

Chapter 5

Film Theory

Objectives: The chapter aims at providing an overview of the key film theories and debates over the past few decades.

Key words: auteur, semiotics, ideology, feminism, postmodernism, queer theory

Background

Some of the earliest examples of film theory are the poet Vachel Lindsay's *Art of the Moving Picture* in 1915 and Hugo Munsterberg's *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* in 1916. Both these works, (the latter which is by a psychologist) consider this new medium in the context of other art forms. While Lindsay draws parallels between film and arts as architecture, sculpture, and poetry, Munsterberg argues for the unique properties of the cinema by focusing on the psychological responses of the viewer and on the aesthetic properties of the film.

French critic Louis Delluc's (1890-1924) writings from journals and newspapers were published in two collections, *Cinema et cie* in 1919 and *Photogenie* in 1920. Delluc introduced the term *photogenie* 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. Around the same time, Jean Epstein published *Bonjour cinema* (1921), where he observed that cinema generalizes and presents an *idea of the idea* of the form that is on the screen.

Auteur theory

A much debated one, auteur theory is useful to understand the works of selected directors. Alexandre Astruc's essay "La Camera-Stylo" ("The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo," 1968, published in *Ecran Francaise*, 1948) popularised the idea of auteurism.

French critic Andre Bazin's collection of essays, *What Is Cinema?* (vol I and II in 1967 and 1971) focus on realist criticism and theory. For Bazin, Kuleshov's and Eisenstein's emphasis on montage is opposed to the realistic possibilities of cinema. Bazin lauds directors such as Orson Welles and William Wyler (refer to the chapters on "Orson Welles" and "Golden Years of Hollywood" for more on them) for the way images were used to convey reality, unlike the expressionistic films of Von Stroheim and Murnau.

Siegfried Kracauer advocated realist cinema, and in *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960), talked about those films that least distort or remove the audience from the “real” world. The philosopher Stanley Cavell has also written on cinematic realism, in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971). Jean Mitry’s *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (1963- 65) is a scholarly work that combines the formalist and realist traditions.

Andrew Sarris took the auteur theory to America. In the Hollywood context, an auteur is a director who transcends the script by imposing on it his own style and vision, or his signature style. In other words, a film involves subjective and personalized film-making. For a French auteur film, there was no pre-existing story. What was important were the spontaneous events that took place in front of the camera.

Semiotics

Peter Wollen’s discussions of Howard Hawks and John Ford in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969) also uses genre in auteur-structuralist approach to analyze thematic structures in the films of these two directors. One of the most important early work in theorizing film studies using the structuralist approach was Christian Metz’s *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema* (1968). Metz illustrated the way films signify meaning through semiotic codes through specific arrangements of shots possible in a narrative sequence. Christian Metz followed Jean Louis Baudry’s model for his semiotic-psychoanalytic approach to cinema in a succession of essays written between 1973 and 1976 published together as *Le Signifiant imaginaire* (1977, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 1982).

In 1969 Jean-Pierre Oudart introduced an important term into film theory, suture, which became a topic of extensive debate for the ways in which subjectivity is expressed in cinema. Daniel Dayan’s exploration of Oudart’s position in 1974, William Rothman’s critique of that position in 1975, as well as Stephen Heath’s explication of the concept in *Questions of Cinema* (1981) and Kaja Silverman’s analysis in *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983) further added to the topic. Semiotics as a cinematic theory received attention from the politicization of theory and criticism from the late 1960s on in the French journals *Cinématique* and *Cahiers du cinéma* and in the British publication *Screen*.

Ideology

1968 also witnessed the politicization of film studies that took place as a result of widespread student and union protests in France. The critics of *Cahiers du cinéma* shifted their emphasis on auteurism and began a rereading of cinema in ideological terms, a shift made perceptible with the publication of Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni’s “Cinema/Ideologie/Critique” (1969, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism”). Comolli and Narboni categorized films according to the degree which they conformed to or criticized dominant ideology, and this is reflected by the well-known *Cahiers* article on *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1969).

Louis Althusser summarizes Marx's notion of ideology by contrasting it with 'the concrete history of concrete material individuals'. Ideology, he claimed instead, was a 'pure dream', it is 'empty and vain' and 'an imaginary assemblage'. In his essay entitled 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1969), Althusser seeks to describe ways in which the state exerts its power outside such institutions as the army, the courts, the police, etc. – that is to say, in culture and society generally. The central insight of this essay is that ideology is bound up with the constitution of the subject, that 'man is an ideological animal by nature' – meaning that people constitute or define themselves *as humans* through ideology.

A major French film journal, *Cinethique*, formed in 1969, adapted a more radical Marxist perspective and abandoned the study of narrative cinema altogether, while endorsing more marginal cinemas such as documentary and avant-garde. The UK based *Screen* magazine also followed this trend and foregrounded ideological discussion and debate. Lacan's mirror stage became a much-discussed subject in film studies. In a 1970 essay in *Cinethique*, "Effets ideologiques de l'appareil de base" (translated in *Film Quarterly* 1974-75 as "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus"), Jean-Louis Baudry developed the mirror analogy as a way of rethinking perspective in cinema and its ideological implications.

Feminist film theory

Feminist film theory and criticism has had a great impact on the teaching of the film. Early texts in this area offer a critical approach in which the various stereotypes of women in film are traced and analyzed as products of patriarchal society and culture. Feminist criticism has also become very much involved with the Althusserian, Lacanian, and semiotic approaches of post-structuralist film theory in its attempt to understand sexual differentiation within the narrative and textual codes of the film.

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), first published in *Screen*, Mulvey addressed the way in which cinema mobilizes primary processes that reflect the gendered nature of narrative and point of view. She asserts that "the unconscious of patriarchy has structured film form" in such a way that narcissistic identification coheres around by his (the viewer's) capacity to look (as a voyeur), whereas the female is defined in terms of her capacity to attract the male gaze (as an exhibitionist). While the active/passive and male/female spectatorship, this essay became the catalyst for the most substantial changes to psychoanalytic film theory from both those in favour of and those who rejected the application of psychoanalysis to cinema. Mulvey later revised her original argument in "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*" (1981), though the limitation of her attempt to theorize female spectatorship appeared to lead to a theoretical impasse.

Laura Mulvey's work was taken ahead by Teresa de Laureti's *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984) and *Technologies of Gender* (1987), where Tania Modelski analyses Hitchcock's work in *The Women Who Knew Too Much* (1988), Constance Penley's *The Future of an Illusion* (1989), Ann Kaplan's *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1990), along with an issue of the American film journal *Camera Obscura* devoted to "The Spectatrix" (1989). Drawing on Mulvey's feminist conceptual framework, film studies also take into account theories of masculinity. Steven Neale's essay, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema" (first published in *Screen* in 1983), was followed by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark's *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (1993), Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin's *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies, and Men* (1993), and Peter Lehman's *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body* (1993).

The interest in Hollywood male stars and spectatorship is continued in Susan Jefford's *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (1997). Chris Holmlund's influential *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies* (2002) combines discussions on both feminist and masculinity theories.

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.

David Bordwell, in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985), develops a narrative theory that takes into account the spectator's perception. Bordwell veers towards the literary theory of formalism, especially the notions of *sujet* and *fabula*.

The Classic Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960, by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson (1985) uses genre theory and narratological concepts, especially those from the Russian Formalists. Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema I: L'Image-mouvement* (1983, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, 1986) and *Cinema 2: L'Image-temps* (1985, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 1989), use the writings of Henri Bergson and C.S. Peirce to establish a theoretical and philosophical study of the dominance of the movement-image in classical cinema and that of the time-image cinema post World War II.

For the concepts and studies of Postmodernism, the most significant works are Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), the works of Baudrillard, especially his *Simulations* (1983), and Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). The concepts of postmodernism are used in the analyses of several films and in understanding certain features of modern cinema, for instance, Jameson's concept of "pastiche," which is the imitation and accumulation of the filmic codes of the past.

Queer Theory

There is an eminent tradition of queer writing in English, writing by men and women who are more or less permanently, more or less openly, more or less explicitly, queer and writing about queerness. This includes Marlowe, Shakespeare, the debauchee Lord Rochester, the eighteenth-century poet Katherine Philips, Henry Mackenzie (author of the novel of exquisite sensitivity *The Man of Feeling* [1771]), Matthew Lewis (author of the Gothic high-camp novel *The Monk* [1796]), Lord Byron, Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. But the Literary canon from the late nineteenth century onwards is full of authors who are queer, who write about the experience of homosexual desire

By the 70s culture and media studies reassessed representation of queers in cinema. The seminal works are: Parker Tyler's *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1972), Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* (1985), Richard Dyer's *Gays and Film* (1977), Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty (*Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, 1995), and Tamsin Wilton (*Immortal Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image*, 1995).

Postmodernism

It resists the totalizing gesture of a metalanguage, the attempt to describe it as a set of coherent explanatory theories. Rather than trying to explain it in terms of a fixed philosophical position or as a kind of knowledge, we shall instead present a 'postmodern vocabulary' in order to suggest its mobile, fragmented and paradoxical nature.

Simulation

The real and its copy has been a fascinating topic of philosophical discussion. This goes back at least as far as Plato, who argued that painters, actors, dramatists, and so on, all produce representations or 'imitations' of the real world. This idea has given rise to a hierarchical opposition between the real and the copy. And the hierarchy corresponds to that of nature and fabrication, or nature and artifice. Postmodernism challenges such hierarchies and shows how the set of values associated with these oppositions can be questioned. Consider how in *Falling Down* (1993) Michael Douglas makes clear, the photograph of the hamburger in the fats-food restaurant is infinitely superior to the rather sad and surprisingly expensive artifact that (you) have just bought. Even nature, in this postmodern reversal, is subject to improvement. In this context Umberto Eco says, 'technology can give us more reality than nature can' (Eco 1993, 203). Films such as *The Truman Show* (1998) and *The Matrix* (1998) reflect the postmodern concern with the technologies of virtual reality. Another way of thinking about this phenomenon is to use Jean Baudillard's term 'simulation' (or the 'simulacrum').

An increasing interest in film history beginning in the 1980s included film histories by Richard Allen, Douglas Gomery and Rick Altman, apart from works by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. Tom Gunning's work on spectatorship and early cinema originally published in *Wide Angle* ("A Cinema of Attractions," 1986), has had a significant impact on this flourishing field.

Selected readings

1. Andrew, Dudley. *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.
2. Braudy, Leo & Cohen, Marshall (eds). *Film Theory and Criticism*. 5thed. NY& Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
3. Etherington-Wright, Christine & Doughty, Ruth. *Understanding Film Theory*. London: Palgrave, 2011.

Selected websites

- <http://users.aber.ac.uk/dgc/Documents/intgenre>
- <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics>
- <http://www2.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/structuralism.html>