

A stylized, light gray graphic of a camera and a film reel is positioned on the left side of the page. The camera is shown in profile, with its lens and various mechanical parts visible. A film strip is shown winding around a reel. The graphic is composed of simple lines and flat areas, giving it a clean, modern look. A vertical dashed line runs down the left edge of the page, passing through the camera graphic.

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**FILM THEORY:
FORM
AND
FUNCTION**

The Critic

In Mel Brooks's and Ernest Pintoff's funny and insightful short film *The Critic* (1963), we watch abstract animated shapes perform on the screen as we hear the voice of Brooks, an old man, puzzle his way happily through the significance of this "art":

Vot da hell is dis?!

Mus' be a cahtoon.

Op.... Mus' be both. Dis looks like both. I remembek when I was a boy in Russia ... biology.

Op! It's born. Whatever it is, it's born.... Look out! Too late. It's dead already.... Vot's dis? Usher! Dis is cute! Dis is cute. Dis is nice. Vot da hell is it? Oh. I know vot it is. It's gobbage. Dat's vot it is! Two dollas I pay for a French movie, a foreign movie, and now I gotta see dis junk!

The first shape is joined by a second, and Brooks interprets:

Yes. It's two ... two *things* dat, dat, dat—they like each other. Sure. Lookit da sparks. Two things in love! Ya see how it got more like?—it envied the other thing so much. Could dis be the sex life of two *things*?

The scene changes again and Brooks's old codger begins to lose interest:

Vot is dis? Dots! Could be an eye. Could be anything! It mus' be some symbolism. I t'ink ... it's symbolic of ... junk! Uh-oh! It's a cock-a-roach! Good luck to you vit ya cock-a-roach, mister!

As the artistic short comes to a close, the critic passes final judgment:

I dunno much about psych'analysis, but I'd say dis is a doity pictcha!

The Critic is humorous partly because Brooks manages, in the short space of his three-minute monologue, to touch on a number of vital truths about criticism. "Two dollars" we pay for a movie; what do we get for it? How do we determine cinematic value? How do we know what's "symbolic of junk"? There are others in the audience with Mel Brooks's critic who seem to be enjoying the film. Are values, then, entirely relative? Are there any true universal "rules" for film art? What does film do? What are its limits?

Questions like these are the province of film theory and criticism, two related but not identical activities that have as their common end an increased understanding of the phenomenon of film. In general, theory is the abstraction; criticism is the practice. At the lowest end of the scale, we find the kind of criticism a reviewer practices: more reportage than analysis. The reviewer's function is to describe the film and evaluate it, two relatively simple tasks. At the upper end of the scale is the kind of film theory that has little or nothing to do with the actual practice of film: an intellectual activity that exists primarily for its own sake, and often has its own rewards, but doesn't necessarily have much relation to the real world. Between these two extremes there is much room for useful and interesting work.

A number of important dichotomies govern the work of film theory. The first, the contrast between the practical and the ideal, is suggested by the difference between criticism (practical) and theory (ideal).

Closely associated with this is the contrast between "prescriptive" and "descriptive" theory and criticism. The prescriptive theorist is concerned with what film should be, the descriptive theorist only with what film is. Prescriptive theory is inductive: that is, the theorist decides on a system of values first, then measures actual films against his system. Descriptive theory, in contrast, is deductive: the theorist examines the entire range of film activity and then, and only then, draws tentative conclusions about the real nature of film. Theorists and critics who prescribe are naturally concerned about evaluation; having strong systems of values, they logically measure real films against their requirements and judge them.

The third and most important governing dichotomy is that between theory and practice. The fact is, no filmmaker needs to study the theory in order to practice the art. Indeed, until recently, very few filmmakers had any interest in theory. They knew (or did not know) instinctively what had to be done. Gradually, however, as film art became more sophisticated, a bridge between theory and practice was established. Many contemporary filmmakers, unlike their predecessors, now proceed from strong theoretical bases. Even Hollywood offices are now full of cinema studies Ph.D.s; since the generation of Coppola, Scorsese, and Lucas (film school students all) took charge, advanced degrees have provided an important entree in the studio system.

This is a major change in the way Hollywood does business. Indeed, the Hollywood style, which to a great extent still dominates film history, never produced a codified body of theory. On the face of it, the Hollywood film of the thirties and forties depended on a complex and powerful esthetic system, yet there is no Hollywood theory as such. No art *needs* theory; no artist needs an advanced degree. When academic study becomes a requirement for employment, the very nature of the art changes: it becomes self-conscious and it probably becomes less exciting. You don't have to be a wild-eyed romantic to believe that it's the renegades who break the rules who make the most intriguing art. Formal training ensures a certain level of journeyman competence, but it tends to suppress creativity. We trade off the excitement of genius for the assurance of branded quality. This may explain what has happened to American film since the early seventies.

The old masters, of course, played it by ear. The best that D. W. Griffith (who inspired so many theorists) could come up with was a rather dizzy idea that the "human pulse beat" was the secret metronome of effective filmmaking. In "Pace in the Movies" (*Liberty* magazine, 1926), he wrote:

The American school . . . makes an effort to keep the tempo of the picture in tune with the average human heartbeat, which, of course, increases in rapidity under such influences as excitement, and may almost stop in moments of pregnant suspense.

Much of this sort of after-the-fact cogitation was the result of film's own inferiority complex as the youngest of the arts. Christian Metz suggests that the function of such criticism, psychoanalytically, is to rescue film from its "bad-object" status. More simply, the thinking went: if film can support a weighty system of theory, then it must be just as respectable as any of the other, older arts. This may seem a rather childish motive for film theory, but it was not so long ago that film was commonly regarded by educated people as not to be taken seriously. In the U.S., for example, film did not become a generally accepted subject for study in colleges and universities until about 1970. So the impetus for much of early film theory was to gain a degree of respectability.*

Because of this desire for respectability many of the earliest works of film theory were prescriptive—often quite pretentiously so, but sometimes intriguingly elaborate. Continuing the psychoanalytic metaphor, we can think of this as the ascendancy of film's "superego"—its sense of the artistic community's standards of

* Yes, I know we seem to be arguing both sides of the case: we want film to be accepted in the university but we don't want filmmakers studying too much. As elsewhere in American life during the seventies and eighties, the pendulum swung too far. Many of the truths we discovered in the sixties were dangerously distorted when they were institutionalized. It's the reason we build blank walls around our highways.

behavior and respectability—as it struggled to be treated as an equal, and mastered its natural libidinous impulses. “Standards” were necessary, and film theorists provided them. Now that film theory has matured, it is much less likely to insist on rules and regulations often derived from outside the domain of film itself and instead concentrates on developing its own more flexible and more sophisticated values.

Within any specific film theory, there are a number of oppositions at work. Is the theory mainly esthetic or mainly philosophical? Does it deal with the relationships of parts of cinema to each other, or the parts of a specific film to each other? Or does it concern itself with the relationships between film and culture, film and the individual, film and society?

Sergei Eisenstein, still the most fecund of film theorists, used cinematic terminology to describe the difference between various approaches to film study. In his 1945 essay “A Close-up View” he described “long-shot” film theory as that which deals with film in context, which judges its political and social implications. “Medium-shot” film criticism, meanwhile, focuses on the human scale of the film, which is what most reviewers concern themselves with. “Close-up” theory, however, “breaks down’ the film into its parts” and “resolves the film into its elements.” Film semiotics and other theories that attempt to treat the “language” of film, for example, are close-up approaches.

The essential concept here is the classic opposition between form and function. Are we more interested in what a film is (form) or in how it acts upon us (function)? As we shall see, it was quite a while before film theory turned from a focus on the form of the art to the more difficult and meaningful analysis of its function. Gradually, prescription has yielded to more scientific methods of investigation as film theory has become less demanding and more inquisitive.

The Poet and the Philosopher: Lindsay and Münsterberg

The first film theorists, as we have noted, were mainly interested—some more consciously than others—in providing a respectable artistic cachet for the young art. In 1915, just as the feature film was rising to prominence, Vachel Lindsay, at that time a well-known poet, published *The Art of the Moving Picture*, a lively, naïve, often simplistic, but nevertheless insightful paean to the wild, youthful popular art.

The very title of his book was an argumentative proposition: he challenged his readers to consider this sideshow entertainment as a real art. Working on the model of the established narrative and visual arts, he identified three basic types of “photoplays,” as movies with pretensions to artistic station were then called:

“The Photoplay of Action,” “The Intimate Photoplay,” and “The Motion Picture of Splendor,” three categories that serve well to triangulate the Hollywood cinema of the next eighty years. In each case, Lindsay had noticed and formulated elements of narrative in which film could not only rival but often surpass the other arts: Action, Intimacy, and Splendor were all strong (sometimes crude), direct values—and still are.

Working intuitively from his lively passion for the movies, Lindsay then further compared the potential of film with the accomplishments of the older arts, discussing film as, in turn, “sculpture-in-motion,” “painting-in-motion,” and “architecture-in-motion.” He concluded his basic outline of the esthetics of film with two chapters, each in its own way surprisingly prescient. At the time he wrote, those few films taken seriously by the cultural Establishment were the ones that mimicked the stage—the “photoplays.”

Yet Lindsay understood very early on—after *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) but before *Intolerance* (1916)—that the real strength of film might lie in precisely the opposite direction. In “Thirty Differences Between Photoplays and the Stage” he outlined an argument that was to become a major concern of film theorists throughout the twenties and into the thirties as he explained how the two seemingly parallel arts contrasted. This became the dominant theme as film theorists tried to establish a separate identity for the adolescent art.

Lindsay’s last chapter on esthetics, “Hieroglyphics,” is even more insightful. With profound insight, he wrote:

The invention of the photoplay is as great a step as was the beginning of picture-writing in the stone age.

He then goes on to treat film as a language and, although his analysis may be, as he suggests, “a fanciful flight rather than a sober argument,” it nevertheless points directly to the most recent stage of development in film theory—semiotics. Quite an achievement in 1915 for an antiacademic poet enamored of the “barbaric yawp” and untrained in the scholarly disciplines!

Nor does Lindsay stop with the internal esthetics of film. The third section of his book is devoted to the extrinsic effects of the “photoplay.” Again, the discussion is not so important for its concrete contributions to our understanding of the medium as it is as an early historical marker, yet one of Lindsay’s most idiosyncratic theories—always dismissed by later theorists and critics—bears further examination.

Lindsay suggests that the audience should engage in conversation during a (silent) film rather than listen to music. No one took his suggestion seriously; if they had, we might have developed a cinema that was communal and interactive much earlier than we did. Many Third World films (as well as those of Godard) were designed, despite their soundtracks, as first statements in conversation between filmmaker and observer. In short, Vachel Lindsay as poet and passionate

lover of film intuited a number of truths that more academic theorists, limited by their rigid systematic thinking, never could have understood.

A year after Lindsay's paean to movies first appeared, it was joined by another major contribution—directly opposed in style, approach, and tone, but just as valuable: Hugo Münsterberg's seminal *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916). Münsterberg, of German origin, was a professor of philosophy at Harvard and, like his sponsor William James, one of the founders of modern psychology. Unlike Lindsay, the populist poet, Münsterberg brought an academic reputation to his work. He was not a "movie fan" but rather a disinterested academician who only a year before his book was published had little or no experience of the rowdy popular art.

His intellectual analysis of the phenomenon not only provided a much-needed cachet but also remains even today one of the more balanced and objective outlines of film theory. Münsterberg was committed to bridging the gap between professional theory and popular understanding. "Intellectually the world has been divided into two classes," he wrote, "the 'highbrows' and the 'lowbrows.'" He hoped that his analysis of the psychology of film would "bring these two brows together." Sadly, his book was ignored for many years and was only rediscovered by film theorists and students in 1969.

Like Lindsay, Münsterberg quickly understood that film had its own special genius and that its esthetic future did not lie in replicating the kind of work that was better done on stage or in the novel. Like the poet, the professor also understood that film theory must take into account not only implicit esthetics but also explicit social and psychological effects. He calls these two facets the "Inner" and the "Outer" developments of motion pictures, and he begins his study with a discussion of them.

His most valuable contribution, however, predictably lies in his application of psychological principles to the film phenomenon. Freudian dream psychology was a useful tool for many popular theories of cinema from the twenties on. Münsterberg's approach, however, is pre-Freudian (which is one good reason why it was ignored for so long); at the same time he is an important precursor of Gestalt psychology, which makes his approach seem surprisingly contemporary. Freudian film psychology emphasizes the unconscious, dreamlike nature of the experience and therefore concentrates on the passive attitude toward the medium. Münsterberg, in contrast, develops a conception of the relationship between film and observer as interactive.

He begins by describing how our perception of movement in moving pictures depends not so much on the static phenomenon of persistence of vision as on our active mental processes of interpretation of this series of still images. Thirty years later, this active process became known as the Phi phenomenon. Münsterberg had described it (without labeling it) in 1916.

In chapters titled “Attention,” “Memory and Imagination,” and “Emotions,” he then develops a sophisticated theory of film psychology that conceives of film as an active process—a strongly mental activity—in which the observer is a partner with the filmmaker. In a second section, titled “The Esthetics of the Photoplay,” he investigates some of the ramifications of this view of the process. In shifting attention away from the passive phenomenon of persistence of vision and toward the active mental process of the Phi phenomenon, Münsterberg established a vital logical basis for theories of film as an active process. At the time, this theory was prescriptive rather than descriptive. During the first thirty or forty years of film theory, the concept of the medium as essentially passive and manipulative was dominant, as it is in film practice. Yet Münsterberg’s understanding of the medium as at least potentially interactive would eventually be redeemed.

Curiously, Lindsay’s and Münsterberg’s books were the last really significant works of film theory produced in the U.S. until quite recently. It seemed as if film theory was beside the point once Hollywood began to dominate film practice. By the early twenties, the focal point of film theory had shifted to Europe and was for fifty years dominated by French, German, and Eastern European thinkers.

Like the British tradition, the American line of development of theory/criticism has been mainly practical—concerned with concrete criticism rather than abstract theory. Ideally, it is not a less valuable tradition because of this practical orientation, but because it is diffuse it is not so easy to describe or to study. Concentrated single volumes of abstract theory lend themselves to analysis much more readily, a fact that should be remembered, since it tends to distort our conception of the shape of developing film theory.

Paradoxically, one of the first signs of the growing vitality of film theory in Europe in the twenties was found in the work of Louis Delluc, who, although he produced several volumes of theory (*Cinéma et cie*, 1919; *Photogénie*, 1920), is best remembered as a practicing daily film critic, filmmaker, and founder of the ciné-club movement. Together with Léon Moussinac, he established film reviewing as a serious undertaking, in direct contrast to the reportage and puff publicity then common. Delluc died in 1924, before his thirty-fifth birthday, but by that time the European tradition of the art film (and the film of art) was solidly established.

Expressionism and Realism: Arnheim and Kracauer

In his useful introduction to the subject, *The Major Film Theories* (1976), J. Dudley Andrew adopted categories derived from Aristotle to analyze the structure of film theory. He approached various theories by four avenues: “Raw Material,” “Methods and Techniques,” “Forms and Shapes,” and “Purpose and Value.” We can fur-

ther simplify the categories if we realize that the two central ones—"Methods and Techniques" and "Forms and Shapes"—are simply opposite facets of the same phenomenon, the first practical, the second theoretical. Each of these categories focuses on a different aspect of the film process, the chain connecting material, filmmaker, and observer. The way in which a theory arranges these relationships to a large extent determines its aim, and is a direct function of its underlying principles. Those theories that celebrate the raw material are essentially Realist. Those that focus first on the power of the filmmaker to modify or manipulate reality are, at base, Expressionist: that is, they are more concerned with the filmmaker's expression of the raw materials than with the filmed reality itself.

These two basic attitudes have dominated the history of film theory and practice ever since the Lumière brothers (who seemed to be obsessed with capturing raw reality on film) and Méliès (who obviously was more interested by what he could do to his raw materials). It is only recently that the third facet of the process, the relationship between film and observer (in Aristotle's terms "Purpose and Value"), has begun to dominate film theory, although it was always implicit in both Realist and Expressionist arguments. The semiotics of film and the politics of film both begin with the observer and work back through the art of the filmmaker to the reality of the raw materials on the other side.

The center of interest has shifted from generative to receptive theories. We are now no longer so concerned with how a film is made as with how it is perceived and what effect it has in our lives. Münsterberg's work (and even Lindsay's) had foreshadowed this shift of emphasis. Moreover, we should remember that all three of these interrelated elements were evident during the practical development of film, even if theory at various points tended to emphasize one to the exclusion of the others.

Expressionism dominated film theory throughout the twenties and thirties. D. W. Griffith described two major "schools" of film practice, the American and the German. The American School, he told his audience, "says to you: 'Come and *have* a great experience!' Whereas the German school says: 'Come and *see* a great experience!'" Griffith's purpose was to suggest that American cinema in the twenties was more active and energetic than German cinema, as indeed it was. Yet although we speak of "German Expressionism" in the twenties and seldom use the word in an American context, nevertheless both of Griffith's schools focus on the essentially Expressionist aim of the "great experience." As Griffith describes his theory of pacing in the movies, it is a tool for the manipulation of the spectators' emotions:

For a quick, keen estimate of a motion picture give me a boy of ten and a girl of fifteen—the boy for action, the girl for romance. Few things have happened in their lives to affect their natural reactions.

What Griffith and Hollywood wanted were pure reactions to their stimuli; the art of film, accordingly, lies almost entirely in the design of effective stimuli. There is little or no sense of the observer actively involved in the process.

Realism was a common, if subordinate, strain in film practice throughout the first four decades of film history; it didn't come into its own theoretically until the late thirties (in the practical work of the British documentarists led by John Grierson) and the forties (with Italian Neorealism). There were good reasons for this late blooming: first, since Realist theory naturally implied that film itself was of lesser importance (that reality was more important than "art"), this led both filmmakers and theorists toward Expressionist positions. Expressionism not only made the filmmaker more important in the general scheme of things, it was also a natural outgrowth of the early efforts to achieve for film "art" a certain degree of respectability. During the early twentieth century, every one of the other, older arts was moving toward greater abstraction, less verisimilitude—"less matter with more art." Why shouldn't the adolescent upstart, film, move in this direction as well? Moreover, if film was in fact to be considered a mature art, it was necessary to show that the activity of the art of film was just as complex and demanding as, say, the activity of painting. Expressionism, by placing emphasis on the manipulative power of the filmmaker, served this function nicely.

More important, perhaps, is the second reason theories of Expressionism dominated the first fifty years of film theory: there was very little room for private or personal art in film. Because it was so expensive, cinema had to be a very popular form. Theories of Realism demand that we see the observer as a participant in the process. If film is strictly a commodity, how could we justify "making the consumer work" for his entertainment? As a product, film had to be manipulative: the more "effect" the film had, the better value for the money the consumer had spent. In fact, most popular film is still judged by this simple rule: witness the success of such "mind-blowers" as *The Exorcist* (1973), *Jaws* (1975), *Alien* (1979), and *Terminator 2* (1991). In this economic sense, movies are still a carnival attraction—rides on roller coasters through chambers of horror and tunnels of love—and Realism is totally beside the point.

The two standard, most succinct, and colorful texts describing the contrasting Expressionist and Realist positions are Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art* (published first in German in 1933 as *Film als Kunst* and translated into English almost immediately) and Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (first published in 1960). Both books are strongly—almost belligerently—prescriptive. Both present "revealed truths" as if film theory were a matter of pronouncements rather than investigations. Yet both remain memorable and have become classics of the literature of film, not only because they each neatly summarize the positions of their respective schools, but also in no small part because

they are so sententious: more complex, less determinist theories of film are obviously not so easily remembered.

Arnheim had a distinguished career as a psychologist (he was the author of *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, 1954), so it is no surprise to discover that the basic tenets of *Film as Art* are psychological. But unlike his predecessor Münsterberg, he is more concerned with how film is made than with how it is perceived. The thrust of his small volume can be described quite succinctly: he proceeds from the basic premise that the art of film depends on its limitations, that its physical limitations are precisely its esthetic virtues. As he himself summarizes his position in his preface to the 1957 edition:

I undertook to show in detail how the very properties that make photography and film fall short of perfect reproduction can act as the necessary molds of an artistic medium.

It is a curious proposition, yet in a sense correct, since logically each art must be formed by its limitations. The problem is that Arnheim suggests that it should not exceed those limitations and that technological developments—sound, color, widescreen, and so forth—that do push the limits further out are not to be welcomed. He finds film at its height artistically in the late silent period, a position that, although understandable enough in 1933, he continued to maintain in the 1957 edition.

After listing a number of ways in which film representation differs from reality, Arnheim proceeds to enumerate how each of these differences—these limitations—yields artistic content and form. The gist of his argument is that the closer film comes to reproducing reality, the less room there is in which the artist can create his effects. The success of this theory rests on two assumptions that are certainly problematic:

- ❑ that art equals effect, or expression; that the magnitude of a work of art is directly related to the degree of the artist's manipulation of materials; and
- ❑ that the limitations of an art form only generate its esthetics and do not restrict them.

"The temptation to increase the size of the screen," he writes, for example, "goes with the desire for colored, stereoscopic, and sound film. It is the wish of people who do not know that artistic effect is bound up with the limitations of the medium...." Yet as those new dimensions were added to the repertoire of film art, filmmakers discovered more freedom, not less, and the range of possible artistic effects expanded considerably.

Basically, the difficulty with Arnheim's theory of limitations is that he focuses all too narrowly on the production of film and doesn't take into account the liberating and complicating factor of its perception. Many of the limitations he lists

(aside from the technological)—the framing of the image, film's two-dimensionality, the breakup of the space-time continuum by editing—are far less important in terms of how we perceive a film than in terms of how we construct one. By ignoring the total scope of the film process, Arnheim produces a strictly ideal prescription for film art that has less to do with the actual phenomenon of practical film than it might at first appear. In any event, his pure, limited conception of film was quickly overtaken by events as technology developed and practical filmmakers discovered the possibilities of new variables.

The conflict between Realism and Expressionism that colors nearly all film theory is not so direct, explicit, and nicely balanced as it might at first seem. The relationship is more dialectical than dichotomous, so that Realist theory grows out of Expressionist theory just as Expressionist theory had, in its turn, grown out of the urge to build an artistic reputation for film.

Siegfried Kracauer's magnum opus, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, coming twenty-seven years after Arnheim's elegant, lean prescription, is in contrast a sprawling, sometimes blunt, often difficult investigation into wide-ranging theories of Realism that had been developing slowly over a period of more than twenty years. Expressionism, because it is self-limiting and self-defining, is relatively easy to outline. Realism, on the other hand, is a vague, inclusive term that means many things to many people. All students of literature have run into the "problem" of Realism before. Is Jane Austen, who wrote precisely about a very narrow segment of society, a Realist? Or is breadth as important as depth to the Realist sensibility? Is Naturalism, rather easily defined as an artistic form based on Determinist philosophy, a kind of Realism, an offshoot from it, or in direct opposition to it? In film, too, "Realism" is a slippery term. The Rossellini of *Rome, Open City* (1945) is a "Realist," but what about the Rossellini of *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*? Or Fellini? Are politics necessary to Realism? What about acting? Are documentaries always more "realistic" than fiction films? Or is it possible to be a Realist and still be a story teller? The catalogue of questions about the nature of film Realism is endless.

Kracauer covers many of them, but his book is by no means a complete survey of the quirky definitions of the word. It is a theory of film, not *the* theory of film. Like Arnheim's essay, it chooses a single central fact of the film experience as crucial, then builds a prescription that leads to a specific conclusion. Like Arnheim, too, Kracauer was writing mainly after the fact. If the great age of film Expressionism was the twenties, then the central period of film Realism was the forties and fifties. The most important Realist trend of the sixties, for instance, occurred in documentary—an area of film activity about which Kracauer has very little to say.

While Kracauer has the reputation of being the foremost theorist of film Realism, he was actually only one among many. André Bazin, for instance, is also generally considered a "Realist," yet although he offered a much richer investigation

of the phenomenon during the fifteen years preceding Kracauer's book, his work was never so clearly codified as Kracauer's and therefore hasn't until recently had the direct impact of his successor's.

Throughout most of film history, Realism has been of more interest to practical filmmakers than theoretical critics. Dziga Vertov in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, Jean Vigo in France, and John Grierson in England in the 1930s, Roberto Rossellini, Cesare Zavattini, and the Neorealists in Italy in the 1940s, all developed Realist positions in opposition to Expressionist theories. It was as if the filmmakers reacted against the potential abuse of power of their medium, instead searching for a more "moral" position in Realism.

At the center of Arnheim's theory had been the limitations of the technology and the form of film art. The kernel of Kracauer's theory is the photographic "calling" of film art. Simply because photography and film do come so close to reproducing reality, they must emphasize this ability in their esthetics. This premise is diametrically opposed to Arnheim's. "Film," Kracauer wrote, "is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates toward it." Therefore, he suggests, content must take precedence over form. He then develops what he calls a material esthetic rather than an esthetic of form.

Because theories of art depend so heavily on formalism, then, film becomes for Kracauer a kind of antiart. "Due to its fixed meaning," he concludes, "the concept of art does not, and cannot, cover truly 'cinematic' films—films, that is, which incorporate aspects of physical reality with a view to making us experience them. And yet it is they, not the films reminiscent of traditional art works, which are valid esthetically."

This is the third stage of the psychological development of film as art. After having established itself as respectable in its adolescence, then having joined the community of the arts in its young adulthood by showing how like them it really was, it now moves into maturity, exerting its "ego integrity" by separating itself from the community and establishing its own personal system of values. If film doesn't fit the definition of art, then the definition of art must be changed.

Having celebrated film's uniqueness, Kracauer then makes a crucial logical jump. Since it can reproduce reality so well, he suggests, it *ought* to. It is at this point that his theory is most open to contradiction. It would be just as easy to propose (as Arnheim does in a way) that, since film and reality have such a close and intimate connection, film ought to exercise this mimetic power in the opposite way: by contradicting, molding, forming, shaping reality rather than reproducing it. Nevertheless, after these first significant pronouncements, Kracauer moves on into a more general and more objective study of the medium of film. The logical end point of his primary contention about the close relationship of film and reality would be to elevate the film record, the nonfiction film, and the documentary over the fictional film. Yet Kracauer, as we have noted, pays relatively little atten-

tion to strict factual film and instead focuses on the most common type of film: the narrative. He finds the ideal film form to be the “found story.” Such films are fiction, but they are “discovered rather than contrived.” He continues, explaining the difference between this quasi-fictional ideal form and the fully developed “artwork”:

Since the found story is part and parcel of the raw material in which it lies dormant, it cannot possibly develop into a self-contained whole—which means that it is almost the opposite of the theatrical story [p. 246].

As his theory develops and broadens, it becomes clear that Kracauer has no great objections to form—so long as it serves the purpose of content. And here we get to the heart of Kracauer’s true contribution to film theory: film serves a purpose. It does not exist simply for itself, as a pure esthetic object; it exists in the context of the world around it. Since it stems from reality it must also return to it—hence the subtitle of Kracauer’s theory: *The Redemption of Physical Reality*.

If this sounds vaguely religious, the connotation is, I think, intended. For Kracauer, film has a human, ethical nature. Ethics must replace esthetics, thereby fulfilling Lenin’s prophecy, which Jean-Luc Godard was fond of quoting, that “ethics are the esthetics of the future.” Having been divorced from physical reality by both scientific and esthetic abstraction, we need the redemption film offers: we need to be brought back into communication with the physical world. Film can mediate reality for us. It can both “corroborate” and “debunk” our impressions of reality.

This seems an admirable goal.

Montage: Pudovkin, Eisenstein, Balázs, and Formalism

The words “Expressionism” and “Formalism” are often used interchangeably in film criticism to denote those tendencies generally opposed to “Realism.” Both Expressionism and Formalism are also labels attached to specific periods of cultural history: Expressionism was the major force in German culture—in theater and painting as well as film—during the 1920s, just as, during the same period, Formalism marked the burgeoning cultural life—both literary and cinematic—in the Soviet Union. Essentially, the difference between the two movements depends on a slight but significant shift of focus. Expressionism is a more generalized, romantic conception of film as an expressive force. Formalism is more specific, more “scientific,” and more concerned with the elements, the details that go to make up this force. It is more analytic and less synthetic, and it also carries with it a strong sense of the importance of function as well as form in art.

During the 1920s, the period immediately following the Russian Revolution, the Soviet cinema was among the most exciting in the world, not only practically but theoretically. There is no doubt that the Soviet filmmaker-theorists wanted not only to capture reality but also to change it. Realism, at least esthetically, is not particularly revolutionary: as we have noted, it tends to deny the power of the filmmaker and therefore makes film seem to be less powerful as a tool to effect social change. During this period—before Stalin imposed the doctrine of Socialist Realism (which is neither Realist nor especially Socialist)—two filmmakers, V. I. Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein, produced not only a number of exceptional films but also an amorphous body of Formalist theory that had a profound impact on the course of development of film theory. At the same time, the Hungarian writer, critic, and filmmaker Béla Balázs was pursuing a line of Formalist thinking that, although it is less well known than those of Pudovkin and Eisenstein, nevertheless deserves to be ranked with theirs.

Unlike Arnheim and Kracauer, Pudovkin, Eisenstein, and Balázs were practicing filmmakers who wanted to describe their art rather than prescribe for it. Their theoretical work was not compressed into single volumes, but rather spread out in individual essays over many years. It was organic, developing, and ongoing rather than closed, complete, and final. It is thus much less easy to summarize quickly; it is also much more useful and insightful.

Very soon after the revolution of 1917, a filmmaker named Lev Kuleshov was put in charge of a workshop. Pudovkin was one of his students as was, briefly, Eisenstein. Unable to find enough filmstock to fuel their projects, they turned to reediting films already made, and in the process discovered a number of truths about the technique of film montage.

In one experiment, Kuleshov linked together a number of shots made at varying times and places. The composite was a unified piece of film narrative. Kuleshov called this “creative geography.” In probably their most famous experiment, the Kuleshov group took three identical shots of the well-known prerevolutionary actor Moszhukin and intercut them with shots of a plate of soup, a woman in a coffin, and a little girl. According to Pudovkin, who later described the results of the experiment, audiences exclaimed at Moszhukin’s subtle and affective ability to convey such varied emotions: hunger, sadness, affection.

In his two major works, *Film Technique* (1926) and *Film Acting* (1935), Pudovkin developed from the basic root of his experiments with Kuleshov a varied theory of cinema centered on what he called “relational editing.” For Pudovkin, montage was “the method which controls the ‘psychological guidance’ of the spectator.” In this respect, his theory was simply Expressionist—that is, mainly concerned with how the filmmaker can affect the observer. But he identified five separate and distinct types of montage: contrast, parallelism, symbolism, simultaneity, and leitmotif (reiteration of theme).

Here we have the basic premise of film Formalism: Pudovkin discovered categories of form and analyzed them. Moreover, he was greatly concerned with the importance of the shot—of *mise-en-scène*—and therefore displayed an attitude that we have come to regard as essentially Realist. He saw montage as the complex, pumping heart of film, but he also felt that its purpose was to support narrative rather than to alter it.

Eisenstein set up his own theory of montage—as collision rather than linkage—in direct opposition to Pudovkin’s theory. In a series of essays beginning in the early twenties and continuing throughout most of his life, he worked and reworked a number of basic concepts as he struggled with the shape and nature of cinema.* For Eisenstein, montage has as its aim the creation of ideas, of a new reality, rather than the support of narrative, the old reality of experience. As a student, he had been fascinated by Oriental ideograms that combined elements of widely different meaning in order to create entirely new meanings, and he regarded the ideogram as a model of cinematic montage. Taking an idea from the literary Formalists, he conceived of the elements of a film being “decomposed” or “neutralized” so that they could serve as fresh material for dialectic montage. Even actors were to be cast not for their individual qualities but for the “types” they represented.

Eisenstein extended this concept of dialectics even to the shot itself. As shots related to each other dialectically, so the basic elements of a single shot—which he called its “attractions”—could interrelate to produce new meanings. Attractions as he defined them included

every aggressive moment ... every element ... that brings to light in the spectator those senses or that psychology that influence his experience—every element that can be verified and mathematically calculated to produce certain emotional shocks in a proper order within the totality ...
[*Film Sense*, p. 231].

Because attractions existed within the framework of that totality, a further extension of montage was suggested: a montage of attractions. “Instead of a static ‘reflection’ of an event with all possibilities for activity within the limits of the event’s logical action, we advance to a new plane—free montage of arbitrarily selected, independent ... attractions...” [p. 232]. This was an entirely new basis for montage, different in kind from Pudovkin’s five categories.

Later, Eisenstein developed a more elaborate view of the system of attractions in which one was always dominant while others were subsidiary. The problem here was that the idea of the dominant seemed to conflict with the concept of

* These essays are collected in *The Film Sense* and *Film Form* and in a number of other volumes.

neutralization, which supposedly prepared all the elements to be used with equal ease by the filmmaker. There are a number of such seeming contradictions in Eisenstein's thought—a good sign that his theory of film was organic, open, and healthily incomplete.

Possibly the most important ramification of Eisenstein's system of attractions, dominants, and dialectic collisional montage lies in its implications for the observer of film. Whereas Pudovkin had seen the techniques of montage as an aid to narrative, Eisenstein reconstructed montage in opposition to straight narrative. If shot A and shot B were to form an entirely new idea, C, then the audience had to become directly involved. It was necessary that they work to understand the inherent meaning of the montage. Pudovkin, whose ideas seem closer in spirit to the tenets of Realism, had paradoxically proposed a type of narrative style that controlled the "psychological guidance" of the audience.

Eisenstein, meanwhile, in suggesting an extreme Formalism in which photographed reality ceased to be itself and became instead simply a stock of raw material—attractions, or "shocks"—for the filmmaker to rearrange as he saw fit, was also paradoxically describing a system in which the observer was a necessary and equal participant.

The simplistic dichotomy between Expressionism and Realism thus no longer holds. For Eisenstein it was necessary to destroy Realism in order to approach reality. The real key to the system of film is not the artist's relationship with his raw materials but rather his relationship with his audience. A hypothetical film that might show the greatest respect for photographed reality might at the same time show little or no respect for its audience. Conversely, a highly Formalist, abstract film expression—Eisenstein's own *Potemkin* (1925), for instance—might engage its audience in a dialectical process instead of overpowering them with a calculated emotional experience.

Eisenstein's basic conception of the film experience was, like his theories, open-ended. The process of film (like the process of theory) was far more important than its end, and the filmmaker and observer were engaged in it dynamically. Likewise, the elements of the film experience that was the channel of communication between creator and observer were also connected logically with each other. Eisenstein's wide-ranging theories of film thus foreshadow the two most recent developments of cinematic theory, since he is concerned throughout not only with the language of film but also with how that language can be used by both filmmakers and observers.

Like Eisenstein, Béla Balázs worked out his description of the structure of cinema over a period of many years. Hungarian by birth, he left his native country after the Commune was overthrown in 1919 and spent time thereafter in Germany, the Soviet Union, and other East European countries. His major work, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art* (1948), summarizes and comments on a

EISENSTEIN'S *POTEMKIN*: THE ODESSA STEPS SEQUENCE



Figure 5-1. As the people of Odessa gather to hail the rebellious soldiers on the battleship *Potemkin* in the harbor, soldiers appear. The crowd runs down the steps in horror as the soldiers fire. A young boy is hit and killed. His mother picks him up in her arms and turns to face the soldiers at the top of the steps....



Figure 5-2. ... As she advances, pleading with them, they prepare to fire. The officer lowers his saber and a volley is fired, cutting down the mother and child. The crowd runs down the steps, trampling those who have fallen....

EISENSTEIN'S *POTEMKIN*: THE ODESSA STEPS SEQUENCE



Figure 5-3. ... As they reach the pathway at the bottom, they are attacked by mounted Cossacks. The people are caught in the pincers between the rank of soldiers relentlessly advancing down the steps, and the Cossacks who whip and trample them. Eisenstein cuts between shots of the victims and shots of the oppressors. A woman with a baby carriage is hit near the top of the steps. As she falls, she nudges the carriage over the first step....



Figure 5-4. ... It careens down the steps over corpses, as people watch in terror, until it reaches the bottom step and overturns. (*All stills l'Avant-Scène. Frame enlargements.*)

lifetime of theorizing. Because he had practical experience in the art and because he developed his theory over a number of years, *Theory of the Film* remains one of the most balanced volumes of its kind.

Sharing many of the basic Formalist principles of Eisenstein and Soviet literary critics of the twenties, Balázs manages to integrate these concepts with certain Realist principles. He was fascinated by the “secret power” of the closeup to reveal details of fact and emotion and developed a theory of the true province of film as “micro-dramatics,” the subtle shifts of meaning and the quiet interplay of emotions that the closeup is so well equipped to convey. His earliest book on film had been entitled *The Visible Man, or Film Culture* (1924). It made this essentially Realist point strongly and probably influenced Pudovkin.

But while he celebrated the reality of the closeup, Balázs also situated film squarely in the economic sphere of influence. He realized that the economic foundation of film is the prime determinant of film esthetics, and he was one of the earliest film theorists to understand and explain how our approach to any film is molded and formed by the cultural values we share. Predating Marshall McLuhan by many years, he anticipated the development of a new visual culture that would resurrect certain powers of perception that, he said, had lain dormant. “The discovery of printing,” he wrote, “gradually rendered illegible the faces of men. So much could be read from paper that the method of conveying meaning by facial expression fell into desuetude.” That is changing now that we have a developing, reproducible visual culture that can match print in versatility and reach. Balázs’s sense of film as a cultural entity subject to the same pressure and forces as any other element of culture may seem obvious today, but he was one of the first to recognize this all-important aspect of film.

Mise-en-Scène: Neorealism, Bazin, and Godard

Like Eisenstein, André Bazin was engaged in a continual process of revision and reevaluation as his short career progressed from the mid-1940s to his early death in 1958 at the age of thirty-nine. Unlike nearly all other authors of major film theories, Bazin was a working critic who wrote regularly about individual films. His theory is expressed mainly in four volumes of collected essays (*Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?*) published in the years immediately succeeding his death (selected and translated in two volumes: *What Is Cinema?*). It is deeply imbued with his practical, deductive experience. With Bazin, for the first time, film theory becomes not a matter of pronouncement and prescription but a fully mature intellectual activity, well aware of its own limitations. The very title of Bazin’s collected essays reveals

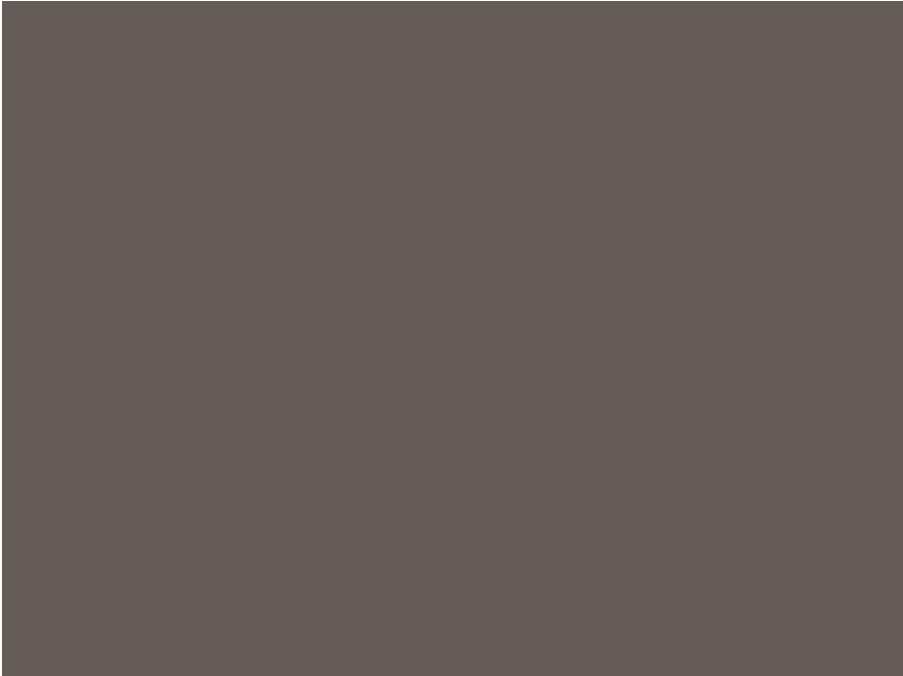


Figure 5-5. Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938): the Battle on the Ice. The Russian army is in position to defend against the German invaders. Battle scenes, with their strong visual oppositions, were among Eisenstein's most striking sequences. (*l'Avant-Scène*. Frame enlargement.)

the modesty of this approach. For Bazin, the questions are more important than the answers.

With roots in his background as a student of phenomenology, Bazin's theories are clearly Realist in organization, but once again the focus has shifted. If Formalism is the more sophisticated, less pretentious cousin of Expressionism, perhaps what Bazin is after should be called "Functionalism" rather than simply Realism, for running throughout his argument is the important idea that film has significance not for what it is but for what it does.

For Bazin, Realism is more a matter of psychology than of esthetics. He does not make a simple equation between film and reality, as does Kracauer, but rather describes a more subtle relationship between the two in which film is the asymptote to reality, the imaginary line that the geometric curve approaches but never touches. He began one of his earliest essays, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," by suggesting: "If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation." The arts arose, he contends, because "other forms of insurance were ... sought." That primal memory of embalming lives on in photography and cinema,

which “embalm time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption.” This leads to an elegantly simple conclusion:

If the history of the plastic arts is less a matter of their aesthetic than of their psychology then it will be seen to be essentially the story of resemblance, or, if you will, of realism.

If the genesis of the photographic arts is essentially a matter of psychology, then so is their effect. In “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” Bazin traces the roots of film Realism back to Murnau and Stroheim in the silent cinema, and quickly and elegantly describes how a series of technological innovations pushed film ever closer, asymptotically, to reality. But while technology was the source of this particular power, it was used for psychological, ethical, and political effects. This tendency blossomed in the movement of Italian Neorealism just at the end of and directly after World War II—a cinematic era for which Bazin felt a great affinity. “Is not Neorealism primarily a kind of humanism,” he concludes, “and only secondarily a style of filmmaking?” The real revolution, he thinks, took place more on the level of subject matter than of style.

Just as the Formalists had found montage to be the heart of the cinematic enterprise, so Bazin claims that *mise-en-scène* is the crux of the Realist film. By *mise-en-scène* he means specifically deep focus photography and the sequence-shot; these techniques allow the spectator to participate more fully in the experience of film. Thus, Bazin finds the development of deep focus to be not just another filmic device, but rather “a dialectical step forward in the history of film language.”

He outlines why this is so: depth of focus “brings the spectator in closer relation with the image than he is with reality.” This implies consequently “both a more active mental attitude on the part of the observer and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress.” No more the “psychological guidance” of Pudovkin. From the attention and the will of the spectator, the meaning of the image derives. Moreover, there is a metaphysical consequence of deep focus: “montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression.” Eisenstein’s attractions are what they are: they are strongly denotative. Neorealism, on the other hand, “tends to give back to the cinema a sense of the ambiguity of reality.” Free to choose, we are free to interpret.

Closely associated with this concept of the value of ambiguity are the twin concepts of the presence and reality of space. Bazin, in a later essay, suggests that the essential difference between theater and cinema lies in this area. There is only one reality that cannot be denied in cinema—the reality of space. Contrariwise, on the stage space can easily be illusory; the one reality that cannot be denied there is the presence of the actor and the spectator. These two reductions are the foundations of their respective arts.

The implications for cinema are that, since there is no irreducible reality of presence, “there is nothing to prevent us from identifying ourselves in imagination with the moving world before us, which becomes *the world*.” Identification then becomes a key word in the vocabulary of cinematic esthetics. Moreover, the one irreducible reality is that of space. Therefore, film form is intimately involved with spatial relationships: *mise-en-scène*, in other words.

Bazin did not live long enough to formulate these theories more precisely, but his work nevertheless had a profound effect on a generation of filmmakers, as did Eisenstein’s (but as Arnheim’s and Kracauer’s prescriptions did not). Bazin laid the groundwork for the semiotic and ethical theories that were to follow. More immediately, he inspired a number of his colleagues on *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the magazine he founded with Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Lo Duca in 1951. The most influential film journal in history, *Cahiers* provided an intellectual home during the fifties and early sixties for François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, and Jacques Rivette, among others. As critics, these men contributed significantly to the development of theory; as filmmakers, they comprised the first generation of cinéastes whose work was thoroughly grounded in film history and theory; their films—especially those of Godard—were not only practical examples of theory but often themselves theoretical essays.

For the first time, film theory was being written in film rather than print.

This fact itself was evidence that the vision of critic and filmmaker Alexandre Astruc was being realized. In 1948, Astruc had called for a new age of cinema, which he identified as the age of *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen). He predicted that cinema would “gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language.”* Many earlier theorists had spoken of film’s “language”; the concept of the *caméra-stylo* was significantly more elaborate. Astruc not only wanted film to develop its own idiom, he also wanted that idiom to be capable of expressing the most subtle ideas. Except for Eisenstein, no previous film theorist had conceived of film as an intellectual medium in which abstract concepts could be expressed.

Nearly all theorists naturally assumed that the proper province of the recording medium of film was the concrete. Even Eisenstein’s dialectical montage depended thoroughly on concrete images—we might call it a dialectic of objective correlatives. Astruc wanted something more. In an offhand reference to Eisenstein, he noted:

* *The New Wave*, edited by Peter Graham, contains two essays of note: “The Birth of a New Avant Garde: La Caméra-Stylo,” by Alexandre Astruc; and “La Politique des auteurs,” by André Bazin; both quoted in this section.

the cinema is now moving towards a form which is making it such a precise language that it will soon be possible to write ideas directly on film without even having to resort to those heavy associations of images that were the delight of silent cinema.

Astruc's *caméra-stylo* was a doctrine of function rather than form. It was a fitting complement to the developing practice of Neorealism that so influenced Bazin.

It would be more than ten years before Astruc's 1948 vision would be realized in the cinema of the New Wave. Meanwhile, Truffaut, Godard, and the others set about developing a theory of critical practice in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Always the existentialist, André Bazin was working to develop a theory of film that was deductive—based in practice. Much of this work proceeded through identification and critical examination of genres. "Cinema's existence precedes its essence," he wrote in fine existential form. Whatever conclusions Bazin drew were the direct results of the experience of the concrete fact of film.

François Truffaut best expressed the major theoretical principle that came to identify *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the fifties. In his landmark article "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français" (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, January 1954), Truffaut developed the "Politique des auteurs," which became the rallying cry for the young French critics. Usually translated as "auteur theory," it wasn't a theory at all but a policy: a fairly arbitrary critical approach. As Bazin explained several years later in an essay in which he tried to counter some of the excesses of the policy:

The *Politique des auteurs* consists, in short, of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference, and then of assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to the next.

This led to some rather absurd opinions on individual films, as Bazin points out, but by its very egregiousness the *Politique des auteurs* helped to prepare the way for a resurgence of the personal cinema of authors in the sixties who could wield Astruc's *caméra-stylo* with grace and intelligence. Cinema was moving from theories of abstract design to theories of concrete communication. It was not material Realism or even psychological Realism that counted now, but rather intellectual Realism. Once it was understood that a film was the product of an author, once that author's "voice" was clear, then spectators could approach the film not as if it were reality, or the dream of reality, but as a statement by another individual.

More important than Truffaut's *Politique*, though much less influential at the time, was Jean-Luc Godard's theory of montage, developed in a series of essays in the middle fifties and best expressed in "Montage, mon beau souci" (*Cahiers du Cinéma* 65; December, 1956). Building on Bazin's theory of the basic opposition between *mise-en-scène* and montage, Godard created a dialectical synthesis of

these two theses that had governed film theory for so long. This is one of the most important steps in film theory. Godard rethought the relationship so that both montage and mise-en-scène can be seen as different aspects of the same cinematic activity.

“Montage is above all an integral part of *mise-en-scène*,” he wrote. “Only at peril can one be separated from the other. One might just as well try to separate the rhythm from a melody.... What one seeks to foresee in space, the other seeks in time.” Moreover, for Godard, mise-en-scène automatically implies montage. In the cinema of psychological reality that derived from Pudovkin and influenced the best of Hollywood, “cutting on a look is almost the definition of montage.” Montage is therefore specifically determined by mise-en-scène. As the actor turns to look at an object the editing immediately shows it to us. In this kind of construction, known as “*découpage classique*,” the length of a shot depends on its function and the relationship between shots is controlled by the material within the shot—its mise-en-scène.

Godard’s synthesis of the classic opposition is elegantly simple. It has two important corollaries: first, that mise-en-scène can thus be every bit as untruthful as montage when a director uses it to distort reality; second, that montage is not necessarily evidence of bad faith on the part of the filmmaker. No doubt, simple plastic reality is better served by mise-en-scène, which in the strictest Bazinian sense is still more honest than montage. But Godard has redefined the limits of Realism so that we now no longer focus on plastic reality (the filmmaker’s concrete relationship with his raw materials) nor on psychological reality (the filmmaker’s manipulative relationship with the audience), but on intellectual reality (the filmmaker’s dialectical, or conversational, relationship with the audience).

Techniques like mise-en-scène and montage then cease to be of main interest. We are more concerned with the “voice” of a film: Is the filmmaker operating in good faith? Is he speaking directly to us? Has he designed a machine of manipulation? Or is the film an honest discourse?

(When the first edition of *How To Read a Film* appeared, in 1977, this question of “honest discourse” was simply a nice idea; it’s much more important now. The growth of special-effects technology in the eighties and the introduction of digitization in the nineties gave filmmakers powerful new tools for constructing “manipulation machines,” and they are using them. As we’ll see in Chapter 7, ethical questions now take on added significance.)

Godard redefined montage as part of mise-en-scène. So to do montage is to do mise-en-scène. This presages the semiotic approach that was to develop in the sixties. Godard was fond of quoting the apothegm of one of his former teachers, the philosopher Brice Parain:

THE SIGN FORCES US TO SEE AN OBJECT THROUGH ITS SIGNIFICANCE.

THE SIGN FORCES US TO SEE AN OBJECT THROUGH ITS SIGNIFICANCE.

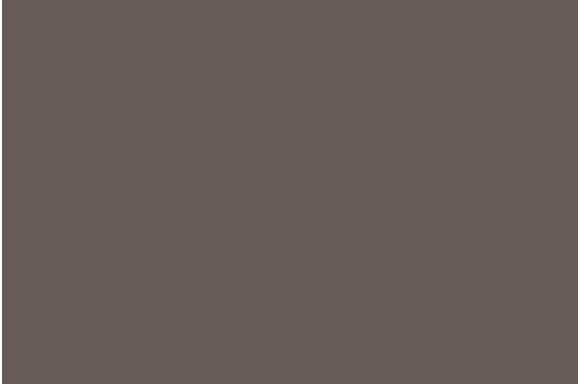


Figure 5-6. Philosopher Brice Parain chats with Anna Karina about freedom and communication in Godard's *My Life to Live* (1962).



Figure 5-7.
MISE-EN-SCENE AS VIEW.
Godard in "Camera-Eye" (*Far from Vietnam*, 1967).
(*Frame enlargement.*)



Figure 5-8. "Rosy" and "Raoul," consumer collages, in *Les Carabiniers* (1963).

THE SIGN FORCES US TO SEE AN OBJECT THROUGH ITS SIGNIFICANCE.

Figure 5-9. *Le Gai Savoir* (1968). Juliet Berto and Jean-Pierre Léaud in the middle of the dark television studio engage in discussions that aren't broadcast. (Frame enlargement.)

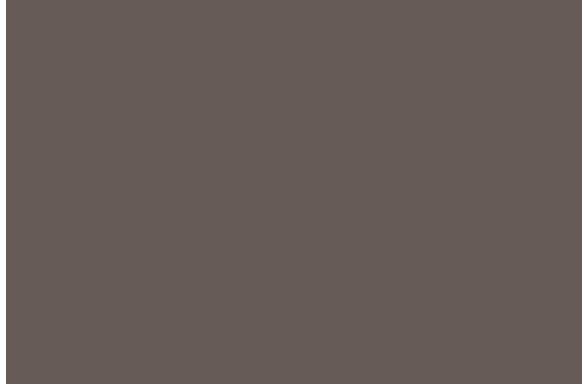


Figure 5-10. Juliet Berto, in *Weekend* (1968), is caught between the two unruly forces of the film, sex and energy, a bra ad and the Esso tiger. (Frame enlargement.)



Figure 5-11. Recalling the long tracking shot in *Weekend* (see Figure 3-65) past the endless line of stalled autos, this opening sequence from *British Sounds* (1969) objectively follows the construction of a car on the assembly line. The soundtrack is a screech of machinery, as the workers are seen only as parts of the larger machine. The fabrication of the car is as painful as traffic accidents. In both the *Weekend* and *British Sounds* tracking shots, mise-en-scène becomes an ideological tool: it is experienced and thus *felt*, whereas montage is analytical: because it summarizes for us, it does not encourage us to work out our own logic. Montage draws conclusions; mise-en-scène asks questions. (Frame enlargement.)



THE SIGN FORCES US TO SEE AN OBJECT THROUGH ITS SIGNIFICANCE.



Figure 5-12. In *Vladimir and Rosa* (1971), Godard (left) and his collaborator Jean-Pierre Gorin (right) set up the “dialectic of the tennis court.” The elements of the dialectic are, variously: Vladimir (Lenin) and Rosa (Luxemburg), Jean-Luc (Godard) and Jean-Pierre (Gorin), sound and image, American experience and French practice, filmmakers (here) and filmwatchers (also here by implication). (*Frame enlargement.*)

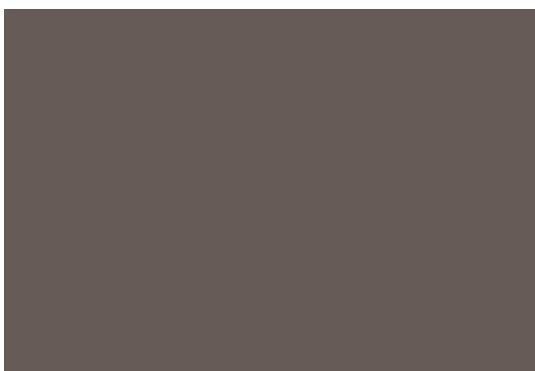


Figure 5-13. An essay on the trial of the Chicago 8, *Vladimir and Rosa* paid close attention to the function of the media. “Bobby X” (Godard/Gorin’s character for the real-life Bobby Seale) is gagged and bound in the courtroom (as he was in real life). To demonstrate the absence of Bobby X for the media, the group of revolutionaries in the movie set up a press conference for him. But he can’t appear. He speaks from a tape recorder set up on a red chair. Looking for a dramatic *story*, the television cameras are forced to cover a less exciting *idea*: the struggle between sound and image. In this shot, sound finally gets its own image! (*Frame enlargement.*)

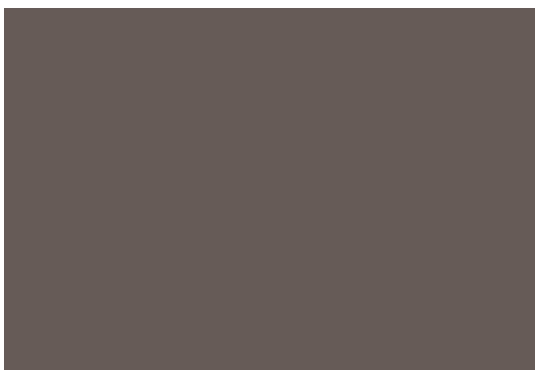


Figure 5-14. The tracking shot in the supermarket at the end of *Tout va bien* is equally as long (and as exhilarating) as the earlier shot in *Weekend*. Godard’s cameras moves inexorably past a huge rank of twenty-four cash registers, most of them clanging away, as the group of young gauchistes stages a political event in the market: production versus consumption—of images as well as products. (*Frame enlargement.*)

Plastic or material Realism deals only with what is *signified*. Godard's more advanced intellectual or perceptual Realism includes the *signifier*. Godard was also in the habit of quoting Brecht's dictum that "Realism doesn't consist in reproducing reality, but in showing how things *really* are." Both of these statements concentrate the Realist argument on matters of perception. Christian Metz later elaborated this concept, making an important differentiation between the reality of the substance of a film and the reality of the discourse in which that substance is expressed. "On the one hand," he wrote, "there is the *impression* of reality; on the other the *perception* of reality..."

Godard continued his examination of these theoretical problems after he became a filmmaker. By the mid-sixties, he had developed a form of filmed essay in which the structure of ideas usually superseded the classic determinants of plot and character. Most of these films—*The Married Woman* (1964), *Alphaville* (1965), *Masculine-Feminine* (1966), *Two or Three Things that I Know about Her* (1966), for example—dealt with general political and philosophical questions: prostitution, marriage, rebellion, even architectural sociology. By the late sixties, however, he was once more deeply involved in film theory, this time the politics of film. In a series of difficult, tentative, experimental cinematic essays, he further developed his theory of film perception to include the political relationship between film and observer.

The first of these, and the most intense, was *Le Gai Savoir* (1968), in which Godard dealt with the acute problem of the language of film. He suggested that it had become so debased by being used manipulatively that no film can accurately represent reality. It can only, because of the connotations of its language, present a false mirror of reality. It must therefore be presentational rather than representational. While it cannot reproduce reality honestly and truthfully, it *may* be able to produce itself honestly. So that the language may regain some of its force, Godard suggests, it will be necessary for filmmakers to break it down, to engage in what literary critic Roland Barthes called "semioclasm"—the revivifying destruction of signs—we must "return to zero" so that we may begin again.

During the following five years, before Godard turned his attention to video, he completed a number of 16 mm films in which he attempted to return to zero. In *Pravda* (1969) he investigated the ideological significance of certain cinematic devices; in *Vent d'est* (1969) he explored the ideological meaning of film genres; in *British Sounds* (1969) and *Vladimir and Rosa* (1971) he examined, among other things, the relationship of sound and image. Sound, he thought, suffers under the tyranny of image; there should be an equal relationship between the two. Eisenstein and Pudovkin had published a manifesto as early as 1928 declaring that sound should be treated as an equal component of the cinematic equation and allowed to be independent of image. But for forty years film theorists had

given only the most perfunctory attention to the element of the soundtrack. Godard hoped the imbalance could be redressed.

Tout va bien and *Letter to Jane* (both 1972) are probably the most important of Godard's theoretical works during this period. The former summarizes what he had learned from his experiments; the latter is, in part, an autocritique of the former.

Tout va bien involves a filmmaker and a reporter (husband and wife) in a concrete political situation (a strike and the worker occupation of a factory) and then studies their reaction to it. From this it builds to an analysis of the entire filmic process of production and consumption. Godard reworked his earlier synthesis of montage and *mise-en-scène* in economic terms, seeing cinema not as a system of esthetics but as an economic, perceptual, and political structure in which the "rapports de production"—the relationships between producer and consumer—determine the shape of the film experience. The emphasis is not on how cinema relates to an ideal system (esthetics) but rather on how it directly affects us as viewers. Film's ethics and politics therefore determine its nature.

This was not a particularly new idea; Balázs was aware of this dimension of film. In the thirties and forties, the Frankfurt school of social criticism (Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, mainly) had examined film in this context, most notably in Benjamin's very important essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin had written: "For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.... Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics." Benjamin, however, was speaking of an ideal. Godard had to show how commercial cinema had usurped what Benjamin had termed film's unique ability to shatter tradition, tamed it, and made it serve the purposes of a repressive establishment. It was this subliminally powerful idiom that Godard knew had to be broken down.

Letter to Jane, a forty-five-minute essay about the ideological significance of a photo of Jane Fonda (one of the stars of *Tout va bien*), carries out this process in detail. Working with Jean-Pierre Gorin, Godard attempted to analyze the signification of the esthetic elements of the photo. The angle, design, and relationships between components, Godard showed, have delicate but real ideological significance. By the time of *Letter to Jane*, Godard was by no means alone in this dialectic, semiotic approach to film.

Film Speaks and Acts: Metz and Contemporary Theory

While Godard was studying on film the consequences of the idea that “the sign forces us to see an object through its significance,” Christian Metz and others were studying in print the ramifications of that dictum. In two volumes of *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* (the first of which appeared in English translated as *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*), published in 1968 and 1972, and in his major work *Language and Cinema* (1971), Metz outlined a view of film as a logical phenomenon that can be studied by scientific methods. The main points of Metz’s thesis have already been discussed in Chapter 3. It will suffice here simply to outline the broad principles of what is the most elaborate, subtle, and complex theory of film yet developed.

Semiotics is a general term that covers many specific approaches to the study of culture as language. With strong roots in the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, it uses language as a general model for a variety of phenomena. The approach first took shape in the cultural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss in the fifties and early sixties. This “structuralism” quickly became accepted as a general worldview. Michael Wood described the nature of this intellectual fashion succinctly:

Structuralism is perhaps best understood as a tangled and possibly unnameable strand in modern intellectual history. At times it seems synonymous with modernism itself. At times it seems to be simply one among several twentieth-century formalisms.... And at times it seems to be the inheritor of that vast project which was born with Rimbaud and Nietzsche, spelled out in Mallarmé, pursued in Saussure, Wittgenstein, and Joyce, defeated in Beckett and Borges, and is scattered now into a host of helpless sects: what Mallarmé called the Orphic explanation of the earth, the project of picturing the world not *in* language but *as* language [*New York Review of Books*, March 4, 1976].

In short, structuralism, with its offspring, semiotics, is a generalized worldview that uses the idea of language as its basic tool.

Metz’s approach to film (like all film semiotics) is at once the most abstract and the most concrete of film theories. Because it intends to be a science, semiotics depends heavily on the practical detailed analysis of specific films—and parts of films. In this respect, semiotic criticism is far more concrete and intense than any other approach. Yet at the same time, semiotics is often exquisitely philosophical. The semiotic description of the universe of cinema, in a sense, exists for its own sake: it has its own attractions, and the emphasis is often not on film but on theory. Moreover, semioticians—Metz especially—are noted for being elegant stylists in their own right. Much of the pleasure of reading semiotic studies has to do with

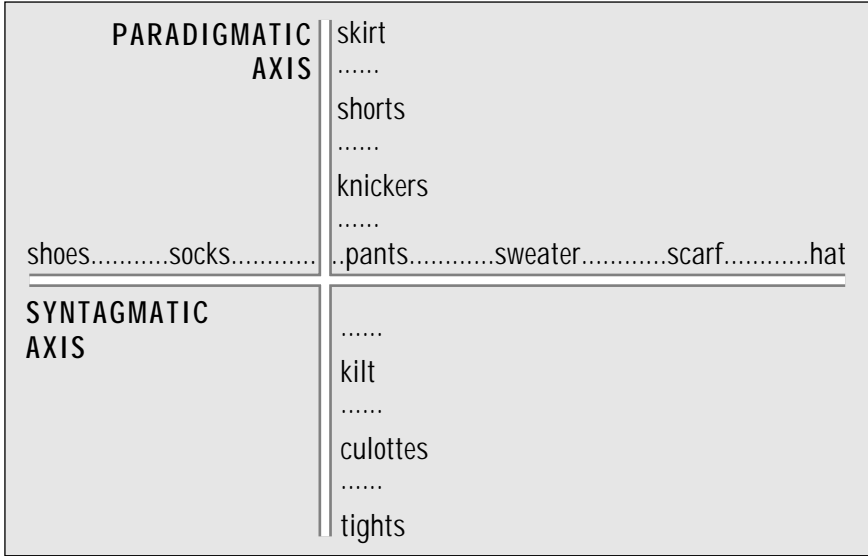


Diagram L. Syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures of clothing.

the pure intellectual creativity and the subtlety of technique of its practitioners. Metz, for example, has a droll, eloquent sense of humor that does much to meliorate his often florid theorizing.

Umberto Eco, next to Metz the most prominent of film semioticians, outlined four stages of the development of the science since the early sixties. The first stage, which according to Eco lasted until the early seventies, was marked by what he calls “the overevaluation of the linguistic mode.” As semiotics struggled to achieve legitimacy, it clung tightly to the accepted patterns of the study of linguistics that had preceded it. (In the same way, the earliest stages of film theory had mimicked that of the older arts.)

The second stage began when semioticians started to realize that their system of analysis was not so simple and universal as they would have liked to believe at first.

During the third stage—the early seventies—semiotics concentrated on the study of one specific aspect of the universe of meaning in film: production. The semiotics of the process, of the making of texts, was central here, and political ideology became part of the semiotic equation.

The fourth stage—beginning in 1975—saw attention shift from production to consumption, from the making of texts to the perception of them. In this stage, film semiotics was greatly influenced by the approach to Freudian psychology of the French sage Jacques Lacan.

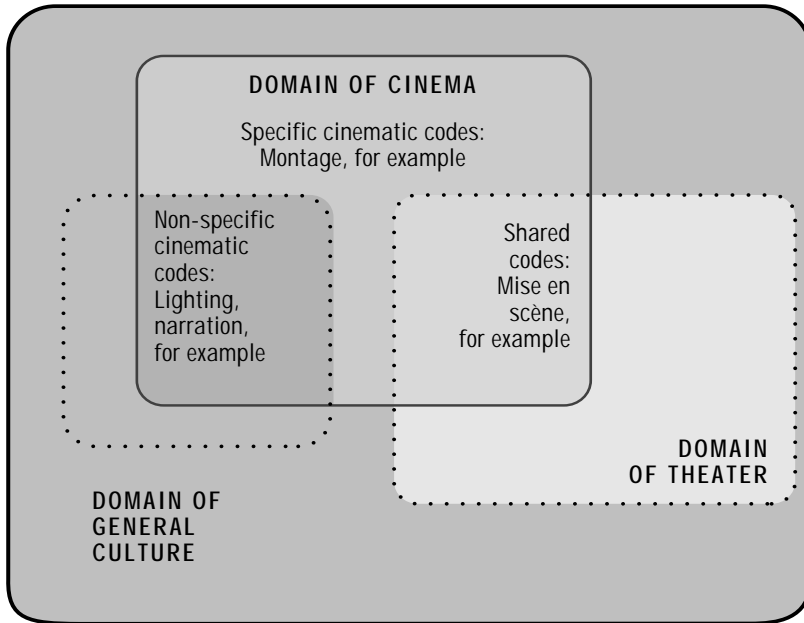


Diagram M. CODE SET THEORY: specific, nonspecific, and shared codes.

Having begun with a quasi-scientific system that purported to quantify and offered the prospect of complete and exact analysis of the phenomenon of film, semiotics gradually worked its way backward to the basic question that has puzzled all students of film: how do we know what we see? Along the way, by rephrasing old questions in new ways, semiotics contributed significantly to the common struggle to understand the nature of film.

We now might want to add a fifth stage—especially in England and the United States: the academic establishment of semiotics. During the past few years, this once elegant system of thought has produced little of real intellectual value. At the same time, it has become a useful tool for academic careerists interested more in publishing before they perish than in increasing our understanding of film theory. Because it is inherently, defiantly abstruse, semiotics is especially dangerous in this regard. In the hands of elegant stylists like Metz, Eco (who later moved on to write popular novels), or Roland Barthes (whose books of essays were their own ends), the tools of semiotics can produce attractive and enlightening discussions. But lesser acolytes can get away with a lot here. Anyone intending to read semiotics should be forewarned: just because you can't understand it doesn't mean it means anything.

Much of Christian Metz's earliest work was concerned with setting up the premises of a semiotics of film. It would seem that the fact of montage offers the eas-

iest comparison between film and language in general. The image is not a word. The sequence is not a sentence. Yet film is *like* a language. What makes film distinctly separate from other languages is its short-circuit sign, in which signifier and signified are nearly the same. Normal languages exhibit the power of “double articulation”: that is, in order to use a language one must be able to understand its sounds and meanings, both its signifiers and its signifieds. But this is not true of film. Signifier and signified are nearly the same: what you see is what you get.

So Christian Metz quickly left behind the structures of linguistics that had served as models for all the various semiotic studies of film, literature, and other areas of culture. He turned to the analysis of specific problems. Although he didn't agree that montage was the governing determinant of film language, he felt that the use of narrative was central to the film experience. The motivation of cinematic signs, he felt, was important to define: the difference between denotation and connotation in cinema is important. (See Chapter 3.)

The second important differentiation in narrative, he felt, was between syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures. Both of these are theoretical constructions rather than practical facts. The syntagma of a film or sequence shows its linear narrative structure. It is concerned with “what follows what.” The paradigm of a film is vertical: it concerns choice—“what goes with what.”

Now Metz felt he had a system of logic that would permit the real analysis of the film phenomenon. Montage and *mise-en-scène* had been thoroughly redefined as the syntagmatic and paradigmatic categories. These Cartesian coordinates determined the field of film.

Metz next turned, in *Language and Cinema*, to a thorough exposition of the system of codes that govern cinematic meaning. Within the syntagmas and paradigms of film theory, what determines how we acquire meaning from a film? Contemporary mathematical set theory plays an important part in his elaborate structure of codes. Making the differentiation between “film” and “cinema” that we noted earlier, Metz explained that the concept of codes transcends the limits of film. Many codes that operate in film come from other areas of culture. These are “nonspecific” codes. Our understanding of the murder in *Psycho* (1960), for example, does not depend on specifically cinematic codes. The way in which Hitchcock presents that murder, however, is an example of a “specific” cinematic code. Finally, there are those codes that cinema borrows from or shares with other media. The lighting of the shower sequence in *Psycho* is a good example of such a shared code. We thus have our first series of overlapping sets.

The next differentiation of codes follows logically. If some codes are specific to cinema and some are not, then of those specific codes, some are shared by all films and some by only a few, while others are unique to certain individual films. The diagram visualizes this logic:

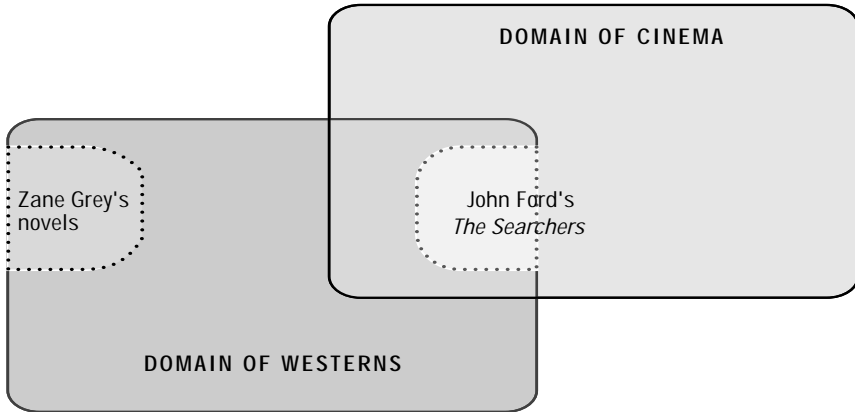


Diagram N. CODE SET THEORY: Generality of codes.

Finally, codes—any codes—can be broken down into subcodes; there is a hierarchy of codes. The system is elegantly simple: film is all the possible sets of these codes; a specific film is a limited number of codes and sets of codes. Genres, careers, studios, national characters, techniques, and every other element ever suggested by previous film theorists, critics, historians, and students can be broken down into code systems.

Codes are the things we read in films.

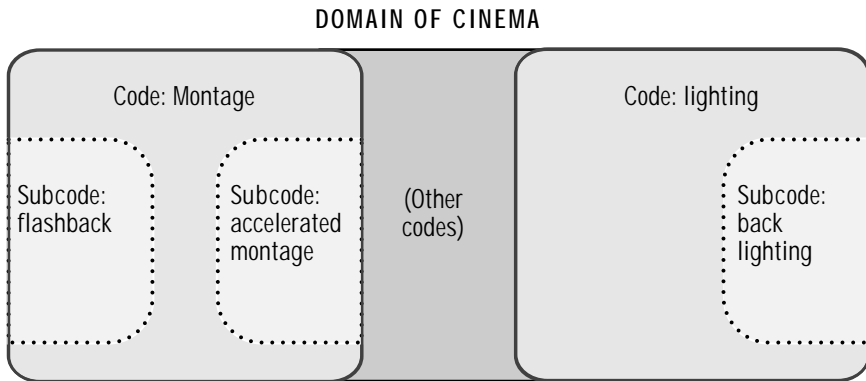


Diagram O. CODE SET THEORY: codes and subcodes.

Along with other semioticians, Metz in the late seventies moved on to a discussion of the psychology of filmic perception, most successfully in his long essay “The Imaginary Signifier,” which appeared simultaneously in both French and English in 1975. Drawing on basic Freudian theory as rephrased by Jacques Lacan, he psychoanalyzed not only the cinematic experience but also cinema

itself. Because of its great debt to Freud, whose theories are now much less highly regarded in America than they once were, this trend in film semiotics elicited much less interest among English-speaking followers of semiotics than among its French practitioners.

While Metz received the most attention, he was by no means alone in his semiotic pursuits. The movement has been central to French intellectual life for a long time. Roland Barthes, although mainly a literary critic, contributed significantly to the debate in cinema before his death in 1980. Raymond Bellour wrote widely; his two extended studies of sequences from Hitchcock's *The Birds* and *North by Northwest* are of special interest. In Italy, Umberto Eco and Gianfranco Bettetini made significant contributions, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, although as he put it an "amateur" theorist, produced some interesting analyses before his untimely death.

In England, semiotics found an early and receptive home in the journal *Screen* and led to the establishment of the English school of "Ciné-structuralism." Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, the major argument of which is outlined in Chapter 3, was the most important English-language contribution to the broad outline of semiotic theory.

In the U.S., semiotics had little effect, except to serve as a tool for academics involved in the growth of film scholarship in colleges and universities in the seventies and eighties. Highly intellectualized, abstract theories of cinema have never been popular in America.

The native tradition of the U.S. has been practical criticism, often with a social if not exactly political orientation, stretching from Harry Alan Potamkin and Otis Ferguson in the thirties through James Agee and Robert Warshow in the forties to Dwight Macdonald, Manny Farber, and Pauline Kael in the sixties and seventies. Andrew Sarris, although he doesn't fit into this sociological tradition, had a marked effect on the course of film criticism in the U.S. in the sixties and seventies through his work in popularizing the auteur policy.

There are no younger critics now writing regularly who have yet established critical personas as strong as Sarris's, Kael's, or even John Simon's in the sixties and seventies. Since the rise of television-show criticism in the early eighties, thumbs have replaced theories. That's not to say there aren't a lot of intelligent people writing about film today; there's just no one with an interesting theoretical ax to grind.

The main tradition of American criticism has preferred to see films not so much as products of specific authors but as evidence of social, cultural, and political currents. Especially in the work of Kael, Molly Haskell, and others, this strain of social criticism was modified to include an intensely personal focus. Practically, American criticism is not so far removed from the French theoretical tradition at the moment. Both are strongly concerned with the problem of perception. The

difference is that the Europeans, as has been their wont, prefer to generalize and to develop elaborate theories, while the Americans, true to tradition, are more interested in the everyday experience of specific phenomena.

Concurrent with the growth of semiotics on the Continent was a revival of Marxist criticism. The French journals *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique* managed to combine the semiotic and the dialectic traditions in the late seventies. In England, too, semiotics often had a distinctly political cast. In America, much of recent theory sees film as a political phenomenon, albeit abstractly rather than practically.

During the seventies, the developing theory of film in the Third World was also of interest. A major document here was "Toward a Third Cinema," by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (*Cineaste* IV:3, 1970). More a manifesto than a theory, the South American filmmakers' essay suggested that the "first cinema"—Hollywood and its imitators—and the "second cinema"—the more personal style of the New Wave or "author's" cinema—would yield to the "third cinema," a cinema of liberation that would consist of "films that the System cannot assimilate and which are foreign to its needs, or ... films that directly and explicitly set out to fight the System." Perhaps that happened somewhere—in Chile for a few years in the early seventies, for example—but with the benefit of hindsight we can discern a lot of wishful thinking in that statement. The world was moving too fast, and the political models of the thirties were no longer viable.

In the U.S. these various currents—semiotic, psychoanalytic, dialectical, and politically prescriptive—each gained their adherents in the 1970s and 1980s as film theory became attractive to academicians. Yet our own native strain of practical criticism continued to develop as well. It centered on a study of narrativity—the ways in which the stories of film are told. Such scholars as Frank McConnell (*Storytelling and Mythmaking in Film and Literature*, 1979) pointed the way to some fertile areas for inquiry.

The great value of such theories of narration is paradoxically that they deflect attention from the specially cinematic qualities of film. If film is seen first as narrative, then we almost immediately infer the corollary, that film is simply one of several different modes of narrative. And that observation, in turn, leads us to consider film in the context of the continuum of media. Both practically and theoretically, this is now a clear necessity.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, film criticism—like its subject—reworked the "postmodernist" truths that had revealed themselves in the 1960s and 1970s. As the French tides of Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian Freudian theory began to recede, the semiotic and dialectic discoveries of earlier years gave rise, respectively, to two new variants: cognitive film theory and cultural studies.

Extending the epistemological quest of semiotics, cognitive film theory has sought to explain the way in which a spectator understands a film: how we *read*

films. Extending the dialectic sport of contextual analysis first pioneered by the Frankfurt school, cultural studies seeks to understand the relationships between the texts of popular culture and their audiences: how we *use* films.*

Both recent trends have found fruitful material for analysis in feminist studies. Since the popular medium of film brightly reflects the general culture in which it thrives, this is no surprise. At the end of the second millennium as Western culture gradually fades into world culture, we find ourselves obsessed with the same topic with which we began this thousand-year journey into literacy and intellectual understanding. Today we call it sexual politics; in the eleventh century we called it Romance. (We still don't understand it. Isn't it nice that it is still mysterious?)

But there may be something more going on here: from the Rice–Irwin *Kiss* to the Playboy Channel, from the phallic lens to hot, round baby spotlights, from the lovemaking of the tracking shot through the voyeuristic reward of the zoom to the rhythmic pulse of montage, movies are sexual. They are not only *about* sexual politics; they *are* sexual politics—subject and object united.

The present course of film theory is away from prescription, toward description. People who think about film are no longer interested to construct an ideal system of esthetics or political and social values, nor do they see their main aim as finding a language to describe the phenomenon of film. These critical tasks were accomplished earlier—with aplomb—by the critics we have discussed in this chapter.

The job of film theory now is truly dialectical. As a fully matured art, film is no longer a separate enterprise but an integrated pattern in the warp and woof of our culture. Cinema is an expansive and far-reaching set of interrelating oppositions: between filmmaker and subject, film and observer, establishment and avant garde, conservative purposes and progressive purposes, psychology and politics, image and sound, dialogue and music, montage and *mise-en-scène*, genre and auteur, literary sensibility and cinematic sensibility, signs and meaning, culture and society, form and function, design and purpose, syntagmas and paradigms, image and event, Realism and Expressionism, language and phenomenology, sex and violence, sense and nonsense, love and marriage ... a never-ending set of codes and subcodes that raises fundamental questions about the relationships of life to art, and reality to language.

* I am grateful to Richard Allen for this succinct analysis.



Figure 5-15. Truffaut asks a simple question in *Day For Night*: "Is film more important than life?"