

Revisiting ‘Solipsistic Film Criticism’: Reply to Clayton and Klevan

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Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (C&K) have written a ‘Reply’ to my review essay ‘Solipsistic Film Criticism,’ published in the *New Review of Film and Television Studies* (Buckland 2012; Clayton and Klevan 2012). My essay, a review of their edited book *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (Clayton and Klevan, 2011), presented the opportunity to discuss in some detail the different assumptions underlying textual analysis and film criticism. However, to consider further these differing assumptions, we also need to address a few of C&K’s errors.

C&K ask in the opening paragraph of their ‘Reply’: ‘It is difficult to see why a reviewer (who is also the journal’s editor) devotes ten pages to criticising, polemically, what he takes to be three ineffectual, and sometime incompetent, essays’ (2012). In other words, C&K are wondering why a reviewer would be disappointed with their book. At the end of their ‘Reply,’ C&K recommend the reader consult a different review of *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, by Nicholas Forster. It is easy to see why. Forster writes: ‘each essay elegantly dances with unique style’; ‘rarely does a thought fade into the ether,’ etc. (Forster 2011). I must admit I failed to praise C&K’s ‘elegantly dancing style’ in my review essay. Instead, I critically interrogated and engaged with their arguments and underlying assumptions.

In defending his chapter on description in the ‘Reply,’ Klevan writes that his aim was to write about ‘the folding together of examination, interpretation, evaluation, dramatic recreation and conceptual rumination within description.’ But when we evaluate the actual results in his chapter – the task I undertook in my review – all we get is Klevan merely repeating, italicising, and paraphrasing the words of the critics under discussion. There is a gap between Klevan’s grand aims and rather modest results.

Furthermore, we read in the ‘Reply’ that Klevan’s chapter ‘lacks ... the methodological authority demanded in the review.’ But it is not simply *my* demand, for Klevan’s chapter does not even meet the aims set up for it in the book’s Introduction: ‘The focus [of *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*] is on methods ...’ (C&K 2011, 21). While most contributors do meet this aim, Klevan’s chapter on description lacks a method. In my review I then provided a method for analysing

descriptive passages in film criticism (Buckland 2012, 292-94). The issue here is whether book editors, publishing in their own books, are exercising sufficient editorial control over their own chapters. This is why it is important to focus on the editors' chapters in a review.

This problem of editorial control also applies to Clayton's chapter, which conflates two different types of writing – Bordwell and Thompson's textual (or close formal) analyses, and Cavell's impressionistic criticism (based on romantic film-philosophy). Clayton's mistake is to discuss Bordwell and Thompson as if they were writing impressionistic criticism. No wonder he feels frustrated when reading Bordwell and Thompson's rigorous analytical language: 'This hardly reads like criticism,' Clayton complains (2011, 28). It hardly reads like criticism because it is not 'criticism' in his restricted definition.

In their 'Reply,' C&K write that 'Bordwell and Thompson *themselves* claim their passage to be "characteristic ... of film criticism" ...' (2012; also quoted in Clayton's contribution to the volume: 2011, 27). Bordwell and Thompson (2001) use the term 'criticism' in a broad sense, to mean the analysis of cultural artefacts. C&K use the term 'criticism' in a narrow sense, based on impressions and experiences (as I outlined in detail in my review essay; I will not therefore repeat it here). Bordwell and Thompson's 'criticism' is a form of analysis that identifies a film's component parts and specifies their interrelationships; and it employs this analysis to explain the causes behind a film's surface impressions. In doing so, Bordwell and Thompson posit film as a formal system of elements.¹ Clayton has missed the point of Bordwell and Thompson's sample essays – by conflating their analysis of films as formal systems with impressionistic criticism; for Clayton both are simply criticism. C&K in fact write about this exact issue in their Introduction: '... film criticism is commonly conflated with "close textual analysis" (or some variant thereof). Such analysis tends to appear in more or less formalist guises and often distrusts the subjective attitudes of criticism ...' (2011, 2). In conflating impressionistic film criticism with Bordwell and Thompson's close analysis of formal systems, Clayton is committing the error he and Klevan warn about in their Introduction! More rigorous editorial control would have identified this error in Clayton's chapter.

My review already highlighted C&K's superficial, one-dimensional account of textual analysis, a point they do not contest in their 'Reply.' What we do get in the 'Reply' is more superficiality – this time in regards to statistical style analysis:

‘Warren Buckland ... has endorsed “statistical style analysis” – essentially, counting shots instead of describing, interpreting and evaluating films ...’ (2012). Their caricature of statistical style analysis is so absurd and inaccurate that it is unworthy of a response. It is unfortunate to see two film studies academics resorting to such feeble falsification.

Their falsification is a result of solipsism. C&K’s attempt to claim in their ‘Reply’ that their criticism is not solipsistic is unconvincing, due to the counter-evidence found in their Introduction and the contents of their ‘Reply.’ The end of the Perkins extract they quote in their Introduction is significant, as are their following sentences. Let’s imitate Klevan for a moment, by simply repeating words and italicising them:

... there is regularly *a more important problem with oneself*... . (Perkins, quoted approvingly by C&K 2011, 19; italics mine)

... *solitude* of the act of criticism (Barthes, quoted approvingly by C&K 2011, 19; italics mine)

This picture of the anxious writer *sitting alone* ... may seem a touch precious or indulgent to some. (C&K 2011, 19; italics mine)

Klevan’s work is useful for pointing out the immediately obvious: the italicised words reflect the thinking of the self-absorbed solipsist – and, as C&K themselves point out, these words do seem a touch ‘precious’ and ‘indulgent.’ (Compare these italicised words to Bordwell and Thompson’s analyses of how filmic elements function in an overall system.)

Against my charge of solipsism, C&K point out in their ‘Reply’ that they ‘appeal to features of the work which are capable of independent affirmation’ (2012, repeated from the beginning of their Introduction: 2011, 3). If this is the case, then there is a clear contradiction between what they say at the beginning of their Introduction and what they say at the end. Like their essays, their Introduction requires some additional editorial control in order to eliminate the errors found there.

Furthermore, the failure of C&K’s critique of textual analysis in their Introduction and their gross misrepresentation of statistical style analysis in their

‘Reply’ indicate another consequence of solipsism, since it shows they are unable to understand a practice outside their own perspective. This also explains Clayton’s reaction when reading Bordwell and Thompson (‘This hardly reads like criticism’). A non-solipsistic reaction would be to consider Bordwell and Thompson’s work as an alternative type of practice that uses the word ‘criticism’ differently; instead, Clayton simply expresses frustration, because their work does not conform to his restricted definition of criticism. In sum, C&K’s own work and their criticisms of textual analysis and statistical style analysis are solipsistic. Their ‘elegantly dancing’ essays and their ‘Reply’ distort and misrepresent the work of others, including my review of their book.

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Note

¹ In the section of *Film Art* that Clayton discusses, Bordwell and Thompson write: 'Our examples and analyses have shown how elements of a film function in an overall system. ... [W]e conclude our look at films as formal systems with a series of brief sample essays on individual films' (2001, 351).