in the following statement, extracted from an interview in *Otrocampo*, where he discusses the presence of the art cinema mode of narration in countries outside Europe: "With other countries it's more complicated. If we take Taiwanese cinema, for example. Taiwan started making very much popular films as a sort of classical martial arts drama but then the market collapsed because of Hong Kong films coming in and then the American films coming in. So there wasn't any more an audience for popular, classical style story tailored in Taiwan. So they realized that they could make films for kind of a festival market. They didn't need to make films for the Taiwanese audience necessarily, now they'd rather make films that would bring international attention to them. So Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, made films which were very much more influenced by art cinema... I mean, if you see Edward Yang's early films, like *That Day, on the Beach* (1983), it's basically Antonioni in Taiwan. And Hou Hsiao-hsien, I would argue it's more complicated, but it's basically, in some of his later films particularly, well, he's really making films for European critics more than for Taiwanese audiences... And this is true also for Japan, and a few other countries where they decided that the way they would make their cinema noteworthy, was by making films that carry on this kind of experimentation that you find in art cinema" (see http://www.otrocampo.com/5/bordwell_ing.html).

[5] Barbara Wilinski provides an invaluable overview of the problematic definitions of the "art film" in her book on the emergence of the art house circuit in the United States. See particularly her chapter 'Reading for Maximum Ambiguity: A Consideration of the Art Film' (Wilinski, 2001: 11-40).

[6] Note that his initial response in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* was slightly different. At that point the three alternative film practices were 'art cinema', the avant-garde cinema and the "modernist" cinema (Bordwell et. al, 1985: 381). In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, he refined this typology, excluding the avant-garde and dividing the modernist cinema into three categories: the art cinema, the historical-materialist and the parametric narration.

[7] There are several ideological and socio-political issues that derive from the assumption that the classical Hollywood narration is the one norm against which everything else should

be compared and measured but this is outside the scope of this article, which has a strictly narratological agenda.

[8] Note that Bordwell's use of the concept of "ambiguity" remains at the broadest level of significance unlike other uses of the term, especially in literary theory. For an overview of the various types of ambiguity see Rimmon (1977).

[9] At a very general level, the activity of a narrator is a prerequisite for a film text to come into being and to acquire a certain narrative form. Every film presents a fictional world comprising both visual and aural information that has been carefully selected and arranged by someone. However, the distribution and the presentation of this information is not a simple or clear process, as it tends to instigate complex narrative voices and employ diverse narrative levels, which are usually responsible for the confusion and the lack of consensus among film theorists. For an elaborate theory on the levels of narration, see Branigan (1992).

[10] The most interesting attempt to describe the multiple levels of "world cinema" is found in Dudley Andrew's suggestion to draw an atlas of world cinema, with each map of the atlas capturing a different dimension of the global cinematic system. See Andrew (2004).

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