Foreword

Sam Rohdie died at his home in Florida on 3 April 2015 from the effects of a severe stroke suffered a few weeks earlier. He had received the proofs of this, his last book, but was not able to correct them – a task that then fell to Des O’Rawe, his former colleague at Queen’s University Belfast, and to myself.

The book is structured as a series of alphabetical entries, from Allegory to Writing. But it is not systematic, nor exhaustive, nor does it offer a single all-embracing definition of its subject. It also contains examples of what appear at first sight to be repetitions, both of argument and, in some cases, phraseology.

As far as the seeming repetitions are concerned, they turn out on closer examination almost always to have a purpose, functioning as a form of insistence reminding the reader how often in films things are not what they seem. The points on which Rohdie most wants to insist concern moments in certain films when the spectator is put in a position of uncertainty as to the solidity and coherence of the world portrayed by the film. ‘Look again,’ he seems to be saying. Look again at how in this film too, and in a different context, the film undermines our confidence in a stable world and the equally stable forms by which this original stability is represented. Look again, and see how the filmmaker has opened up possibilities of perception that break with habitual modes of viewing, possibly in discomfiting ways. The point being made is rhetorical, certainly, but also theoretical – though not in the context of a systematic theory.

Rohdie’s distrust of system comes out also in his resistance to offering a formal definition of artistic modernism, preferring instead to approach the topic allusively and wait for a definition to emerge. While

this generally works well, in the sense that the reader soon picks up the sense of Rohdie's argument, it also allows him to elude a paradox which some readers at least will find surprising.

The core of Rohdie's anti-definition lies in an argument by negation. Modernism in the arts, most dramatically in the years immediately preceding the First World War, asserted itself above all through its rejection of the classical rules of art – notably principles of harmony, order and proportion applied to broadly realistic forms of representation. These principles had been undermined throughout the nineteenth century but it was only at the beginning of the twentieth that what can be broadly called classicism came under sustained attack across the board – in painting, music, theatre, literature. Not, however, in cinema. The cinema in the period of early modernism around 1910 was still amorphous. It was a field in which artists could experiment as much as they liked, but with no guarantee of their experiments being understood for what they were. Mostly, however, cinema was in search of rules and until it found them it could not break them. It would be at least ten years – say around the very end of the silent period – before the cinema established its equivalent of classical form and a further thirty years before it discovered the value of breaking the rules it had so painstakingly invented. Modernism in the cinema, therefore, properly begins only around 1960, with the arrival on the scene of a film-making generation deeply versed in a classical tradition and equally convinced that they had to break with that tradition and – in the famous phrase of Ezra Pound, 'Make it new'. Which they did.

Film modernism starts, then, not as one would expect with the early avant-garde of Fernand Léger (*Ballet mécanique*, 1924), Dziga Vertov (*The Man with the Movie Camera*, 1929) or Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí (*Un chien andalou*, 1929), but a full generation later. First on stage are outliers like Orson Welles in (or more often outside) Hollywood and the heretical neo-realist Roberto Rossellini in Italy, both of whom broke the classical rules and suffered for it. The book's focus then is on the cine-literate film-makers of the 1960s and after – Antonioni and Bertolucci in Italy and the Nouvelle Vague and its successors in France. Its protagonist is Jean-Luc Godard, both the young iconoclastic Godard of *À bout de souffle* in 1960 and the later Godard of the monumental *Histoires du cinéma* (1988–98). Godard's *Histoires*, in fact, is the key to Rohdie's book, a book that is at times pyrotechnically brilliant, at times puzzling, and always instructively enjoyable ... like *Histoires*.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, July 2015