Chapter 26

Understanding Film Theory and Criticism - I

Background

In this chapter we will essentially learn about the major cinematic theories and movements related to full-length feature films. As discussed in the chapter on Cinema and Modernism, Thomas Edinton’s Kinetoscope peephole machines were first open to the public in New York City in 1894, and the Lumiere brothers first projected their short actualities to an audience in a cafe in Paris in 1895.

The first steps towards film theory were taken by Vachel Lindsay’s Art of the Moving Picture in 1915 and Hugo Munsterberg’s The Photoplay: A Psychological Study in 1916. Both of these works, the first by a poet and the second by a psychologist, consider this new medium in the context of other art forms. While Lindsay draws parallels between film and such other arts as architecture, sculpture, and poetry, Munsterberg goes much further in arguing for the unique properties of the cinema by focusing on the psychological responses of the viewer and on the aesthetic properties of the film.

Russian and French theory and criticism

French film critic and later an important “impressionist” filmmaker, Louis Delluc’s writings from journals and newspapers were published in two collections, Cinema et cie in 1919 and Photogenie in 1920. Delluc first used the term photogenie to suggest film’s capacity to present the real world as something newly seen, to depict the beauty of reality and make us comprehend the things of our world.

Another French critic Riccioto Canudo whose writings were collected in L’Usine aux images in 1926 argued that cinema must go beyond realism and imagistically express the filmmaker’s emotions as well as characters’ psychology and even their unconscious. Jean Epstein in 1921 published Bonjour cinema, where he observed that cinema generalizes and presents an idea of the idea of the form that is on the screen.
As evident, these early theoreticians highlighted the formalist nature of cinema. True to this, Lev Kuleshov began to publish essays in 1917 and books in 1929 on Russian formalism, including the montage theory. The term “Kuleshov effect” stood for explanations of editing and montage. His peer V. I. Pudovkin wrote the book *Film Technique* when he was working on his motion picture *Mother* in 1926. The book contains theories of montage, what Sergei Eisenstein referred to as “linkage,” in which shots are unobtrusively linked together so that they continuously and naturally flow along with the film’s narrative line, but he also pushes theoretical discourse further with his discussion of filmic space and time, dimensions created by the editing process itself and distinct from any space and time known in external reality.

Different from Pudovkin’s concept of linkage editing is Eisenstein’s “collision” theory of montage, in which the dramatic and dialectical juxtaposition of shots produces a kind of attraction to one another that makes the significance or meaning of their synthesis explode upon the viewer. Whereas Kuleshov had demonstrated how two juxtaposed shots could create a produced context not inherent in the individual images, Eisenstein went beyond his mentor in both his writing and films to show how the two images could be synthesized in the mind of the viewer to create a single totality and perception, even to create a level of thought or cognition beyond the realistic images. In an astonishing array of writings (see especially the book published in English as *Film Form*, which brings together twelve of his best essays written between 1928 and 1945), we can witness Eisenstein pushing beyond the relationships of individual shots in montage to search out the very form of film sequences and the entire film itself, exploring the ways in which shots are drawn to dominant and subsidiary lines or codes.

Rudolf Arnheim’s *Film as Art* (1933) and Bela Balaz’s *Theory of the Film* (1945), are two works where film theory is based on formalistic and realistic underpinnings.

French critic Andre Bazin’s collection of essays, *What Is Cinema?* (vol I and II in 1967 and 1971) are a collection of realist criticism and theory. Bazin found Kuleshov’s and Eisenstein’s emphasis on montage opposed to the realistic possibilities of cinema. He praised the American directors Orson Welles and William Wyler for the way images were used to convey reality, something missing in cinema since the expressionistic films of Erich Von Stroheim and F. W. Munrau. Bazin praised Welles and Wyler for their use of techniques of deep focus and the long take to represent space and time as continuous and whole for the touch of reality. One
of the founders of the French film journal *Cahiers du cinema*, Bazin influenced the criticism of such figures as Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, and Jacques Rivette, who wrote for the journal. Bazin’s *Cahier du Cinema* soon became an influential journal of French films. The policies proposed by Bazin and his followers were put into practice by the filmmakers of the French New Wave of the 60s. They criticized films that had high production values, relied on stars, and followed the genre conventions.

**Case study**

**Read the following excerpt from Andre Bazin’s *What is Cinema?***

As in the novel, the aesthetic implicit in the cinema reveals itself in its narrative technique. A film is always presented as a succession of fragments of imaged reality on a rectangular surface of given proportion, the ordering of the images and their duration on the screen determining its import.

The objective nature of the modern novel, by reducing the strictly grammatical aspect of its stylistics to a minimum, had laid bare the secret essence of style. Certain qualities of the language of Faulkner, Hemingway, or Malraux would certainly not come through in translation, but the essential quality of their styles would not suffer because their style is almost identical with their narrative technique——the ordering in time of fragments of reality. The style becomes the inner dynamic principle of the narrative, somewhat like the relation of energy to matter or the specific physics of the work, as it were. This is which distributes the fragmented realities across the aesthetic spectrum of the narrative, which polarizes the fillings of the facts without changing their chemical composition. A Faulkner, a Malrux, a Dos Passos, each has his personal universe which it defined by the nature of the facts reported, but also by the law of gravity which holds them suspended above chaos. … What matters is the creative surge, the special way in which the situations are brought to life. The necessity inherent in the narrative is biological rather than dramatic. It burgeons and grows with all the verisimilitude of life. One must not include that this method, on the face of it, is less aesthetic than a slow and meticulous preplanning. But the old prejudice that time, money, and resources have a value of their own is so rooted that people forget to relate them to the work and to the artist. But the old prejudice that time, money, and resources
have a value of their own is so rooted that people forget to relate them to the work and to the artist. Van Gogh repainted the same picture ten times, very quickly, while Cézanne would return to a painting time and again over the years.


Discussion

What are those parallels that Bazin draws between a work of literature and cinema in terms of their narrative structures?

Apart from Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer became a champion of realist cinema, and in Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality (1960), talked about those films that least distort or remove the audience from the “real” world. The philosopher Stanley Cavell has also written on cinematic realism, in The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film (1971) where he describes film as satisfying our desire to see the world unseen but, at the same time, as presenting a world that seems more natural than reality Jean Mitry’s Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma (1963-65) is a scholarly work that combines the formalist and realist traditions. Here, Truffaut criticized the dominant tendency in French cinema during the 40s & 50s, which he calls ‘the tradition of quality’. This cinema of “quality” is contrived and projects a bourgeois image of good taste and high culture. Truffaut declared, “I demand that a film express either the joy of making cinema or the agony of making cinema. I am not at all interested in anything in between.”

Auteur theory gave major significance to the director, whose personal vision and style were now seen as the controlling force in a film, even a film made in Hollywood within the studio system with its many obstacles. Auteur criticism sought to give to the director the same legitimacy as given to the author of literature itself, and subsequent film criticism owes much to auteurism.

While practicing what they preached in their films, the French auteurs rejected the cinematic practices of the 1950s, made low-budget films, shot on locations with new actors, and preferred natural light to studio-style lighting and natural sound to extensive studio dubbing.
Andrew Sarris took the auteur theory to America. In the Hollywood context, an auteur is a director who transcends the script by imposing on it his own style and vision, or his signature style. In other words, a film involves subjective and personalized film-making. For a French auteur film, there was no pre-existing story. What was important were the spontaneous events that took place in front of the camera. The director was more important than the producer (cf. Hollywood, where producer called the shots). Moreover, an auteur (as opposed to a metteur-en-scene) is a director who manifests a consistency of style & theme across his works. The French auteurs believed in abandoning the script in favour of improvisation & spontaneity.

An important characteristic of the New Wave was the introduction of characters who were often marginalized, young anti-heroes and loners, with no family ties; who behaved spontaneously, and often acted immorally and are frequently seen as anti-authoritarian. Also, the films, through techniques like the jump cut, deliberately caused a distance between the screen and spectators.

**Genre theory and criticism**

genre theory and criticism attempted to legitimate the very popular nature of film, especially as a product of the Hollywood studio system, and to identify the similar items and elements in a group of works by different directors. Apart from the works of individual directors, genre theory also attempted to explain the social and cultural needs of the viewers of a particular era. Genre theory and criticism was useful for adopting the emphasis on structuralism, which had a profound effect on cultural criticism during the late 1960s and the 1970s. This was the period when Hollywood offered a large number of similar films with similar elements in each genre (the Western, the gangster, the Epic, etc), which made these films popular.

Jim Kitses’s *Horizons West* (1969) establishes a basic structural and thematic argument in the Western and also shows the individual contributions of specific directors in this field. Peter Wollen’s discussions of Howard Hawks and John Ford in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969) also uses genre in auteur-structuralist approach to develop thematic structures and tensions in the films of these two directors. One of the most important early work in theorizing film studies using the structuralist approach was Christian Metz’s *Film*
Language: A Semiotics of Cinema (1968). Metz illustrated the way films signify meaning through semiotic codes, especially specialized codes unique to the cinema, such as the eight arrangements of shots possible in a narrative sequence.

Semiotics in Film Theory

Semiotics as a filmic discourse received considerable impetus from the politicization of theory and criticism from the late 1960s on in the French journals Cinéthique and Cahiers du cinéma and in the British publication Screen. Termed as the “second semiotics” (based upon a combination of semiotics, Althusserian Marxism, and Lacanian post-Freudianism) these discourses eventually became a strong force among a group of film teachers at American universities and in the professional journals for which they wrote.

The central concern of the second semiotics was to identify and then deconstruct the ideological structures and codes of society implied in narrative cinema and to marry this ideological focus with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory about the child’s early developmental stages, especially the mirror stage, to which we regress on some level when viewing the images on the screen.

Jean-Louis Baudry’s “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus,” (1974-75) was the first of several essays on the subject that were to influence Metz’s further development of these ideas. Lacan’s concept of suture influenced debates on the re-creation of the imaginary and subject positioning, on the way we understand techniques of narrative film as point-of-view editing, match cutting, and eye-line matching. A scholarly synthesis of ideology, psychoanalysis, and film technique, could be found in Stephen Heath’s Questions of Cinema (1981) and Bill Nichol’s Ideology and the Image (1981).
QUIZ

1. **Answer in brief:**

   i. Write a short note on the earlt formalists in cinema.

   ii. Briefly explain the genre approach to reading films.

   iii. What do you understand by the “second semiotics” in film theory?

2. **Match the following:**

   i  Siegfried Kracauer  a  *Horizons West*

   ii  Christian Metz  b  *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*

   iii  Peter Wollen  c  *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*

   iv  Andre Bazin  d  *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema*

   v  Jim Kitses  e  *What Is Cinema?*

**Answer key**

2: i-c ; ii-d; iii-b ; iv-e ; v-a

**Suggested readings:**


**Suggested websites:**

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_theory)
- [http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html)