

Peter Verstraten

MIDDLEBROW MODERNISM IN FILM (THEORY):

Visconti's *Senso* (1954) vis-à-vis Diamant-Berger's *La madone des sleepings* (1955)

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By reflecting upon the travelling concept of the (film) 'auteur', the first part of the article argues that Modernism manifests itself differently in cinema studies than in literary studies. Whereas the literary canon is constituted by excluding anything connoting conventional reading matter, a 'pantheon' of great directors exhibits a 'peaceful coexistence' between popular films and art cinema. The second part of the article addresses the shift in Rudolf Arnheim's film theory from die-hard Modernist in the 1930s to middlebrow Modernist in the 1950s in a period when Henri Diamant-Berger made an adaptation of Maurice Dekobra's *La madone des sleepings*. Concerned with a 'psychology of art', Arnheim is to claim a 'stylized simplicity' which in the end is better represented by Luchino Visconti's colourful but nonetheless 'sophisticated' melodrama *Senso* than by Diamant-Berger's too modest picture. Visconti's film gives body to the idea of film as a 'pan-art', which implies that it is characteristic of cinema to incorporate influences from other art films but also to parasitize upon sentimentalism and (high) emotion.

Any attempt to reflect upon the relation between Modernism and cinema affirms the rule that it is frankly impossible to take the history of film as analogous to the histories of painting, music or literature (Verstraten, 221-28). If Modernism is to be regarded as a reaction to a critical and historical tradition of the medium at hand, then such a tradition is still in development for cinema by the time Modernism is blossoming in other media, roughly from 1910-1940. It is customary to speak of a 1920s film 'avant-garde' in the case of the bold and formal experimentalism of (European) cinema, like the work of

Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, Hans Richter, Fernand Léger. Paradoxically, these 'avant-garde' films had the effect to elevate cinema to the status of an art, which is at odds with the usual avant-gardist endeavour to put any notion of art into doubt (Friedberg, 163). Insofar films were to be labelled (retrospectively) as 'Modernist' in the 1920s, then this could only concern those titles which explicitly adopted influences from other art forms, as András Bálint Kovács hypothesized (17). *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) is such a first impulse of (early) Modernist cinema, for this film clearly drew inspiration from German Expressionist painting in its mise-en-scène. Modernism only truly manifests itself in cinema, however, after Modernism is already over the hill in other art forms. Kovács has suggested that 1966 is the key year when films like Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrej Rublev*, Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-up* were released, which all put specifically cinematic conventions to the test (338). My aim in briefly referring to the debate on the 'paradoxical place' cinema holds in the discourse on Modernism (Friedberg, 164), is to indicate from the very start that the position of film, and film theory, is no less problematic in the case of middlebrow Modernism. This difficulty is predominantly related to a difference in artistic status between cinema on the one hand and literature, music, painting on the other hand. The great merit of (re)thinking the terms and conditions of (middlebrow) Modernism is that it sheds light on the medium-specific characteristics of cinema vis-à-vis the other arts.

The surplus value of the film 'auteur' as a concept

When the idea of an 'auteur' in cinema became particularly vibrant in the 1960s, this concept turned out to be a perfect catalyst to legitimize the necessity of the discipline of film studies. Many academics were sceptic at the suggestion that film courses were to be lectured, since they presumed that the aesthetic value of cinema was too poor, as Thomas Elsaesser notes (14). Appropriating a specifically literary concept for the cinema worked to countervail the presumption that film was too entertaining to become a serious object of study. The term 'auteur' had the advantage that it could give the impression that film scholars were to examine movies/cinema in the vein of literary or poetic analyses. And thus this very term offers a good entry point for a ground of comparison between literature and film, and, following on from this, it can help us to consider the value of middlebrow Modernism in film studies in distinction from literary studies.

The notion of an auteur in cinema goes back to a polemical essay by François Truffaut, published in the French journal *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1954,

but the term proved to be a travelling concept and had an entirely different ring eight years later. At the time, Truffaut spoke of a *politique des auteurs* in order to criticize the so-called 'Tradition of Quality'. He was fed up by the tendency in French cinema that scriptwriters produced a neat scenario, based upon a quality novel, and the director just made sure he produced the 'right' images to the screenplay. This practice had turned French cinema into a regrettably sterile and risk-free undertaking, for both scriptwriters and director are content with solutions under 'the cover of literature': presumed 'unfilmable' scenes are usually solved by dialogues, and hence the equivalence proposed is never of a cinematic nature. Instead of a limited role as *metteur-en-scène* Truffaut advocated the director as an *auteur* who was supposed to be responsible for the film from start to finish. Only when the filmmaker is taking the initiative to write a script himself and thus can exert control over his film, can he be attributed the honorary label of 'auteur'. Whereas the *metteur-en-scène* always produces more or less the same old stuff, confined as he is by a prefab script, only the 'auteur' can be potentially innovative, idiosyncratic and/or anti-bourgeois, and Truffaut mentions among others Jean Renoir, Jean Cocteau, Robert Bresson and Jacques Tati – 'men of the cinema' – to illustrate his point. An 'auteur' can also 'misfire' of course, but his failure is nonetheless preferable over predictable 'quality'.

The definition of an 'auteur' by Truffaut is first and foremost an ontological one: did the director really have a say in the story and style of the film? This ontological notion of the 'auteur' was soon exchanged for an interpretative one by the critics of *Cahiers du cinéma* in the late 1950s. If one could detect after a few minutes 'this must be a film by X', then X became acknowledged as an *auteur*. It is of seminal importance that this label was not just reserved for European directors like Roberto Rossellini, but also directors who were hired within the Hollywood system could be called an *auteur*. The only criterion was whether the critics could discern the 'personality' of the director on the basis of the film. The one school of *auteur* critics was particularly focused on 'a core of meanings': Howard Hawks made a number of adventure dramas (the gangster picture *Scarface*; the film noir *The Big Sleep*; the western *Rio Bravo*) as well as a number of crazy comedies (*Bringing Up Baby*; *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*), but despite the great diversity in genres, the motifs and incidents were always alike and his thematic preoccupations the same (Wollen, 81). The other school of critics had a keen eye for style and *mise-en-scène*, because the composition of shots provided a prime means to fathom the director's signature. Moreover, they were bent on detecting remarkable acting performances, striking gestures, skilful lighting – in short,

they searched in films for non-linguistic and therefore specifically cinematic features to write about. Preferably, these features were so subtle that one needed a special acuity for film to appreciate them, and thus these critics, as Christian Keathley put forward, could show themselves off as privileged viewers. They were precisely 'these devotees, and they could see what the average viewer could not: the meticulous, distinctive stylishness in the work of an apparently conventional filmmaker' (96).

The American critic Andrew Sarris parasitized upon the predilection of the French critics for American film makers – Vincente Minnelli, Samuel Fuller, Nicholas Ray – who were, on closer look, not as run-of-the-mill as often presumed. In a 1962 essay Sarris transformed the original *politique des auteurs* into a quite chauvinistic 'auteur theory' by entertaining the claim that 'American directors are generally superior to foreign directors', since they express their 'personality through the visual treatment of material' whereas European film makers more often opt for the 'literary content of the material' (Sarris, 105). Ingmar Bergman, precisely because he is free to develop his own scripts, has less stylistic consistency than those directors who, like Douglas Sirk and Otto Preminger, work within the confinements of the studio-system (Sarris, 105). This evaluative version of auteurism was to meet scorn from the influential film critic Pauline Kael in a scathing essay from 1963,¹ but despite her witty jeremiads one important net result was that Sarris' notes consolidated the belief that film has a canon, worthy of study. Sarris himself proposed near the end of his essay his own personal lists of twenty film makers who deserved to be part of a 'pantheon' of directors. It will not surprise that several of the twenty top division film makers are from American descent like D.W. Griffith, Robert Flaherty, Buster Keaton, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Orson Welles, or when from European origin, they made their most memorable pictures while working in America: Charlie Chaplin, Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, Josef von Sternberg, Erich von Stroheim.

If we are to linger over this list of names, a clear distinction between literature and cinema can be articulated. Writers are selected for the literary canon on account of their artistic and cultural value and status: one can think of James Joyce, Rainer Maria Rilke, Marcel Proust, Marguerite Duras. Whether they have a great public appeal, is not directly relevant; 'a personal, private style as unique and unmistakable as your fingerprint' to coin Fredric Jameson's phrasing (114), is more of an asset. This idea that a literary canon catalogues writers who produce Literature (with a big L) accords with a remark Stanley Cavell made in his study *The World Viewed* in the 1970s: you can only call yourself a devoted lover of literature in case you admire serious

books, written by the like of Emily Brontë or George Eliot or Fyodor Dostoyevsky. If you are addicted to potboilers and bouquets, you can only say that you like to read, as a pastime. In literature, Cavell asserted, there are only a 'few instances of very great artists who are at the same time popular'. There is a clear-cut divide between 'high' and 'low' in literature, or at least there still was such a divide in the 1970s, before attempts to close this gap became more outspoken. In the case of cinema, the argument can be reversed. A cursory glance at Sarris' list of Pantheon Directors immediately suggests that public appeal does count very much: Europeans like Jean Vigo, Jean Renoir, Luis Buñuel, and Carl-Theodore Dreyer are included, but they do not have any pride of place over the popular Griffith, Ford, or Chaplin. Thus, Cavell was to conclude that 'in the case of films, it is generally true that you do not really like the highest instances unless you also like typical ones. You don't even know what are the highest instances of unless you know the typical as well' (6). Dedicated followers of cinema will only be able to appreciate the films of Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Martin Scorsese on condition that they also, if not first, acknowledge the genius of the Warner Bros' gangster pictures from the 1930s, the melodramas by Douglas Sirk, the films by maverick director Samuel Fuller, and Robert Rossen's movies like *Body and Soul* (1947) and *The Hustler* (1961). Hence, genre films and pulp fiction are already part and parcel of a film canon, whereas the literary canon is rather constituted by excluding anything connoting conventional reading matter. Hence, in contrast to its literary counterpart, the film canon exhibits a 'peaceful coexistence' between art cinema and studio-pictures, which corresponds to the notion of cinema as a medium that hovers incessantly between its status as an entertainment industry and a wished-for acknowledgement as a true art form. This tight embrace between high/art and low/commercialism in cinema (studies) is most relevant for shedding a light on middlebrow Modernism.

Film Adaptations of *La madone des sleepings*

The adaptation of Maurice Dekobra's middlebrow Modernist novel *La madone des sleepings* by Henri Diamant-Berger in 1955 can be considered a negligible picture, according to present-day standards. No more than five voters have voted for this picture at imdb.com and its rating is no higher than a 4,6 out of 10, but it is slightly better at commeaucinema.com: 2,51 out of 5. An even earlier adaptation, co-directed by Marco de Gastyne and Maurice Gleize in 1929, is still awaiting five votes, but at commeaucinema.com it scores a poor 1.75 out of 5. In a review published in *The New York Times* on October 14, 1929,

critic Mordaunt Hall was not very favourable to this 'melodramatic and highly improbable chronicle' in which traveling is done 'chiefly during fade-ins and fade-outs': 'As quick as a wink the mileage is covered, from London to the Riviera, to a castle near Loch Lomond', and the only words of praise are reserved for actress Claude France, 'who in either frivolous or serious episodes gives an intelligent performance' as Lady Diana. 'In fact, her good looks and acting are worthy of a more plausible narrative. When the scenes leave her behind the interest in the film dwindles materially.' According to the frenchfilmsite.com the 1929 film can be considered as 'good – passable entertainment', and the 1955 version, which is a Le Film d'Art production, as 'mediocre – watchable, but not unless you have something better to do'.

Even though the response to both adaptations is far from raving that does not yet imply that their neglect is self-evident. Perhaps there are three main reasons why a film like Diamant-Berger's *La madone des sleepings* has remained under the radar. First, when French critics show great interest in popular American cinema in the 1950s, the disadvantage of the film is, ironically, that it is a French production. Second, the quality of the film is not that poor that it could have a second life in later decades as a cult movie. From the 1990s onwards, it became an increasing mark of hipness among cinephiles to embrace the lowest of 'pulp fiction'. Ed Wood Jr., Russ Meyer and Hershell Gordon Lewis were derided back when they made their outrageous pictures, but they now enjoy a belated popularity as superb cult works, precisely because their cinema transgresses the conventions of 'proper' taste. Third, Truffaut had been particularly critical of adaptations from novels, unless the film maker searches for specifically cinematic alternatives for presumed 'unfilmable' scenes, like Robert Bresson did when shooting *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1951), inspired by Georges Bernanos' same-titled novel from 1936. Diamant-Berger, however, lacked the ambition to create a cinematic tour-de-force as idiosyncratic as Bresson's film. The many changes Diamant-Berger made were hardly of a formal nature, but basically concerned Dekobra's plot and tone.

Lady Diana Wyndham still visits professor Traurig, played by no one less than film 'auteur' Erich von Stroheim in his final role, but instead of her dream she tells about an adventure in San Miguel, a municipality in Guatemala. Hence, the film does not contain the witty persiflage of psychoanalysis via the interpretation of the dream in Dekobra's novel. It has a few episodes extra with the professor who even gets shot at one point. The Russian romantic interest from the novel has been exchanged for a Latin lover, called Armando Felix. There is a female rival indeed, called Irena, but the

finale is entirely different. In the novel, lady Diana challenges Irina to shoot her, but then the Russian sweetheart intervenes; in the film a hilarious saloon brawl ensues after which lady Diana walks away on horseback together with Armando. Even more striking than such plot changes is a difference in tone, for the film lacks internal narrator Gérard's sharp-minded comments and perceptions, bordering on camp. To compensate, there is the introduction of a new character, the chauffeur Henri who offers much comic relief because of his clumsy actions.

If this summary is meant to indicate that a comparison between novel and film is of little relevance, the adaptation can nonetheless be used to sketch under which conditions Diamant-Berger's film could have become a middlebrow Modernist picture. *La madone des sleepings* is an example of popular European cinema, made by an old hand, for Diamant-Berger had already visited America way back in 1918 to see what he as a European, eager to make popular films, could learn from the craft and skills in Hollywood. He was impressed by the technical facilities and returned to France with the disconcerting words: 'In America, lighting effects are created; in France, shadow effects are created' (cit in. Abel,87). This sad realization contributed to the many artistic tendencies in the European cinema of the 1920s under the motto that if the Americans surpass us in storytelling, let us then explore the specificity of the medium by wondering what cinema is. This question after the inalienable essence of the medium can be regarded as a characteristic Modernistic preoccupation, albeit a Modernism of a 'high' stature.

Rudolf Arnheim's Film Theory

Since Modernism can only prosper when a medium has a sufficiently developed critical and historical tradition, according to Kovács, the experiments by film makers in the 1920s could only be tentatively Modernist, for cinema had no such tradition yet at the time. Several directors were particularly keen on exploring affinities with other art forms. Ricciotto Canudo had defined cinema as the 'seventh art' in an essay from 1923, and according to him, film was an amalgam of music, dance, poetry, architecture, painting, and sculpture. Short films like Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy's *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) and René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924) gave flesh and bones to this idea. Even though the German Rudolf Arnheim, one of the fathers of film theory, was not delighted by '[f]orm for form's sake' as such (*Film as Art*, 42,) he was enthusiastic about the many attempts in the silent era to put film techniques to artistic use, for such devices undermine the idea that cinema was to have a realist vocation. For him, film could only become an art by

acknowledging that it is not a transparent window onto the world, but an expression, just like other arts: the surface of the screen is two-dimensional instead of 3-D, and thus by definition distorted. Film techniques were to underscore the permanent distortion of cinema by mobile cameras, backward motion, accelerated motion, creative camera angles (as in *Entr'acte*), fades, superimpositions, simultaneous montage, and the like. In the concise words of Dudley Andrew, '[f]or each limitation of natural perception there is a gain for potential aesthetic perception' (32).

In his essay 'A New Laocoön: Artistic Composites and the Talking Film' (1938), which became part of the English edition of *Film as Art*,² Arnheim expresses his dismay with the coming of spoken words in cinema. The large movie audience has applauded this development, because it 'wants to take part in exciting events as fully as possible', and this can best be achieved by 'the mixture of visual action and dialogue' (185). Such a mixture, however, creates a disequilibrium, Arnheim postulates. Speech pushes all other things into the background and paralyzes visual action. Bearing in mind that Arnheim's title refers to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's notion that arts have to be reduced to their essential qualities, for him the silent cinema of the 1920s had reached the apogee of film art. With the intrusion of speech, the 'union of silent man and silent things' would be put off balance, disrupting the organic whole. A true fusion between image and speech is impossible, because there is a hierarchy between the two. The visual elements can function as segregated representations, but the dialogue is always incomplete. If, Arnheim argues, 'the image on the screen were ever shut off', the spoken words are incapable to fully 'take over' (172). Hence, speech in film cannot constitute an 'artistically complete and closed word pattern' (174), as might be possible in the much more text-based theatre. The addition of spoken words is a supplement at best, but in the practice of most cases, the dialogue has come to compensate for the poverty of visual scenes. The possible purity of silent cinema has given way to quite unstable, hybrid forms (Arnheim, 188-89): With the introduction of speech in cinema, the medium had been turned into an 'impure kind of theatre-substitute' (Andrew, 35).

At the time of writing 'A New Laocoön', Arnheim proved himself to be a die-hard Modernist.³ Had he persisted in his disdain for the talking film he would have fought a lost battle, but by the time he published his study *Towards a Psychology of Art*, he wrote in the Introduction that the collection of papers was the result of 'the gradual spelling-out of a position' (3). In the opening essay he claims that contemporary art has become 'incomprehensible', for it has degenerated into a 'contemplation of formal

relations', which disaccords with the principle that 'good form does not show' (5). Since content is too often disregarded in this 'incomprehensible' art, he advocates interpretations which are 'capable of opening the eyes and ears to the messages transmitted by form rather than distracting them with shapes' (16).

As a critic influenced by the so-called Gestalt theory, Arnheim considered a work of art – including film – not as an object, but as a device for a better understanding of the world. In discussing Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film* (1960) in a 1963 text, Arnheim welcomes the consistent focus in this study upon 'the medium's affinity with the flow of life' (184). Perhaps cinema is the gateway to reacquaint the spectator with earthly concerns, as a response to the fact that '[m]odern man ... has become ideologically shelterless' (184). This does not mean that the camera just has to record and reveal the minutiae of ordinary life, as Kracauer was to claim, for in Arnheim's prescriptive account, film has to convert raw material into meaningful expressions. Ideally, a work of art exhibits a balance between complexity and clarity. The (moving) images should not be too simplistic, for in that case the spectator is not truly triggered. Art has the task to challenge the conventions of a visual logic, but only to a certain extent, for art should also not become too obscure. Arnheim celebrates a "'stylized" simplicity' of conception as 'the prototype of genuine concreteness, of elementary closeness to reality!' (187).

Artificiality is no problem as long as a stylistic consistency is guaranteed, Arnheim surmises. The artificiality of the setting as such in *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* is not ludicrous, but the fact that the unity of space is broken up in the manner of Expressionist and Cubist painting creates an unwelcome contradiction (185). Alain Resnais' *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), by contrast, is a flagrant violation of realism as well, but here the peculiar attitude of the actors is just 'the logical climax of their remote, stylized gestures', and therefore has the favourable 'Surrealist effect of revealing the unreal in the real' (185). If the Arnheim of *Film as Art* had seemed like a formal purist, the postwar Arnheim has taken a more moderate position. Working with 'unshaped matter', as artists do, should result into 'significant form' so that man can rediscover a 'grip on reality' (191). This worked for Arnheim in the case of *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, whereas he was much more critical of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960). Although he calls it a film of 'some merit', he suspects it might be an example of 'dissolution by unorganized form' (188-89). As Ara H. Merjian observes, in the eyes of Arnheim, film has to 'fight against its affinity to reality, but not so hard as to

be totally abstract' (178), but with *L'Avventura* Antonioni seemed to strive for 'a kind of narrative formlessness' (176).

On the basis of *Toward a Psychology of Art* Merjian qualifies Arnheim's gestaltist ideas as 'middlebrow [M]odernism' if compared to Greenberg's 'elitist formalism': 'Art is not unruly but prescribable; art is not the reserve of the pontifical critic, but the democratic tool of education' (178). Let me, in the vein of Merjian, emphasize Arnheim's middle-position. If films become too hermetic, there is the risk that many spectators will 'search for visual stimulation in popular culture and superficial entertainment' (178). And thus, he arrives at a 'diet' version of Modernism: it is fine to put a series of reigning dogmas into doubt, if one at some point compensates for all negation. At the same time, such reaffirmation of some truth should resist absorption into commodity culture.

Colour

Arnheim was to voice his version of middlebrow Modernism precisely when Modernism is about to thrive in cinema if we stick to Kovács' account. By the mid- to late 1950s, film had built the critical tradition that had still been lacking in the 1920s partly thanks to the rise of film festivals, the increased production of film reviews, and a solid system of storytelling in Hollywood. Modernist film makers were to problematize these narrative tendencies, which, in turn, helped to consolidate the discourse surrounding film festivals, for they benefited from the release of challenging, if not scandalizing pictures: think of the work of Godard, of Antonioni, of Bergman, Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana* (1961) and *El ángel exterminador* (1962), Federico Fellini's *Otto e mezzo* (1963). But beneath the level of these usual suspects of a cinematic Modernism, a more moderate set of films can be detected, some of them as (very) fine achievements, albeit independent from any specific category (like *nouvelle vague*, or Modernism). Candidates could be Juan Antonio Bardem's *Muerte de un ciclista* (1955), René Clement's *Plein Soleil* (1959), Dino Risi's *Il Sorpasso* (1962), but only beneath this class, a film like Diamant-Berger's *La madone des sleepings* could be positioned, on a par with equally modest films (from an artistic perspective) like the early Antonioni film *La signora senza camelia* (1953), *Ciske de Rat* (Wolfgang Staudte, 1955), or André Hunebelle's *Le Bossu* (1959).

In order to suggest how these latter films could have elevated themselves to the fine achievements among a provisional category of middlebrow Modernism, I would like to use Luchino Visconti's *Senso* (1954) as a point of comparison. This melodrama about an Italian Countess who starts a love affair with a lieutenant from Austria, the country her motherland is in

war with, is the very first Italian film shot in colour. Without a doubt an idiosyncratic choice, since black-and-white was taken for granted for directors with a reputation like his. In 1948 Visconti had made the neo-realistic film *La terra trema*, which was radically 'authentic': the actors were not professionals, but locals who had to speak their own Sicilian dialect. Such 'authenticity' was matter-of-factly underscored by a choice for black-and-white, for at that time, colour 'did not connote reality but the opposite' (Buscombe, 88), and was above all reserved for 'unrealistic genres' like musicals, costume romances, fantasies, westerns (89). When Visconti decided to shoot *Senso*, this was a clear rupture with the neo-realistic tradition that he himself had helped to constitute. It is important to distinguish this rupture from Antonioni's break with neo-realism. *L'avventura*, with its stringently composed black-and-white shots and dead moments, was an attempt to explode conventional causality as the parameter of classical cinema, and this ambition makes it into an exemplum of (high) Modernism. Visconti's aim was more modest: the use of colour was innovative in light of the tradition, but it was particularly functional from a narrative angle considering that *Senso* was an exuberant melodrama, situated in the high classes.

In her brief essay 'A note on novels and films' Susan Sontag who refers to *Senso* in passing, describes cinema as a 'fruitfully conservative medium'. The representation of emotions in a relatively banal manner is a no-go for literature with its fairly elitist connotation, but acceptable in film. Writes Sontag in 1965: 'All the trappings of melodrama and high emotion may be found in the most recent and sophisticated cinema (for example, Visconti's *Senso* and *Rocco and His Brothers*), while these have been banished from most recent sophisticated novels' (245). Whereas literature is worthy of the label Literature in case it excludes sentimentalism and kitsch, cinema is to be taken as a 'pan-art': film 'can use, incorporate, engulf virtually any other art: the novel, poetry, theater, painting, sculpture, dance, music, architecture' (245). Canudo's idea of cinema as the 'seventh art' was in the 1920s an attempt to have film acknowledged as an art form, but Sontag's concept of a 'pan-art' is to state that it is in the nature of film to appropriate miscellaneous influences, without making tight hierarchical distinctions – on the one hand, poetry, sculpture, dance and on the other hand, the trappings of 'high emotion'. Sontag qualifies *Senso* as 'sophisticated cinema', but it has unmistakably many features of popular (genre-)pictures: a plot based upon sentiments accompanied by music and a flamboyant use of colour. But at the same time, this conventional employment is so unconventional for a director of the category Visconti belongs to, that it here functions as a device which reacts to

the specific 'realistic' convention of black-and-white. Thus, we arrive with *Senso* at a strange circular argument: the choice for colour is conventional for some genres, but for a melodrama as sophisticated as *Senso* it can be taken as a contrarian statement: an art cinema director wilfully adopts an overtly popular device. Hence, I want to claim that *Senso* approaches Arnheim's prescriptive ideal of post-war middlebrow Modernism: it can both befit an art film and a melodrama to have characters perform theatrical gestures and a meticulous mise-en-scène. The use of colour, however, testifies to Visconti's preference of popular appeal over abstract impression, turning the 'sophisticated' *Senso* into a case of 'stylized simplicity'.

My point is that Diamant-Berger's adaptation of *La madone des sleepings* has been a missed opportunity to explicitly 'stylize' its 'simplicity'. With a main character focused upon luxury, it would have been at any rate legitimate to resort to exuberant colours. If *Senso* might have been used as an example, then *La madone des sleepings* could have been its French counterpart. In the 1930s Arnheim was still allergic to colour in cinema because he feared that its inclusion would strengthen the idea of a realist vocation in film, but in the film practice of the 1950s it turned out to be the polar opposite: colour was a token of unrealistic (genre-)pictures. Whereas Antonioni's Modernist *L'avventura* was too rigid and formless for Arnheim, an excessive colour print of a melodramatic movie, displaying wealth and decadence, could have been an optimum balance between popular amusement and idiosyncratic Modernism – giving form to his idea of a middlebrow Modernism.

Notes

1. There is a fair chance, Kael lamented, that a director is acknowledged as an 'auteur' simply because he makes the same (mediocre) movie over and over again, for that is taken as proof of his thematic preoccupations, whereas the film maker who surprises the spectator each time with something new is ignored, as was Carol Reed's fate according to her opinion. And indeed, *Odd Man Out* (1947), *The Fallen Idol* (1948) and *The Third Man* (1949) are wonderful pictures, but hardly comparable.
2. The very first German edition of Arnheim's study *Film als kunst* was from 1932.
3. The famous art-historian Clement Greenberg was to write, two years after Arnheim's essay, the article 'Towards a Newer Laocoön' (1940). According to Greenberg, it is a Modernist goal to prevent visual art from being perverted by words; painting should resist the tendency to imitate literary effects, that is, to produce subject matter which can be easily couched into narrative terms. According to Greenberg, music was to offer an interesting model to visual art, since as a pure art form of immediate sensation, music can be considered as antithetical to literature.

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