"Practical Aesthetics in Critical Studies"[1]
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Last year at the UFVA conference there was a wonderful panel on "The CILECT Theory for Practice Project," during which CILECT member Igor Korsic's feelings about much of contemporary film theory were summarized, to wit: it suffers from theoretical snobbery, critical and aesthetic narrowness, and ideological bias. In short, wrote Korsic, "film theory stifles film practice."

Actually, I'm not so sure that the theories themselves have stifled film-<u>practitioners</u> as much as they stifled film <u>scholars</u>, who over the past twenty-some years essentially had to toe the psychoanalytic and Marxist Party line in order to be taken seriously as academics, get teaching jobs, or get published. But Korsic's basic point – with which I heartily agree – is that the lion's share of these theories are not only problematic as theoretical arguments, but also make no sense in a production context. That is, they contribute almost nothing to an aspiring young filmmaker's understanding of the motion picture medium from a practical, let alone an artistic, point of view.

Since the question we're all addressing in some fashion or other on this panel is how or what film theory to teach to our production students, I'd like to talk about some of what I use in my critical studies classes at the North Carolina School of the Arts, School of Filmmaking.

One course I teach is entitled "Comparative Directors: Polanski and Lynch." Naturally this sounds fairly *auteur*-ist in approach, but by the time my students take this class, they've already had another course with me in which we've discussed the history of *auteur* criticism, its pros and cons, as well as another way to think of the role of the director (akin to that of an orchestra conductor who guides the creative contributions of many other artists), so in the Polanski-Lynch class we're already operating on that assumption, and can move quickly on to some other ideas.

For example, a number of Polanski's and Lynch's films can well be understood through the lens of the surrealist aesthetic, so on the first day of class I show them *Un Chien Andalou*, to remind them of the defining characteristics of surrealism: its celebration of *l'amour fou*, its iconoclasm, parodic tone, oneiric structure, its reliance upon Freudian dream theory and symbolism, the oft-repeated motif of doubled or split-selves, etc. I have my students read the first fifteen pages or so of André Breton's 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto*, and we discuss his definition of surrealism as the merger of the dream-world (what Breton would call "the marvelous" and "the fantastic") with the waking world (which he calls "the mundane"). Then I screen Lynch's *Lost Highway*, and afterwards we analyze how this narratively complex film appeals both thematically and formally to the surrealist tradition.

Over the next few weeks of the term, I assign readings from various theorist-practitioners, such as Jean Epstein, Slavko Vorkapich, and Andrei Tarkovsky – essentialists all. So I point out the two overlapping aspects of essentialist rhetoric: its <u>de</u>scriptive and <u>pre</u>scriptive character, and (with a nod to Noël Carroll) explain the logical flaws of essentialist theory. But then I also emphasize its very positive value: these theorists and their theories provide us with thoroughly imaginative insights about the film-medium, as well as creative metaphors and descriptive terms that are wonderfully useful for both the film critic <u>and</u> filmmaker.

For instance, Epstein's notion of *photogénie* and Vorkapich's term "kinesthesia" deal with, among other things, the beauty of captured movement and of space-time manipulations both photographic and editorial. For Vorkapich, cinema is the art of organizing movements in order to affect an audience on a sensorial (that is, kinesthetic) level. Epstein writes similarly about the visual and emotional power of the cinema, but he also discusses the creative possibilities of sound: in the late 1940s he coined the term "sonic slow-motion" to describe sound effects recorded at, say, four-times normal speed, which, when played back at regular sound speed, reveal otherwise imperceptible audio components.

Epstein's ideas about the possibilities of experimentation in sound, and both his and Vorkapich's descriptions of the beauty of cinematic movement provide my students with a number of ways to look at and discuss the creative visual and sound-design work in Lynch's and Polanski's films. They furthermore begin to recognize aspects of *photogénie* as well as kinesthesia not only in other films, but also in contemporary television commercials and music

videos that rely upon the rapid montage of moments of movement: the magnified blink of an eye, the turn of a head, even the smallest gesture, a billowing curtain, leaves falling in autumn….

Rhythm conveyed through movement, either within or between shots, is of primary concern too for Andrei Tarkovsky. For him, shaping the recorded flow of movement is the very job of the filmmaker – a task to which he ascribes the poetic phrase "sculpting in time." I assign readings from Tarkovsky's book of the same name – excerpts on the subjects of time, rhythm, editing, music, and sound effects. Tarkovsky's aesthetic tends to emphasize the photographic over the editorial aspects of film production – a fact that delights my cinematographers but of course somewhat annoys my editing students. But I point to places in the Tarkovsky readings where he clearly states that rhythmic design is achieved through the careful combination of recorded <u>and</u> edited movement, <u>and</u> that it is in finding the right arrangement of sequences that brings a film to life. It is not editing *per se* but rather Sergei Eisenstein's conception of it with which Tarkovsky explicitly takes issue.

At this point we'll review a number of the Soviet montage theories – of Eisenstein, Kuleshov, and Vertov – and contrast their concepts with Tarkovsky's. Regardless of their different terminology, the earlier Soviets all articulate how meaning is derived through context, whereas Tarkovsky would emphatically insist upon meaning emerging from the image <u>itself</u>, first through how it connects to the material world it represents, and then through whatever further connections the viewer brings to it. My students may initially be frustrated by what seems like an insuperable conflict of opinion, because in their experience as filmmakers, they recognize that <u>both</u> perspectives on the subject of meaning are true. I agree with them, and tell them that what we have here is simply two different aesthetics: one of montage and the other of the long take, each one emphasized quite preferentially by their theorists, but each one a legitimate approach to film-form depending upon what effect the filmmaker wants to achieve.

In addition to the theorist-practitioners, I go over some genre theory, which I take and tweak from various sources. Louis Giannetti, for example, discusses genre in terms of "cycles." I like his labels – classical, parodic, and revisionist – and use his definitions, but I prefer the term "genre <u>modes</u>," over "genre cycles," because the word "mode" better indicates what the terms "classical," "parodic," and "revisionist" <u>are</u>: that is, attitudes and approaches towards the chosen story or subject matter at hand.

We talk about why someone might write a genre film or engage in genre analysis, what kinds of connections genre films make (historical and cultural, for example, or intertextual ones through allusion or parody). And we discuss how certain genres are useful for treating certain story ideas, say, the western for the subject of manifest destiny, or science fiction for cautionary tales about technology.

Stuart Voytilla's book entitled *Myth and the Movies* is particularly good for genre analysis, so in my Polanski-Lynch class I assign readings from his sections on both horror and the thriller. Voytilla describes well the key issues addressed in these genres: horror often deals with our sense of powerlessness, dehumanization, or our primal fears of the unknown or death; the thriller presents an ordinary person in extra-ordinary circumstances, is about tapping into one's inner strength and courage, and rising to the challenge, or perhaps succumbing to temptation. Of course genre categories can and often do overlap, and so we screen and discuss, for instance, the ways in which *Rosemary's Baby* appeals to the conventions of both the horror and thriller genres.

The last perspective I bring in is that of screenwriting instructor and story editor Michael Hauge, whose words of wisdom regarding character development provide my students with another tool for story analysis, whether they're looking at someone else's film or thinking about their own. Hauge identifies outer and inner motivations (that is, what the main characters want and why), and outer and inner conflicts (what obstacles stand in their way) as character elements that a writer must explore in order for a drama or comedy to work well. In my Polanski-Lynch class, we analyze *The Elephant Man* very productively along these lines.

At mid-term I give my students an in-class essay exam to make sure they've kept up with the readings and to test their comprehension of the theories we've discussed. Then their final assignment is a short term-paper, for which they are required to select a film by either Polanski or Lynch (not limited to those we've watched in class), then choose at least one of the aesthetic or theoretic paradigms we've discussed over the term, and use it as a "lens" through which to look at and analyze the film's formal style, its approach to the narrative subject matter, thematic meaning, and/or emotional tone.

In the end, my dual purpose and my hope is that my filmmaking students come away with a variety of aesthetic terms through which they can speak articulately and critically about existing films, and through which they may be able to think creatively about their own productions.