

David Vichnar, PhD  
OPPONENT'S REPORT: re "*Between Mainstream and Avant-Garde  
Filmmaking: The French New Wave and the Illusion of Realism*"  
by Dunja Ilić (MA dissertation, 2022)

Ms Ilić's MA project explores the question of "[w]hat allowed the French New Wave to make a break with the classical filmmaking of its time – that is, what puts it in the category of avant-garde filmmaking," which she identifies with "what ultimately denies [New Wave] a firm place in that same category: its concern for realism and realistic representation" (9).

This she attempts by a series of "close readings" of the cinematic language of several selected New Wave films (Claude Chabrol's *The Cousins*, François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, and Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, *The Little Soldier*, and *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*) as informed by the aesthetics of American art cinema (Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons*) and Italian Neorealism (Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*) and contrasted with some Tradition of Quality staples.

Ms Ilić's thesis departs from the position of André Bazin vis-à-vis "realism", and goes on to trace its rendering in the early New-Wave films (Chabrol & Truffaut), as well its subsequent development in more politically-critical pictures (the late-1960s Godard). Her detailed forays into the New Wave are informed by a broad-ranging critical and theoretical apparatus: apart from the most influential Anglo- and Francophone works of film theory (Neupert, Bordwell, Clouzeau, & Siclier), she also brings to bear Adorno/Horkheimer's analysis of cinema as part of the "culture industry", Berthold Brecht's analysis of the "V-Effekt" as mode of ideological critique, and Guy Debord's critique of consumption capitalism in *Society of the Spectacle*.

Laudable is Ms Ilić's consistency with which she painstakingly (re)defines her crucial terms ("realism", "ideology", etc.) and the grace with which she employs these sources to inform her own argument, without her voice ever becoming subservient to theirs or relying on them to make her point for her. Ms Ilić's command of the critical discourse she employs is competent, her close readings of the primary films are insightful and well-argued, she is apt at synthesising concepts and drawing original conclusions.

As for critical remarks, they really are minimal: the only formal reproach would concern the overuse of the superfluous past-perfect tense (e.g. pp. 25-28) during plot summaries, plus the occasional language slip (e.g. "ensure" instead of "assure" [20], or "stadium" instead of "stage" [26]). But overall, the thesis is well-written, with enough attention paid to stylistic consistency, and decently proofread. Thus my only formal complaint would be the baffling omission of a Conclusion that would help synthesise the many interesting, yet somewhat scattered insights into the films surveyed and bring into relief the main thrust of the thesis (cf. my question no. 4).

My questions for the candidate would concern some further omissions & suggestions for an expansion:

1. First off, I would like to ask Ms Ilić to give a summary of the two chief terms employed through her thesis, "reality" vs. "ideology". What is the understanding thereof

in Bazin, Astruc, Brecht, Debord (et al.) and what are the shortcomings of these individual conceptions? Also, what about the ever-changing “real” and “ideology” of cinema in Žižek’s post-Lacanian understanding of cinema as the art of the “perverse”? Would that help to theorise her argument further?

2. I am curious about the term “mainstream”, which is present in the title of the thesis but doesn’t seem to receive the same amount of critical attention as Ms Ilić’s other crucial notions. Didn’t it, too, undergo a shift from the 40s Hollywood “decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver’s response” (11), all the way to the late-60s (where Ms Ilić’s foray ends)? Either way, wouldn’t it deserve some critical attention in a thesis supposedly about the uneasy ground between the “mainstream” and the “avant-garde”?

3. In numerous instances, the thesis takes issue with what feminist criticism (esp. Laura Mulvey) has theorised as the “male gaze”, cf. descriptions of the New Wave as “a bourgeois milieu populated by intellectuals, artists and “parasites” with women, sex and cinema as their central preoccupations” (47). I understand a feminist critique of the New Wave is beyond the scope of the thesis, but cannot help but wonder if the all-male director line-up doesn’t help to perpetuate the very same patriarchal stereotypes Ms Ilić rightfully criticises, and whether the inclusion of e.g. *La Pointe Courte* and *Cléo from 5 to 7* by Agnès Varda would have been in place?

4. Finally, what is the “argument” of thesis? The individual probes into scenes and techniques from the main movies are apposite and intriguing, but what I find lacking (perhaps due to the omission of the Conclusion) is some kind of overall summary of insights gleaned along the way. Also I cannot help but feel that what Ms Ilić towards the end of her work identifies as the New Wave’s “formalist” (Wellesian) and “thematic” (Neorealist) inspiration (62), and its two stages of “manipulating reality” (as per Bazin) and critiquing “the false consciousness perceived as reality” (63), is a cyclical return to Peter Wollen’s notion of the *two* avant-gardes, the purist/formalist and the politically subversive, detailed in the introduction (6-7)? Perhaps I’m doing ill-justice to the nuances of the argument’s development and digressions, but I still wonder where/how the thesis argument manages to break through this circle?

Having raised these issues (which rather than criticism constitute an attempt of thinking through and with the thesis), I am still positive that Ms Ilić’s M.A. project presents a well-researched work of original theorising and compelling novel argumentation. As such, it exceeds the usual scope and depth of a regular M.A. thesis at the Department.

Therefore, I have no qualms in recommending it for the defence and propose a grade of **excellent – výborně. Práci doporučuji k obhajobě.**



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