Style, Narrative, and Cultural Politics in *Bullitt*[1]

Jeffrey Childs
Universidade Aberta / Centro de Estudos Comparatistas, Univ. de Lisboa

Within the context of *Bullitt* (1968), as within the larger historical context of the late 1960s, style occupies an uneasy position, awkwardly situated between the different temporal demands of narrative and fashion. The tension with narrative can be traced back to modernism's own ambivalent commitment toward these terms, toward both the narrative events that form a story and the telling of a story itself (as Victor Shklovsky theorized in his ground-breaking essay on *Tristram Shandy*, first published in 1921 [1965]). In somewhat different terms, this tension can be viewed in the individual modernist's commitment to the telling of a particular story, requiring its own marriage of content and form, and to the cultivation of an individual style capable of leaving its imprint on any content whatsoever. Such a view of style corresponds to what Roland Barthes, in "Style and Its Image," refers to as the second conceptual formulation of the term, which, in the discussion following the delivery of the paper at the International Symposium on Literary Style held at Bellagio, Italy, in 1969, led to the following succinct description: "Style too [like the signature] is a substitute for the proper name; literature is the institution which consists of attaching one's name to a verbal product" (quoted in Chatman 15).

"Style," then, was the term that emerged in the field of literary studies, due largely to the work of theorists such as Shklovsky and Leo Spitzer, to denote the proprietary process by which an author lays claim to a certain range of verbalized experience, the ambiguity of which is perhaps symptomatic of the process as a whole. Was "style" the means by which the modernist writer laid claim to the world, or was the world (and its various material processes, artifacts, discourses, and registers) the raw materials through which each writer sought to rework, and redefine, his or her medium? This question, albeit modified to a new medium, bears directly on the aesthetic project of *Bullitt*; and, as I will argue with respect to Peter Yates's film, though compelling in its form, the question itself misses the complexity of aesthetic production in general. What lends the question its urgency is the artistic need to define, from the outset, the direction of one's work, but aesthetic practice is less linear than artistic intentions, and

the entire process resembles more of a perceptual gestalt—always susceptible to sudden reversals of orientation—than a definitive aesthetic program. The important point here is that the conventional aesthetic category of "form" is now informed by a proprietary process in which the artist's *own* attributes become the currency of his or her exchange with the world.

Within the performing arts (and by extrapolation the world of cinema) this tendency found itself entangled with what came to be known as "Method." The term and its corresponding procedures emerged from Lee Strasberg's widely influential assimilation and adaptation of Constantin Stanislavky's innovative approach to acting:

> Stanislavsky illustrated the meaning of emotional memory by asking an actor to imagine a large number of houses, large numbers of rooms in each house, a large number of cupboards in each room, drawers in each cupboard, large and small boxes in each drawer, and among the boxes, one that is very small and that is filled with beads. It is easy to find the house, the room, the cupboard, the drawer, the boxes, and even the smallest box of all. But it will take a very sharp eye to find the tiny bead that fell out of the box and, flashing for a moment, has gone for good. If it is found, it is by sheer accident. The same is true with the cupboards, drawers, and large and small boxes. Some of them are more and others less accessible. But how is the actor to find one of the beads of his emotional memory which flashed across his mind and then vanished, seemingly forever? Stanislavsky maintained that this is really the true task of the actors. This was the task I was to devote myself to in establishing the Method. (Strasberg 60)

This point requires further explanation, since the conventional understanding of "Method"—the immersion of the actor into the content of his or her character—appears to be the exact opposite of modernist "style." As Stanislavsky suggests, however, the ultimate point of reference for the Method actor was to be found among the beads of

emotional memory he or she carried within this set of nesting boxes, drawers, rooms, and so on. However, once Method acting reached Hollywood, it underwent another transformation: the actor still immersed himself or herself in the role—in the habits (mental and physical), environment, outlook, and even body of his or her character—but largely as a means of extending the range of the characterological materials that would bear his or her mark or signature. As with the modernist writers themselves, the litmus test for the success or failure of this proprietary process was imitability. Just as you could imitate Hemingway's or Faulkner's prose, you could also now imitate Brando playing a factory parts salesman or De Niro's embodiment of a small-time hood.

The tensions between actor and part, as a result of Hollywood's gradual absorption of method acting, appear even more pronounced in the attempt to produce a film vehicle for a method actor who had, by 1968, already become a star. One of the signifying layers of *Bullitt* is precisely the cementing of Steve McQueen's image within a new fold of male actors, thus representing another wrinkle in the possibilities for representing masculinity as such, as aptly described by Stanley Cavell in 1971:

> The rebirth of unexpressed masculine depth required the rebound of culture that created the new possibility of the cool; the young Montgomery Clift and Marlon Brando are early instances of it; James Dean and Paul Newman and Steve McQueen count on it; its latest original was Belmondo. Conviction in their depth depends on their being young, upon the natural accuracy of their physical movements (like athletes between plays), suggesting unknown regions of physical articulateness and endurance. In this figure, the body is not unhinged from the mind, as in the brute; it is the expression of selfhood, of the ability to originate one's actions. (Cavell 67-68)

This description offers us a physical, bodily equivalent of Barthes's second formulation of the term "style," and allows us to bridge the (apparent) distance between literary modernism and Hollywood's appropriation of Method acting. It is important to stress, however, that style is merely one signifying layer in the total composition of the text, literary or filmic, and a layer whose relationship to the rest of the work and context is determined as much by what it excludes as by what it includes:

> As manner in the treatment of matter, style chooses and discards matter as well as arranging it; it works within the categories of invention as well as within those of disposition and elocution. Therefore we need to know not only disposition or arrangement of what materials, but also from what materials—the prior givens, the limits and potentialities of thought and attitude already weighting the available materials as well as the accustomed manners. The loaded materials and manners are met and confirmed or counteracted by the specific loadings of the specific artistic structure of the specific artistic work. (Miles 25)

The dialectical nature of style, as described here by Josephine Miles, suggests that whatever tensions can be detected between the narrative and stylistic features of *Bullitt* and its other symbolic means (or ends) are the understandable result of its total circumstances. Thus far in my description of the film, I have focused on questions of form—"style," "method," "frame" all coming down on one side of the great (but suspect) divide between content and form. But though these elements can be isolated for the sake of reflection, it is in their interaction with content—with the givens of concrete historical circumstances (both on the level and in the act of representation)—that such elements become legible. As Leo Spitzer notes, in his discussion of the etymology of *conundrum*, the apparent divide between content and form is resolved in the act of interpretation:

> What seemed an agglomeration of mere sounds now appears motivated. We feel the same "inner click" accompanying our comprehension of this evolution in time as when we have grasped the meaning of a sentence or a poem—which then become more than the sum total of their single words or sounds (*poem* and *sentence* are, in fact, the classical examples given by Augustine and Bergson in order to demonstrate the nature of a stretch of *durée réelle*: the parts aggregating to a whole, time filled with contents). (Spitzer 6-7)

In this vein, what makes *Bullitt* such an intriguing film is its placing of two elements of film history—the crime genre or police procedural (which it is only reluctantly) and a particular conception of the role of the actor—in articulation with late 1960s America. Does *Bullitt*, then, look back on the 60s or forward to the 70s, and through what lens or lenses does it do the viewing? These are questions we will want to bear in mind as we examine particular sequences of the film.

The question of genre allows us to place *Bullitt* precisely between decades, as both McQueen and director Peter Yates took pains to distance the film from the police procedural which had, by that time, firmly established itself in the medium of television. McQueen was reluctant even to play the role of a police officer, as he felt there would be little sympathy among the general public toward such a figure. Yates managed to convince McQueen that his character would give him an opportunity to create such a sentiment, but was uninterested in recreating the familiar visual style of the genre. His previous work with director Tony Richardson and background in commercials pointed him in a different direction, one that emphasized location shooting, complex compositional and traveling shots, and an innovative approach to lighting and sound mixing. In his own words, Yates sought to create a film with a distinctly European feel to it, and the various resources he employed to achieve this end resulted in a film palpably estranged from the genre that made it possible (Yates 2005).

One sequence designed to break with the expectations a film viewer in the late 60s might have for a police officer, and thus to allow McQueen to distance himself from the conventional role, appears just after Bullitt witnesses the death of John Ross/Albert Renick at San Francisco General Hospital. The sequence also marks the first appearance in the film of the soon-to-be iconic 1968 Ford Mustang, which comes into view as it rises to the peak of one of San Francisco's rolling streets, turns a corner, and is easily maneuvered into a parking spot by Bullitt/McQueen, who proceeds to shop for groceries (mostly frozen dinners) at the neighborhood market across the street. The sequence has no narrative function, although Yates does a brilliant job of referring back to it in the film's final sequence by means of the absent Ford Mustang, thus retroactively endowing it with a kind of narrative meaning. But, as it stands here, the sequence functions like a non-restrictive relative clause in the larger sentence of the film narrative, allowing for the qualification of Bullitt/McQueen. The composite construction of character/actor (which corresponds fairly accurately to the subject/object distinction that separates the fictional from the viewing processes of film) compels us to acknowledge that individual

sequences generate different types of film sentences, often deeply incommensurate in representational terms, yet easily and unproblematically assimilated to the total film experience. The cue here is provided by Yates's decision to film Bullitt's arrival in the Mustang with a fixed long-focus lens, allowing the viewer to appreciate both Bullitt's and McQueen's skill with a motor vehicle. The effect is the creation (or heightening) of an imperfect overlay of character and actor, which can be exploited or collapsed in the elaboration of new film sentences, as is performed in the second-to-last shot of the film, in which Bullitt/McQueen stares into a bathroom mirror, brooding over his own image.

An earlier sequence, in which the camera follows Bullitt through the hospital recovery room, allows Yates to establish the camera as a direct formal equivalent of the character's reticence. The sequence begins with an over-the-shoulder tracking shot, pans past the first patient in the recovery room and then moves past the body of Carl (the officer wounded under Bullitt's command) and on to a moment of eye contact between Bullitt and Carl's wife. The rapport established between McQueen's visual representation of his character and the particular pacing and horizontal movement of the camera allows us to combine the insights offered by Miles and Cavell. Here style, as the deliberate (in both senses of the word) representation of reserve, leads to the evoking of "unexpressed masculine depth."

It is on the merits of sequences like this that *Bullitt* (and Frank P. Keller) won the Academy Award for Best Film Editing in 1968. McQueen insisted to Yates during filming that he was not an actor but a reactor (Yates 2005), and the idea of the male film star of the late 1960s as essentially a reactor is laden with its own social and political content. Here, however, it is Yates and Keller's achievement to have produced a visual equivalent of Bullitt's laconic but methodical observation of the scene that deserves our attention. It should also be noted how important this act of observation is in the film and how insistent Yates was on trying to guarantee the freshness of this moment and on providing a range of angles from which it could itself be observed. The extensive use of location shooting, non-actors, and unfamiliar sets were a few of the methods employed to this end. Two instances of such defamiliarizing techniques include Bullitt/McQueen's examination of the hotel room after the shooting and the search of Albert Renick's trunk. As Yates mentions in his commentary on the film (2005), both scenes were designed to be shot with limited preparation of the actors, who were instructed to conduct their search without prior knowledge of what it would yield. This procedure foregrounds the natural expressiveness of the actors, making this (rather than the clues

unearthed by their search) the primary content of these sequences. We can thus grasp in these moments the unraveling of "Method" into relatively autonomous film sentences whose subjects are the film's characters, actors, and (by proxy) viewers. The aesthetic value of perceptual freshness, for instance, which Yates sought to capture here, unites the experiences of actor and film viewer but distances both from the routine observational habits of the seasoned police detective (a character trait that will play a significant role later in the film, where it serves as a contrast to Cathy's emotional response). The cumulative effect of these techniques is the rendering of a world that—in its interplay of sameness and difference, familiarity and strangeness, tension and lassitude—serves as a palpable, even startling, reminder of the one we inhabit:

> The world of *Bullitt* is not different from ours (but then, the future need not look much different from the present); yet the simplifications and opacities of the lives it presents are what ours may fully become when the subtlety and sensibility that human relationships require are no longer negotiable. The action does not take place against an independent world, as gangster and police movies take place against the normal life of a city, or Westerns beyond the outposts of civilization; it forms a complete and abstract world. The effect of imminence is again accented by a concentration on the technology of hospital procedures, by the animation of the sounds and effects of the weapons in play, and further, for me, by the extraterrestrial quality lent by the telephoto lens to the cadenza of the car chase. That quality is complex, but it depends in the first instance on the accuracy of perception which realizes the hills of San Francisco as the ultimate site for the ancient motif of a car chase through a city. The narrative mode is not "Once upon a time …" but "What if one day…." (Cavell 82-83)

Another iconic sequence of the film (subtly referred to in Cavell's description above) can also be considered more a tribute to Yates's directing than to McQueen's acting (or reacting), although, as in the previous scene, McQueen subtly rises up at the end of the sequence to steal the scene back from both Yates and actress Jacqueline

Bisset. What ought to be appreciated here is the series of formal inversions that characterizes the ride to and from the motel in San Mateo, and which includes such elements as mood, Bullitt's shift from passenger to driver, and the nature of the freeway traffic that frames the scenes. Freeways themselves, it should be added, are a constant, almost obsessive, presence in the film, and Yates has discussed his own fascination with them at the time of filming, describing them as "veins running through the city" (2005). Clearly, as motorized crowds, they signify a range of different features and valences of human flux: speed and the passing of time, shared experience and individual isolation, noise and energy. There seems to be something manic-depressive about freeways in general, and Yates finds a way to link this quality to Cathy's discovery of Bullitt's (and society's) dual nature.

The significance of the freeway is established in two key moments of the film, both of which precede Cathy and Bullitt's trip to San Mateo. The freeway figures as an obtrusive presence outside the window of the room at the Hotel Daniels where Chalmers has stashed the main witness in his Senate subcommittee hearing. The freeway's bustling overpass solicits immediate concern from Bullitt in his initial inspection of the room and receives conspicuous treatment, in the form of a long framing shot, in his subsequent examination of the crime scene. When Johnny Ross/Albert Renick asks why Bullitt and his partner want to know who picked the hotel room, Bullitt answers: "Stay away from those windows. That's why." Although the freeway and fire escape are referred to as elements of potential danger, the primary significance of the former lies in its value for portraying the contemporary city, both in the erosion of a clear sense of its geographical limits and in the projection of its defining aural feature: noise. Both of these representational values come into play in the film's most famous scene: the car chase sequence between Bullitt and the killers of Johnny Ross/Albert Renick. The sequence begins in a symbolically relevant fashion, with the killers' Dodge Charger idling in the shadow of a freeway overpass, while Bullitt walks to his Ford Mustang. Lalo Schifrin's original track "Shifting Gears" is cued just as Bullitt slips behind the wheel of the Mustang and notices the Charger. The track continues to play as Bullitt and the killers engage in a game of cat-and-mouse through a residential section of San Francisco but stops abruptly as soon as the Charger, now trailed by Bullitt, accelerates up one of the city's hills. From this point on, the protagonists of the sequence are the motor vehicles, whose engines replace the musical soundtrack as aural equivalents of the film's visual action. As a result, the freeway and

its noise are elevated from the condition of distractions and indices of modern urban life to the role of dramatic players. The ambiguity surrounding these elements stems precisely from this dual function, and finds its clearest expression in the structural opposition that characterizes the rides to and from the motel in San Mateo, as has already been noted.

The freeway blurs the lines of the modern city's geographical identity, passing over and through it, and subtly undermining its integrity as both starting point and destination. Also contributing to this end is the figure of the motel, and Yates employs extended, deep focus shots to underline the transitional nature of the motel in San Mateo, including the shot that frames Bullitt's arrival at the motel against the backdrop of the busy freeway. The use of such deep focus shots, as well as the strategic use of oblique lines and the play of light and shadow, reveal the influence of Welles's *Citizen Kane*, also on display in the sequence in the evidence room that immediately follows the conversation between Bullitt and Cathy at the edge of the freeway, while the temporal lassitude and hip boredom of the film's transitional shots bear the mark of Antonioni, whose *Blow Up* (1966) was released two years earlier. The odd mixture of privacy, impersonality, and voyeuristic intrusion that characterize the freeway and the motel are uniquely captured in the freeway dialogue between Bullitt and Cathy, in which Yates suppresses the noise from the freeway and cuts frequently to shots filmed from the opposite side of the exit road, as if the camera/spectator were observing the scene from the car. The structural opposite to this scene—in which the viewer feels he or she is intruding upon the conversation—is an earlier scene in which Bullitt is called to Chalmers' residence in the midst of a gathering of San Francisco's social elite. In this scene, the camera is positioned just above floor level, framing Bullitt's arrival in a sea of stockings while the chatter of the mingling socialites conspicuously drowns out his request to speak to Chalmers, which suggests that "noise" is not just a product of motor vehicles.

The film culminates in a sequence shot at San Francisco International Airport, yet another transitional space, which knits together many of the threads—both narrative and thematic—considered thus far. Bullitt is shown scanning the crowd for a sign of the real John Ross; and though the dramatic tension is genuine, the primary elements in this sequence are the crowd and Bullitt's state of attention. We soon realize in this long sequence why *Bullitt* had to be shot in San Francisco and what San Francisco signified at this moment in the cultural history of the United States. The crowd is San Francisco,

and San Francisco is not a melting pot but a mixing pot, an assortment of different styles, religions, and ethnicities that have come together in a particular time and place. We have been shown Bullitt's ease within this new multicultural context, both in the scene at the restaurant with Cathy and in his rapport with Dr. Willard, the African-American doctor who, like Bullitt himself, finds his competence questioned by the ambitious politician Walter Chalmers. Here, however, the cultural eclecticism Bullitt finds presents him with the further perceptual difficulty of locating Ross in the crowd. McQueen's performance of registering this difficulty and deflecting it is masterful, as is his ability to exude a feeling for the crowd marked not by frustration but rather by deference or decorum, signaled most evidently by Bullitt's covering of Ross's corpse with his blazer, a gesture that recalls Bullitt's obscuring of Dorothy Renick's body from Cathy's gaze and, equally, the shielding of Cathy's expression of candid vulnerability from the viewer's gaze. Bullitt's observation of the airport crowd offers us a reverse view of the camera that pans slowly through the hospital recovery room, and embodies the same constellation of values: patience but intensity, shrewdness of observation but discretion, and a democratic respect for and appreciation of the differences and commonalities of everyday American life.

What is also compelling about the character of Bullitt is his refusal to defend himself (to Chalmers, his superiors, Cathy) in the face of threats and bribes, accusations of callousness, and elements of change, noise, hostility, and difference. His facial expression suggests stone *becoming* human. It strikes me that what *Bullitt* offers us here is a different type of filmic sentence, one that does not, strictly speaking, follow from its narrative but that seems to offer us a reception of history as it is projected in and through the film itself. There is something aporetic about this projection, as the film positions us somewhere between the noise (aural and visual) of the contemporary industrial city and the music (again, both aural and visual) of a multicultural and counter-cultural renaissance in full bloom. *Bullitt* thus represents the humanizing (in both senses of the word) of this aporia, and in this vein both anticipates and stands in stark opposition to the westernizing (or rewesternizing) of the police procedural whose classic expression would arrive three years later, with the release of Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry* (1971).

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "Style and Its Image." *Literary Style: A Symposium*. Ed. Seymour Chatman. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971. 3-10.

Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. Enlarged Edition. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Chatman, Seymour, ed. *Literary Style: A Symposium*. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Miles, Josephine. "Style as *Style*." In Chatman, *Literary Style: A Symposium*. 24-28.

Shklovsky, Victor. "Sterne's Tristram Shandy: Stylistic Commentary." *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Ed. and trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. 25-57.

Spitzer, Leo. "Linguistics and Literary History." *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967 (1948). 1-39.

Strasberg, Lee. *A Dream of Passion: The Development of the Method*. New York: Plume, 1988.

Filmography

Blow Up. Dir. Michelangelo Antonioni. MGM, 1966.

Bullitt. Dir. Peter Yates. 1968. Warner Bros., 2005. DVD.

Dirty Harry. Dir. Don Siegel. Warner Bros., 1971.

Schifrin, Lalo. "Shifting Gears." *Bullitt Soundtrack*. Warner Bros., 1969. LP.

Yates, Peter, dir. *Bullitt* (DVD Commentary). 1968. Warner Bros. 2005. DVD.

Notes

[1] This chapter of the research project "False Movement—Studies on Writing and Film" (reference PTDC/CLE-LLI/120211/2010), Centre for Comparative Studies at the University of Lisbon, was funded by FCT—Foundation for Science and Technology.