Essays on Some of the Prose Poems in Barbara Guest’s *The Confetti Trees*

In many ways Barbara Guest has a late-Romantic sensibility though she began as a poet firmly rooted in the experimental poetry world of the first generation of New York School poets. In the fifties she was associated with Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, and James Schuyler, as well as many of the Abstract Expressionist painters of the time, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. She has also written extensively on the work of these painters. Her poetry is visual and one of her concerns in this book is with the problem of art and reality, the ideal and the real. In *The Confetti Trees* (1999), she examines these issues in terms of the visual medium of film.

“The Tear”

Guest’s “The Tear” expresses a kind of poetics of implication and suggestion rather than direct address. In this way, the Director in the film is able to convey a subjective state without the interference of objective fact. In this prose poem, the fatigue of the actress is “conveyed by the way she bends down to loosen her hiking boots.” This feeling is exhibited through a physical motion, the subjective by a concrete action. Moreover, the “heat is given a further tonality when a cloud of bees swarms over the
horizon.” The subjective experience of the heat, which we are told “arises from the distant sand,” is influenced by a change in the surrounding space, that is, the introduction of the fact of a “cloud of bees.” But the camera, we are told, focuses primarily on the actress’s eye, and “this close up of her eye with its tear is purposefully designed to interfere with the camera’s exploration of landscape.” The tear “signifies … a possible sadness entering the film,” just as the motion of the actress signifies “fatigue.” Conveying emotion is by suggestion rather than explication. The objective landscape recedes into the background as the camera focuses on the “tear.” In fact, “The Director desires to wrest our attention from the landscape! The camera ‘says’ it is no longer interested in the details of nature.” Rather than a specific concrete detail or fact, the director is more interested in the subjective, romantic scenario. The camera must now focus solely on this mysterious “long-haired woman,” which has become, indeed, a kind of Romantic figure.

Then the camera changes its focus and rather than “its engaged closing in on her eye, we are permitted to follow the hesitation of her arm.” It is as if the scene is being revealed through implication and suggestion, a balance between what is seen and what remains unseen, where a “tear” and the “hesitation” of an arm reveal more about a subjective state than language ever could. This is an idea that will be further developed in the following essays on The Confetti Trees. For now, it suffices to say, that against the fact of nature and the landscape, the director’s Romantic sensibility is more concerned with implication and subtle changes in tone. Finally, Guest writes, “Only then, (an almost invisible moment of time) we recognize that the camera is ‘intimating; not telling that the dramatic action of this film is about to begin.” For Guest, it is through implication, ellipses, suggestion, and changes in tonality, that the poem can convey the subjective truth of experience, more realistically than any attempt at conventional realism.
“The Cough”

“The Cough” is similar to “The Tear” in that both concern an uncontrollable physical or emotional reaction, pregnant with meaning through suggestion. In this poem, the director, Wilhelm is suffering from an uncontrollable cough. Guest writes about him, “perhaps his throat was struggling with words.” The conflict between words and images is a theme that will be explored throughout *The Confetti Trees*. On one level, this poem is about the problem of language in expressing ideas, and the two directors, Wilhelm and Nagao, seem to misread and almost mishear each other in the attempt to find a solution to the problems they pose. Language is a game where these two directors seem to exist in their own subjective worlds. Nagao, the Japanese director, says about Wilhelm’s cough, amusingly, that it exhibits an “Allergy to our film.” The directors are riding in a car as they talk about the film they are making. At a bend in the road, “where in Japanese films a short dark woman usually squats, Wilhelm pointed out a break between two buildings where light crept through like an oyster. He would like to use that oyster light.” To the Japanese director this seems like a “Cliché.” Perhaps he is thinking of oyster lights as artificial. Nevertheless, the poetic image is not what the Japanese director seems interested in. But once again, there appears to be a problem with their communication. Can we be totally sure that they understand each other? Nevertheless, Wilhelm improvises the title *Dark Blue Denim*, for their film, while gazing at the Japanese director’s blue denim jeans. Wilhelm alternates from a poetic image to a more mundane image. Moreover, he “wished the noise an oyster makes could get into the film.” Curiously, John Philpots, in his book, *Oysters, and All About Them* (1891) writes about a curious incident involving the sounds an oyster makes:

The landlord listened, hardly believing his ears. There was, however, no doubt about the matter. One of the oysters was distinctly whistling or, at any rate, producing a sort of “sifflement” with its shell. It was not difficult to detect the phenom-
enal bivalve, and in a very few minutes he was triumphantly picked out from among his fellows, and put by himself in a spacious tub, with a plentiful supply of brine and meal. The news spread through the town, and for some days the house was besieged by curious crowds. That the oyster did whistle, or do something very much like whistling, is beyond all question. How he managed to do so is not upon record.

I use this interesting detail from a writer of the Victorian period to suggest that Wilhelm is obeying the directive of the imagination here, a subjective and romantic vision of what his film could be. This detail also suggests the romantic sensibility of the nineteenth-century Romantics. Nevertheless, the Japanese director comes up with an image even more mysterious. He says, “Better noise the eye when it blinks. ‘Pachi Pachi in Japanese.” It is said that there are numerous sounds the eyelid can make when the eyes blinks, from a “squeaking” to a “cracking” sound. Oysters don’t normally make sounds and they have no ears. Wilhelm challenges the Japanese director by suggesting a “sound of creaking wood” for the “scene of the two people lost in the garden.” But the Japanese director insists that “Pachi Pachi” is better because it is “more subtle.”

The Japanese director is interested in more “arty” images; “the noise an oyster makes” and “the noise eyelids make” are conceptual poems themselves or conceptual images. Wilhelm is more radical in his subjectivity, more the romantic, perhaps. Moreover, Wilhelm wants a “violent crescendo” where a body falls down the stairs and where “perhaps another body could fall on top of it.” The more we learn about Wilhelm the more we see a Romantic sensibility at work, improvising subjective states, and attempting to give a shape to the invisible through suggestion while he is nevertheless bound by ideas of the real. The Japanese director is more practical: “Could be liquid soap on stair.” The Japanese director’s comment about technicalities and how the scene could be facilitated undercuts Wilhelm’s scene of romantic violence, almost sexualized, which is not an
accident produced by soap on the stairs. Finally, we learn about the emotional and psychological state of mind that Wilhelm is struggling with here:

In the middle of a film, Wilhelm had the feeling he was being chased. He complained that when he directed those shots up in the sky with two planes flying parallel to each other, he was also in a sky chase.

A dream of being chased is a common one. It suggests the avoidance of something, or perhaps a fear of something from his past. Essentially, this suggests anxiety. In the following passage, the reader learns more about the possible source for Wilhelm's feelings of unease:

Perhaps he might return home for awhile and the scenarist could work with Nagao. She could put her own story into the script, how she got hired, etc. Was there something going on between her and Nagao.

The German director, Wilhelm, exhibits a characteristic Germanic interest in the Romantic and a sexualized violence that lies underneath, which is also barbaric. Wilhelm is clearly jealous of the Japanese director; this may have been the cause of the tension in their conversation. On the other hand, the Japanese director maintained his composure. He is not a Romantic but as practical as he is subtle.

Guest writes that Wilhelm “thought of home as a possible sequence” for his film. He thought Home needed editing, “especially the scene with his analyst when they discussed his cough that now seemed like another room in the movie.” He inserts not only the life of the scenarist but his own personal life into the film. In this way the film becomes a personal, subjective, vision. Nagao believes that the film is “too slow,” and “old fashioned.” His main complaint is about what he thinks is Wilhelm's need to “explain why gangsters upset the fish cart.” But for Wilhelm, the fish cart, is like “a capsule of real life,” like “a scene
by the painter, Utamaro,” the eighteenth-century Japanese artist. Wilhelm finally offers a title for the film that expresses his conflicted feelings, which are similar, in one way or another, to many of the directors in the Confetti Trees: Dreams of Real Life.

The dilemma of the ideal and the real is balanced by imagining a dream of the real. Of course, Nagao, with “both eyes blinking,” a witty detail inserted by Guest, says, “No … The Cough is better.” By comparison with Wilhelm, the Japanese director is a realist, unconflicted emotionally, and by suggesting The Cough as the title, both concedes to Wilhelm, in the sense that it is his cough that will stand for the title of the film, and contradicts him, with an image that is both suggestive and physical. One can also say that the European mind, represented by Wilhelm, which is fundamentally based on duality, is different from the thought of the East, represented by Nagao, where no such philosophical problem subsists. And, finally, the poem also suggests the fierce and barbaric, Romantic sensibility of the Germanic mind as against the contemplative Buddhist sensibility with its idea of the Tau.

“Falling in Love” and “Details”

The two prose poems, “Falling in Love” and “Details” are linked because they contain the same mysterious and unnamed director, who, in the former, directed an actress’s movements that suggest a kind of erotic pose based on his own repressed desires, and in the latter, expresses the fact that he “lived in the real world too much” and thus “hated reality,” which leads him to attempt, in his film, to synthesize the ideal world of the dream and reality. We are introduced to the director in “Falling in Love” as he is telling his actress, “you have to be on your toes.” Then a curious and rather funny thing happened, the “actress obediently tiptoed out of the room.” Apparently, she takes the directive literally. We, as readers, are surprised and amused at Guest’s turn of phrase. But actually this shows the working of a main theme in her book: the ideal world of art and its encounter with reality; the confusion this may cause is, in this case, a matter of language, as in the poem, “Romance,” discussed later, where words
evoke a dream-like and magical world. Here, a colloquial phrase is taken literally. The “creative” phrase is interpreted in a literal sense. This crossing of the one sense with another, as in the case of the dream with reality, produces a humorous effect. Like the Freudian slip, one phrase suggests another, and the result suggests repressed desires. Guest is suggesting that the difference between a magical world and a real world is contained in the language we use; a poem is not a legal handbook. And so, like the Freudian slip, what is said often suggests repressed feelings of a sexual kind. Guest’s writes about the director that he

liked small body movements, toes turned outward and knees hidden under clothing. He had seen her knees knocking against the fabric of her body. Knocking knees disturbed him, although his own walk was odd, with one foot hitting the other.

Thus, like the director in the poem, “Enchantment,” film is a subjective record of an inner need. In this case, the feeling suggests a kind of sexual frustration, or more generally, any repressed desire. Furthermore, this repressed desire is born of his own insecurity with the odd way he walks. But the actress emerges again in the frame, “obediently on tip toes, her head in a cloud the effects man had built, but her body was off balance. Standing on one foot as she was told to do, her torso was off center.” There is the surprising detail which operates like the initial “misreading” of the colloquial phrase earlier in the poem, this being “her head in a cloud the effects man had built.” “Her head in a cloud” is a phrase similar to “being on your toes.” In the latter case, the actress takes a colloquial phrase literally. Here the phrase, “to have your head in the clouds,” which means to have a dreamy temperament that suggests an aversion to reality, expresses something literal, when the reader is told this “cloud” has been created by an effects man. So, the “dream” is a creation, born of props and the creativity of the effects man, thus born from real things in the world. In fact, film is a simulation of reality. Of course, since the actress is in a very precarious
position, her body off balance, she falls down, “with that little look of surprise one always has,” but, unfortunately, her fall is not captured by the camera, and she fell outside the camera’s range. Guest continues, “This deeply annoyed the Director who wanted to stress the frailty of the body with this fall.” We are told that her “pose,” which created great stress on the muscles of her body, causing her to fall, was the director’s attempt to show how frail the body is. The actress, in her contorted pose and her eventual fall, comes to represent the dream’s tenuous relation to reality. The dream is not only manufactured from objects in the real world and thus bound to reality, but it’s representation on film is subject to the same strict demands of filmmaking—the very real concerns of schedules, finances, fees for the actors, actresses, etc. Often the director is forced to compromise. But the problem between the Ideal and the Real is an essential one. Guest concludes the poem with “The whole company would be surprised when later the front office titled their film, ‘She Falls in Love.’” There is this wonderful final twist to the poem that adds another level to Guest’s exploration of the relation between dream and reality. The title “She Falls in Love” is in one sense, so prosaic and Hollywood-like, but in another, it shows that love itself is like a dream, which forces reality to conform to its insane demands, often with tragic results.

In the following prose poem, “Details,” we learn more about the director of “Falling in Love.” We learn he has the “same attitude toward his actors, sitting in his poncho under an umbrella reading the script as the storm approached.” It is an image of loneliness. And immediately he makes a mistake in perception. Apparently, the actors are standing near a barrel. The director had asked them to stand there. Taking out his binoculars he notices something different, that there are also barns in the frame. He had asked the actors to gather barrels while the cameraman fixed his shot. But, in fact, he then notices that the barns were a house. It is a perceptual mistake, one, Guest tells us, that was common for the director. We also learn that the director was noted for his use of the landscape and that “the house changed
the whole concept.” Furthermore, the barrels were added to lend a sense of “impermanence to the scene,” something he wanted in the picture. Guest notes that “impermanence” was not the word the director used. Instead he used the phrase, “a bit shaky, apt to roll away if not watched.” There is the landscape, the house, and the barrels. In the director’s mind the landscape comes to represent a kind of eternal or imaginary space, against which the house, suggesting human interference, is intrusive. The barrels, apparently “rolling” along suggest movement, and thus “impermanence”; they could also be thought of as a bit-shaky; they are there, as we learn, to be moved from the house, down “rickety stairs.” When the action begins, there is the addition of “mechanical studio rain.” The actors reappear in the scene, exiting or entering the house, “with lit or unlit cigarettes.”

The final “detail” concerns the cigarettes the actors are smoking. The director asks them to put them out but to keep the unlit cigarettes in their mouths, as they continue to push the barrels in and out of the house. It is an interesting detail, perhaps phallic, or, perhaps, there to maintain any common associations with cigarette smoking, from elegant sophistication to manly virility. Presumably this scene takes place in the forties, where the public perception of smoking was not as it is now. The director, after witnessing this scene, returns to his car, not content with the image. First, there was the problem with the “mechanical,” rain, but it looked too mechanical — the attempt to represent reality has failed. The director feels he has “missed something,” and is critical about the scene. He notes that the script had mentioned something about an “apparition.” Guest suggests here that the conflict is between an ideal image and the representation of that image in reality on film. Guest writes,

Wasn’t the landscape supposed to be like an apparition while the men in their raincoats going in and out of the house in the studio rain were supposed to represent reality as opposed to … he had missed something. He lived in the real world too much these days. He hated reality. His raincoat had already dampened the seat of his expensive car and there we puddles
on the floor. ... You had no control over reality. He sat back in his seat, prepared to reconsider the film in terms of an apparition with absolutely no intrusion of the physical world and its weather.

The “real” storm had arrived to drench the director and the set. The real rain has a more devastating effect than the fake “mechanical rain.” In Guest’s memory, there were many hurricanes that had devastated Florida when she lived there during her youth. For her, a storm or hurricane, suggests death. For the director of “Falling in Love” and “Details,” the simulation of reality proves impossible. The simulated effects of rain prove too mechanical. The attempt to finish the scene also appears futile, since there is something essential missing. For a director with this romantic sensibility, the attempt to represent the real becomes so problematic that he desires to dispense with reality, and reject any reference to the physical world in his film. But this is a perilous wager he sets up between the real and the unreal. Reality intrudes upon the dream and the reverse also happens. They coexist and form the tension in any image; they cannot be separated or resolved to perfection. This tension between the real and the ideal can also create an ambiguity in the image, or something mysterious, something one cannot explain using reason. In “Details” the director’s attempt to create a “perfect” film without any reference to the physical world will result in a sterile film, divorced, as it would be, from the life blood of reality. There is also the suggestion in these two prose poems of repressed desires, that may be sexual in nature. The desire to create this kind of film is also an attempt at the sublimation of a need or desire. But this also signals death since such a film lacks a physical presence and so the desire remains repressed.

“Romance”

In the humorous prose poem, “Romance,” Guest shows the disposition of a romantic temperament in the conflict between art and reality. In this poem the artifice of romantic language is con-
trasted sharply with the more prosaic and earthy language. The actors and actresses seek an environment of enchantment and wonder and are dissatisfied with the very common surroundings they find themselves in: “The director had led his cast to a viaduct of a dry river and the cast resented this overture to reality. They wanted to be seated in green with blossoms.” The cast rebels against reality and attempts to create a scene of enchantment. The leading actor throws his motorbike “on the slope of the dry hill. He wished the bike were a grey palfrey resting on the green.” A palfrey was usually one of the most expensive type of horses during the Middle Ages, sometimes equal in price to the knight’s war horse which was used in battle. As a result, it was popular with nobles, ladies, and highly ranked knights and was used for riding and hunting. The word “palfrey” is evocative of the romantic Middle Ages and is a soft and mellifluous sounding word. By contrast, “motorbike” is a harsher sounding word. The first “motorbike” was created in 1894, and thus the word evokes the great industrialization of the nineteenth century, which led to a growing labor force, and a focus on materialism. Many of the late-Romantic poets reacted against this. Language and music are key in creating an atmosphere of the marvelous. Guest continues, “Having to play the tough guy was annoying. It betrayed his true character which was romantic, like the grey palfrey.” Against the brash new worker produced by the new world of capital and labor, the actor seeks to evoke an older time, a time where men were romantic and chivalrous, where honor and bravery were held in high esteem.

The actresses also rebel against the director’s imposition of reality. They are annoyed because they are given silly names like “Dessie” and “Brunnie” and are forced to wear “harsh leather and gun belts.” Like the actors, they too are romantics. They believe their true names are “Desdimona” and “Brunhilde,” even “Lotus Blossom.” “Desdimona” evokes the Venetian beauty in Shakespeare’s Othello and “Brunhilde” evokes the female warrior who was one of the Valkyries in Wagner’s Ring Cycle. The lotus in Buddhism is a symbol of the purity of the body, speech, and mind. The director makes them sip “tacky sodas” believing
That the sodas would “underline,” that was his ridiculous word, "the level of society they belonged to. Stupid.” According to the cast this is a stupid idea. And furthermore, “underline” is a ridiculous word, suggesting the highlighting of a fact for emphasis. The cast would prefer evocative and magical language instead. Thus “underline” is a silly and prosaic word in the minds of these actors and actresses.

But the director also comes under the influence of his cast, the spell that they weave around him. He puts “a pinch of snuff in each nostril” and begins to remember a certain evocative and romantic language: “Norma Shearer … Conquistadores … silver armor … Norma Shearer … daughter of Emperor … expensive hotel … Barrymore … beautiful voice … thick oak door … Norma.” Norma Shearer was the young Austrian princess in Marie Antoinette (1938). “Barrymore” is the famous actor “John Barrymore” whose beautiful and trained voice captivated audiences when the first talkies were introduced. “Conquistadores” evokes the Spanish conquerors of the sixteenth century. “Norma” evokes the female lead in Bellini’s opera, a world of druids and priestesses, of mysteries and of love. These words and phrases have the evocative power of romantic poetry.

They run through the director’s head, “like the sips of rum he remembered from the old days in the screening room, the feel of the glass in his now shaky hand.” The director remembers a time in his life when dreams and enchantment were what the films were all about. He remembers, perhaps, the excitement and desire, the willingness to be seduced by the glamorous women and handsome men in films. But now he is reduced to making realistic films about, in this case, presumably, fifties youth culture. He ponders. “Tacky soda … laced with gin … ugly Burbank.” The director, now under the spell of the old movies and of romantic language and memory, in a magical moment in the poem, himself, enters a kind of fantasy film of his own making and “floats away to his new home in New York State: ‘Duchess County roses climbing roof.’” And so Guest wonderfully concludes this humorous poem about the conflict between enchantment and reality in films.
“NO WORDS”

In the poem, “Romance,” words assumed an importance to the extent that they evoked magical worlds or Medieval romances or actors and actresses from the golden age of Hollywood. In the poem that follows this one, “No Words,” the ability of language to accurately represent reality is questioned. We are immediately told that the director, “sat slouched and disheveled in his chair,” holding the screenplay in his hands. It is an image of weariness and perhaps despair. Words invade not only his mind but are projected onto the physical space around him, “They bounced from off the window onto the floor. They plastered the ceiling. They had fallen into his coffee cup. How he detested these words.” Immediately, a complex and unusual situation is created in the poem, resulting from a conflict between language and reality. According to the director, words do not explain the motives of actors, nor do they explain, in the scenario, why an actor leaves his house to go to the river, and then sits in his car next to the river, nor do words finally explain why the actor drove his car into the river. In frustration, the director throws the script across the room. As readers, we can more or less accept these arguments. Words cannot explain everything and are relatively useless in expressing heightened emotional states. Finally they cannot explain the suicide in the screenplay.

Significantly, the director addresses his cat, saying, “You cannot write words. That is why I love you.” But is a purr a word? No. It is a sound that expresses something very real about the animal’s “feelings,” yet it is not a “language” in the sense that the director means. Becoming increasingly agitated, he begins to shout: “Films are the enemy of words,” and “Words are the enemy of films.” He describes a scene where an actor has to go upstairs and murder a woman, “because these damn words say so.” Furthermore, he says, “I will not tell the actor to go up these stairs because these damned words are lying. Motives personal motives refuse to let the actor go up these stairs, even if it is written that he should go up!” He reads something in the script, which is not revealed to the reader, that he refuses to believe is
true. He refers to a motive which rejects what the words claim. Indeed, a subjective reading of the script reveals the insufficiency of words. The fact that the actor “should go up” is countered by a personal motive that the director reads into the script.

In fact, the director believes that it is not “words” that “tell that actor to go up these stairs” but “Character and Time and Space.” Words in a screenplay delineate the course of the story, they are descriptive and contain direction for the actors as well as the words they speak. But they are not sufficient to explain subjective states. The forming of character is a subjective experience which deviates from the fact of the words on the page. Time and space are also independent from the written text and cannot be embodied in the words. Words have a one-dimensional orientation on the page, space is three dimensional, and time or duration is relative in comparison to words. The director is at his wit’s end. He finally refuses to direct any more films, “if they keep on handing me these Words.” It is as if he is speaking in a “foreign tongue” and the actors cannot understand what he is saying. The actor is holding a glass of water which the Director takes from him, with a smile on his face, saying, “in the familiar way of the theatre,”

‘Now walk over to the piano that is there in the dark and start to sing. But don’t … sing any words! No WORDS. You understand. Turn your back to me and make beautiful noises. PURE NOISES! NO WORDS!’

The actor, being a musician, is able to satisfy the director’s demands. The director, breathing deeply, responds, “Ah, No Words. Passion. Only Passion.” Passion is a subjective state that words cannot describe with accuracy. The director desires language to approach the condition of music. Music is purely emotional, or even cerebral, but is it never dependent on words, never bound by a referent; music only refers to itself. In this way, the director is able to manifest an ideal of “pure noise” against the lie that is semantic language. Words are seen as a kind of impassable wall that represses the manifestation of pure desire.
In “Enchantment,” the director falls back on his own subjective experience and a critical language. He too was seduced by films, but he could not satisfy his desire. In “No Words,” the director dispenses with the written word and finds that he can express his passion if words approached the condition of music. In this he can experience the ideal in sound without the limitation of words.

“Enchantment”

In the prose poem, “Enchantment,” Guest traces the subtle development of a fascination for films and filmmaking and its consequences on a certain temperament. The man in question emerges “from the grit-grey skies of Los Angeles” to go to the motion picture theater to view films. For him, this is not escapism, nor he is seeking entertainment; rather, he is under a kind of spell, fascinated by films as art and thus the images he sees cause him to reflect on the ideal. He is not totally aware of the trajectory of his fascination, the true source of it. That it arises to counter the “grey skies of Los Angeles.” It arises from a poverty of vivid images in his own reality. Thus his reaction to what he is seeing on the screen is all out of proportion to any sense of reality; it is really about desire and seduction:

If what he saw was totally innocuous, he crept out of the theater with bits of remembered location and dialogue in his pocket, so to speak, and hastened home to salvage them. Frequently he became choked by the splendor of the celluloid images.

He is excitable, passionate. The harmless and mundane images become imbued with a kind of luster, unreal.

But the real motive, unbeknownst to him at this point, is to “gather material for the daily dialogues with himself about the construction of a motion picture and its metaphysical position in a physical world.” To this end, he rips apart the film in his mind, and rearranges the parts, until the film lay in its bare es-
sentials before him. He believes he has found a pattern to the film, the “ideal” thread by which he could reconstruct the film according to the rules of the “ideal.” His real motive is to find a metaphysics that would harmonize with the physical in his life. He is seeking to fulfill a need deep within himself. It is not a rational motive but one governed by an idealistic vision of film. And since this is his motive, he is drawn into a kind of disordered relation to the real.

His fascination drives him to want to be an “acknowledged expert on the making of film.” But by this he does not mean the study of the mechanics of making a film; rather, the field that interests him is more philosophical, made of “incantation and illusory objectivication.” His fascination leads him to a philosophy of film not actual filmmaking. His knowledge of philosophy is considerable, but he is willing to exchange this for the “study of film as an Art,” and “The theater repays him for his excessive interest by introducing him to its secret visual life.” The “secret,” in part, concerns the mysteries of how to create an ideal image of beauty with the magic of lighting. Naturally, this now “occupies him completely.” His fascination is leading him to a final realization of his motives.

He quickly realizes that, “this world of imagined scenes needs help in its masquerade of the real.” The imaginary image needs to be imbued with a sense of reality. To him, an image is simply made up of subtle variations of light and shade projected on a screen. In this sense it is fundamentally abstract or unreal, metaphysical, and thus has to acquire a sense of reality. This thought says more about himself and his fascination, the spell he is under to find a metaphysics that would accord with the physical reality, than anything about filmmaking. It satisfies a deep yearning in himself. He desires reality to be more than itself, to reflect something even greater than himself, to make of the poverty of his daily visual life an enchanted world. He wants to be seduced. This is the result of his passion, his desire to idealize the mundane object. Thus, as a “director” he
introduces into his study of this art a portion of his philosophy of the ‘real’ diluted with the film’s portion of enchantment. It is at this point that everything becomes mixed up. As a consequence of his involvement with film he gradually is less realistic in his expectations of its scenes.

The enchantment of films works on him until reality cannot keep up; his world becomes less and less real; his expectations are all out of proportion with reality. Finally “Real life dissolves into a motion picture frame.” Realism is diluted unto it simply disappears from the picture frame, on which is projected the unreality and enchantment of the motion pictures, which have become entirely real to him. He can no longer distinguish between art and reality. Guest concludes,

The only thing to do is to write his way out of this dilemma. He appoints himself a film critic. In the darkness of the theater he scribbles. When after a few months he reviews the rapidly developing notes, he finds he has written only about himself.

He finally realizes that his fascination for films was the attempt to satisfy a desire, to be seduced by the images on the screen. This spell was born from the poverty of his visual life, the grey skies of Los Angeles. It was born of a melancholic disposition. Finally, unable to make films himself, he realizes his true calling as a film critic. But in the end, he realizes that he can only write about himself. He is marked because of his temperament, which I would call “late Romantic.” He is not artistic in any conventional sense. He is unable to make films, but his failure leads to him becoming a writer. Nevertheless, he cannot escape himself in language. His entry into the film world was born of a desire to transcend himself, to prove something about himself, whether it was being an “expert” in film, or philosophy, or metaphysics, or even by learning what goes on behind the scenes in the art of making films. But he finds only that he is writing about himself.
He returns to himself, his desires remain unsatisfied because unreal. So what else could he have become but a writer!

“The Spell of Beauty”

Film, by its very nature, makes apparent the problems of representation and reality. The projection of light upon a screen produces an image as ephemeral as reality, but it is only a simulation of reality and in many ways an idealization of the real. The duration of a film is also illusory, however much the sensation of linear time passing is suggested. The problem of the ideal and the real is embedded deeply in the image projected on the screen.

How that image is lighted is an essential aspect of filmmaking. Film in its essence is simply a collection of images composed of subtle gradations of light and shadow. The way this light is projected, for example, onto a woman’s face (one thinks of the Hollywood stars of the forties) becomes the pressing issue in creating an image of exceptional, and thus unreal, beauty. For example, Garbo’s beauty was largely constructed by the cinematographer’s manipulation of light and shadow. Beauty is an illusion, prepackaged in the Hollywood films of this time, for our consumption. The “star system” was just such an arbitrary collection of beautiful women during the golden age of Hollywood.

Guest’s prose poem, “The Spell of Beauty” is an examination of how a concept of beauty was manufactured in the Hollywood studios of the forties. However, much directors sought out beautiful women to film, “Hollywood had never determined its own canon of beauty.” Guest points to the elusive quality of Beauty, using an image worthy of a late-Romantic poet:

For this canon to remain indestructible one had to be fanatically aware that the skin that presents itself as beauty is part of the fairy tale that envelops the studio while it continues to sleep in its palace of cobwebs.
Of course, the reference is to the fairy tale of “Sleeping Beauty.” But there is no prince. Beauty is asleep, and, in terms of the beautiful image in film, she will never awaken, never reveal her secret. Here also is a feminist reading of the fairy tale. Guest continues, “The giants of industry were always under a spell” and for this reason, “a certain type was displayed in their films, not beautiful at all.” In fact, ideal beauty is a mirage. One of the producers, “stripped as he had been of money and wives” continues a futile search for the beauty in the “fairy tale.” Guest describes this producer, continuing her feminist reading, as one of the most “voluble” of the “unhappy men powerful determined magnetic men” who “discuss a subject that eludes them and will continue to do so.” This producer “had lost so many worldly goods” in the search for beauty. The ideal possesses the mind to the neglect of things in the world. He is under a spell.

Furthermore, “The fault lay actually in the camera. A truly lovely woman is an enigma to its lenses, she is beyond the propriety of real life.” The ideal cannot be represented on film. Film must always strike an unprofitable bargain with the ideal. But this problem is one that every visual artist knows: “beauty lies in distortion as Ingres, a favorite of this studio official …, discovered.” Beauty is subjective, which is one reason why the Ideal cannot be successfully captured by the camera. It is so rare as to be impossible to find. The realization that an ideal of beauty is a fiction, and that rare beauty is the result of a visual distortion, is not what the studio officials want to hear. This causes the men to be “restless and domineering at the same time,” because they are aware that the rarest jewel commands the highest price, and despair of ever finding it. Guest tells us that there was only one director who, “marked by the ‘wound of artistry’” was willing to “cope with ideal beauty.” The artist is like André Gide. Gide, having been a symbolist in his youth, encountered the harsh nature of the real, and it changed the tone and themes of his later work. The “wound” Guest is speaking of is unique to the artist who suffers from the failure of his idealization of the world, as it crashes into the wall of the real. This director’s work was never finished according to schedule. Indeed, the film by a director
working with “ideal beauty” is never finished, is always provisionally. The elusive and ephemeral nature of the ideal can only be captured in a fragmentary, partial sense, in reality.

The director halts before the completion of an impossible project and asks the studio heads, “if before they brought him into their discussions, he might be permitted to listen to *Ariadne in Naxos* with Elizabeth Schwarzkopf singing the title role.” In this opera, by Richard Strauss, two performances compete with one another; one is by a burlesque group, and the other is an *opera seria*. When the performance schedule is compromised, the two groups are forced to perform at the same time. The young composer of the *opera seria* is seduced by Zerbinetta, played by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, the famous soprano who once sang Zerbinetti’s role, the saucy comedienne and leader of the burlesque group and agrees to cut sections from his musical score. Realizing that this leads to a fiasco in which his work is compromised, he is overcome by despair. Essentially, the opera is about high and low art, the ideal and the real, and the seductions of the real for one inclined toward the ideal.

It is important also that the director thinks about a musical genre instead of a visual one. The abstract nature of music perhaps suggests to the director a way of looking at his film differently. But the studio officials, as if suddenly overcome by a strange compulsion, or, rather, a magic spell, react to the director’s proposal in a starling way: “One person fell down, another broke his little finger. The woman presently quietly pulled out her eyelash.” Thus, Guest writes, “The spell of beauty began to work.” The ideal encounters the real in this witty scene. The studio official mark themselves by altering their bodies, but then, the uniqueness of a jewel, the result, perhaps, of a kind of “defect,” is what allows it to command a higher price. Beauty is ephemeral and elusive because it contains something rare, a “distortion,” which makes it unique, and for this reason it is virtually impossible to embody in its totality as an image on film.
Works Cited
