A new look at the concept of style in film: the origins and development of the problem-solution model

Colin Burnett

a University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA

Online Publication Date: 01 August 2008
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A new look at the concept of style in film: the origins and development of the problem–solution model

Colin Burnett*

University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, WI, USA

This paper presents a history of the development of a ‘neoformalist’ tool for researching the history of film style: the problem–solution model of style explanation. The significance of this model can be seen in the knowledge it yields into the innovation by filmmakers of stylistic devices at the ‘textual’ level and in its insight into the broader question of how the history of style should be told. In this account, I draw on rarely discussed writings by key proponents of this research program to highlight the stages of refinement of this aspect of the concept of ‘film style’, and ultimately trace the origins of the problem–solution model to art historian E.H. Gombrich, who championed it in a period of meta-critical debate in art history in the mid-twentieth century. The story of the model’s emergence in film studies reveals that art historical methods are just as critical to contemporary cine-stylistics as those of French theory and Russian Formalism. Our concept of style, it is claimed, while apparently ‘natural’ in the eyes of the current student of film, has in fact changed as our understanding of historical causation has changed.

Keywords: problem–solution model; neoformalism; history of film style; art history; Bordwell; Thompson; Salt; Gombrich; Riegl; Wölfflin

Neither normative criticisms nor morphological descriptions alone will ever give us a theory of style. I do not know if such a theory is necessary; but if we want one we might do worse than approach artistic solutions in terms of those specifications which are taken for granted in a given period, and to list systematically, and even, if need be, pedantically, the priorities in the reconciliation of conflicting demands. Such a procedure will give us a new respect for the classical but will also open our minds to an appreciation of non-classical solutions representing fresh discoveries. (E.H. Gombrich, cited in Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 2)

The study of film style now stands as an entrenched and multifaceted tradition. ‘Film style’ as a concept, taken in light of this tradition, itself has a history, and is the product of competing models and the debates that have resulted from the intersection and perceived implications of such models. Sources of what we now call ‘film style’ include such disciplines as linguistics, musicology, and semiotics. As I will argue, a further source, too often overlooked, is art history. From the study of fine arts film studies has borrowed the idea that historical styles are best explained as products of practical compositional problems to which artists develop skilled

*Email: burnett2@wisc.edu

ISSN 1740-0309 print/ISSN 1740-7923 online
© 2008 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/17400300802098289
http://www.informaworld.com
solutions. In lieu of fuzzy romantic ruminations about inspiration or unconscious creative drives, this approach promises a concrete and testable psychology of artistic creativity. Individual styles of directors or cinematographers, and group styles associated with an industry, a studio, or as mandated by a movement can now be studied as fruits of individual innovation in problem situations rather than predetermined byproducts of deeper social or cultural forces. The problem–solution model for recounting style development, although most often used by historians in its ‘thin’ form as a simple heuristic, has recently shown potential in its ‘thicker’ version, that is, as a legitimate ‘engine’ of change and stability in style history. An implication of this thicker articulation is that without the emergence of new problem situations for filmmakers to test their skills, film art would not have a history. As bold or even reductive as such an assertion may for the moment sound, it should first be recognized that few film scholars have considered the significance and origins of this model.

The most prominent practitioners of this explanatory paradigm are associated with so-called ‘neoformalist’ stylistics. The tendency in secondary accounts of this school (if it can be considered as such) is to equate the core tenets of ‘neoformalism’ with those of the Russian Formalists. Ian Christie’s ‘Formalism and Neo-Formalism’ is a case in point. ‘Neoformalism’ is taken as an amalgam of the Formalist theory of the active spectator and cognitive theories that link perception with cognition. This ‘enhanced and systematized Formalism’ leads via ‘a sampling of films made within certain production regimes’ towards a ‘formalist historical classification’ (Christie 1998, 62). But this characterization overlooks the instruments ‘neoformalism’ has honed to research and delineate historical stylistic classifications and examine filmic creativity – namely, those entailed in the conception of filmmaking as problem-solving.

This paper therefore presents a revisionist intellectual history which traces the origins of the problem–solution model in film studies to a moment of vibrant metacritical debate in art history in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In fact, this facet of ‘neoformalism’ is indebted in its mature articulation to art historian Ernst Gombrich, who himself developed it as a response to prevailing trends in the work of a previous generation of art historians. My goal here is to underscore that the dominant conception of style in film studies is not simply a rebirth of Formalist approaches, but rather the systematic fusion of Formalist and art historical schemes (among others). Less explicitly, I suggest that neglect of the latter has diverted attention from the discipline’s most promising theory of practical art-making. Finally, for the benefit of those indifferent to stylistics in any form but interested in the history of film studies, my discussion nominally serves as a reminder that the concept of style that is now institutionally accepted is hardly ‘natural’, but rather the result of a period in which theoretical questioning, empirical research, and lively debate made room for this version of the concept.

In the first section, I show that the ‘neoformalist’ concept of style was originally devised in consideration of art historical approaches to history; then, I demonstrate how this concept of style defined itself against the perceived shortcomings of the historical model of Barry Salt; and lastly, I sketch how ‘neoformalist’ stylistics
developed into ‘historical poetics’ in part due to the influences of Gombrich’s problem–solution model.

**This style over that: the emergence of cine-stylistics and the question of style’s ‘internal’ history**

The concept of ‘film style’ was in the late 1970s and early 1980s either a somewhat nebulous ‘normative’ term used by critics to distinguish true film artistry from mere technical wizardry, or else it was a tool wielded in a ‘descriptive’ capacity in certain new strains of textual analysis, at once more scholarly and rigorous than most of the evaluative conceptions.⁴ There was even some indication that style was beginning to take the interest of scholars in the Marxist and psychoanalytical vein.⁵ As a relatively obscure case of the first trend, consider Richard T. Jameson’s ‘Style vs. “Style”’, in which ‘the fundamental confusion of form with formula, style with technique’ is unraveled (Jameson 1980, 10). Jameson’s opening caption is aphoristic, encapsulating the prescriptive tenor of the piece; he contrasts true style with a less graceful pretender:

One is aesthetic substance, the other is clever technique. One is intelligent energy, the other is mindless jitter. One is Sternberg and Lang, Carpenter and Benton, the other is Milestone and Kershner and Hill. One breathes, the other doesn’t. (9)

Jameson’s evaluative bent – true directors, great films have ‘style’ rather than participate in one – continues a trend which started eight years earlier in V.F. Perkins’ *Film as Film*. More nuanced and sustained than Jameson’s one-off intervention, this important work launched a still-thriving British version of film stylistics, which one might label a synthetic theory of evaluative stylistics, in which a premium is placed on the viewer’s ability to perceive a film’s organic unity of form and content (Perkins 1972, 61).⁶ At the other end of the spectrum was Noël Burch, who spearheaded a French strain of film stylistics with his groundbreaking *Theory of Film Practice* (1969). This was carried on in the 1970s by Raymond Bellour, who admits to having borrowed the term ‘stylistics’ from Austrian literary critic Leo Spitzer.⁷ Bellour’s project, dubbed ‘film analysis’ (Bellour 2000, 7), grew out of the semiology of Christian Metz, refining it with an analytical dimension devoted to the close study and description of texts as exemplars of the styles of auteurs.

David Bordwell’s response to structuralist methods begins to take shape in ‘Textual Analysis, Etc.’ (1981/1982), published between Kristin Thompson’s Ivan the Terrible: *A Neoformalist Analysis* (1981), which applies the Formalist program to Eisenstein’s canonical film, and *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985; hereafter *CHC*), which borrows from a number of sources for its approach to the style of the central tradition of American filmmaking. Already in this short piece Bordwell’s revision of previous attempts to conceptualize a film-specific approach to stylistics is clear. It would straddle two disciplines – art history and literary stylistics – combining historical and ‘textual’ methodologies. The perceptual– or cognitive–psychological dimension to his approach – drawing initially on art historical
methods as well – would only begin to weave itself into this strain of cine-stylistics in CHC.

‘Textual Analysis, Etc.’ cites Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, whose call for an ‘art history without names’ and idealization of artistic norms and deviations from them as the ‘meat’ of a cyclical conception of art history is rebuffed for being too deterministic, too ‘autonomous’, thus requiring refinement via the work of the Formalists and of Jan Můkarový (Bordwell 1981/1982, 130). In calling Wölfflin’s model ‘autonomous’ Bordwell points to the art historian’s idea that styles develop ‘internally’, which is to say, the birth, maturation, and death of a form cannot be explained by an artist’s social context – a view with which ‘neoformalism’ has become associated. As Jonathan Gilmore explains, ‘Wölfflin asserted that the visual tradition the artist belonged to uniquely explained how the artist’s work developed from his or her predecessors’ (Gilmore 2000, 9). Wölfflin investigates the ‘two roots of style’ – the culture or society the artist belongs to and the visual tradition in which the artist participates – but only long enough to reject the first as having little bearing on the immanent causes of styles. Drawing on Boris Eikhenbaum’s study of O. Henry’s novels, Bordwell not only calls for a greater sensitivity to the textual features of a style, but (contra Wölfflin) for research into how they are conditioned by empirically verifiable norms in the context of proximate institutional factors – those concrete considerations which mediate aesthetic form and encourage the stylistician to eschew predetermined models of historical causation (Bordwell 1981/1982, 133). For this cine-stylistician, the concept of film style cannot, as it had previously, draw on literary, linguistic, or structuralist models alone, but must consider developments in and limitations of available art historical projects, particularly if the study of film style is to develop into a mature historical approach.

In this way, the earliest conceptions of film style in the American academic setting need to be considered in the context of developments in art historical research. These conceptions would wind up being the seedbed of debate in their own right, receiving response from scholars concerned about the isolation of film style from social and political pressures. The point to be noticed now is that the neoformalist model was initially designed as a response to the ‘isolationism’ of this art historical pedigree. Wölfflin and neoformalists may have focused on proximate sources of style, but their respective characterizations of ‘proximate’ considerations are not identical. At stake here is the question of what counts as evidence in researching a style’s historical determinants. Let us consider Wölfflin’s approach to history more thoroughly.

Wölfflin’s philosophy of history proved too crude for a later generation of art historians. Sympathetic critics of Wölfflin’s model hastened to point out that his stylistics was, in certain respects, underdeveloped. Writes his student Gombrich: ‘[Wölfflin] never entered into speculations about the ultimate causes of historical change’ (Gombrich 1960, 17). Gombrich’s alternative to Wölfflin will occupy us presently, but one should point out here that the most controversial aspect of Wölfflin’s stylistics for mid-twentieth-century art historians consisted of what might be called his ‘Rota deck’ thesis of change in period styles. In his seminal ‘A Theory
of Style’, architecture historian James Ackerman labels this process a ‘theory of preordained evolution’ (Ackerman 1962, 230), with moderate and measured Classicism (epitomized here by High Renaissance art works) inevitably succumbing to the exaggeration and flamboyance of Baroque principles. Art history consists of a perennial reenactment of this shift between relatively clear and complex modes. In lieu of looking to institutional conditions for historical causes as the authors of CHC would, or to the sources of art in cultural history, or Geistesgeschichte, investigated by his professor Jacob Burckhardt (Gaiger 2002, 25), Wölfflin deduces that this cyclical logic is built into the history of seeing itself. He measures this change by way of five universal pairs of polar terms, a case for which is made in his influential Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art (1932): linear vs. painterly, planimetric vs. recessional, closed vs. open form, fused or uniform vs. multiple unity, and absolute vs. relative clarity.

Ultimately, he believed that the root of visual styles is toto genere different from ‘external’ concerns like institutional, social, or political pressures. The five pairs of concepts are perceptual, prior to social behavior and artistic expression. As Jason Gaiger explains, ‘they do not impose constraints on the expressive possibilities available to the artist’; ‘rather, they form the very medium through which different expressive contents are first realized’ (Gaiger 2002, 26). These concepts also capture how the visual characteristics of art condition the beholder’s experience. ‘Classical’ styles (measured by the first term of the above pairs) are in this model ‘closed forms’ calling the viewer to see ‘in lines’ as opposed to ‘masses’. A painting like Palma Vecchio’s Adam and Eve (1504) uses line to create balance, regularity, a unified motive across the composition, and model figures by showing things ‘as they are’. This mode proffers a ‘haptic’ apprehension of things. ‘Baroque’ styles, on the other hand (captured in the second term in the pairs), emerge from a different ‘conception of the world’ (Wölfflin 1932, 18), one that is ‘optic’. They articulate the sensation of movement, of subjective perception – how things ‘seem’. Using an ‘open’, ‘painterly’ form with ‘recessional’ planes, Peter Paul Rubens’ The Raising of the Cross (1610) can coax the spectator to combine a multiplicity of competing views, to treat the composition as free and irregular, and by playing with ‘relative clarity’, it can encourage the viewer to ‘delight’ ‘in what is elusive, mobile and indeterminate’ (Gaiger 2002, 29).

Significantly, cine-stylisticians can trace their conceptions of ‘classical’ and ‘baroque’ forms to Wölfflin’s scholarship. Not only do Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson label Hollywood’s dominant studio form ‘classical’ for its principles of ‘decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver’s response’, for its ‘elegance, unity, rule-governed craftsmanship’ (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 4), but recent scholars appeal to a Wölfflin-inspired ‘baroque’ concept to argue that Hollywood in its post-studio era exemplifies a post-classical, or neo-baroque, style characterized principally by its ‘lack of respect for the limits of the frame’. ‘Neo-baroque’ Hollywood, exemplified by the Star Wars phenomenon, exploits ‘open structures that favor dynamic and expanding polycentrism’, that eschew the single structure for an apparently limitless narrative universe of sequels, prequels, and
serials (Ndalianis 2004, 25). These formulations attest to the continued influence of Wölfflin’s concepts even as his cyclical philosophy of history has largely been rebuked. (Cf. also Bordwell [2006, 188–9].)

Art history, believes Wölfflin, based as it is on a ‘logic of depiction’ (Gaiger 2002, 31) derived from these basic binaries, necessarily repeats itself; moreover, each period is said to be committed to a single style. This one-style-per-period conceit, so popular in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century stylistics, sees the historian mold both broad and fine shifts in compositional tactics to fit ostensibly governing period concerns. For Wölfflin and contemporary, Alois Riegl, these concerns are unified because each period has its own ‘way of seeing’ or unique perspective on the world – which perspective determines the solutions artists develop to compositional problems. As Gaiger states:

Wölfflin was committed to the view that ‘vision has its own history’. This claim can be interpreted in both a strong and a weak sense. In its strong sense, it is the claim that at different periods in human history, human beings actually see the world in different ways. Wölfflin even speaks of a ‘development of the eye’, referring not to physiological changes in the human organism but to transformations in the way in which visual phenomena are apprehended. In its weaker sense, the claim is simply that different historical periods have produced different modes of representation. (25; emphases in source)

While Wölfflin is credited with coining the expression ‘history of vision’, he warned historians not to take this metaphor too seriously or to accept it as explanatory (Gombrich 1960, 17). Nevertheless, Alois Riegl went a step further with this ‘historicist’ notion in his first book, The Problem of Style (1893).

Wölfflin was therefore not alone in his commitment to a teleological historical paradigm, but Riegl succeeded in offering a more intricate theory of change that grows out of his means for explaining period styles. As Gombrich argues, Riegl assumed that ‘if styles have differed it must be because intentions have changed’ (Gombrich 1960, 17). For Riegl, what distinguishes styles and the period which they exemplify are not the devices the artworks exhibit or Wölfflin’s five polarities or the practical methods used to give them shape, but the particular character of the will (the Kunstwollen or ‘will-to-form’) that urges artists to make the art that they do. Here is Riegl in ‘The Main Characteristics of the Late Roman Kunstwollen’:

Whether we grasp the essence of late antiquity – early imperial and late Roman – art on the basis of observation of the monuments or on the basis of the surviving textual evidence, the premise remains the same: in every period there is only one orientation of the Kunstwollen governing all four types of plastic art in the same measure, turning to its own ends every conceivable practical purpose and raw material, and always and of its own according selecting the most appropriate technique for the intended work of art. […]

All human will is directed toward a satisfactory shaping of man’s relationship to the world, in the most comprehensive sense of this word, within and beyond the individual. The plastic Kunstwollen regulates man’s relationship to the sensorily perceptible appearance of things. Art expresses the way man wants to see things shaped or colored […] Man is not only a passive, sensorily recipient being, but also a desiring, active being who wishes to interpret the world in such a way (varying from one people, region, or epoch to another) that it most clearly and obligingly meets his desires. The
character of this will is contained in that which we call the worldview (again, in the broadest sense): in religion, philosophy, science, even statecraft and law; as a rule, one of these forms will predominate in any period. (Riegl 1901, 94–5)

The film scholar will notice an overlap between Wölflin’s ‘history of vision’ thesis and Riegl’s more radical concept of Kunstwollen on the one hand and the approach to style of so-called ‘modernity’ theorists in film studies on the other. More important, Riegl ‘interprets the history of art as a single process of development from a “haptic” or tactile apprehension of things to an increasingly “optic” or subjective mode of vision’ (Gaiger 2002, 30). In bold contrast to Wölflin’s cyclical model, Riegl’s progressivist one did not envision a return to the ‘haptic’.

Responses to these models would influence neoformalist stylistics. It is the causes of change in artworks and art-making over time – a question the Kunstwollen theory was designed to answer – that led Gombrich to criticize the deterministic tendencies of ‘historicism’ (‘artworks must have taken such and such a shape given the predominant worldview of the period in question’) and propose a more practical, psychological conception of style formation. While ‘Textual Analysis, Etc.’ would not be the final formulation of stylistic explanation that film studies would have to offer, its affinity (particularly for Bordwell and Thompson) for a more Gombrichian approach, one that works up to a conception of what unites a body of art works via institutional determinants rather than down to this unity from a preconceived notion of a period’s ‘internal’ drive or way of seeing, is already apparent.

In this section, we have seen how innovations in the first stages of cine-stylistics as a historical research program come into relief as a response to earlier art historical conceptions of history. Before completing my sketch of the ‘neoformalist’ assimilation of Gombrich’s model, I think it necessary, in the interest of offering a comprehensive account of the development of the concept of ‘film style’ in this context, to describe the debate between Bordwell and Thompson and Barry Salt – one initiated prior to ‘neoformalism’s’ ‘Gombrichian’ turn. We will see that this debate (and other developments) eventually encourages film scholars to consider style formation in the light of artistic problem-solving, first as a heuristic and then as an engine of historical development.

Phase two: style as system and the limits of Formalism

With the publication of CHC and Narration in the Fiction Film in 1985, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson would make further refinements to the concept of film style. In the latter, Bordwell explicates the role of stylistic devices in a film’s narrative system in general and, more specifically, in a variety of historical narrational modes from the classical (in which style facilitates narrative intelligibility) to the parametric (in which style breaks free from narrative concerns and operates according to its own decorative patterns). Here, ‘style’ is taken as a set of textual cues that the spectator engages in the narrational process. In the former, style, specifically classical Hollywood style, is analyzed as a set of norms that the historian studies at three levels of generality: devices (matches on action, for instance), systems (how these devices articulate temporal, spatial, and narrational relations), and relations between systems (for example, whether spatial and temporal relations render
intelligible or opaque narrative causality) (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 6–7). What is remarkable from the standpoint of this current survey is that the latter commits to a conception of style that limits if not rejects the study of individual agents as catalysts of significant historical change. According to CHC, individual filmmakers might innovate isolated devices, but it is the system, and mode of production adopted by the studios, that sustains a commitment to continuity storytelling. While the individual might develop a new means for lighting a scene that seems antithetical to ‘classicism’, the layered conception of style that Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson perceive as operating in the studio era encourages them to argue that such innovations can be absorbed into the style (seen now from its highest level of generality). Hollywood classicism proves to be a highly adaptable and variegated form.

The motivation for this approach can perhaps be gleaned from a much lesser piece. Just after the publication of these monumental works, Bordwell and Thompson would co-author ‘Towards a Scientific Film History?’, an instructive essay–review devoted to what was at that time the most sustained study of the history of film style, Barry Salt’s Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis (1983). The term ‘style’ is not given systematic treatment in Salt’s tome, although the author’s definition can be inferred from the section entitled ‘Practical Film Theory’ (Salt 1983, 33–9). In the subsection ‘Film Style’, he points out that style is a relational or comparative phenomenon; that is, the stylistician studies many films in order to formulate claims about norms and innovations. Salt anticipates that his quantitative approach to style will be generalizable:

When this method of norms and differences is generalized to all the features of films it can help one avoid the frequent error of describing as unique what is in fact a common feature of a large class of films from a particular time or place or genre. (Salt 1983, 36)

Both here and throughout the book, Salt studies a style as an entity identical to the cluster of quantifiable features that make up the visual traits of a group of films. Salt’s definition of a filmmaker’s personal style is also a clue to his concept of style:

If analysis along the lines just mentioned [i.e. in terms of ‘semi-quantifiable parameters’] has been carried out, then the distributions of these quantities (shot length, etc.) for a particular group of films, say by a particular director, when compared with those for other directors working at the same place and time, give sure indication of the existence of a personal style; in fact this is what formal style is. (35)

Quantitative style analysis as Salt presents it makes the student of film style conscious of conventions and the potential causes of these conventions (new technologies, shifts in practice) and puts the historian on firmer ground when making claims about innovation. Salt thus re-conceives V.F. Perkins’ initial inclination to marry value judgment with the close analysis of film technique. Both Salt’s and Perkins’ approaches might be said to rely upon a combination of normative and descriptive uses of ‘style’. A closer look at Salt’s methods for researching style should bring into clearer focus the finer points of the ‘neoformalist’ stance in this period.

Salt’s ‘style’ uses quantitative methods to draw the parameters of different styles for persons, groups, and periods. For example, attributing trait X to filmmaker Y’s
personal style is correct if and only if X is not a characteristic of norm Z that obtains in the period in which Y makes films. By making use of norm Z this filmmaker cannot be said to be developing a unique personal style; rather, the traits of her films merely participate in the norms that characterize the style of a period. Salt avers that:

[previous style analysis] has not got much further than remarking things like the fact that Howard Hawks keeps the camera at eye-level and doesn’t move it if possible. But in fact there are other directors of his vintage that do this too. For instance Henry Hathaway. […] The real stylistic distinction is that further than this, Hawks keeps his Average Shot Length a little longer than normal, whereas Hathaway uses faster cutting. (Salt 1983, 36)

Salt admits that examples like this oversimplify the make-up of actual styles, but at least serve to show that in his eyes stylistics should consist of the ability to ascertain the uniqueness of traits in a body of works, which uniqueness signals the existence of a new style.

Salt occasionally reverts to a problem–solution scheme to recount stylistic innovations. Consider his chapter on developments in film style between 1900 and 1906, in which the following methodological note is offered: ‘I find it useful to follow E.H. Gombrich in thinking in terms of artistic problems, and then the solution of these problems by using models derived from other films’ (Salt 1983, 51). In the same chapter Salt confronts ‘The Doorway Problem’, the solutions to the problem early filmmakers faced in showing an actor move from one side of an aperture in the set (a doorway, a window frame) to the other. The problem that needed solving was how to show a single action over a cut. Prior to 1906 filmmakers relied on two sets of solutions: (1) they could show the same action once (a figure moves to the aperture in one set-up, we cut to the other side, and then in the second set-up, the figure moves through the aperture to complete a continuous movement and a match-on-action, as in James Williamson’s Fire! [1901]) or show the same action twice (in the first set-up, the action is completed all the way without a cut, followed by a second set-up from a new angle with the exact same action repeated in its entirety, as in Porter’s The Life of an American Fireman [1903]); and (2) they could link these two shots with either a cut, as we saw with Williamson’s film, or a dissolve, like in Méliès’ Barbe-bleue (1901) (58). Salt’s use of the problem–solution model shows a twofold yield: it potentially allows him to (1) tell a nuanced story that can cope with the coexistence of two sets of viable stylistic devices designed to construct for the viewer the same kind of action; and (2) speculate why filmmakers might, through either the force of habit or the interest in creating certain effects, remain committed to certain solutions even as apparently less cumbersome ones are readily available.

Salt’s history recounts the march to greater stylistic intricacy; innovative, artful solutions produce superior works. His findings ‘disperse’ what others might take as unified period styles by attributing historical developments and changes to on-the-set decision-makers. In stark contrast to Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, whose version of classical Hollywood is defined as a system that sustains itself despite and feeds itself on a wide range of devices and their effects, Salt’s model turns its
attention to more localized continuities. In fact, Salt only refers to a ‘classical’
Hollywood style with some trepidation, instead favoring the broader notion of
‘continuity cinema’ verifiable at the level of individual habit and ingenuity as of
1914–19 (Salt 1983, 162). Salt’s conception, then, determines a style by both
quantitative means and researchable innovations (at times discussed as ‘solutions’)
that either remain unique and whose ‘lives’ span relatively short periods or that are
adapted and formalized as long-term norms against which new innovations can
define themselves.

Bordwell and Thompson are sympathetic to Salt’s stylistics, but nonetheless
offer several pointed criticisms motivated by an alternative means for delineating
the contours of a given style and telling history. In their eyes, Salt oversimplifies
style: ‘His research strategy makes style simply a set of isolated technical devices.’
Style X becomes the sum of devices A, B, C, etc. They instead propose that style be
conceived of as a ‘system in which some parameters [or techniques] are inter-
dependent and some are promoted to a level of salience that others never achieve’
(Bordwell and Thompson 1985, 227; italics in source), or style as the relations
between devices A, B, C, etc. In contrast to Salt’s approach, which is said to reduce
the historian’s work to arbitrary ‘technique-spotting’ (229), they contend that the
historian must pre-occupy herself with salient technique alone – those technical
devices that have functions vis-à-vis larger formal systems, like narrative. This
requires the historian to develop a theory of narrative and spectatorship, otherwise
the historian is bound to ‘[ignore] the gap between pertinent stylistic features […]
and trivial features distinguishable only to connoisseurs at the editing table’ (228).

The authors find fault with Salt’s historical approach as well. The manner in
which Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson explain film art history amounts at this
stage neither to a historicist conception of periods à la Wölfflin nor to a Saltian
‘innovators-as-motor-of-change’ approach, but to an institutional account that
links stylistic norms to the institutions committed to sustaining them in spite of the
individual personalities of the filmmakers working within the system. Bordwell and
Thompson contend that Salt’s history (1) presupposes ‘an evolutionary [or Riegl-
like progressivist] model of film style’, in which filmmakers are said to move
toward greater stylistic sophistication and therefore to produce increasingly
complex artworks; and (2) offers few causal accounts. The institutional approach
they take (with Staiger) in CHC is positioned as more subtle than Salt’s ‘individual-
as-innovator’ explanation of style development. They cite Salt: ‘[…] novel features
which suddenly appear like mutations are sometimes rapidly taken up, forming a
line of descent, while on other occasions original devices die out because they have
some unsuitability of a technical or artistic nature’ (Salt 1983, 51). The authors
argue that this model harbors a teleological bias, fashioning the development of a
given style into a natural or organic occurrence. Continuity, in Salt’s hands, reliant
on stylistic devices like crosscutting and shot/reverse shot editing patterns, is
positioned as the goal of filmmakers of the 1900s and 1910s. Salt apparently
overlooked Gombrich’s analysis of the limits of normative stylistics: ‘periods [i.e.
early cinema] in which the means are not yet quite sufficient to realize the ends [i.e.
continuity storytelling] are experienced as primitive or archaic’ (Gombrich 1968, 356).
Despite not being cited in the review, Formalist tenets (albeit slightly modified) inform Bordwell and Thompson’s approach. Their insistence that the historian of film style must anchor his conception of style ‘within an overall theory of film form’ draws on the Formalist notion of ‘the dominant’, which in Bordwell and Thompson’s hands becomes refashioned as the aforementioned concept of stylistic ‘salience’ (Bordwell and Thompson 1985, 227). They criticize a model of historical stylistics that simply indulges in the whimsy of the connoisseur: quantifying shot duration, uses of color vs. black and white stocks, the presence or absence of wipes, whip pans and so forth leaves one not with a coherent conception of a given style but a set of historical curiosities without context, without explanation, without any sense of the function of these devices in a film’s larger formal systems. The stylistician must therefore show how these devices are used systematically, combining what Thompson calls ‘diachronic’ analysis of systematic stylistic change with the ‘synchronic’ articulation of stylistic systems in particular works (Thompson 1981, 17–8).

The Formalists did not believe that all structures perceptible in a work are equally important. As Thompson explains, the Formalists posited the concept of the ‘dominant’ to explain the distinction between a work’s one-off usage of a device and patterned form. Each work has one dominant structuring principle: ‘This dominant is a formal organizational principle around which other structures in the work cluster’ (Thompson 1981, 34). The dominant would be front-and-center in the work and subjugate all other structures of form. In Ivan, spatial relations between shots shift perceptibly from shot to shot. Objects therefore appear to move between cuts – a series of deliberate ‘continuity errors’ – and yet no temporal shift is indicated. This prompts Thompson to label this technique ‘cubistic editing’ (63) – a technique which ‘dominates’ and gives function to other patterned choices in the film.

Concern for a technique’s dominance or saliency lead Bordwell and Thompson to define style in Film Art, the first edition of which appeared in 1979, as ‘[t]he repeated and salient uses of film techniques characteristic of a single film or a group of films’ (Bordwell and Thompson 2008, 480). But Formalism has its limitations. Although, as Thompson notes, Formalist poetics trumps New Criticism in its ability to consider singular artworks in the context of the historical development of genre (Thompson 1981, 18), it lacks a fully developed theory of practical art-making, and therefore of stylistic change. As Salt contends in Film Style and Technology,

[j]t is usually considered that Russian Formalist aesthetics was severely limited in dealing with the history of art, because it refused to deal with historical causation in the creation of particular works of art, and also in the development of artistic styles. Bordwell and Thompson have likewise rejected the consideration of the way the actual makers had put any particular film together when they are analyzing its form […]. (Salt 1992, 29)

Carrying this analysis further, one overview of Formalism (Macey 2000, 336) argues that Eikhenbaum’s ‘Theory of the Formal Method’ (1926) in fact shares a great deal with Wölflin’s deductive approach to art history, particularly in its limitation of the range of formal possibilities to an array of ahistorical categories.

The historical lacunae of Formalism no doubt occurred to Bordwell as well in the wake of CHC; it is precisely the problem of accounting for filmmakers’
decisions and the impact they have on changes in styles that would render the problem–solution model attractive. This choice would guide this strain of cine-stylistics toward a more nuanced consideration of the causal links between creative decision-making and style, and align it with a tradition of inductive art historical research that was, at the time, only a quarter of a century old.

Specifically, by the mid- to late 1980s, this model begins to benefit Bordwell in two ways: (1) by providing him with a template that would justify the study of the contributions of individual filmmakers to the refinement of specific techniques over time (an issue addressed in the next section); and (2) by reinforcing aspects of his controversial position on the agency of filmmakers in the process of narration. In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Bordwell argues that films are narrator-less texts. One need not assume that because one is watching a Bresson film that Bresson as creator sends via *Une femme douce* (1969) a communiqué that one as the reader receives. Viewers appear to want to ascribe the stories they see in movies to an agent or series of agents – a point which Bordwell underscores in *Poetics of Cinema* (Bordwell 2007, 122) –, but this does not mean that we need to cede to a Filmmaker *qua* Narrator position. Where, then, is the agency of filmmakers located if not in the creation and delivery of messages that are embedded in films and decoded by the spectator?

Traditional auteurism, whereby the films of those directors who achieve the status of *auteurs* are seen as shaped, via *mise-en-scène*, as an expression of a worldview, provides no answer, for it offers little insight into the film practices by which this worldview finds its way into the films. To resolve these problems, Bordwell distinguishes between *narration* and *communication*, claiming that the filmmaker’s ‘presence’ in a film can be measured in the system of created cues that condition the viewer’s experience and uptake of the plot, but that it adds nothing to ‘assign every film to a *deus absconditis*’ (Bordwell 1985, 62), to a singular ‘voice’ who communicates a message to the viewer. The consideration of film artists as historical agents making practical decisions which determine the cues movies use to engage the spectator allows this cine-stylistician to shirk superfluous theories of filmic narrators and nebulous formulations about the *auteur*’s personal vision. Conceiving moviemakers as rational agents who develop real solutions that create experiences for viewers therefore allows the historian of style to evade the shortcomings of available theories of narration, filmic authorship, and, if adhered to in a Gombrichian sense, determinist conceptions of history.

On a quick glance, then, it is apparent why Bordwell would see Gombrich’s approach as salutary, but what exactly were its parameters? It now remains to examine the origins, goals, and benefits of Gombrich’s problem–solution approach to art styles before finally showing where cine-stylisticians would take the model in the late 1980s and beyond.

**From systems to agents: Gombrich, problem-solving, and the riddle of film style**

Mid-century art history interrogated the models it had inherited from figures like Wölfflin and Riegl. In ‘A Theory of Style’, James Ackerman complains:
In the past half-century no new theories of style have taken root; in [the USA] none has even been proposed. This is not due so much to satisfaction with earlier theories as to the rise of a narrow scientism which has made philosophical speculation suspect. Although we cannot work without a theory of style, and although we continue to speak of classical, baroque, or painterly forms, we have allowed the systems that give meaning to these terms to slip into the unconscious, where they operate without the benefit of our control, as a barrier. (Ackerman 1962, 230)

Four years earlier came Arnold Hauser’s *The Philosophy of Art History*, a study which was no less critical of the previous generation’s methods. For our purposes, we should note that Hauser challenges the tradition (at this stage inchoate) of taking art-forms as representative of solutions to problems: ‘[Wölfflin] describes the history of art in terms of alternatives and treats it as a history of problems and their solution.’ A painter, for instance, must solve the problem of representing a chair either by accentuating the line that forms its contour or by favoring the brushstroke itself (Wölfflin’s ‘linear vs. painterly’ binary). ‘But here,’ Hauser writes, underscoring the approach’s tendency to oversimplification, ‘he seems to overlook the fact that some changes in the development of art occur without any “problem”, and that in any case a solution is often a choice among more than two possibilities.’

Hauser’s rejection of ‘the history of forms as the history of problems’ thesis furthermore sees the problem–solution model as necessarily tied to historicism. As Hauser has it, Wölfflin’s conception of the problem–solution model is fatally Hegelian (Hauser 1958, 144), with each unitary phase of style history developing solutions to problems that themselves arose in the solutions preferred by the previous era. The closest any stylistician has come to conceiving the history of film style in this way is André Bazin, whose dialectical model of history perceived each new development in film style as a response to limitations in a prior stylistic movement.18

Gombrich’s problem–solution model would show that style formation need not be considered in such broad and speculative terms. He achieved this by re-directing the attention of art historians toward artistic *skill* and conceiving stylistic development as a product of what he called the ‘logic of situations’ in which skills are tested.19 Styles arise not from a metaphysical Kunstwollen or the drive of cyclical historical forces but from patterns in the situations in which artists make decisions that result in the traits of the works they produce. A specific solution to a major compositional problem may not relate to a previous epoch’s styles of representation.

Why artists make the concrete decisions and innovations that they do is for Gombrich the riddle of style, or why art has a history, and in order to explain this phenomenon, the historian of style ‘must stage a counterraid across the psychologist’s frontier’ (Gombrich 1960, 27) – Gombrich’s call for art historians to appeal to the experimental sciences to explain perception, rational selection among alternatives, and thus style change more concretely. The study of problem situations assists in this endeavor by bridging the gap between the perceptions of art-makers (which shape their decisions) and the perceptions of beholders. Artists are taken as practical psychologists, seeing the world through schemas – the same schemas that the public already holds or can shape –, and not reality ‘as it is’. Under
the pressure of market demands, new technologies and the like, and aware of the visual skills of spectators, they develop new schemas, that is, new solutions to problems of representation.

But to what extent is this a methodological boon? The study of the situated exercise of artistic volition and skill permits the historian to reassemble the ‘material’ base on which styles are demonstrably built by individual artists. Self-guiding historical currents and broad social forces alone cannot create a painter’s style; her decisions, constrained by material conditions and skills at her service, do. Such an approach was explicitly eschewed by at least one of the historians we have been considering. Riegl’s explanation of the decorative arts in *The Problem of Style*, for instance, dismisses as inadequate the notion that ‘pattern depended on such techniques as weaving and basketry and the technological assumption that what counts in art is skill of hand’ (Gombrich 1960, 17). Art instead becomes ‘an expression of the age’, controlled by the *Kunstwollen* which ostensibly obtains. In response, Gombrich disclaims ‘will-to-form’ theories as dependent on a ‘ghost in the machine’, an intentional nonentity that carries no explanatory force and that is worthy only of association with the ‘prescientific’ habits of the mythmakers’ (19).

In the end, Gombrich summarizes the ‘fatal flaw’ of proponents of the *Kunstwollen* model of style formation – a theory for explicating artistic intention and styles – as follows: ‘by throwing out the idea of skill they have not only surrendered vital evidence, they have made it impossible to realize their ambition, a valid psychology of stylistic change’ (21). Questions of ‘will’ cede in Gombrich’s model to questions of ‘skill’ (77).

The importance of the problem–solution model for Gombrich’s theory of style now becomes clear. Only with this model can the historian reconstruct the immediate and ultimate mechanism of stylistic causation: ‘the choice situation[s]’ that reveal the psychology of artistry (Gombrich 1960, 21).

The reader may now be tempted to ask: given this, what is a style for Gombrich? It is at base those characteristics, considered through the historical problem-stating and problem-solving mechanisms that caused them, which permit the historian to date a particular work to a place and time. In a manner that echoes Bordwell’s rejection of ‘culturalism’ (2005, 242–9), Gombrich insists that style must be considered in light of ‘an analysis of problems arising within a tradition’. ‘Styles,’ he asserts, ‘are instances of such traditions.’ More precisely, solutions to common problems result in the invention of a series of stylistic ‘master keys’:

> The history of art […] may be described as the forging of master keys for opening the mysterious locks of our senses to which only nature herself originally held the key. They are complex locks which respond only when various screws are first set in readiness and when a number of bolts are shifted at the same time. Like the burglar who tries to break a safe, the artist has no direct access to the inner mechanism. He can only feel his way with sensitive fingers, probing and adjusting his hook or wire when something gives way. Of course, once the door springs open, once the key is shaped, it is easy to repeat the performance. The next person needs no special insight – no more, that is, than is needed to copy the predecessor’s master key.

There are innovations in the history of art that have something of the character of such an open-sesame. Foreshortening may be one of them in the way it produces the
impression of depth; others are the tonal system of modeling, highlights for texture, or those clues to expression discovered by humorous art [...]. (Gombrich 1960, 359–60)

The study of the ‘keys’ developed to address local challenges – in painting, the creation of the illusion of three-dimensional space; in film, the development of devices to evoke a character’s psychological point of view – should emerge from insight into the skills involved, the techniques wielded, and ultimately lead to an understanding of the processes (both psychological and practical) that create fluctuations in the history of experiences artists craft for beholders.

Not to be overlooked is the fact, already mentioned, that this method promises a non-deterministic account of these fluctuations:

[... ] while we must give up the search for the laws of history which could explain every stylistic change, we are still entitled to watch for sequences and episodes which we can hope to explain in terms of the logic of situations. For though a non-deterministic account must restore to the individual artist his freedom of choice between various rational options, this choice need not therefore be random. (Gombrich 1979, 213)

By setting up the history of style as a set of practical problems that are solved, Gombrich is able to both maintain that artistic solutions do not occur on a whim and show that, in the final analysis, they drive the history of the look (and, if pertinent, sound) of artworks. This manner of reasoning would furnish ‘neoformalism’ with a subtler means for researching a filmmakers’ agency. But this was not something that Bordwell and Thompson were initially interested in explaining.

It was not just an open appeal to Gombrich’s problem–solution model by name that was missing from the ‘neoformalist’ approach as it took shape at the time of CHC. The ambitious research project that yielded CHC motivated Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson to consider style formation in the context of a self-sustaining mode of production, studio-based divisions of labor and pan-studio consolidation of resources and technological research. Bordwell and Thompson actually at this stage find fault in the idea (which they attribute to Salt) that filmmakers be conceived of as crafty problem-solvers who build up styles from their moment-to-moment decisions. The historical determinants of Hollywood classicism were such that stylistic change would be slow, or trended, and not the result of individual ambition and creativity; studio filmmaking, after all, was intensely collaborative and hierarchical. Remark Bordwell and Thompson in their review of Salt:

Ignoring the context of film production, Salt concentrates on how particular artists solved technical problems of their times. When innovations involve several individuals, Salt invokes notions of influence, trends, and fashions. Such informal processes are undeniably present in film history, but elsewhere [in CHC] we and a collaborator have argued for a more institutional approach, whereby individual innovation occurs within a larger sphere of priorities and favored problems, that matrix of aesthetic and economic protocols constructed by the mode of production. (Bordwell and Thompson 1985, 236; emphasis added)

The theory of ‘trended’ change is borrowed from Leonard Meyer (1967, 99). Bordwell invokes it to dispel the notion, held by V.F. Perkins, among others, that the technological determinants of film style automatically lead style in a certain direction – namely, toward ‘realism’. In lieu of this teleological or ‘directional’
schema Bordwell proposes that style develops along the lines of ‘a series of disparate shifts’ and not toward a specific goal (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 247). But once again, ‘neoformalists’ hesitate at this stage to attribute such shifts to practical artistic decision-making, perhaps for fear that viewing shifts along these lines would mean suggesting that history could shift on the whim of the individual. Bordwell on Meyer: ‘Meyer’s account lets us situate an individual’s innovation within the stylistic preconditions that shape and limit it’ (248).

With *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (1988), Bordwell launches his ‘historical poetics’ project, introducing two complementary new methods of historical inquiry into his concept of style, conceived now with a more intricate psychological approach to art-making: the ‘rational-agent’ method and our problem–solution model. Whereas the first is drawn from John Elster, the second as we now know was inspired by Gombrich, who, despite this article’s epigraph, is cited in *CHC* almost exclusively for his insight into the psychological effects of stylistic devices rather than for the problem–solution paradigm. Notwithstanding Bordwell’s first book-length director’s study, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (1981), largely indebted to Formalism and Roland Barthes, this new context (i.e. an analysis of Ozu’s film practice) in tandem with an awareness of both the limits of traditional auteurism and the advantages of conceiving individual filmmakers rather than just industrial systems as significant historical mechanisms required a revised notion of style. Now the director is allotted active and determining agency in the development of style through his/her manipulation of materials (Bordwell 1988, 162, 165). Unlike Salt’s history, change in Bordwell’s would be trended; only now the site for researching such rates of historical change would be problem situations interpreted and responded to by individuals rather than institutional constraints alone.

With his increasing interest in filmmaking as problem-solving, Bordwell ‘zeroes in’ on directing as an art of creative decisions and problem-solving at the level of cinematic staging. We also begin to find in this cine-stylistician’s writings explicit references to the ‘problem–solution model of stylistic history’, especially in *On the History of Film Style* (1997) and *Figures Traced in Light* (2005), both of which cite Gombrich extensively. *On the History of Film Style* lays out the task before the historian of style, one which stands in bold relief to the stylistic research projects described in earlier works. ‘[T]he historian of style should be alert for shared problems and parallel or linked solutions’, he notes. ‘That dynamic, Gombrich reminds us, may be prolonged indefinitely. A successful solution may create new problems. [...] Today, as rapid cutting attempts to quicken viewer interest, cinematographers are obliged to compose images that are legible at a glance.’ ‘The task facing the student of style, then,’ he concludes, ‘is one of reconstruction’ (Bordwell 1997, 156), of telling the story of the impact of on-the-set decision-making on the look of movies. Summarizing his approach to stylistics, Bordwell writes: ‘The model I propose seeks to be more delicate, building from patterns of task-governed decision-making to schemas and thence to norms and their open-ended dynamic across time’ (157). Unlike the approaches developed by the Russian critics, this method would allow Bordwell to tell ‘finer-grained causal stories’ (Bordwell 2005, 248).
For our purposes, *On the History of Film Style* stands as the most sustained and committed investigation of the possibilities of the problem–solution paradigm. Salt may have intermittently employed the notion of filmmakers as problem-solvers, but here Bordwell studies the entire history of style as those innovations motivated by slight changes to an array of comparable or parallel problem situations characteristic of the challenges faced in staging action before the camera. Problem-solving is cast as a motor of short- and long-term historical development—a logic that describes the nature of practical filmic creativity, links the problems faced by filmmakers working in different contexts, and ultimately drives the history of the art. Otherwise put, this cine-stylistician suggests that it would be difficult to imagine how significant change in the look of movies could ever have taken place unless filmmakers were presented with new problem situations. Likewise, it would be equally difficult to fathom that continuities in the look of movies could ever have been achieved unless certain problem situations repeated themselves, or unless certain solutions provided perennially useful. Bordwell’s history of long take staging strategies, stretching roughly from 1896 to 1994, recounts how specific filmmakers solve problems ‘by replicating, revising, synthesizing, or rejecting schemas already in circulation’ (Bordwell 1997, 158). What distinguishes the solutions innovated to meet the problems of staging in the 1910s from those of the 1930s was not simply the fact that institutions elected for and technological limitations formed certain norms, but that institutional and technological factors shaped different problem situations within which filmmakers could display their skills. With this model, cine-stylisticians had devised a strategy for solving the riddle of style—a riddle which Hegelian cyclical or evolutionary histories, not to mention impersonal institutional models and Russian Formalist tenets alone, are ill-equipped to crack.

**Conclusion: style today and tomorrow**

My account began with the observation that the concept of film style itself has a history. In order to trace this history, I have set aside the common tack of claiming that ‘neoformalism’ is rooted predominantly in Formalist principles and instead shown how certain lacunae in Formalism were remedied by drawing on art historical tools. We have seen how research into a specific historical style, Hollywood classicism, led a group of historians to conceive of style in terms that eschewed individual decision-makers as catalysts for stylistic change and stability, and then how, in the context of subsequent research and under the scrutiny of alternative approaches to the history of style, one ‘neoformalist’ adapted his concept of style to render practical problem-solving a salient determinant of style formation and continuity. Thus, to the Russian Formalist-derived notion of stylistic saliency, Mukačovskij’s doctrine of artistic norms, Meyer’s paradigm of trended change, and Gombrich’s cognitive–perceptual approach to viewer comprehension Bordwell would add the important ingredient of the problem–solution method to the repertoire of ‘neoformalist’ stylistics, now refashioned as ‘historical poetics’. This constitutes not just a refinement, but a shift: no longer merely the research into
artistic choices among options in the context of broader institutionally sanctioned norms, but research into filmmaking as an individual’s recognition of problems and subsequent fashioning of inventive solutions. In potentially accounting for why a given stylistic option is chosen as a solution to a problem in the mode of film practice which obtains, this paradigm is equipped to explain both the choices and the origins of the governing norms. In this way, Bordwell meets Salt’s challenge to the limitations of Formalism, refocuses Salt’s initial intuition to research problem situations, and associates his stylistics with an influential strain of art history.

More broadly, this survey has shown that ‘style’ seems inconceivable apart from the historical mechanisms used to explain it. The question ‘what is style?’ becomes manageable only in the context of the question ‘how do we explain style?’ Our concept of style, seen in this light, changes as our understanding of historical causation changes. But where to next? Art history may once again prove to be a useful guide.

If the problem–solution model is in its ‘thick’ articulation designed to provide insight into the psychology of artistic creativity and the means for telling the history of art in a non-determinist manner, then further refinements through historical and conceptual investigation need to be made to the model itself. Rudolf Arnheim observes in *The Genesis of a Painting: Picasso’s Guernica* (1962):

> Gestalt psychologists have described productive thinking [of artists, mathematicians, and so on] as a restructuring of the problem situation. [...] What determines the directions the restructuring takes? The answer is that the image of the goal situation – that is, a temporary or definitive notion of what needs to be achieved – [...] it also provides the direction in which the restructuring presses forward. In sum, the various operations of shaping the thought material can be understood only as being controlled by an underlying target concept. Without this concept, creativity presents itself as mere child’s play with the building blocks of experience. (Arnheim 1962, 8)

Arnheim’s basic position is that the study of artistic creativity must focus on how artists as agents ‘shuffle’ the terms of the problem situation within the context of their overarching goals. With regards to film style, this would mean that the historian researches not merely the solutions devised by a filmmaker, but how these solutions were guided by an aesthetic *goal* – that is, what the filmmaker *believed* she was doing and how this belief led to the privileging of certain solutions or means over others. The study of practice-defining ‘target concepts’ would insert into the causal explanation an additional practice-defining intentional mechanism, give a fuller view of the circumstances of art-making, and help the historian discern what style certain solutions participate in. A fine-tuning of this tool could open up new avenues of inquiry that seek to shed light on the origins of the creative options, on the roots of intentional structures, and the nature of the situational logics that weave their way through film history and cause what historians classify as styles.

**Acknowledgements**

I thank Warren Buckland, the anonymous *New Review* reader, Ben Singer and Josh Shepperd for their suggestions in the revision process.
Notes

1. I owe this ‘heuristic vs. engine’ distinction to David Bordwell, private communication, September 2007.
3. Gombrich is most familiar to film scholars for his insights into the perceptual psychology of art. Cf. Andrew 1984, 38; Kirihara 1992, 23–7; Peterson 1994, 7; Bordwell 1996, 93; and Branigan 2006, 74.
4. A ‘normative’ approach uses ‘style’ ‘as a laudatory term denoting a desirable consistency and conspicuousness that makes a performance or artifact stand out from a mass of “undistinguished” events or objects’ (Gombrich 1968, 353). By contrast, ‘descriptive’ style terms characterize those labels or analytical procedures that are developed in order to isolate characteristic qualities: ‘a passionate style’, a ‘theatrical style’, a ‘classical style’, and so on.
6. As I mentioned, this approach is still influential; cf. Gibbs 2002 and Buckland 2006, particularly the section ‘Formalist Film Criticism and Organic Unity’ (36–51).
7. Bellour had since the mid-1960s been trying to create a space in the French academic context for stylistics as a unique area of research alongside semiotics and filmology; cf. Bellour 1966.
8. Bordwell borrows from Mukařovský the concept of the ‘artistic norm’. Tom Gunning explains:

It must be emphasized that the norms here described, particularly of the modes of film practice, are understood in terms of Mukařovský’s concept of the ‘aesthetic norm’. Mukařovský sees the aesthetic norm as a dynamic and changing force rather than a static and restricting one. The aesthetic norm exists to be violated. It is not simply to be ignored, of course, but neither does it serve as an impenetrable barrier. As Bordwell says, Mukařovský’s concept allows the authors ‘... to think of a group film style not as a monolith but as a complex system of specific forces in dynamic interaction’. In their pursuit of the ‘typical’, the authors try to avoid being reductive. At several points they make a distinction between majority and minority practices within the Hollywood industry. Most interesting in this context is the way a particularly dynamic innovation will effect standard practice. Both the use of low key lighting in DeMille’s The Cheat (1915) and Toland’s use of deep focus in Citizen Kane (1941) were widely praised or commented on by industry professionals, but considerably ‘tamed’ when adopted as part of the classical paradigm. (Gunning 1985, 75)
9. King (1986, 1987) was the first to suggest this. Cf. especially King 1986, 86, in which he points out that Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson borrow from Mukařovský the concept of aesthetic norms while excluding the theorist’s notion of ‘ethico-socio-political norms’.
10. For more on Wölfflin’s concern for the ‘immanent’ causes of style, and Aloïs Riegl’s and Paul Frankl’s commitment to this model of explanation as well, cf. Gilmore 2000, 9.
11. Elsewhere (Burnett 2006) I combined Gombrich’s with Rosen’s idea of ‘historicism’ in order to define the term. Gombrich, to my knowledge, never defines historicism explicitly, but as best I can tell from Art and Illusion, his definition would read something like this: ‘A theory in which history is taken as being determined by immutable laws and
not by human agency.’ Rosen’s definition is somewhat more involved. Historicism is ‘[t]he thesis that all meanings and values are historical creatures’, so that ‘residents of a later historical epoch can never understand the intentions or meaning of residents of an earlier epoch except through the historical spectacles of the later time’ (Rosen 1999, 184).

12. One critic calls Kunstwollen ‘an immanent artistic drive’, ‘art’s volition, also translated as art’s aesthetic surge, artistic intention, what art wants to do, or the will of art’ (Ostrow 2001, 7).

13. Bordwell has made this connection: ‘Gombrich’s remarks incline me to think that the “culture of modernity” strain in current Frankfurt School film theory is replaying preoccupations of nineteenth-century Viennese art history’ (Bordwell 1997, 295). For more on Benjamin’s position on style, cf. W. Benjamin 1931/1933; Wood 2000, 437; Ostrow 2001, 7; and A. Benjamin 2006.

14. In this paper, I also cite, where appropriate, from the second edition of Film Style and Technology (1992). Cf. also Salt 2006a, 2006b for his approach to style.

15. As Bordwell and Thompson note, Salt sets out three criteria for measuring the value of a good film: ‘originality in all respects’, ‘the influence which the film has on other films’, and ‘the degree to which the finished film fulfills the maker’s intentions’ (Bordwell and Thompson 1985, 226).


19. For a more detailed discussion of ‘logic of situations’, cf. Gombrich 1979, 209–13. ‘Logic of situations’ would become the blanket term for Gombrich’s interest in art-making as the solution to problems, or as the choice among a set of options. He borrowed this approach from Karl Popper; cf. Popper 1957.

20. Cf. Gombrich 1960, 357–8 for more on the importance of considering artistic skill and the artist’s choice of means to respond to problems of representation that obtain.


22. Bordwell borrows the term ‘schema’ directly from Gombrich. He appeals to Gombrich in order to supplement Mukařovský’s explanation of style formation as an appeal to or modification of available norms (in the case of film, technical and aesthetic ones). Gombrich’s psychology of art is useful here: ‘Gombrich points out that the artist cannot simply copy reality; the artist can only render the model in terms of one schema or another’ (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 8). Bordwell then extends this model – following Gombrich’s lead – to the work of the spectator. Cf. Bordwell 1985 for his continuation of this work.


References


