FILM THEORY

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Film theory debates the essence of the cinema and provides conceptual frameworks for understanding film's relationship to reality, the other arts, individual viewers, and society at large. This term is not to be confused with film analysis, a way of analyzing film, which may draw upon ideas from film theory.

FILM ANALYSIS

Film anaylysis is the process in which a film is analyzed in terms of mise-en-scène, montage, cinematography, sound, and editing. One way of analyzing films is by the shot-by-shot analysis, though that is typically used only for small clips or scenes.

HISTORY OF FILM THEORY

As the new art form of the twentieth century, film immediately and continuously invited theoretical attempts to define its nature and function. Mostly as a result of film's own inferiority complex as the youngest of the arts, the impetus for much of early film theory was to gain a degree of respectability.

In some respects, French philosopher Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* anticipated the development of film theory at a time that the cinema was just being born as a new medium. He commented on the need for new ways of thinking about movement, and coined the terms "the movement-image" and "the time-image". However, in his 1906 essay *L'illusion cinématographique* (in *L'évolution créatrice*), he rejects film as an exemplification of what he had in mind. Nonetheless, decades later, in *Cinéma I and Cinema II* (1983-1985), the philosopher Gilles Deleuze took *Matter and Memory* as the basis of his philosophy of film and revisited Bergson's concepts, combining them with the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce.

Early film theory arose in the silent era and was mostly concerned with defining the crucial elements of the medium. It largely evolved from the works of directors like Germaine Dulac, Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, Dziga Vertov, Paul Rotha and film theorists like Rudolf Arnheim, Béla Balázs and Siegfried Kracauer. These individuals emphasized how film differed from reality and how it might be considered a valid art form.

In the years after World War II, the French film critic and theorist André Bazin reacted against this approach to the cinema, arguing that film's essence lay in its ability to mechanically reproduce reality not in its difference from reality.

In the 1960s and 1970s, film theory took up residence in academe, importing

concepts from established disciplines like psychoanalysis, gender studies, anthropology, literary theory, semiotics and linguistics.

During the 1990s the digital revolution in image technologies has had an impact on film theory in various ways. There has been a refocus onto celluloid film's ability to capture an indexical image of a moment in time by theorists like Mary Ann Doane, Philip Rosen and Laura Mulvey who was informed by psychoanalysis. From a psychoanalytical perspective, after the Lacanian notion of the Real, Slavoj Žižek offered new aspects of the gaze extensively used in contemporary film analysis. There has also been a historical revisiting of early cinema screenings, practices and spectatorship modes by writers Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen and Yuri Tsivian.

TYPES OF THEORIES

structuralist film theory
The structuralist film theory emphasizes how films convey meaning through the use of codes and conventions not dissimilar to the way languages are used to construct meaning in communication. An example of this is understanding how the simple combination of shots can create an additional idea: the blank expression on a person's face, an appetising meal, and then back to the person's face. While nothing in this sequence literally expresses hunger—or desire—the juxtaposition of the images convey that meaning to the audience. Unraveling this additional meaning can become quite complex. Lighting, angle, shot duration, juxtaposition, cultural context, and a wide array of other elements can actively reinforce or undermine a sequence's meaning.

marxist film theory
Marxist film theory is one of the oldest forms of film theory. Sergei Eisenstein and many other Soviet filmmakers in the 1920s expressed ideas of Marxism through film. In fact, the Hegelian dialectic was considered best displayed in film editing through the Kuleshov Experiment and the development of montage. While this structuralist approach to Marxism and filmmaking was used, the more vociferous complaint that the Russian filmmakers had was with the narrative structure of Hollywood filmmaking.

Eisenstein's solution was to shun narrative structure by eliminating the individual protagonist and tell stories where the action is moved by the group and the story is told through a clash of one image against the next (whether in composition, motion, or idea) so that the audience is never lulled into believing that they are watching something that has not been worked over. Eisenstein himself, however, was accused by the Soviet authorities under Stalin of "formalist error," of highlighting form as a thing of beauty instead of portraying the worker nobly.

French Marxist film makers, such as Jean-Luc Godard, would employ radical editing and choice of subject matter, as well as subversive parody, to heighten class consciousness and promote Marxist ideas.

Situationist film maker Guy Debord, author of The Society of the Spectacle, began his film In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni [Wandering around in the night we are consumed by fire] with a radical critique of the spectator who goes to the cinema to forget about his dispossessed daily life.

Situationist film makers produced a number of important films, where the only contribution by the situationist film cooperative was the sound-track. In Can dialectics break bricks? (1973) a Chinese Kung Fu film was transformed by redubbing into an epistle on state capitalism and Proletarian revolution. The intellectual technique of using capitalism's own structures against itself is known as detournement.

screen theory
Screen theory is a Marxist film theory associated with the British journal *Screen* in the 1970s. The theoreticians of this approach -- Colin MacCabe, Stephen Heath and Laura Mulvey -- describe the "cinematic apparatus" as a version of Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). According to screen theory, it is the spectacle that creates the spectator and not the other way round. The fact that the subject is created and subjected at the same time by the narrative on screen is masked by the apparent realism of the communicated content.

formalist film theory
Formalist film theory is a theory of film study that is focused on the formal, or technical, elements of a film: i.e., the lighting, scoring, sound and set design, use of color, shot composition, and editing. It is a major theory of film study today. Formalism, at its most general, considers the synthesis (or lack of synthesis) of the multiple elements of film production, and the effects, emotional and intellectual, of that synthesis and of the individual elements. For example, let's take the single element of editing. A formalist might study how standard Hollywood "continuity editing" creates a more comforting effect and non-continuity or jump-cut editing might become more disconcerting or volatile.
Or one might consider the synthesis of several elements, such as editing, shot composition, and music. The shoot-out that ends Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Western "Dollars" trilogy is a valid example of how these elements work together to produce an effect: The shot selection goes from very wide to very close and tense; the length of shots decreases as the sequence progresses towards its end; the music builds. All of these elements, in combination rather than individually, create tension. Formalism is unique in that it embraces both ideological and auteurist branches of criticism. In both these cases, the common denominator for Formalist criticism is style.

realist film theory

For Rudolph Arnheim, writing in the early 1930s, film offered the possibility of "the mechanical imitation of nature" in which original and copy become indistinguishable in the eyes of the public. Yet it was Bazin who, a decade later, would transform the mechanical reproduction of the cinematic image into a prophecy. A prolific critic, Bazin is best known for his defense of cinematic realism. For Bazin, what filmmakers as different as Robert Bresson (1901–1999), De Sica, Renoir, Rossellini, and Orson Welles (1915–1985) had in common was a desire to put cinema at the service of what Bazin called a fundamental faith in reality. The credibility of a film did not come from its verisimilitude but from the identity between the photographic image and its object. In "The Ontological Realism of the Photographic Image" (1945), Bazin sketches a brief history of art, in which he identifies cinema as the fulfillment of the human craving for realistic representation. Cinema's mission was thus to fulfill this goal. For Bazin, realism was a style whose chief elements were the long take, deep focus, limited editing and, when possible, the use of non-professional, or at least relatively unknown actors. Realism for Bazin was both the essence of cinema—its ontology—and a rhetoric whose keys were simplicity, purity, and transparency.

In 1960, two years after Bazin's death, Kracauer continued and radicalized Bazin's project in his book Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality . Like Bazin, Kracauer argued that of all the arts, film is uniquely qualified to record physical reality. Kracauer conceded that many films combine realist with formalist tendencies, but he concluded the films that make us "experience aspects of physical reality are the most valid aesthetically." Thus for Kracauer, the best moment in Laurence Olivier's Hamlet (1948) is not Shakespeare's text, or Olivier's acting, or even his direction, but a moment when the camera, almost by inadvertence, frames a window of Elsinore castle and lets us see the "real ocean" in all its force (p. 36). In his previous book, From Caligari to Hitler (1947), Kracauer traced the rise of Nazism through the psychological terror of German expressionist cinema. It is possible his conclusions for the redemption of physical reality through cinema were a reaction against films whose formalism he deemed tainted by its association with totalitarianism and racism. For, in the end, the realist tendency is a form of humanism. In Kracauer's vision, cinema's ontological realism reasserts the fundamental equality of all before the camera.

Philosopher Stanley Cavell also has argued for the ontological realism of cinema, even though his main references are the films of classical Hollywood. For Cavell as for Bazin and Kracauer, the basis of the film medium is photographic. A photograph, and by extension film, always implies the presence of the rest of the world. Film "displaces" people and objects from the world onto the screen. This is not only proof, for Cavell, of film's ontological realism, it is also the beginning of our reconciliation with the world. Movies permit us to view the world unseen, at a distance, and this sets in motion the intellectual process that will bring us back to the world and will reaffirm our participation in it. More than any other film critic or theorist, Cavell insists that film's fundamental realism makes it an art of

contemplation, an intellectual and spiritual exercise meant to restore our relation to the world.

Also among the proponents of the realist tendency are a number of figures associated with left-wing politics. From Williams to Zavattini, from Walter Benjamin to Loach, the realist tendency has often been tied to forms of democratic thought for two reasons. First, realism tends toward a Marxist critique of illusion. The Marxist critique of forms of art that obfuscate economic and social inequalities resonates with filmmakers, technicians, and writers for whom cinematic realism is way of cutting through the artifice of standard cinema. This does not mean that Communist filmmakers had a privileged access to truth, but rather that because they put their faith in what Bazin called the "ontological realism" of the image, realist films could perform the type of demystification often associated with leftist intellectual goals. Not coincidentally, two of Bazin's wittiest articles—"Entomology of the Pin-Up Girl" (1946) and "The Myth of Stalin in the Soviet Cinema" (1950)—are clever attacks on the ideological mystifications in films coming from Hollywood and Moscow, respectively.

The second reason to associate the realist continuum with a reflection on democracy is its tendency to give equal time to anonymous voices and unknown faces. Hollywood films may have regularly put ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, but did so through a codified system of well-known actors and stereotypes. Realism's desire to show what had heretofore remained invisible challenges such images and the values that underlie them. To take just one example, Gillo Pontecorvo's La Battaglia di Algeri (The Battle of Algiers , 1965) is considered by many to be one of the last instances of Italian neorealism. But of all the realist techniques that Pontecorvo (b. 1919) uses, the most radical departure of the film, at least for European audiences, was his decision to show the faces and amplify the voices of the Algerian men and women who had led the Algerian revolution. The realist tendency is not sociology; rather, it sees itself as a democratic form of art.

feminist film theory
Feminist film theory is the theoretical film criticism derived from feminist politics and feminist theory. Feminists have many approaches to cinema analysis, regarding the film elements analysed and their theoretical underpinnings. The development of feminist film theory was influenced by second wave feminism and the development of women's studies within the academy. Feminist scholars began applying the new theories arising from these movements to analyzing film. Initial attempts in the United States in the early 1970's were generally based on sociological theory and focused on the function of women characters in particular film narratives or genres and of stereotypes as a reflection of a society's view of women. Works such as Marjorie Rosen's Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies, and the American Dream (1973) and Molly Haskell's From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in Movies (1974) analyzed how the women portrayed in film related to the broader historical context, the stereotypes depicted, the extent

to which the women were shown as active or passive, and the amount of screen time given to women.[1]

auteur theory

In film criticism, the 1950s-era Auteur theory holds that a director's films reflect that director's personal creative vision, as if he were the primary "Auteur" (the French word for "author"). In some cases, film producers are considered to have a similar "Auteur" role for films that they have produced. In law the Auteur is the creator of a film as a work of art, and is the original copyright holder. Under European Union law the film director shall always be considered the author or one of the authors of a film. [1]

Auteur theory has had a major impact on film criticism ever since it was advocated by film director and film critic François Truffaut in 1954. "Auteurism" is the method of analyzing films based on this theory or, alternately, the characteristics of a director's work that makes him an Auteur. Both the Auteur theory and the Auteurism method of film analysis are frequently associated with the French New Wave and the film critics who wrote for the influential French film review periodical Cahiers du cinéma.

apparatus theory

Apparatus theory, derived in part from Marxist film theory, semiotics, and psychoanalysis, was a dominant theory within cinema studies during the 1970s. It maintains that cinema is by nature ideological because its mechanics of representation are ideological. Its mechanics of representation include the camera and editing. The central position of the spectator within the perspective of the composition is also ideological. Apparatus theory also argues that cinema maintains the dominant ideology of the culture within the viewer. Ideology is not imposed on cinema, but is part of its nature. Apparatus theory follows an institutional model of spectatorship. Apparatus theorist such as Jean-Louis Baudry claimed that film's technological characteristics, as well as the conditions of spectatorship (such as the darkness of movie theaters and the silence and motionlessness of theater audiences), have inherent ideological effects.

philosophy of language film analysis

The philosophy of language film analysis is a form of film analysis that attempt to study the aesthetics of film by investigating the concepts and practices that comprise the experience and interpretation of movies. It is based on the philosophical tradition begun by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Critics from this tradition often clarify misconceptions [citation needed] used in theoretical film studies and instead produce analysis of a film's vocabulary and its link to a form of life.

psychoanalytical film theory

The concepts of psychoanalysis have been applied to films in various ways. However, the 1970s and 1980s saw the development of theory that took concepts developed by the French psychoanalyst and writer Jacques Lacan and applied them to the experience of watching a film. The film viewer is seen as the

subject of a "gaze" that is largely "constructed" by the film itself, where what is on screen becomes the object of that subject's desire.

The viewing subject may be offered particular identifications (usually with a leading male character) from which to watch. The theory stresses the subject's longing for a completeness which the film may appear to offer through identification with an image; in fact, according to Lacanian theory, identification with the image is never anything but an illusion and the subject is always split simply by virtue of coming into existence.

semiotic theory
Semiotic theory focuses on the social and cultural meaning of signs and codes Signs consist of an image, a word, an object or even a certain type of practice. The meaning of signs depends on the relationships between the signifier (the image, word, object, or practice), the signified (the implied meaning), and the referent (what the image, word, object, or practice refers to) A yellow yield sign is a signifier that conveys the meaning — the signified, to yield to other cars. The referent is the actions referred to, in this case, yielding to other cars. People learn that the colors red and green as signifiers have certain signified meanings — stop and go, with the referent being stopping and starting a car on the street based on a set of cultural codes and conventions.

Roland Barthes, a key figure in semiotic theory, argues that the meaning of images are cultural and ideological. In his book, Elements of Semiology, Barthes describes the ways in which the sign assumed cultural meanings:

The semiological sign is also, like its model, compounded of a signifier and a signified (the colour of a light, for instance, is an order to move on, in the Highway Code), but it differs from it at the level of its substances. Many semiological systems (objects, gestures, pictorial images) have a substance of expression whose essence is not to signify; often, they are objects of everyday use, used by society in a derivative way, to signify something: clothes are used for protection and food for nourishment even if they are also used as signs. We propose to call these semiological signs, whose origin is utilitarian and functional, sign-functions. The sign-function bears witness to a double movement, which must be taken apart. In a first stage (this analysis is purely operative and does not imply real temporality) the function becomes pervaded with meaning. This semantisation is inevitable: as soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself; the use of a raincoat is to give protection from the rain, but this use cannot be dissociated from the very signs of an atmospheric situation. Since our society produces only standardised, normalised objects, these objects are unavoidably realisations of a model, the speech of a language, the substances of a significant form.

phenomenology
Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions.

Phenomenology as a discipline is distinct from but related to other key disciplines in philosophy, such as ontology, epistemology, logic, and ethics. Phenomenology has been practiced in various guises for centuries, but it came into its own in the early 20th century in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and others. Phenomenological issues of intentionality, consciousness, qualia, and first-person perspective have been prominent in recent philosophy of mind....

Example: Review from book

The Address of the Eye:
A Phenomenology of Film Experience
Vivian Sobchack

Cinema is a sensuous object, but in our presence it becomes also a sensing, sensual, sense-making subject. Thus argues Vivian Sobchack as she challenges basic assumptions of current film theory that reduce film to an object of vision and the spectator to a victim of a deterministic cinematic apparatus. Maintaining that these premises ignore the material and cultural-historical situations of both the spectator and the film, the author makes the radical proposal that the cinematic experience depends on two "viewers" viewing: the spectator and the film, each existing as both subject and object of vision. Drawing on existential and semiotic phenomenology, and particularly on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack shows how the film experience provides empirical insight into the reversible, dialectical, and signifying nature of that embodied vision we each live daily as both "mine" and "another's." In this attempt to account for cinematic intelligibility and signification, the author explores the possibility of human choice and expressive freedom within the bounds of history and culture.