DEFINING QUALITY IN FILM

Abstract
This paper offers a critical overview of some of the underlying bases on which certain kinds of quality status are characteristically ascribed to films. An inclusive notion of quality is employed here across a considerable spectrum of types of film that are marked as distinctive, to varying degrees, from that which is associated with the work of the most commercial mainstream. This ranges from what can be identified as the ‘quality’ end of Hollywood production to various examples that fall into categories such as ‘art’ or ‘independent’ film. A number of textual and extra-textual characteristics of such films are identified, in broad terms, with an emphasis on the essentially relative nature of the concept of quality. Textual features include the claims made by many such films to certain varieties of thematic significance or importance, including formal qualities such as claims of objective realism or more expressive or reflexive approaches.

A key aim of the paper is to identify the long-standing hierarchical schema and implicit assumptions within which such notions of quality are discursively established, and a number of related assumptions according to which particular value is usually ascribed to films that fall within a broad notion of quality such as that which is employed here. Quality is identified here as an unavoidably elitist concept, within a variety of particular manifestations, one that typically implies a denigration of other kinds of film and that raises a number of questions particularly relating to its use as a basis for decisions about state or international funding support. The paper concludes with a call, not for the abandonment of the employment of such a notion but for the importance of acknowledging the very particular and partial nature of the bases on which it rests.

Keywords
Quality film; art film; independent film.

1. INTRODUCTION

How do we define quality in film, generally, and what are the broader cultural implications of the manner in which such a concept is understood or employed in film policy? The term implies a number of value judgements that draw on a range of deeply sedimented socio-cultural assumptions. ‘Quality’ suggests a type of product that is in some way ‘better’ than whatever is defined as non-quality, although the underlying bases on which such oppositions are established – and the political implications of these – are often left unstated. Quality, as understood here, is not primarily an evaluative judgement of how well something is done in film, as I have also suggested elsewhere in the

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case of Hollywood. It also implies a particular kind of film product that has specific associations within the broader socio-cultural sphere. Quality, as I understand it in this context, suggests a range of potential locations within an hierarchical system of cultural evaluation and taste patterns. It is in this sense an elitist concept, founded on a process of differentiation from that which is customarily accorded a lower place in prevailing cultural hierarchies, whatever value its textual characteristics might be accorded from any particular perspective.

This paper examines these dimensions of quality as used in relation to several different kinds of film. From establishing the concept generally in the terms outlined above, it offers a broad sketch of the particular textual characteristics that are often associated with the designation in particular manifestations. These include qualities such as an avowed seriousness, real-world reference, complexity, subtlety, reflexivity, or the use of literary or other artistic sources or points of reference. The valuation of these, I argue, is premised on the existence of negative others, whether this is made explicit or, as is often the case, remains unstated. This is a process that has to date been studied more often in relation to television, where the notion of ‘Quality TV’ has gained sufficient critical and commercial traction to have achieved such capitalized status to a greater extent that has been the case in film. The degree of difference through which quality is marked is variable: from what we might expect to find at the ‘quality’ end of the spectrum produced by the major Hollywood studios, to the characteristics of relatively commercial independent productions of various kinds and locations, and the more substantial challenge to the viewer sometimes posed by works at what we might expect to find in a forthcoming volume. I should make it clear that I am using the term ‘quality’ here to apply broadly to the positioning of work across this quite wide range of cinema, to varying degrees, despite the considerable differences that exist within so broad a territory. This contrasts, for example, with a narrower usage, in which quality has served negatively as a marker of an often denigrated ‘middlebrow’ status that is considered to possess the merits of neither the popular nor the more ‘authentically’ artistic, an issue to which I return below.

The differential structure within which quality is valorized is then traced in this paper to a much longer historical context in which notions of artistic distinction were developed from the eighteenth century, in response to the increasing commercialization of culture. The inheritance of this period remains strongly in play in discourses of quality today, including their reliance on the celebration of dimensions such as individual authorship and certain kinds of critical consecration – key aspects also of the basis on which notions such as quality, indie or art film are often celebrated or promoted. While films associated with quality of these kinds are sometimes championed for their socio-politically oppositional stance, this paper highlights the contradictory nature of this status, given their basis on an inevitably elitist process of distinction from works of popular film or popular culture more widely.

3 G. King, Positioning Art Cinema: Film and the Articulation of Cultural Value, manuscript currently in progress, forthcoming 2018.
2. DEFINING QUALITY, POSITIVELY AND NEGATIVELY

As far as the actual textual characteristics of individual films are concerned, there is no such thing as a single or remotely clear-cut basis on which quality can be defined. It is an entirely relational concept. It is defined, often quite loosely, on the basis of particular characteristics that are valued in various ways. Such definitions rest on the basis of distinction from others that are not accorded the same value. If quality is a differential concept, it is also relative in the degree of difference that is marked by various types of films from the negative others against which they are effectively defined.

In a broad sense, quality, as understood in these hierarchical terms, is defined according to distinction from what is seen as the most nakedly commercial kind of film. The most obvious negative point of reference is the contemporary Hollywood studio franchise blockbuster, or particular varieties of this format. Other varieties of cinema that are seen as invested only in commerce might also be included, such as low budget ‘exploitation’ films and, at the extreme, that which is defined as pornography. Different relative degrees of quality might then be accorded to a range of alternatives. At the most commercial end of this scale is a kind of film that is accorded a certain degree of quality status – albeit often limited – from within the confines of the Hollywood studios or other major commercial operations elsewhere. Despite regular claims that the studios do not, or ‘no longer’, produce anything of this kind, a fairly consistent strand has continued to exist of Hollywood films that position themselves in this manner and/or are accorded quality status in critical discourse. We can then identify a further range of types of films that are likely to be accorded (or sometimes denied) quality status in various additional degrees. Closest to Hollywood in the American case would be some films produced or distributed by the studio ‘speciality’ divisions (the two most prominent examples at the time of writing being Fox Searchlight and Focus Features, the latter the speciality division of Universal). Beyond the realm of the studios are many other possible locations. Variable levels of quality might be accorded to relatively commercial productions from other national or trans-national locations, including some with associations with major media organizations. We then have the broad territory constituted by what are termed independent and art cinemas from across the globe. These overlap to varying extents across a spectrum of variable degrees and mixes of more or less commercial or alternative/artistic components. Quality status might be accorded to some features on the basis of being a locally-rooted alternative to the global dominance of Hollywood, whether defined specifically in relation to Hollywood or occupying other bases of definition and understanding. But it is also clearly the case that differentiation can occur within any national setting, where resources are sufficient for relatively substantial/commercial production.

The whole arena of cinema in which quality status might be accorded is a large one, impossible to encompass in any specific detail in an overview such as this. But it is possible to outline some of the kinds of characteristics that tend to be involved in quality designations. These can be divided between the textual and the extra-textual. My main focus here is on the former, but extra-textual factors are also important, including most obviously the nature of the institutions involved in the production, distribution and exhibition of such films. One of the strongest markers of quality in many contexts is

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4 For more on this, see King, *Quality Hollywood*; on the earlier history of the ‘prestige’ film in Hollywood, a related concept, see C. Cagle, “Two Modes of Prestige Film”, *Screen*, 48, 3 (2007): 291-311.
simply not to be a Hollywood studio film (with the exception of the quality Hollywood strand, although how far this is deemed worthy of the term is always open to potential contest; a studio film is likely to be considered non-quality unless some specific ground is suggested for arguing otherwise). This is often a starting point, if unstated, for the quality status accorded to independent films (for example, those from the American indie sector). To have independent status in these industrial-institutional terms is not to guarantee quality-distinction at the textual level, given the numbers of independent productions that occupy positions of lower status within dominant cultural hierarchies (independent horror films or other ‘exploitation’ genres, for example). Distinctions are made within the realm of the independent on exactly this kind of basis (see, for example, the definition of ‘low-budget, low-key quality film’ provided by Yannis Tzioumakis5).

Much of what is defined as art cinema is also similarly distinguished from Hollywood at the industrial-institutional level. As well as having different sources of finance and production, art and independent films are often distinguished by who distributes them, how and on what scale, and by the venues in which they achieve exhibition.

It need not be the case that all forms of cinema that are accorded quality status produced around the world are created specifically in opposition to the globally dominant institution of Hollywood. They might be positioned more immediately as alternatives to dominant local cinemas, or might respond to dynamics of their own that are less helpfully considered in terms of such binary oppositions, as is argued by Lúcia Nagib’s inclusive employment of the concept of ‘world’ cinema6 to signify a more polyvalent landscape. A mid-range variant of quality that does not aspire to the status associated with more markedly distinctive forms of art or independent film can also be found within some national cinemas. Binary formulations are often strongly mobilized, however, in the discursive and institutionalized realms within which many such films circulate and are celebrated as exemplars of certain kinds of quality, a dimension I explore at length elsewhere7 and to which I return below.

What, though, of the kinds of textual features that tend to signify quality, across the kind of range encompassed here? Markers of quality can be found at the levels of both substantive content and form. Prominent among aspects of content are qualities cited above such as an avowed seriousness and reference to matters of substance as they are understood to relate to real-world issues, particularly those of broad social salience8. This can be viewed as entailing a particular modality, involving a seriousness of tone, something I examine in more detail elsewhere in the specific context of art cinema9. A key underpinning opposition is implied here between that which is taken to be serious, substantial and important and that which is accorded the status of the unserious, the insubstantial or the trivial. The exact manner in which this is enacted can vary widely, including, for example, formats that emphasize an impression of objective realism (from Italian Neorealism to the many subsequent inheritors of aspects of that tradition,

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7 King, Positioning Art Cinema.

8 See, as one of many examples, the reading by James Tweedie of art cinema ‘new waves’ in France, Taiwan and China as figurations of various aspects of issues relating to major processes such as modernization and globalization: J. Tweedie, The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013

9 King, Positioning Art Cinema.
including the Romanian ‘new wave’ and the films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne) to films that present themselves as more expressively substantial or philosophical/political in nature (from, say, the films of Michelangelo Antonioni and Andrei Tarkovsky to more recent work by figures such as Bela Tarr and Michael Haneke).

Quality films, defined in these terms, are those which are seen as offering important insights into the nature of humanity, human existence and the states of contemporary societies. These are key markers, often, of the status of the heavier-weight end of the spectrum of art cinema. Taking on such issues is valorized, for those who celebrate such work, in contrast with the association of non-quality (generally popular) cinema with supposedly ‘merely’ distractive entertainment, or that which is viewed as offering ‘cheap’ affective forms of pleasurable bodily sensation (from horror to pornography, for example). This measure of quality can also include a provocative challenging of the viewer and/or an undermining of more conventional expectations, as in Nikolaj Lübeck-er’s notion of the ‘feel-bad’ film. The values underpinning the basis of discursive oppositions of this kind have often been challenged (see, for example, the argument in favour of ‘mass’ art offered by Noel Carroll) but they remain largely uncontested in many instances, as implicit assumptions upon which the discursive celebration of quality frequently rests.

In formal terms, quality can also be marked in various ways. The quality associated with critical forms of realism is usually inseparable from some kind of realist aesthetic (the classic valorization of which is found in Andre Bazin’s celebration of Italian Neo-realism). The long take that can signify realism, in its sense of relatively less mediated cinematography, can also be extended to a degree that becomes more expressive and reflexive. In both cases, such forms are defined largely in opposition to the more ‘synthetic’ classical Hollywood style of shooting and editing. Such is the relative nature of all such markers of distinction, however, that a quietly classical style can also become a signifier of quality, particularly in Hollywood but also more generally, when contrasted with the more frenetic approach employed in what David Bordwell has termed ‘intensified continuity’. A clear sense of hierarchical opposition is developed by Bordwell in his comparison of this style – with its often unstable and highly mobile camerawork and rapid editing – and the alternative represented by the very slow style of figures such as Mizoguchi Kenji, Theo Angelopoulos and Hou Hsiao-hsien.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AND INHERITANCES

Underpinning most of the discourse within which notions of quality are valorized is an over-arching opposition between the notions of ‘art’ and ‘entertainment’ (or ‘art’ and ‘mass’ culture). Here, the contemporary currency of notions of quality needs to be situated in a much longer historical context, as suggested above. Current dominant western

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notions of art and entertainment are rooted in distinctions that became institutionalized from the eighteenth century. Raymond Williams dates the use of the term ‘art’ to suggest something of a higher type of imaginative or creative skill to this period, before which it was used to denote any kind of human skill\textsuperscript{16}. The same goes for the term ‘artist’ as distinguished from the notion of the artisan or craftsman. Larry Shiner argues, similarly, that: “After over two thousand years of signifying any human activity performed with skill and grace, the concept of art was split apart, generating the new category of fine arts […] as opposed to crafts and popular arts”\textsuperscript{17}. A series of further distinctions followed, all of which remain highly germane to the manner in which hierarchical notions of quality are articulated, including those between: artist and artisan; genius and the following of rules; inspiration vs. calculation; spontaneity vs. skill; creative imagination vs. reproductive imagination; originality vs. imitation of models; creation vs. copying; freedom vs. trade\textsuperscript{18}. The first and valorized components of each of these oppositions is what tends to be associated with quality film within the range considered in this paper, primarily articulated around the status of the individual filmmaker as distinctive auteur/artist creator, a figure characteristically situated in opposition to those who work within narrower commercial constraints (within a mainstream-commercial arena such as Hollywood, this figure continues to play an equally important role for those singled out as auteurs able to carve out some such space within a heavily industrialized zone).

The main cause of this historical change, for Shiner, was the very process of commercialization that was to be denigrated in the developing notion of a ‘higher’ form of art to be separated from other forms of creative work. It was the product, effectively, of its perceived opposite. The notion of art as a separate realm was firmly in place by the 1830s, Shiner suggests, but it took the rest of the century for the institutional separation between fine and popular art to be completed. The increasing commercialization of cultural production, and the resultant widening of access, beyond the confines of a small elite, provoked a reaction that further reinforced these kinds of discursive oppositions. The advent of ‘mass’ culture, including the development in the nineteenth century of mass-circulation newspapers and serial periodical fictions, and later of cinema itself, prompted a conservative critical response that saw such forms as a threat to the maintenance of ‘higher’ culture and broader social order. This included the work of numerous influential British literary-cultural theories such as Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, Q.D. Leavis, T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards. The elevation of ‘higher’ forms of art, coupled with the denigration of that associated with popular or ‘mass’ audiences, was further sedimented into widely taken-for-granted critical assumptions through the work of figures such as Clement Greenberg, Robin Collingwood and, from a Marxist perspective, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer\textsuperscript{19}.

Such perspectives can also be located within a much longer history of debate about the value of art in general, or of particular forms, a controversy in the western intellectual tradition that dates back to the work of Plato (hostile to the arts in general) and Aristotle (who argued for important positive benefits from the right kinds of material). The tradition associated with Aristotle values the arts in various ways as sources of education, enlightenment, civilization and moral improvement. It is within this broader heritage that we can locate much of the argument made for the particular cultural value

\textsuperscript{18} Shiner, \textit{The Invention of Art}, 115.
\textsuperscript{19} For a critique of the approaches of the latter four, see Carroll, \textit{A Philosophy of Art}. 
of ‘higher’ forms such as those associated with quality or art cinema, even if the explicit articulation of a distinction between high and low culture was primarily a product more particularly of the eighteenth century. The idea that the arts in certain favoured forms can offer valuable and educative moral lessons is a key component in this discourse, one that plays directly into the basis – often left implicit – on which some valorizations of quality are founded. This also implies the absence of negatively valued opposite characteristics, within prevailing western aesthetic/intellectual traditions, such as an emphasis on pleasures based on bodily sensation.

The point here is not necessarily to challenge such claims – although plenty of grounds might well be found for this – so much as to identify them as very specific notions, the origins of which have their own very particular conditions of existence. As Belfiore and Bennett observe, the inherited baggage within which notions of cultural value are implicated are rarely acknowledged in the spheres of policy making in which such notions are deployed. As Chris Baldick notes, a positive virtue was claimed by figures such Arnold and F.R. Leavis for the notion that the basis of critical valuation should remain unspoken – thus disavowing any of the interests that are inevitably involved in such processes. To force such issues into the limelight is to demonstrate the deeply partisan and elitist nature of the whole enterprise, even if the textual approaches of some manifestations of quality or art cinema might be avowedly oppositional in character.

4. ELITISM AND SOCIAL DISTINCTION

Quality, as understood in the terms used here is, then, an inescapably elitist concept, to one degree or another. The valorization of certain forms is generally predicated on the de-value of others that are consumed by a larger audience. And, historically, this whole process has roots in a dynamic of active separation from the world of mass or popular culture, even if the degree to which this is marked might vary across the spectrum from more commercially oriented varieties of quality to less widely accessible forms of art or independent cinema. If quality is often associated, within these terms, with distance and contemplation, and its opposite with the bodily affective, then these are also often discursively aligned with positions in terms of class, gender and race/ethnicity (‘mass’ culture often being ideologically associated within such complexes with the lower classes, women and those defined as racially or ethnically ‘other’). The articulation of such oppositions is a process we can find constantly at work in the policing of distinctions between types of film (and culture more broadly) that are deemed by critics or other commentators to merit one kind of status or another. This is an often-heated debate in the arena of American indie film, for instance, one that entails an ongoing process of relative distinction-marking between types of films considered deserving or not of the label indie or independent (much of the debate can occur merely between the connotations given to these two terms themselves; ‘independent’ being used in some accounts to imply something of greater value than what can be implied to be a dimin-

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21 Belfiore, Bennett, _The Social Impact of the Arts_, 11.
ished form of ‘indie’). The term ‘quality’ itself can also have mixed resonances and is not always employed positively. A classic example of its use as a negative signifier is Francois Truffaut’s citation of what he terms the French ‘tradition of quality’ literary adaptations as an other against which to valorize his notion of an auteurist directors’ cinéma. Quality can signify, as here, a ‘middlebrow’ location, one often denigrated as falling between two stools: neither ‘honestly’ popular or ‘genuinely’ artistic. The version of quality that associates the term with the middlebrow can also be considered more positively, however, or more analytically – whatever evaluative position is taken – as demonstrated by a recent collection that examines a number of different national manifestations in such terms.

The best way to understand the dynamics within which such concepts are valorized or otherwise, in this relational way, remains Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of distinction-marking, as part of the broader process through which patterns of taste and consumption can be viewed in social terms. As Bourdieu suggests, particular tastes – among which we could locate the taste for quality cinema, of whatever individual variety – are strongly related to social class positions (an approach that can also be extended to include other forms of social status). This is not the place for a lengthy discussion of the extent to which Bourdieu’s theory of distinction – rooted in studies in France in the 1960s – remains applicable in every detail today, within the particular class or other status structures that have evolved in Europe, the United States or elsewhere in more recent decades. Recent studies suggest, however, that the basic mechanism remains intact, through which the consumption of particular kinds of products can confer particular kinds of social status. This seems very clearly to remain the case as far as quality, art or indie film are concerned, even if it has been argued that higher status is often conferred not just by consuming such products but by including them in a wider range of preferences (if those who consume quality also consume more mainstream films, that is, they remain a minority niche constituency; most consumers of mainstream productions do not also view works from the art-quality end of the spectrum).

Michael Newman offers a formulation that can be expanded to include the realm of quality film more generally when he identifies a contradiction at the heart of American indie film. On the one hand, as he suggests, the notion of indie includes, at least in part, a commitment to some sense of opposition to the dominant mainstream, whether this is presented in an overtly political or more implicit manner. On the other hand, indie remains the domain primarily of a relatively narrow and elite constituency of viewers. This raises an immediate problem when it comes to the question of quality being used as a basis on which to offer state funding or other kinds of support to certain kinds of films.

State funding or support from international bodies such as the EU is usually employed to support films that might otherwise be presumed to struggle to exist, particularly in the face of the global market dominance of Hollywood. It remains a key part...
of the framework that permits the production of many European quality or art films. Whether this realm should be restricted solely to films at the quality end of the spectrum or be defined more inclusively is a subject of long-standing and ongoing controversy. To fund productions of relatively more mainstream orientation might be justified on the basis of national or inter-national specificity: that is, to support an indigenous industry in general (either in a particular state or in a region such as the EU) rather than only those that have artistic characteristics likely to appeal only to a small, minority audience. This is the basis of the declared objectives of the MEDIA programme run by the European Commission, for example, the key aim of the most recent version of which at the time of writing is to strengthen the European audiovisual sector, “reflecting and respecting Europe’s cultural identity and heritage”\textsuperscript{30}. The latter is sufficiently broad a statement to be able to include works viewed as having particular artistic/quality value without specifying this as a condition or limiting funding to productions of this kind. Much the same is the case in some of the conditions for support of international co-productions established by Eurimages, the cultural fund of the Council of Europe\textsuperscript{31}, although artistic quality is a more specific factor in some of its schemes\textsuperscript{32}.

Although sometimes seen as leaning more heavily in the direction of commercial factors, both MEDIA and Eurimages have included support for work at the art cinema end of the quality spectrum, including films from many well established auteur figures. This might be seen as an important part of their mission to maintain a greater diversity of production than would otherwise be likely to be viable, including at least some investment in the specific notion of artistic quality. But the latter immediately takes us back to the question of the manner in which this kind cultural valuation is established in the first place: its basis on questionable oppositions and the tastes of a socially elite minority constituency. The answer to those who raise such questions is often pitched at the level of proclaiming the value of ‘art for art’s sake’, as something that stands above any questions relating to more instrumental bases of valuation. But such notions are, themselves, part of the same broad cultural complex: the concept of art having a ‘higher’ value of its own, in a separate realm, is one of the key components of the discursive separation of art and opposites such as entertainment or popular cultural outlined above. It offers, therefore, nothing more than a circular basis of argument.

How, then, ultimately, can we accord particular value to one type of quality cinema or another? The answer, I suggest, is that we cannot, in any absolute sense. We might want to value films that fall into this category, but we need to spell out the exact terms in which such value is accorded – and we need to accept that its basis is always particular, proximate, partial and never universal. I personally value many of these types of films – those of figures such as Tarr, Haneke and the Dardennes, for example, and many others from the heavyweight end of the art-film spectrum or from the indie sector. But I do so from a very particular socio-cultural position (middle class, white, male, academic, etc), one that has to be acknowledged. That no universal position can be established does not mean that the terrain of cultural value should be abandoned, or that a pragmatic form of cultural policy based on such notions is, as a result, disabled; or that such films should not receive the measures of funding that are often essential to their viability. It does suggest a need for the particular value of particular types of film-cultural product

to be spelled out and justified. This does not seem to be typical of the manner in which such policies are usually enacted, however, when it comes to the selection of films on the basis of notions of quality itself rather than their national or inter-national status. What is constituted by ‘artistic quality’ seems often to be left implicit and unstated, along with the socio-political implications that follow and that we need to confront. We might speculate that this is because those who support such films do not want to have to make explicit the very partial basis on which they appeal, for fear of undermining their case. But to rely on implicit and unspoken bases of valuation is to participate in a long-standing historical-cultural process that seems fundamentally elitist and undemocratic, particularly when it comes to the sharp end that involves the spending of public funds or the equally implicit denigration of more popular forms that tends to be the other unspoken half of the discursive equation.