FILM THEORY- From John Hopkins Guide To Literary Theory and Criticism

Because of the relative newness of the film medium compared with other art forms--Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope peephole machines were first open to the public in New York City only in 1894, and the Lumière brothers first projected their short *actualités* to a paying audience in a cafe in Paris in 1895--film theory and criticism are dependent on a limited number of major texts, and the lines of their discourse can easily be traced up to the point when Structuralism and poststructuralism had their profound effect on cultural history in general. From that point on, especially with the expansion of film departments and faculties at institutions of higher learning, film theory and criticism proliferated at a rapid rate, and film journals became as much a place for heated debate on the issues of art and aesthetics as the learned journals were for essays on literature. Much of the discourse on cinema from the start is concerned with fictional narrative films, an emphasis that parallels the vast popularity of such works compared with the more limited and specialized appeal of the documentary and avant-garde film.

For the first 20 years of motion pictures, film writing was largely descriptive and sometimes evaluative, but with the rise of the feature film, theory took its first pronounced steps with the appearance of two pioneer texts in English, Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture* in 1915 (rev. ed., 1922) and Hugo Münsterberg's *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* in 1916. Both of these works, the first by a poet and the second by a psychologist, consider this new medium in the context of other art forms. But whereas Lindsay is content to draw parallels between film and such other arts as architecture, sculpture, and poetry, Münsterberg goes much further in arguing for the unique properties of cinema by focusing in the first part of his work on the psychological responses of the viewer and in the second on the aesthetic properties of film as a mental creation. For him, film, by being freed from the constraints of real time and space as well as causality, is capable of being constructed with the free play of the viewer's mental life.

In relating the world depicted on the screen to the actual world and in demonstrating film's capacity to reformulate time and space to create the mental process of the imagination, Münsterberg was implicitly introducing a critical issue that would be the focus of much of the theoretical discussion of cinema for the next 40 years, namely, the tension between realism and formalism. The relationship between reality and film art was certainly a major issue in the eruption of criticism that began in France about the same time, often touching upon theoretical issues. Heralded in his own country as the creator of French film criticism and eventually to become a leading force among the "impressionist" filmmakers, Louis Delluc, whose various writings from journals and newspapers were published in two collections, *Cinéma et cie* in 1919 and *Photogénie* in 1920, used the term *photogénie* to suggest film's capacity to present the real world as something newly seen, to depict the beauty of reality and make us comprehend the things of our world. Much in sympathy with these views was Riccioto Canudo, the Italian-born French critic whose writings were collected in *L'Usine aux images* in 1926 and who argued that cinema must go beyond realism and imagistically express the filmmaker's emotions as well as characters' psychology and even their unconscious. Jean Epstein, also on the verge of becoming a major "impressionist" filmmaker, published in 1921 *Bonjour cinéma,* in which he claimed that cinema abstracts, generalizes, and presents an idea of a form, while the viewer's eyes distill and perceive an idea of the idea of the form that is on

the screen. (See Abel for essays by Delluc, Canudo, and Epstein.)

Most of these early theoreticians show a clear predilection toward the formalist possibilities of cinema, and certainly formalism is the underpinning of the montage theory expounded by the great Russian filmmakers starting in the 1920s. In the midst of a busy filmmaking career, Lev Kuleshov began to publish essays in 1917 and books in 1929 outlining his theory of montage, which had received its impetus from the practice of American filmmakers, especially D. W. Griffith. The term "Kuleshov effect" has passed into cinematic language to describe what for Kuleshov was the inherent magic of the film medium itself, the creation of meaning, significance, and emotional impact by relating and juxtaposing individual shots, resulting in a context that was not inherent in any of the single pieces of film but was a product of the editing itself. His pupil V. I. Pudovkin began writing the two manuals that together were to become the book *Film Technique* when he was working on his motion picture *Mother* in 1926. In this book he explores his own variation of montage, what Sergei Eisenstein referred to as "linkage," in which shots are unobtrusively linked together so that they continuously and naturally flow along with the film's narrative line, but he also pushes theoretical discourse further with his discussion of filmic space and time, dimensions created by the editing process itself and distinct from any space and time known in external reality.

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

The formalist bent in early film theory was clearly a product of the silent film: cinema was divorced from the real world by the lack of natural sound (the typical musical accompaniment actually widened the gulf), and most of the artistic emphasis was on the *mise en scène.* It was for this reason that Rudolf Arnheim could argue in his book published in Germany in 1933 as *Film as Art* (the same title was used for a collection of his writings published in English in 1957 that included part of the original work) that the new dimension of sound was the death toll of film as an art form. Arnheim, a Gestalt psychologist and art critic, sees the very unreality of cinema as its greatest asset and the plasticity of its image as its major claim to art. In the Hungarian-born Béla Balázs's *Theory of the Film* (first published in the Soviet Union in 1945 as *The Art of Cinema*), however, we find ourselves at a transitional point where film is celebrated as both formalistic and realistic. Balázs may argue that technique must shape the raw material of nature into art, but at the same time he stresses that the filmmaker must never take us away from the natural and that a technique such as the closeup, so brilliantly employed in silent film, has the capacity to reveal to us what happens beneath appearances.

In the essays of André Bazin written in France in the late 1940s and the 1950s (published as *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma* in four volumes from 1958 to 1965 and in English as *What Is Cinema?* in two volumes in 1967 and 1971), we have an impressive blend of realist criticism and theory. Bazin found Kuleshov's and Eisenstein's emphasis on montage antithetical to the realistic possibilities of cinema, creating instead an illusory reality that is a product of the interaction of shots and not a reflection of the world photographed. He praised the American directors Orson Welles and William Wyler for emphasizing the individual image itself and what each reveals of reality (not the relationship of images), an emphasis largely absent in cinema since the silent films of Erich Von Stroheim and F. W. Murnau. Through the techniques of deep focus and the long take, Welles and Wyler present space and time as continuous and whole, as they appear in external reality, so that viewers are forced to immerse themselves in the image and select for themselves what to see. One of the founders of the important French film journal *Cahiers du cinéma,* Bazin influenced the criticism of such figures as François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, and Jacques Rivette, who wrote for the journal. His emphasis on the individual image, his analysis of the single motion picture in the context of film genre, and his appreciation of the personal and the unique in the achievement of each film artist also had an impact on the new-wave films the five critics went on to direct. But it is basically Bazin's shrewd and perceptive appreciation of film, his ability to respond to the nuances of each work, his discerning eye for style and form, and his telling use of details and techniques as the source for his concepts that have survived as a model for future writers of film criticism.

Along with Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer must be recognized as one of the two major advocates of realist cinema. The title of his major theoretical text, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960), indicates the direction of his argument: the fictional films that most fulfill the potential of the filmic medium are those that least distort or remove the audience from the world as we know it, but those films also have the capacity to make us rediscover the real world, to expand our vision of it. The philosopher Stanley Cavell has also written on cinematic realism, in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971, rev. ed., 1979). Cavell describes film as satisfying our desire to see the world unseen but, at the same time, as presenting a world that seems more natural than reality because, already drawn from fantasy, it relieves us from private fantasy and its responsibilities and also because, though not a dream, it awakens us from withdrawing into our longings deeper inside of us. Jean Mitry's two-volume *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (1963-65) is an impressive and scholarly work that seeks to reconcile the formalist and realist camps by recognizing that the images of film are composed of analogues of people, places, and objects that exist in the real world but that the art of film orders this world, imposes on it significance and meaning. In this sense Mitry bases his theory on the simple phenomenological truth that reality is known only through the perceiving mind: what we ourselves perceive on the screen is always the product of the filmmaker's own perceptions of reality, and the filmmaker's perceptions are conveyed through such techniques of cinema as montage.

The auteur school of criticism--suggested by François Truffaut in his essay "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema," which appeared in *Cahiers du cinéma* in January 1954 (trans. in Nichols, vol. 2); given substance by him and the other critics mentioned above who wrote for *Cahiers;* and popularized in English by Andrew Sarris in

his essay "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" (1962-63, in Mast, Cohen, and Braudy)--had great importance for a period of time. This critical approach gave major significance to the director, whose personal vision and style were now seen as the controlling force in a film, even a film made in Hollywood within the obstacles of the studio system. Auteur criticism sought to give to the director the same legitimacy as that given to the author of a novel, and to the film the same legitimacy as that given to literature itself. Indeed, it is mainly through auteur criticism that literary criticism and film criticism merge.

On the other hand, genre theory and criticism, which made considerable strides during the same period of time, sought to recognize and legitimate the very popular nature of film, especially as a product of the Hollywood studio system, and to identify and explain what was similar in a group of works from director to director. Although individual directors might be cited for their abilities in certain genres or for their innovations or personal stamp within the tradition, much genre theory and criticism was based on the connection between these works and their audiences and sought to explain the social and cultural needs of the viewer. Genre theory and criticism was itself the most profitable location for adopting the new emphasis on structuralism, which was having such a profound effect on cultural criticism during the late 1960s and the 1970s-Hollywood offered a large number of similar films with repeatable elements in each genre, which made these works the inevitable source for studies in cine-structuralism. The binary oppositions and structures explored in these studies may seem to be too superficial to suggest the deep structures that Claude Lévi-Strauss had propounded in myths from "primitive" cultures or in his treatment of the Oedipus myth, but a work such as Jim Kitses's *Horizons West* (1969) is able to establish a basic structural and thematic dialectic in the Western and also to show the individual contributions of specific directors within this context. Peter Wollen's discussions of Howard Hawks and John Ford in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969, rev. ed., 1972) also uses genre in its auteur-structuralist approach to develop thematic structures and tensions in the films of these two directors.

Lévi-Strauss's discussion of Ferdinand de Saussure's Semiotics left a great imprint on film theory and set off a train of argument that itself was to stay relevant even in the period of poststructuralism. The most important early work in this context was Christian Metz's *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema* (published in France as the first volume of *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* in 1968 and in English in 1974). Metz's major concern is to demonstrate the way films signify meaning through semiotic codes, especially *specialized* codes unique to the cinema, such as the eight arrangements of shots possible in a narrative sequence, which he outlines as the "grande syntagmatique." Such a code may seem compelling theoretically, but in actuality it had little applicability or function in relation to specific films.

It was the "second semiotics," a term employed for a series of theoretical texts based upon a combination of semiotics, Althusserian Marxism, and Lacanian post-Freudianism, that was to be the dominant theoretical discourse for almost two decades (see Marxist Theory and Criticism: 2. Structuralist Marxism and Jacques Lacan). We are discussing here a filmic discourse that received considerable impetus from the politicization of theory and criticism from the late 1960s on in the French journals *Cinéthique* and *Cahiers du cinéma* and in the British publication *Screen*. This filmic discourse eventually became a strong force among a group of film teachers at American

universities and in the professional journals for which they wrote. The impulse of the second semiotics was to identify and then deconstruct the ideological structures and codes of capitalistic society evident or, more often, implied in commercial narrative cinema and to tie this ideological focus in with Lacanian psychoanalytical theory about the child's early developmental stages, especially the mirror stage, to which we regress on some level when viewing the images on the screen--recreated within us in the imaginary, a feeling of oneness and self first developed in us when we viewed our reflections in a mirror during early childhood, but now actually shaped by the film's ideology. Jean-Louis Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus" (1970) was the first of his several essays on the subject that were to influence Metz's further development and popularization of these ideas in the four texts he wrote between 1973 and 1976, published together as *The Imaginary Signifier* (1977, trans., 1982). Lacan's concept of *suture,* earlier introduced to film theory in Jean-Pierre Oudart's essay "La suture," which appeared in *Cahiers du cinéma* (1969) and in English in *Screen* (trans. Kari Hamet, 1977-78), was to become the source of much debate on the recreation of the imaginary and subject positioning, on the way we impose unity on such techniques of narrative film as point-of-view editing, match cutting, and eye-line matching, and on the way such techniques impose unity upon us. Two 1981 books, both collections of related essays that present a provocative synthesis of ideology, psychoanalysis, and film technique, are Stephen Heath's *Questions of Cinema* and Bill Nichols's *Ideology and the Image.* Mention should also be made of Peter Brunette and David Wills's *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory,* published in 1989, one of the few attempts to apply to film the ideas of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida that already had played such a major role in literary theory.

Feminist film theory and criticism has also been a vigorous and influential school, one that has had a great impact on the teaching of film. Early texts in this area offer a straightforward critical approach in which the various stereotypes of women in film are traced and analyzed as products of a patriarchal society and culture, but feminist criticism has also become very much involved with the Althusserian, Lacanian, and semiotic approaches of poststructuralist film theory in its attempt to understand sexual differentiation within the narrative and textual codes of the film as well as within the viewing process itself. An important initial step in this feminist dialogue was made by Pam Cook and Claire Johnston in the mid-1970s with a series of essays for the Edinburgh Film Festival and the British Film Institute (see especially their essays on Raoul Walsh and Dorothy Arzner published in Penley). Cook and Johnston argue for the importance of analyzing classic Hollywood films from a theoretical perspective to understand the role of women and women's desire in these films. Within the Hollywood film, these critics sought to find ruptures, places where repressed female desire erupts and disturbs the patriarchal text.

Laura Mulvey's important essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) described the image of woman in the Hollywood cinema as the passive object for the active male gaze. But the pleasure of the male gaze is threatened by the woman's representation as a signifier of castration. Mulvey describes two unconscious responses of the male to alleviate his fear of castration, the first a process of sadistic voyeurism, which denigrates the woman, and the second a process of "fetishistic scopophilia," which overvalues the woman's physical appearance. In response to this focus on male pleasure

and desire, Mulvey herself in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*" (1981), Kaja Silverman in "Dis-Embodying the Female Voice" (1984), and Mary Ann Doane in "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator" (1985) all consider, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the pressures and problems brought upon the female viewer by films structured for the male gaze and forbidding any positive identification with the female characters.

For Gaylin Studlar, however, sexual differentiation and patriarchy need not play a role in spectatorship, nor need the viewing experience be limited to Oedipal responses. Basing the theoretical argument of her book *In The Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* on *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty* (Gilles Deleuze's study of the novels of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch), Studlar seeks to demonstrate, through the Von Sternberg-Dietrich films, a masochistic aesthetic that arises from the woman in the film creating visual pleasure in both male and female viewers by eliciting their unconscious identification with and desire for the pre-Oedipal mother of the child's oral stage. The cinema apparatus's suggestion of the dream screen, the representation of the maternal breast, evokes within the viewer archaic visual pleasures.

In the early 1990s, film theory and criticism seem to be at an impasse. A number of recent essays and books, notably Noël Carroll's *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* and David Bordwell's *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema,* have argued that much of post-1970 criticism and theory has taken us further and further away from understanding film and the viewer's actual response to the images on the screen. Common criticisms of contemporary film theory argue that Lacanian post-Freudianism is ultimately itself an unprovable abstraction applicable to cinema only as a seemingly remote analogy and that Althusser's ideology has made theory and criticism into social and political tracts.

One response to the psychoanalytic-Marxist approach has been a greater emphasis on film form and technique. What is striking about this response is its reliance on literary concepts and its examination of what takes place on the screen in the context of the viewer's reactions--the creation of a type of film Narratology that includes an important dose of viewer-response analysis. Edward Branigan's *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (1984) often uses the vocabulary and concepts of literary narratology to discuss filmic narrative texts but does so to achieve a detailed analysis of the ways film techniques create various types of subjectivity on the screen and subjective responses in the viewer. Branigan's mentor, David Bordwell, published in 1985 *Narration in the Fiction Film,* in which he develops a narrative theory that takes into account the spectator's perception and cognition. In addition to employing a constructivist theory of psychology, Bordwell leans heavily on the literary theory of the Russian Formalists, especially their notions *sjuzet* and *fabula.* In *Flashback in Film: Memory and History* (1989), Maureen Turim uses Gérard Genette's and Roland Barthes's structuralist and semiotic approaches to narrative textuality as the underpinning for her own theory of the flashback in film. She also refers to Derridean Deconstruction as a context for her discussion.

Although the recent emphasis on film history is also part of a retreat from past theory, such works themselves may employ theory, such as, for example, *The Classic Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960,* by David

Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. Published in 1985, this impressive and detailed study of four decades of Hollywood films is not averse to using genre theory and narratological concepts, especially those from the Russian Formalists. Historical changes and developments, however, ought themselves to be a consideration in film theory, as they are in Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image,* which use the writings of Henri Bergson and Charles Sanders Peirce as springboards for a theoretical and philosophical study of the dominance of the movement-image in classical cinema and that of the time-image in cinema after World War II. It is still too early to know the impact these complex and richly documented volumes, published in French in 1983 and 1985 and in English in 1986 and 1989, respectively, will have on future film studies.

It is also impossible during this period of reconsideration to guess the future course of film theory and criticism in general. Psychological analysis of what takes place on the screen and in the audience both as individuals and as a group still seems a profitable way to proceed, but it needs to be cognizant of the insights of feminist writings and should not rely only on the works of Freud and Lacan, and social and cultural coding remains an important issue, especially if shorn of polemics and preconceptions. Theorists and critics still have much to say on the nature of filmic representation and film as art by further examining film form, technique, and style, but they must get beyond the terminology and concepts of literary narratology. The interface of technology and art in the cinema, which has only begun to be explored, offers the possibility of theoretical ramifications that could change our way of thinking about film both as a medium and as a cultural and social phenomenon. Through such investigations, we may come closer to understanding the unique properties of film and the medium's impact on viewers and to achieving the language for cinematic discourse that theoreticians and critics began to search for three-quarters of a century ago.

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