

## FILM & TECHNOLOGY, HISTORY & ANALYSES\*

By Barry Salt

/.../ there are some people who will say, and indeed have said already, that what I have written on the subject is false and worthless because I do not have the correct theoretical approach. Because of this, and because it is a good thing to have one's conceptual frameworks clear to oneself and others, it is essential that I show why their claims on your time and attention are unjustified, and why my approach to the matters with which this book deals is the correct one. /.../

The intellectual position that I take from this background could be described as Scientific Realism, and this can be crudely summarized as the view that there is a real world and that this real world is described by the established natural sciences. Scientific Realism is a development of commonsense realism (or 'naive realism' as some would have it), and the relation between Scientific Realism, commonsense realism, and the real world is a kind of parallel to the relation that exists between science, technology, and the real world. The rest is just words, some of which have some sort of correspondence to the real world as described by the natural sciences, and some of which do not. Perhaps I should make it clear that amongst those working in the sciences it is recognized that what constitutes an established or mature science is, amongst other things, that there should be agreement amongst its practitioners as to what are its basic concepts, and also the general way research should be carried on. Disciplines such as biochemistry and astronomy meet these requirements, whilst others such as sociology do not. Linguistics and psychology are in a marginal state, but making some progress towards maturity. One of the essential and characteristic features of the way the natural sciences approach the world is through thinking and reasoning in terms of strict causal relationships, and indeed this is the source of our present and increasing power to control the natural world, and also of the benefits enjoyed *by everyone* to some degree in the industrialized world. All our technology, including the components of the cinema, could not exist without the kind of rational, causal thinking central to the real sciences, and even the economic and other organization of all countries East and West is attempted using the same principles. Procedures based on other kinds of subjective, semi-arbitrary, irrational, associational, relativistic, or magical thinking have no power to produce results with any certainty, and if everyone restricted themselves to such thinking the average person would have to live a short and unpleasant life in a mediaeval hut. Before the advent of science and technology the average person had the benefit of stuffy, dark, cramped dwellings, butcher-type surgery, and a very good chance of dying in an epidemic or famine, and this is the alternative that a specially favored minority of the population in the very richest parts of the world has managed to forget or never learn about.

The other essential component of real science is the continual interaction between theory on the one hand, and experiment and observation on the other, and this too is necessary for the useful application of the products of science. It is because of the features I have just mentioned that the natural sciences present the paradigm of objective knowledge, and because they are the same everywhere - in Russia and China, Britain and America - they demonstrate that objective knowledge is possible, whatever some ill-informed literary intellectuals may happen to believe. For the unfortunate truth is that many people have great difficulty in thinking rationally, logically, and causally, and are limited to purely verbal manipulations. They tend to conceive of the world as being totally describable by words only, and to think of words as the labels over discrete pigeonholes into which everything in the world fits. But just as there are not three distinct categories of

heights of people corresponding to the words we use to describe them - tall, short, and average - but a distribution of heights over a continuous range for the population, so many other phenomena exist in a fairly continuous range that defies exact description by words alone, however precisely defined. Just so with objectivity: it is not an absolute quality, but something one can have more or less of, and the way to get as much objectivity as possible is by adopting the general attitude to their subjects (not necessarily copying any particular methods) that workers in the natural sciences take. As I said before, this entails the critical use of rational and logical thinking in inspecting one's theories, and also the careful comparison of those theories with the real world. I have purposefully put these essential characteristics of real science in a form sufficiently general to accommodate all the major attitudes in the philosophy of science that are acceptable to actual scientists as being in accord with their practice: for instance those of Kuhn, Lakatos, and Popper. The importance of these requirements for real science is that they are what ensure that it will 'work', and that we can be as sure as possible of its results. A large proportion of the psychologists, linguists, and anthropologists in the English-speaking world, and even some of the sociologists, wish their disciplines to meet these requirements. But there are people without exception uneducated and inexperienced in the real sciences, who desire to attach the name of science to what they call the 'human sciences', which apparently include no more than Marxism, psychoanalysis, and perhaps the French schools of linguistics and structural anthropology. Their motives for doing this are not clear, but it is natural to conjecture that they desire to appropriate some of the prestige and trust that are attached to the real sciences, even though their activities lack the precise characteristics that have given rise to that prestige and trust.

So there has recently arisen the remarkable phenomenon of what is claimed to be a scientific theory of film created by people calling themselves theorists, who yet know very little, and apparently have no interest in learning, about what the films that exist are actually like, as I shall show in subsequent chapters. I call this a remarkable phenomenon because it is only fairly recently, after several hundred years of its existence, that just one of the established sciences, namely physics, has reached the point of having quite separate groups of theoreticians and experimentalists, who nevertheless continuously depend on each others' work. On the other hand, in biology, despite its vast achievements in this century, there is still little real separation into experimental and theoretical branches. So the idea that a few people can, by sitting in a chair and spinning a web of words, create a 'science' of film can only seem grotesque to anyone with any close acquaintance with the real sciences.

There are other subsidiary features of these unfortunate attitudes that need commenting on here, the most serious of which is the belief that it is only necessary to cite one feature of one or two films to support vast generalizations about the nature of all films, without bothering to note that there may be hundreds of films that contradict those generalizations. Such procedures have always been endemic in writing about the arts, but never before has a claim to 'scientific truth' been made on that basis. Again, I shall give examples in succeeding chapters.

Although it is not necessary for the acceptance of what I have to say in this book, I will add that in its entirety my philosophical position goes beyond Scientific Realism to the most tough-minded form of Physicalism, which is the most recent and sophisticated variety of philosophical materialism. I mention this to point out to Marxist film 'theorists' who always coyly use 'materialism' as a euphemism for Marxism that there are forms of materialism prior and subsequent to the historical and dialectical variety.

Many people whose behavior shows that they accept the truth of scientific realism, in that they expect that transistor radios will produce sound (rather than say paint the room

blue), or that modern drugs will cure their ills, and so on, indulge in a form of ‘double-think’ in coming to irrational and arbitrary conclusions in less essential areas of their lives, and refuse to recognize that it is possible to arrive at sounder knowledge. To do this one only needs enough theory to do the job in hand: in this particular case to produce new information about film style and its determinants that is not only true now, but will always be true to the greatest possible extent. This extent is limited by the essential uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of individual art objects, in our case, films; and of course that idiosyncrasy and uniqueness is what makes some films art rather than craft. It is in the nature of artists to defeat the expectations of everyone about what they are going to do next, as I, and I think other interested observers, found out during the last three decades. Around 1960, having reached the minimal extremes of abstract painting, there seemed to be nowhere left for artists to go, but then there was Pop Art. And several years later the same kind of impasse looked as though it might have been reached, but Conceptual Art was in the egg. And who could have anticipated New Image painting twenty years ago?

So the study of film can never completely be a real science, although it can use the scientific approach in the general sense described earlier. In fact this is largely what has been done in Art History as it has successfully developed in this century, and this should provide the model for the development of Film History. (When I speak of Art History, I mean Art History proper, and not the occasionally entertaining but always dubious business that is variously called ‘cultural history’ or ‘culture critique’.) Some younger workers are proceeding in the sound direction of Film History, but this development has been impeded by the attitude that a correct total theory explaining everything about films is necessary to do any valid research.”

\*Salt, Barry:  
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p 1 - 3