

# The film text: theoretical frameworks

## 6

## Classic film theory and semiotics

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Film theory had to struggle a surprisingly long time before it could become a proper theory of film. Difficulty arose from the very feature which ensured cinema its universality: ever since the earliest audiences flung themselves out of the way of an oncoming screen locomotive, film has stunned us by its seeming capacity to reproduce reality transparently, immediately, directly. Because of this realism, serious analysis of film was confronted from the first by antagonism from the smothering inheritance of Kantian aesthetics.

In *The Critique of Judgement* (1790) Kant contrasts sensation and contemplation, singular and universal, interested and disinterested (useful and useless). Aesthetic experience is opposed to merely sensuous gratification (eating, for example) because it combines sensation—through hearing and vision—with contemplation. The aesthetic object is focused on as a singularity, not as an instance of a general concept, for its own sake and not for any kind of usefulness or social purpose. All this kicks against what cinema appears to do best; its rendering of the real seems just too

obviously contaminated with unprocessed sensation, too liable to documentary appropriation, too easily turned to useful social purposes.

### Classic film theory

As Aaron Scharf (1969) shows in convincing detail, the early impact of photography on painting and notions of art was enormous. Although encouraging some artists into innovation and experiment, photography also served to strengthen and substantiate the opposition between art and craft, the aesthetic and the useful. As 'moving pictures', produced when light is projected through strips of celluloid onto a screen, cinematic images have a double intimacy with reality since they are both caused by it (light from these objects marked photosensitive film) and also resemble it. It was only too tempting to deny cinema a status as art.

In the face of a seemingly incontestable naturalism, the labour of classic film theory was to designate the

specific value of cinema—what has allowed it to provide such a compelling representation of modernity. For this two main strategies emerged. The creationists (or formalists), including Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, and Béla Balázs, defend cinema as an art form which goes beyond realism, while the realists, particularly Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin, appreciate cinema just because it does provide such an exact representation of reality.

Creationism is well represented by Rudolf Arnheim's book *Film* (1933), which sets out 'to refute the assertion that film is nothing but the feeble mechanical reproduction of real life' (1958: 37). Arnheim points out first of all how the experience of sitting in the cinema differs from our empirical perception of the everyday world. In everyday experience the world is three-dimensional, while in the cinema all we get is a flat screen; our life is lived colour with sound, while cinema is black and white, and silent (or was, up to 1929); in our ordinary world we can look wherever we want within our field of vision, while cinema limits what we see within the masked frame of the screen.

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Arnheim celebrates the many effects through which cinema transforms and constructs a reality, including camera angles and movement, focus, lighting effects, framing, altered motion, superimposition, special lenses. And, in addition to these features pertaining mainly to the single shot, cinema works through sequences of shots edited together, producing dazzling and significant effects of contrast and repetition, metonymy and metaphor. Editing makes something available to someone in the cinema that could never be seen by any empirical viewer of what was originally filmed.

Arnheim is one of the first to codify the specific resources of cinema and the many ways it produces meanings beyond anything present in the reality from

which the photographed image originates. Yet though he argues that film exceeds reality, Arnheim does not challenge the view that film is powerfully influenced by its photographic resemblance to reality. The realists, led by André Bazin, make that relation the essential virtue of the medium, as, for example, in this passage:

The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction. (Bazin 1967: 13–14)

This passage makes it clear that Bazin is aware that in cinema filmed objects are not presented but 're-presented'. And elsewhere he explains how he values cinematic reality because it has an almost Brechtian effect in leaving the viewer free to criticize, when more obviously constructed cinema (Eisenstein, for instance) aims to manipulate the viewer's understanding.

Formalist theory (Arnheim) and realist theory (Bazin) appear to oppose each other. But what is crucial, and what marks off classic film theory, is the assumption they share. Formalist theory values cinema to the extent that it is, in Arnheim's phrase, more than 'the feeble mechanical reproduction of real life': realist theory values cinema to the extent that it adheres to 'a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part', as Bazin says (1967: 12). Both positions suppose that cinema, based as it is in the photographic process, must be assessed as in part a mechanical reproduction, whether feeble or convincing. It was not until the 1960s that this view—the naturalist, or reflectionist, fallacy—began to be finally overthrown in film theory.

## 1968 and after

Film theory was able to develop into a fully fledged account of cinema because it staged what Stephen Heath refers to as 'the encounter of Marxism and psychoanalysis on the terrain of semiotics' (1976: 11). Of these three theoretical interventions, semiotics (or semiology) arrived first. In a posthumous work, *Course in General Linguistics*, published in 1916, Saussure introduced into the study of language a number of

theoretical distinctions, of which two in particular proved fruitful when carried over into film theory.

From ancient rhetoric, Saussure revived the distinction between signifier and signified to analyse the naïve concept of 'words'. In any utterance the level of the signifier is made up from the sounds (phonemes) selected for use by a particular language, arranged in a temporal order, while that of the signified consists of the meanings assigned to any group of signifiers. Signifiers consist of entirely arbitrary sounds related only to each other in an internally self-consistent system, and it is purely a matter of convention what set of signifiers give rise to a certain meaning. In modern English, for example, the sounds represented by 'mare' can open onto the meaning 'female horse' or possibly 'municipal leader' (mayor), while a very similar group of signifiers in French ('mer'/'mère') open onto the meanings 'sea' and 'mother'.

A principle is implied by Saussure's distinction, that the material organization of a language is ontologically prior to any meaning it produces. During the 1960s semiotics had a decisive impact upon film theory by concentrating attention on the question what were the specific properties of film, its *specifica differentia*, distinguishing it from other forms of signification (novels and drama, for example).

There are certain problems in detail, however. For while Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified applies perfectly to a language, it is much harder to get it to work for a visual medium such as film. In any famous sequence, such as that at the end of Ford's *The Searchers* (USA, 1956) when the John Wayne figure is left outside the door, what exactly takes the place of the signifier and the signified? This is a question addressed by the work of Christian Metz, as we shall see.

A second distinction put forward by Saussure was also expanded in film semiotics. Language works by moving forward in time so that in English (as in Chinese) syntax can draw simply on word order to make 'Dog bites man' mean something different from 'Man bites dog'. Naming this linear axis of discourse as 'syntagmatic', Saussure pointed out that at every point along this horizontal axis terms were selected and rejected from a potential corpus lying in a vertical dimension (the 'associative' or 'paradigmatic'). Thus, 'Snake' is a possible paradigmatic substitution for 'Dog' or 'Man' in either of the previous examples but 'Yesterday' is not,

since 'Yesterday bites man' is not a meaningful sentence.

In other words, it was possible to think of the syntagmatic axis as a consistent structure which would remain the same even when different paradigmatic terms were substituted along it. In 1928 Vladimir Propp applied this principle to the analysis of narrative, discerning across 115 Russian folk stories a common structure consisting of thirty-one 'functions'. Thus, function (Propp 1968: 11), 'The hero leaves home', can be realized as easily by 'Ivan is sent to kill the dragon' as by 'Dmitri goes in search of the princess'.

A semiotic analysis of film narrative was initiated with enthusiasm and some effect, notably by Raymond Bellour (1972) in his study of *The Birds* (USA, 1963) and by Peter Wollen (1982), also discussing Hitchcock, in his account of *North by Northwest* (USA, 1959). Bellour discusses the Bodega Bay sequence shot by shot, while Wollen aims for a Proppian analysis of the whole movie. Both examinations, plausible as they are in detail, suffer from what are now recognized as the inevitable assumptions of formal narrative analysis—that there is only a single narrative and not a number of simultaneous narrative meanings, that the narrative is fixed once and for all 'out there' in the text and not constructed in a relation between text and reader.

Narrative analysis of film on the precedent of Propp had the definite benefit of shifting argument away from any question of the relation or correspondence between a film and some real it might be supposed to reflect. It focused on film as text but did so only by incurring a concomitant limitation. Narrative is an effect which runs across many different kinds of text, so detailing it in films does not advance understanding of what is specific to film. Nevertheless, the overall consequence of semiotic attention to cinema was to weaken concern with the issue of realism and strengthen attention to the cinema as a particular kind of textuality. After 1968 these tendencies were reinforced from a somewhat unanticipated quarter.

Classic Marxism theorized that the economic base and mode of production determines the political and ideological 'superstructure'. However, during the 1960s the French Marxist thinker Louis Althusser had argued that notions of base and superstructure should be rethought in terms of practices—economic, political, ideological—each of which was 'relatively autonomous', each with its own 'specific effectivity'. Carried over to the analysis of cinema after the revolutionary

events of 1968 (by, for example, the journal *Cahiers du cinéma*). Althusserian Marxism was as rigorous in excluding apparently non-political approaches to cinema as it was in rejecting film theory which began from literary or theatrical models. As Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni assert in *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1969, it is the case that 'every film is political' and that 'cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself to itself' (1993: 45, 46). To understand cinema is to understand film as film, not something else.

### Christian Metz

The intervention of both semiotics and Althusserian film criticism brought the narrative of the developing discussion of film to a point where it was ready for the cavalry to ride over the hill with a more or less complete theory. This role was taken by someone whose work is characterized less by brilliant insights than by a dogged willingness in a series of essays written over nearly twenty years to try, fail, and try again: Christian Metz (1974a, b, 1982). Although the conscientious, overlapping, and exploratory nature of his project is thus compromised, it is convenient to divide Metz's writings into three main attempts.

The first, today perhaps better known through refutations than in the original (see Cook 1985: 229–31; Lapsley and Westlake 1988: 38–46), was the theory of the *grande syntagmatique*. In the search for a notion of film language, it became obvious that cinema had no equivalent to the unit of sound (phoneme) which combined to make up the particular signifiers of a language. Images in the cinema are as infinite as photographable reality. Metz therefore decided to concentrate on the single shot and treat it as a primitive sentence, a statement, on this basis considering how effects were built up syntagmatically by organizing segments, beginning with the autonomous shot, into a hierarchy (he discriminates eight levels within this hierarchy) (Metz 1974a: 108–46).

To some extent Metz Mark I was following Arnheim, because he looked for the specificity of cinema in its narrativization of what is photographed—the fact that 'reality does not tell stories'. But objections pile up against his account—not only the difficulties faced by semiotic narratology in general (its formalism, its belief that there is always only one narrative), but crucially the

problem of deciding in the first place what constituted an autonomous shot or segment.

From the wreckage of the *grande syntagmatique*, Metz Mark II turned to the concept of codes, describing some as shared between cinema and other kinds of representation (characterization and dialogue, for example) and others as specific to cinema (editing, framing, lighting, and so on). Metz Mark III is already partly anticipated in his previous projects, for he had made the point, a little enigmatically and without properly developing it, that in a film 'the image of a house does not signify "house", but rather "Here is a house"' (1974a: 116).

The radical implications of this distinction do not become apparent until Metz Mark III pulls Lacanian psychoanalysis into the orbit of his effort to theorize cinema, notably in his essay 'The Imaginary Signifier', first published in 1975. Lacan distinguishes between the orders of the Imaginary and of the Symbolic, the Imaginary being the world as the individual ego envisages it, the Symbolic being the organization of signifiers which makes this possible (for this, see especially Lacan's 1964 account of vision; 1977: 67–119). Lacan's account enables Metz to argue that imaginary presence in the cinematic image must be thought of as resulting from a signifier that stands for something which is absent. Cinema provides 'unaccustomed perceptual wealth, but unusually profoundly stamped with unreality': the more vividly present the cinematic image appears to make its object, the more it insists that object is actually lacking, was once there but is there no more, 'made present', as Metz says, 'in the mode of absence' (1982: 44).

That the cinematic image is an active making-present clarifies retrospectively the view that in the cinema 'the image of a house does not signify "house", but rather "Here is a house"'. What this affirms, of course, is the ontological disjunction between perceived reality and *anything* that is supposed to be a representation of it. Representation, regardless of whether that representation derives by a photographic process from reality, is an intervention, an act of signifying which reality itself can never make. Although obviously you have to know about houses in order to recognize a shot as a shot of a house (just as you have to know about houses to follow a poem about a house), photographic derivation is neither here nor there in relation to the status of the cinematic image as utterance, statement, a meaning introduced in a semantic context in which it is always saying 'Here is a . . . '.

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At the end of his famous 'Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics' (1960), Roman Jakobson tells the story of a missionary complaining about nakedness among his flock, who in turn asked him why he did not wear clothes on his face and then told him they were face everywhere. Similarly, Jakobson argues, 'in poetry any verbal element is converted into a figure of poetic speech' (1960: 377). On a comparable basis, breaking with reflectionism, the achievement of film theory to Metz is to establish the principle that in cinema any visual element may be turned to expressive purpose, converted into 'poetic speech'. This renders the whole visual, aural, and narrative effect of cinema available to inspection for its significance, the meaning it produces.

## The critique of realism

An immediate consequence of this theoretical breakthrough was to reopen in a much more suggestive and radical way the whole question of realism in the cinema. While film theory was committed to a reflectionist view that the text was to be assessed against some prior notion of the real, comprehensive analysis of realism was blocked. The moment reflectionism goes, the way is open to consider cinematic realism essentially as an effect produced by certain kinds of the text.

Roland Barthes had already pointed in this direction. And so also, back in the 1930s, had Bertolt Brecht. Dismissing conventional naturalist or realist theatre as Aristotelian, as finished, easily consumed commodity, Brecht promoted his own version of modernist, anti-illusionist 'epic' drama, on the grounds that this form was politically radical because it forced the audience to confront the text and think for itself.

Drawing on both Barthes and Brecht, Colin MacCabe, in a wonderfully compact essay, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses' (1974), put forward an analysis of realism which was wholly 'internal': realism was explained not with reference to

external reality but as an effect the text produced through a specific signifying organization. MacCabe's first move is to concentrate on classic realism, excluding from his account such texts as the novels of Dickens or the Hollywood musical. His next two moves specify realism in terms of a discursive hierarchy and empiricism: 'A classic realist text may be defined as one in which there is a hierarchy amongst the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth' (1993: 54).

All texts consist of a bundle of different kinds of discourse: realism, MacCabe argues, arranges these into two categories corresponding to the relation between metalanguage and object language. Introduced by Alfred Tarski, this philosophic distinction refers to what happens when one language discusses another, as, for example, in a book written in modern English called *Teach yourself Japanese*. Japanese is placed as the object language and modern English as the metalanguage, situated outside, as it were, and able to take Japanese as an object of study. In the classic realist text, the words held in inverted commas (what the characters say to each other) become an object language which the narrative prose (what is not marked off as cited) promises to explain as it cannot explain itself.

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The relation between the two modes of discourse is said to be empiricist because while the object language is seen to be rhetorically constructed—the partiality of the points of view of the represented characters is all too apparent—the metalanguage can pass itself off as though it were simply transparent, the voice of Truth: 'The unquestioned nature of the narrative discourse entails that the only problem that reality poses is to go and see what *Things* are there' (1993: 58). In realist cinema, MacCabe concludes, dialogue becomes the object language, and what we see via the camera takes the place of the metalanguage by showing what 'really' happened. This effect invited the spectator to overlook the fact that film is constructed (through script, photography, editing, sets, and so

on) and treat the visual narrative as though it revealed what was inevitably *there*. Realism for MacCabe (as for Brecht) is conservative in that this givenness necessarily cannot deal with contradiction, which contains the possibility of change.

Stephen Heath's (1976) discussion of realism as 'narrative space' follows on from MacCabe's theory. Heath begins with the system of visual representation on which cinema, as photography, depends, that is, the Quattrocento tradition developed to depict three-dimensional objects on a flat surface in such a way that the image affects the viewer much as the natural objects would have done (for a brilliant development of this thesis, see Bryson 1983). Quattrocento space relies not only on linear perspective but on various strategies for placing the viewer at the centre of an apparently all-embracing view.

Cinema, however, is 'moving pictures', a process which constantly threatens the fixity and centring aimed for by the Western tradition of the still image. Figures and objects constantly move, moving in and out of frame, likely therefore to remind the spectator of the blank absence which actually surrounds the screen. Mainstream cinema seeks to make good this dangerous instability through narrative, a narrativization which 'contains the mobility that could threaten the clarity of vision' (1993: 76) by constantly renewing a centred perspective for the spectator. Heath cites in detail the procedures advised by the film manuals—use of master shot, the 180-degree rule, matching on action, eye-line matching, avoidance of 'impossible angles', and so on—and affirms that all of this is designed to ensure that 'the spectator's illusion of seeing a continuous piece of action is not interrupted' (Heath 1993: 80, quoting Reisz and Millar 1968: 216).

A perfect example is the beginning of *Jaws* (USA, 1975): 'a beach party with the camera tracking slowly right along the line of faces of the participants until it stops on a young man looking off; eyeline cut to a young woman who is thus revealed as the object of his gaze; cut to a high-angle shot onto the party that shows its general space, its situation before the start of the action with the run down to the ocean and the first shark attack' (1993: 80). Through such narrativization, Heath maintains, conventional cinema seeks to transform fixity into process and absence into presence by promoting (in Lacanian terms) the Imaginary over the Symbolic. An alternative or radical cinema would refuse this kind of coherence; it would open its textuality, compelling the viewer to experience the process

they are always part of, a process implying change and which is the condition for any sense of coherence and stability.

In these ways MacCabe and Heath intend to fulfil the promise of bringing together semiology and ideology, a close analysis of the fundamental operation of cinema as a signifying effect with an understanding that cinema is always political. There is, however, one important difference between the two accounts.

Heath's argument is that realism and the effect of narrative space try to *contain* the process of signification, while for MacCabe realism effaces the signifier to achieve *transparency*. It is arguable that MacCabe is still writing from an essentially structuralist conception in which realism is an organization of the signifier which necessarily produces certain effects on the viewer. Heath, in contrast, asserts that transparency is 'impossible' (1993: 82) and assumes from the start a conception of process as a process of the *subject*. Subjectivity does appear in MacCabe's account but is not integral to it as it is to Heath's. Heath, then, looks beyond structuralism to a post-structuralism which draws on psychoanalysis to discuss cinema in relation to subjectivity, including, in the work of Laura Mulvey, *gendered* subjectivity. After Metz, after the redefinition of realism as a textual effect, that is where film theory goes next.

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# Formalism and neo-formalism

Ian Christie

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Formalism is the usual, if somewhat misleading, name of a critical tendency which has survived for over eighty years, despite misunderstanding and even persecution. First used by opponents, the label was reluctantly adopted by Russian exponents of 'the formal method'—although they protested that it was neither a single method, nor confined to what is normally considered 'form'. But aside from these local disputes, the tradition of Formalism could well be considered the twentieth century's distinctive contribution to aesthetics. For it was born, historically, of the desire to find an objective or scientific basis for literary criticism, partly in order to respond to the novelty of modern art—specifically Futurist poetry—and at the same time to revitalize appreciation of the classics. In short, it was a critical position which uniquely responded to the peculiar challenge of the modern era; and one that would later be echoed by the American 'new critics' of the 1930s, as well as by structuralists and semioticians.

But if its focus was literature, how did Formalism first become involved with film? This is largely explained by the peculiar status that cinema acquired during the early years of the Soviet regime in Russia. With filmmakers like Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein making large ideological claims for their work, film aesthetics became a subject of intense public debate, and eventually a political issue. In this heady climate of polemic and innovation, leading Formalist critics such as Viktor

Shklovsky and Yuri Tynyanov found themselves not only theorizing the new forms of Soviet cinema, but actually working as scriptwriters and advisers. The scene had been set for a dangerous slippage between critical and political disagreement. When the Soviet leadership began to regiment cultural life at the end of the 1920s, 'Formalism'—now meaning any commitment to artistic experiment, or resistance to an authoritarian 'socialist realism'—became an all-purpose term of abuse, and during the purges of the 1930s it could carry a death sentence.

Unsurprisingly, surviving Russian Formalists fell silent or recanted, and it was not until the 1960s, amid renewed Western interest in the early Soviet era, that many key Formalist texts were translated for the first time and began to exert a wide cultural influence. Once again, the links between Formalist criticism and cinema were revived, as semiotics became the basis for a new theorization of film—and for a revival of avant-garde filmmaking, which partly drew on Soviet Formalist models. The Russian structural or cultural semiotic movement which emerged in the late 1960s counted the Formalist school as one of the influences on its wide-ranging analysis of different cultural and artistic texts; and this continues to produce valuable work on cinema. Formalist critical tools are also still used, under the banner of 'Neo-Formalism', by film theorists concerned with analysing the structure of narration and by critics wishing to sharpen our percep-





*October* (1928) undermines the Tsarist invocation of 'God and country' by showing an otherwise unmotivated montage sequence of increasingly bizarre folk-gods

tion of—or in Formalist terms 'defamiliarize'—mainstream cinema.

### The birth of a poetics

Formalist poetics developed rapidly in the highly charged atmosphere of Russian avant-garde art in the years immediately before and after the revolutions of 1917. Futurist poets were experimenting with invented language in an effort to return to the very roots of speech in sound and gesture, and Viktor Shklovsky took this as a particularly vivid example of how artists play a vital part in sharpening our habitual

perception by a deliberate 'roughening' of normal language. For Shklovsky and his fellow members of the St Petersburg Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ), the poetic use of language involved a whole range of techniques or 'devices' which are not confined to poetry as such, but may also be found in literary prose. He traces an inexorable movement from poetry to prose, from novelty to routine, as language becomes automatic, and compares this with the way old art is 'covered with the glassy armour of familiarity' as we cease to experience it in a truly artistic way.

What is lost in this transition is art's characteristic purpose of making the familiar screen strange (*ostranenie*), or of 'defamiliarizing' what is normally taken for granted—an influential idea which would later be echoed in Bertolt Brecht's 'alienation effect' in theatre. For the Formalists, art is less an object or a body of work than a *process* by which perception is slowed down, or even obstructed. Hence what the critic studies are the forms and devices which achieve this effect. As Shklovsky put it, provocatively; 'I know how a car is made; I know how *Don Quixote* is made.'

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Although the Formalists drew much of their inspiration from the contemporary energy of Russian Futurist art, which they saw as typically 'laying bare the device' in its radical new forms, many of their most influential analyses were of the classics seen from a revealing new angle. Shklovsky, in particular, delighted in drawing examples from a wide range of sources, and his 1925 essays on Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (Shklovsky 1990) established the basic formalist approach to fictional narrative. The crucial distinction to be made in narrative is between what Formalists call *fabula* and *syuzhet*, usually translated as 'story' and 'plot' (Bordwell 1985: 49–50 provides the clearest modern definition of these as applicable to cinema). However, these translations can be misleading (and indeed contradict some uses of these terms in English). For *fabula*, in the Formalist sense, is an imaginary

sequence of events narrated by the *syuzhet*, which provides the actual narrative pattern of the work, or 'story-as-told'. Thus, in literature, Cervantes' and Sterne's numerous digressions, abrupt shifts forward and backward in time, repetitions, and withholding of information are all devices which constitute the *syuzhet*, or plot; and the Formalists regarded the relationship between the *syuzhet* and *fabula*, rather than one or the other, as the essence of literary art.

Such an analysis of the 'literariness' of literature clearly could be developed for other arts, and Shklovsky led the way in applying formalist analysis to cinema (Shklovsky 1923). His discussion of Chaplin noted that the same basic character, 'Charlie', appears in many films, and that these all use similar cinematic devices, which are 'stunts' such as the fall, the chase, and the fight. In each film some of these devices are 'motivated', in that they appear to arise plausibly from the specific plot's characters or props, while others are 'unmotivated'—the typical 'Charlie' gestures and actions whose familiarity had made Chaplin a star. The critical issue for Shklovsky was whether Chaplin would succeed in going beyond the self-referential parody that was already evident by 1921–2; and he predicted that Chaplin might move toward the 'heroic comic' genre—which, in fact, he did in later films such as *The Gold Rush* (1925) and *The Great Dictator* (1940).

The Formalist insistence that poetic and prosaic language are not confined to the literary genres of poetry and prose could also be applied to cinema, with interesting consequences. Amid the passionate debates of the early Soviet era between advocates of polemical fiction and those who opposed all film drama as intrinsically false, Formalists were able to argue that the use of 'factual' documentary material by Dziga Vertov did not in itself make his films factual. Having rejected the fictional structures of the novel and drama, he had effectively fallen into those of poetry, the lyric, and the epic: 'red verse with the rhythms of cinema'. Similarly, a Formalist comparison between Chaplin's drama *A Woman of Paris* (1923), Vertov's *One Sixth of the World* (1926), and Pudovkin's *The Mother* (1926), based on the idea that poetry uses more arbitrary formal devices than the semantic ones of prose, suggests that Chaplin is here working in cinematic 'prose' and Vertov in poetry, but that Pudovkin had created a hybrid form which moves between prose and poetry (Shklovsky 1927).

This hybrid quality, making full use of the 'poetic' devices that appeared in early cinema, was also what

attracted the Leningrad Formalist critic Yuri Tynyanov to the irreverent Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS) group. Having already worked on the use of parody by such writers as Gogol and Dostoevsky, he adapted Gogol's *The Overcoat* for FEKS in 1926 as a polemical intervention, to pose 'anew the question of "the classics" in cinema'. The film functions as a radical commentary on the original text and its conventional accretions. And in the FEKS's subsequent historical films, *SVD* and *New Babylon* (1929), Tynyanov saw a welcome challenge to the merely picturesque in the elaborate use of metaphorical devices to produce irony and pathos.

The culmination of Russian Formalist engagement with cinema came in 1927, with the publication of an anthology, *The Poetics of the Cinema*, which included Boris Eikhenbaum's major essay 'Problems of Film Stylistics' (Taylor 1982). Amid many shrewd observations which make this one of the most sophisticated early texts in film aesthetics, Eikhenbaum focuses on two key features which can perhaps be considered the filmic equivalents of *fabula* and *syuzhet*. From the French critic Louis Delluc he borrowed the concept of 'photogeny' to describe the photographic raw material of cinema—what makes filmed images of people and things intrinsically attractive—and from the Soviet avant-garde he takes 'montage' as the fundamental principle of syntax for combining these images (plot construction). Filmic utterance then depends on the creation of film phrases, which require the construction of an illusory, yet convincing, impression of continuity in space and time.

Eikhenbaum's most original contribution is his answer to the question: what links film phrases? Or, in Formalist terms, how do transitions appear motivated, rather than arbitrary? He suggests that the viewer is prompted to supply links through internal speech, by completing or articulating what is implied by the sequence of (silent) screen images. This idea is most easily illustrated by examples of visual metaphor. Eikhenbaum quotes the sailor in *The Devil's Wheel* (Chërtovo koleso', FEKS, 1926), who has decided to stay on shore with his girl and enters a tavern, where we see a billiard-ball *fall* into a pocket, thus triggering the idea of his *fall* from duty. Another example would be the famous 'gods' montage sequence in Eisenstein's *October* (1928), in which a series of images of increasingly bizarre statues of folk-gods are intended to undermine the Tsarist invocation of 'God' by showing this to be a heterogeneous concept.



Boris Eikhenbaum linked the fall of a billiard-ball in the tavern scene in *The Devil's Wheel* (1926) with the sailor's 'fall' from duty as an example of 'inner speech' reinforcing filmic metaphor

Appearing as it did on the even of the sound revolution in cinema, Eikhenbaum's concept of internal speech attracted little interest until the 1970s. In the wake of Christian Metz's (1982) combination of semiology and psychoanalysis, it was then taken up again, notably by Paul Willemsen (1974–5, 1994a), who argued that it need not be confined to silent cinema or to examples of 'literalizing' metaphor as in the *Devil's Wheel* example. Might not this discourse of 'thought work' accompany *all* filmmaking and viewing, he asked, and be subject to the same processes of abbreviation, condensation, distortion, and the like that Freud identified in dreams, so that it could function as both a constituent and a product of the filmic text—a kind of unconscious of the filmic system?

Another branch of Russian Formalist research also had to wait nearly forty years before it began to be applied to cinema, although Vladimir Propp's (1968) *Morphology of the Folktale* was already becoming known in the early 1960s through the anthropologist

Claude Lévi-Strauss's use of it in his study of myth, and consequently became a corner-stone of the emergent structuralist movement. In line with the Formalists' ahistorical, scientific spirit, Propp's analysis of a body of Russian fairy-tales took as its model the biological idea of morphology, or the study of a plant's component parts in relation to the whole. By identifying the full range of fairy-tale characters and their narrative functions, and determining the 'moves' which constitute each story, Propp was able to show how these could all be reduced to variations on a single basic formula.

In adapting this structural approach to the study of a filmmaker's body of work, Peter Wollen (1972: 93) noted that there is a danger in mapping resemblances of reducing all the texts in question 'to one, abstract and impoverished'. He draws a distinction between this result, as 'formalist', and the 'truly structuralist' aim of comprehending 'a system of differences and oppositions'. Thus, for Wollen and other structuralist

film critics, a measure of success is to bring works which may at first seem eccentric or deviant within an enlarged system of recurrent motifs or 'oppositions'.

Despite this rejection of morphology as a goal, the terms of Propp's narrative analysis have proved valuable in other ways too. Laura Mulvey (1981) recalls the function of marriage as a means of narrative closure in all the tales studied by Propp in her discussion of Oedipal patterns in the western. But unlike the Russian folk-hero who *must* marry to conclude the tale satisfactorily, the western hero may choose not to marry for a different, though no less common, closure. Mulvey's exploration of these alternatives, discussed in terms of *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and *Duel in the Sun* (1947), again points away from Propp's essentially descriptive enterprise, but none the less draws upon its characteristic Formalist clarity.

## Neo-formalism

The most substantial and influential modern use of Formalism in the film study has been that of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, notably in the former's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Bordwell 1985) and the latter's 'essays in neoformalist film analysis', *Breaking the Glass Armour* (Thompson 1988). In defending Formalism against claims that it is 'merely' formal, seeking to isolate theory from either detailed textual criticism or social and historical interpretation, Bordwell and Thompson argue that, on the contrary, only its basic tools can contribute to building an adequate historical poetics of cinema.

Formalism, they believe, unlike some structuralist and psychoanalytic methodologies, crucially implies an active spectator, and to supply this important subject Bordwell proposes a 'constructivist' theory which links perception and cognition. Drawing on cognitive psychology, he identifies a hierarchy of schemata by which the individual's perception is organized. Thus, following a film—like many other everyday yet complex activities—routinely involves the use of already learned prototype and template schemata to identify basic situations, characters, and events. Individual films then involve mobilizing (or learning) procedural schemata, at the level of narrative, and stylistic schemata. These art- or film-specific schemata correspond in part to the Formalists' concept of motivations as compositional, realistic, or

artistic (this last expanded to cover 'transtextual' allusion to other texts).

Bordwell's many detailed examples of this enhanced and systematized Formalism at work show how, for example, the typical operations of film noir and melodrama can be distinguished in terms of different patterns of *syuzhet* and stylistic construction—gaps and retardation, the deliberate withholding of information, different motivations—and how a broad sampling of films made within certain production regimes can lead towards a 'formalist' historical classification. Thus 'classical Hollywood' (the subject of Bordwell et al. 1985) can be described in more dynamic terms than usual, as having 'normalised options for representing the fabula and for manipulating the possibilities of *syuzhet* and style'. Art cinema, by contrast, can be defined by a particular set of procedural schemata which underlie widely differing narrational strategies.

Both Thompson and Bordwell make use of the term 'parametric cinema', adapted from Burch (1973) to take their neo-formalist analyses into more challenging terrain. This is defined as the foregrounding of an artistic motivation in a systematic, structuring fashion. Examples discussed range from Jacques Tati's *Play Time* (1968), and Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) (where style completely dominates *syuzhet* as the film's vestigial narrative is subordinated to an overriding continuous zoom structure), and also include films by Robert Bresson and Jean-Luc Godard.

Like Shklovsky's famous comparison of literary history to the knight's move in chess, Formalism's influence outside its Slavic homeland has largely depended on the erratic progress of translation and, indeed, fashion. Thus, it was not until the 1980s that translations began to appear of the long-neglected work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his colleagues, who were critical of the Formalists in the late 1920s but can now perhaps be seen as extending Formalism's range through their critique of its ahistoricism and dogmatism.

Bakhtin's most influential concept is probably that of 'dialogism', which emerged particularly from his study of Dostoevsky's novels. Put at its simplest, in a 1929 paper (Matejka and Pomorska 1978), this involves distinguishing between an author's direct speech and that of his characters, which can 'approach the relationship between two sides in a dialogue'. Bakhtin's wide-ranging analysis of novels from many periods and cultures reveals degrees of 'polyphony' among the discourses present and, by implication, validates

such dialogism for its complexity and richness. From his work on Rabelais comes another key concept, 'carnivalism', denoting the persistence of a 'folk tradition of laughter' and parody characteristic of the carnival.

If 'dialogism' and 'carnivalistic' have become quite widely used terms of critical approbation in film as well as literary and cultural criticism, two of Bakhtin's other contributions seem even more pertinent to cinema. In tackling the variety of 'speech genres' encountered in everyday as well as artistic discourse, Bakhtin showed how these interact with literary genres to define a 'genre memory' which sets limits to each genre. Ivanov (1981) suggest that this is directly applicable to cinema, as is Bakhtin's concept of the 'chronotope'. This term, taken from mathematics, is used by Bakhtin (1981) to refer to the specific interrelationship of time and space in different forms of narrative. Thus, he identifies 'adventure time' and 'romance time' in the Greek novel, with their characteristic elisions and transitions; and Ivanov proposes that similar distinctions may be made within the main film genres.

Despite the promise of Bakhtin's ideas, it must be admitted that relatively little has been done by non-Russian critics to apply them widely or systematically. Exceptions, however, are Robert Stam's (1989) survey of the tradition of reflexive, carnivalesque works from a specifically Bakhtinian perspective, and the use Paul Willemsen (1994) makes of Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue, otherness, and genre as 'a fragment of collective memory' in his work on Third Cinema. Within the Russian tradition, Maya Turovskaya (1989) has used the concept of the chronotope to illuminate Andrei Tarkovsky's idea of cinema as 'imprinted time', and a Bakhtinian influence is discernible in the work of Yuri Lotman and his circle in cultural semiotics (Lotman and Uspenskij 1984).

One of Lotman's followers, Yuri Tsivian (1994), defines cultural semiotics as studying 'texts as they are processed "through" people', so that faulty transmission is as much its focus as 'successful' communication without interference. Tsivian's pioneering study of the early reception of cinema in Russia ranges from consideration of the architecture of cinemas and the practice of projection (including mishaps), to the social reception of films as coloured by prevailing cultural assumptions. Most radically, he argues that the boundary of the 'cinema text' is inherently unstable, since non-filmic elements could, and often did, prove culturally more significant for spectators than the films themselves.

Tsivian's evidence is drawn from journalism, literature, and memoirs, and its extent shows how widely the forms and devices of cinema had permeated Russian culture by the 1920s. Although this was also the culture that produced Formalism, his work has wider methodological implications. And together with that of other contemporary cultural semioticians, Neo-Formalists, and assorted fellow travellers, it proves that the Formalist impulse continues to provide sharp, versatile tools for both critical and historical analysis.

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## Poetry and prose in cinema

**Viktor Shklovsky** from Viktor Shklovsky, 'Poetry and Prose in Cinema', in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (eds.), *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents* (revised edition London and New York, Routledge 1994).

In literary art poetry and prose are not sharply differentiated from one another. On more than one occasion students of prose language have discovered rhythmic segments, the recurrence of the same phrase construction, in a prose work. Tadeusz Zieliński has produced interesting studies of rhythm in oratorical speech and Boris Eichenbaum has done a great deal of work on rhythm in pure prose that is intended to be read rather than recited, although it is true that he has not pursued this work systematically. But, as problems of rhythm have been analysed, the boundary between poetry and prose has, it seems, been confused rather than clarified. It is possible that the distinction between poetry and prose does not lie in rhythm alone. The more we study a work of art, the more deeply we penetrate the fundamental unity of its laws. The individual constructional aspects of an artistic phenomenon are distinguished qualitatively, but this qualitiveness rests on a quantitative base, and we can pass imperceptibly from one level to another. The basic construction of plot is reduced to a schema of semantic constants. We take two contrasting everyday situations and resolve them with a third; or we take two semantic constants and create a parallel between them; or, lastly, we take several semantic constants and arrange them in ranking order. But the usual basis of plot (*syuzhet*) is story (*fabula*), i.e. an everyday situation. Yet this everyday situation is merely a particular instance of semantic construction and we can create from one novel a 'mystery novel', not by changing the story but simply by transposing the constituent parts: by putting the ending at the beginning or by a more complex rearrangement of the parts. This is how Pushkin's *The Blizzard* and *The Shot* were produced. Hence what we may call everyday constants, the semantic constants, the situational constants, and the purely formal features may be interchanged with, and merge into, one another.

A prose work is, in its plot construction and its semantic composition, based principally on a combination of everyday situations. This means that we resolve a given situation in the following way: a man must speak, but he cannot, and so a third person speaks on his behalf. In *The Captain's Daughter*, for instance, Grinev cannot speak and yet he must in order to clear his name from Shvabrin's slanders. He cannot speak because he would compromise the captain's daughter, so she herself offers Ekaterina an explanation on his behalf. In another example a man must vindicate himself, but he cannot do so because he has taken a vow of silence: the solution lies in the fact that he manages to extend the deadline of his vow. This is the basis

for one of Grimm's fairy-tales, *The Twelve Swans*, and the story *The Seven Viziers*. But there may be another way to resolve a work, and this resolution is brought about not by semantic means but by purely compositional ones whereby the effect of the compositional constant compares with that of the semantic.

We find this kind of resolution to a work in Fet's verse: after four stanzas in a particular metre with caesura (a constant word division in the middle of each line), the poem is resolved not by its plot but by the fact that the fifth stanza, although in the same metre, has no caesura, and this produces a sense of closure.

The fundamental distinction between poetry and prose lies possibly in a greater geometricity of devices, in the fact that a whole series of arbitrary semantic resolutions is replaced by a formal geometric resolution. It is as if a geometrization of devices is taking place. Thus the stanza in *Eugene Onegin* is resolved by the fact that the final rhyming couplet provides formal compositional resolution while disrupting the rhyme system. Pushkin supports this semantically by altering the vocabulary in these last two lines and giving them a slightly parodic character.

I am writing here in very generalized terms because I want to point out the most common landmarks, particularly in cinema. I have more than once heard film professionals express the curious view that, as far as literature is concerned, verse is closer to film than is prose. All sorts of people say this and large numbers of films strive towards a resolution which, by distant analogy, we may call poetic. There is no doubt that Dziga Vertov's *A Sixth Part of the World* (USSR, 1926) is constructed on the principle of poetic formal resolution: it has a pronounced parallelism and a recurrence of images at the end of the film where they convey a different meaning and thus vaguely recall the form of a triolet.

When we examine Vsevolod Pudovkin's film *The Mother* (USSR, 1926), in which the director has taken great pains to create a rhythmical construction, we observe a gradual displacement of everyday situations by purely formal elements. The parallelism of the nature scenes at the beginning prepares us for the acceleration of movements, the montage, and the departure from everyday life that intensifies towards the end. The ambiguity of the poetic image and its characteristically indistinct aura, together with the capacity for simultaneous generation of meaning by

## Poetry and prose in cinema continued

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different methods, are achieved by a rapid change of frames that never manage to become real. The very device that resolves the film—the double-exposure angle shot of the Kremlin walls moving—exploits the formal rather than the semantic features: it is a poetic device.

In cinema at present we are children. We have barely begun to consider the subjects of our work, but already we can speak of the existence of two poles of cinema, each of which will have its own laws.

Charlie Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* (USA, 1923), is obviously prose based on semantic constants, on things that are accepted.

*A Sixth Part of the World*, in spite of its government sponsorship, is a poem of pathos.

*The Mother* is a unique centaur, an altogether strange beast. The film starts out as prose, using emphatic intertitles which fit the frame rather badly, and ends up as purely formal poetry. Recurring frames and images and the transformation of images into symbols support my conviction that this film is poetic by nature.

I repeat once more: there exist both prose and poetry in cinema, and this is the basic division between the genres: they are distinguished from one another not by rhythm, or not by rhythm alone, but by the prevalence in poetic cinema of technical and formal over semantic features, where formal features displace semantic and resolve the composition. Plotless cinema is 'verse' cinema.



# Impressionism, surrealism, and film theory: path dependence, or how a tradition in film theory gets lost

Robert B. Ray

## Film theory's two traditions

In the fall of 1938, when the movies were only 40 years old, Walter Benjamin received a rejection letter. Inspired by Louis Aragon's Surrealist narrative *Le Paysan de Paris* (1927) and by Soviet experiments with cinematic montage, Benjamin had conceived what has come to be known as *The Arcades Project*, a history of nineteenth-century Paris constructed primarily from found material—texts, documents, images—whose juxtaposition would reveal the buried origins of modern life. Benjamin had been receiving financial support from Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research, relocated in New York, and he had submitted three chapters of a book on Baudelaire, designed as a prologue to the more experimental work ahead. But speaking for the Institute, Benjamin's friend Theodor Adorno said no. 'Your study', Adorno wrote, in the now famous passage, 'is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell' (Adorno 1938/1980: 129).

Although Adorno came to regret this decision, his formulation of it defines the history of film theory. For what could be a more exact definition of the cinema

than 'the crossroads of magic and positivism'? Or a more succinct definition of film theory's traditional project than to 'break the spell'?

- **What could be a more exact definition**
- **of the cinema than 'the crossroads of**
- **magic and positivism'?**

As a technologically based, capital-intensive medium, the movies quickly developed into an industry keenly attracted by positivism's applications: the Taylorist-Fordist models of rationalized production. Indeed, as Thomas Schatz (1988) has described, the Hollywood studios set the tone by explicitly imitating the organizational system developed in large-scale manufacturing. Mass production, standardized designs, concentration of the whole production cycle in a single place, a radical division of labour, the routinizing of workers' tasks, even the after-hours surveillance of employees—all of these Fordist practices became Hollywood's own. Thus, at the peak of its early 1930s power, MGM could produce one feature film per week, a quota enabled by its standardized

genres, enormous physical plant, strict definition of roles, and a star system whose performers remained as alienated from their tasks as any factory worker. And to guarantee this system's reliability, L. B. Mayer kept watch on his personnel's every move.

And yet, for all of its commitment to the positivism which Taylor and Ford had perfected, Hollywood was not making Model Ts. That ascetic vehicle, a triumph of functionalism, had succeeded by avoiding any traces of the irrational decoration that Ford portrayed as wasteful, inefficient, 'feminine'. Strikingly, however, the Model T's decline (Ford abandoned the car in 1927) coincided with Hollywood's ascendancy, as Ford's increasingly successful rival General Motors' Alfred Sloan began to demonstrate the enormous seductive power of style (Wollen 1993; Batchelor 1994). In doing so, Sloan was deriving an explicit business practice from the crucial discovery intuited by Hollywood's moguls: the movies succeeded commercially to the extent that they *enchanted*.

Hence the inevitable question: could enchantment be mass-produced? The movies' most influential form, Hollywood cinema (what Noël Burch (1990) calls the Institutional Mode of Representation), arose as an attempt to address this problem. The calculus has always been a delicate one: the temptations of rationalization on the one hand, the requirements of seduction on the other. As a result, any commercial filmmaking represents a site of negotiation between these conflicting positions. 'The cinema', Jean-Luc Godard once told Colin MacCabe, 'is all money' (MacCabe 1980: 27), but at any moment it can also become, as Godard once wrote of Renoir's *La Nuit du carrefour* (France, 1932) 'the air of confusion . . . the smell of rain and of fields bathed in mist' (Godard 1972: 63).

Developed as the means for balancing filmmaking's competing demands, Hollywood's protocols became the norm of cinema. Increasingly, film history has suggested that the key figure in their development was less D. W. Griffith than MGM's Irving Thalberg. Far more than the independent Griffith, Thalberg spent his days negotiating between L. B. Mayer's insistence on thrift and the popular audience's demand for glamour. In effect, he occupied Adorno's crossroads, embracing both positivism and magic. Working at the origins of the cinema's dominant mode, a rationalist longing to be enthralled by his own productions, Thalberg, in fact, embodied the two tendencies of all subsequent film theory.

Film history's conceptual neatness depends on its dual provenance in those great opposites, Lumière and Méliès, documentary and fiction. 'Cinema', Godard famously summed up, 'is spectacle—Méliès—and research—Lumière,' adding (impatient with the forced choice) that 'I have always wanted, basically, to do research in the form of a spectacle' (Godard 1972: 181). Inevitably, film theory took longer to appear, but after the First World War it quickly developed into two analogous positions, only one of which was attached so neatly to a single name.

That name, of course, was Eisenstein. With his insistence that filmmaking-as-an-art depended on repudiating the camera's automatic recording capacity, Eisenstein aligned himself not only with Méliès, but also with pictorialism, the movement that sought to legitimize photography by disguising its images as paintings. Eisenstein avoided that retrograde move while nevertheless sharing its fundamental premise: that a medium's aesthetic value is a direct function of its ability to transform the reality serving as its raw material. For Eisenstein, the means of such transformation was montage, the ideal tool for deriving significance (chiefly political) from the real details swarming in his footage (see Kolker, Part 1, Chapter 2).

As his theoretical essays appeared in the 1920s, Eisenstein assumed the role simultaneously perfected by T. S. Eliot—the artist-critic whose writings create the taste by which his own aesthetic practice is judged. Eisenstein's sensational films enhanced the prestige of his theoretical positions, which quickly triumphed over the alternative proposed by the French Impressionists and Surrealists. If Eisenstein saw the cinema as a means of argument, the French regarded it as the vehicle of revelation, and the knowledge revealed was not always expressible in words. 'Explanations here are out of place,' Louis Delluc wrote about the 'phenomenon' of Sessue Hayakawa's screen presence, an example of what the Impressionists called *photogénie*. 'I wish there to be no words,' Jean Epstein declared, refusing to translate the concept that he posited as 'the purest expression of cinema' (Abel 1988: 138–9, 243, 315).

The concept of *photogénie*, especially in the Surrealists' hands, emphasized precisely what Eisenstein wished to escape: the cinema's automatism. 'For the first time', André Bazin would later elaborate, 'an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative invention of man' (Bazin 1967: 13). More-

over, for reasons which the French could not define, the camera rendered some otherwise ordinary objects, landscapes, and even people luminous and spellbinding. Lumière's simple, mesmerizing films had proved that fact. Eisenstein anticipated Brecht's proposition that 'less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality . . . something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial, posed' (Benjamin 1979: 255). The French who followed Lumière, however, insisted that just turning on the camera would do the trick: in René Clair's words, 'There is no detail of reality which is not immediately extended here [the cinema] into the domain of the wondrous' (Willemen 1994: 125). And in his first published essay, Louis Aragon suggested that this effect did not result from 'art' films alone:

All our emotion exists for those dear old American adventure films that speak of daily life and manage to raise to a dramatic level a banknote on which our attention is riveted, a table with a revolver on it, a bottle that on occasion becomes a weapon, a handkerchief that reveals a crime, a typewriter that's the horizon of a desk, the terrible unfolding telegraphic tape with magic ciphers that enrich or ruin bankers. (Hammond 1978: 29)

This response seems, in retrospect, an acute description of the way movies are often experienced—as intermittent intensities (a face, a landscape, the fall of light across a room) that break free from the sometimes indifferent narratives which contain them. Why, then, was the Impressionist–Surrealist approach so rapidly eclipsed by Eisenstein's? First, its emphasis on fragmentation poorly suited the rapidly consolidating commercial cinema whose hard-earned basis lay precisely in its continuity system. Both the Impressionists and the Surrealists, in fact, often regarded narrative as an obstacle to be overcome. ('The telephone rings,' Epstein complained, pointing to the event that so often initiates a plot. 'All is lost'; Abel 1988: 242.) Surrealist filmwatching tactics, for example, were designed to reassert the autonomy and ambiguity of images: think, for example, of Man Ray's habit of watching the screen through his fingers, spread to isolate certain parts of the screen. Lyrical, contemplative, enraptured by the camera's automatism, the Impressionist attitude derived more from Lumière's way of working than from that of Méliès. The latter's commitment to fiction, and his willingness to construct a narrative world out of discontinuous fragments, proved

the premise of all subsequent commercial filmmaking, including Eisenstein's which quickly attracted the attention of the Hollywood studios. (Samuel Goldwyn: 'I've seen your film *Potemkin* and admire it very much. What I would like is for you to do something of the same kind, but a little cheaper, for Ronald Colman.') Although Méliès had begun as a magician, the filmmaking tradition he inspired lent itself readily to the Taylorist procedures adopted by the American moguls. It was Lumière who had discovered the cinema's alchemy.

• **Surrealist filmwatching tactics, for example, were designed to reassert the autonomy and ambiguity of images: think, for example, of Man Ray's habit of watching the screen through his fingers, spread to isolate certain parts of the screen.**

Second, by insisting that film's essence lay beyond words, the *photogénie* movement left even its would-be followers with nowhere to go. As Paul Willemen (1994: 131) has suggested, 'mysticism was indeed the swamp in which most of the theoretical statements of the Impressionists eventually drowned'. By contrast, Eisenstein had a thoroughly linguistic view of filmmaking, with shots amounting to ideograms, which, when artfully combined, could communicate the equivalent of sentences. As the hedonistic 1920s yielded to the intensely politicized 1930s, Eisenstein's propositions seemed a far more useful way of thinking about the cinema.

In fact, however, while *photogénie's* elusiveness caused the term to disappear gradually from film theory, other people were thinking about it—people like Irving Thalberg. Having perfected its continuity system by the mid-1920s, the Hollywood studios turned to the great remaining problem. MGM's constant screen tests; its commitment to having the best cameramen, costume designers, and lighting technicians; its regular resort to previews—these practices indicated Thalberg's obsessive quest for the photogenic actor, location, or moment. MGM's pre-eminence during this period suggests that Thalberg achieved, however intuitively, what the Impressionist theoreticians did not: a formula for *photogénie*.

## CRITICAL APPROACHES

Current film theory has often discredited Impressionist–Surrealist film theory by pointing to *photogénie*'s obvious connection to fetishism. Aragon's own explanation of the cinematic marvellous, amounting to a precise definition of the fetishist's gaze, confirms this diagnosis: 'To endow with a poetic value that which does not yet possess it, to wilfully restrict the field of vision so as to intensify expression: these are two properties that help make cinematic *décor* the adequate expression of modern beauty' (Hammond 1978: 29).

In its history, fetishism has appeared most prominently as knowledge's opposite, as a means of false consciousness and disavowal. Marx, for example, argued that the 'fetishism of commodities' encourages us to ignore the exploitative social relations that such objects simultaneously embody and conceal. The commodity is a 'hieroglyph', all right, but not one meant to be read. It substitutes the lure of things for a curiosity about their production. Similarly, Freud posited fetishism as the result of an investigation's *arrest*. Fearing the sight of the mother's genitals, misunderstood as 'castrated', the male infant stops at another place (a foot, an ankle, a skirt's hem), investing this replacement with libidinal energy, but denying the sexual difference his gaze has discovered.

What film theory discredited, however, Hollywood skilfully employed. In fact, the development of classical narrative cinema finds its exact parallel in the etymology of the word 'fetish'. As William Pietz (1985) has shown, the problem of fetishism first arose in a specific historical context: the trading conducted by Portuguese merchants along the coast of West Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Renaissance businessmen, the Portuguese were looking for straightforward economic transactions. Almost immediately, they were frustrated by what Pietz (1985: 7–9) evocatively calls 'the mystery of value'. For the Africans, material objects could embody—'simultaneously and sequentially—religious, commercial, aesthetic, and sexual' worth, and the balance among these categories seemed, at least to the Europeans, a matter of caprice. Especially troubling was the Africans' unpredictable estimate of not only their own objects, but also those of the European traders, which the merchants themselves regarded as 'trifles'.

Like the Portuguese traders, commercial filmmakers began naively by proposing an uncomplicated deal: a story in exchange for the price of a

ticket. But they were quickly surprised by their viewers' fascination with individual players. For a brief moment, the industry resisted this unintended consequence of the movies, this admiration for actors which seemed an 'overestimation of value', a fetishism. Preserving the players' anonymity, after all, had minimized their power and kept them cheap. Inevitably, however, Hollywood came to recognize this fetishism as a means of making money, and the star system deliberately set out to encourage it (see Butler, Part 2, Chapter 9). In fact, although continuity cinema's insistence on story often reduced the immediate attraction of its components ('while an image could be beautiful,' one cameraman recalls, 'it wasn't to be so beautiful as to draw attention to itself'), inadvertently, as the Impressionists and Surrealists saw, the movies glamorized everything: faces, clothes, furniture, trains. A dining-car's white, starched linen (*North by Northwest*, USA, 1959), a woman's voice (Margaret Sullavan's in *Three Comrades*, USA, 1938), a cigarette lighter (*The Maltese Falcon*, USA, 1941)—even the most ordinary objects could become, as Sam Spade put it in a rare literary allusion, 'the stuff that dreams are made of' (Ray 1995).

It is hard to know whether this effect was always intended. Constant economic pressures, the conversion to sound, and the absolute pre-eminence of narrative all encouraged Hollywood's tendency towards Fordist procedures and laconic filmmaking. The American cinema's functionalism, in other words, abetted the rationalist theoretical tradition descending from Eisenstein. In this context, Thalberg's more complicated approach seems especially significant. For



An impressionist moment, Greta Garbo in *Grand Hotel* (1932)

despite MGM's production quotas, strict regimentation, and highly developed division of labour, Thalberg often encouraged, or at least allowed, moments of the kind so admired by the Impressionists and Surrealists. In *Grand Hotel* (USA, 1932), for example, whose production he closely supervised, the camera cut suddenly to an unmotivated overhead shot of Garbo in her ballerina costume, alone for the first time, opening like a flower as she settled wearily to the floor. The narrative idled, enabling this instance of *photogénie* to unfold because, as Thalberg knew, the movie would be the better for it. The plot could wait.

### Path dependence

One of the most decisive moments in the history of film theory occurred during a span of twelve months from late 1952 to early 1953. Having emerged from the Second World War alive, but with the teaching career for which he had trained foreclosed to him because of a stammer and poor health, André Bazin (Andrew 1978) confirmed his commitment to film criticism with 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema' and 'The Virtues and Limitations of Montage' (Bazin 1967, 1971), essays in which, for the first time, someone suggested that the two most prestigious schools of filmmaking (Soviet montage and German Expressionism) were wrong. The movies' possibilities, Bazin insisted, were more radical than those ways of working had suggested.

Bazin, of course, is famous for arguing that film's true destiny is the objective representation of reality. 'The guiding myth . . . inspiring the invention of cinema', he had argued a few years earlier, 'is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of the mechanical reproduction of reality in the nineteenth century, from photography to the phonograph, namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time' (Bazin 1967: 21). The Soviets and Germans, according to Bazin (24), had betrayed this sacred purpose by 'putting their faith in the image' instead of in reality, convulsing the camera's objectivity with abstracting montages and grotesque *mise-en-scène*.

Since about 1970 this position has been represented as fantastically naïve, another version of Wes-

tern culture's longing for what philosopher Jacques Derrida calls 'unmediated presence'. In a passage often singled out for critique, Bazin (1971: 60), had apparently earned this attack praising *Bicycle Thieves* (Italy, 1948) as 'one of the first examples of pure cinema': 'No more actors, no more story, no more sets, which is to say that in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality there is no more cinema.' In fact, however, behind Bazin's realist aesthetic lay an intuition about the cinema's most profoundly radical aspect: its automatism. With photography, Bazin kept insisting, an absolutely accurate representation of the world could be produced, for the first time in history, by *accident*. This miraculous revelatory power made the Soviet or Expressionist imposition of subjective meanings seem a kind of misguided vanity.

This argument, of course, amounted to a displacement of Bazin's unrequited religious impulse. But it also involved a revival of the Impressionists' *photogénie* and the Surrealists' automatism. In his own proposed dictionary entry, Breton (1972: 26) had designated this feature of modern technology as Surrealism's defining activity:

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

Breton had also made explicit the metaphoric connection between technology and the Surrealists' favourite game, describing automatic writing as 'a true photography of thought' (Ernst 1948: 177). For the Impressionists, *photogénie* was untranslatable but intentional, the product of particularly talented filmmakers. For the Surrealists, on the other hand, it was often accidental, and thus capable of appearing anywhere. Man Ray made the point provocatively: 'The worst films I've ever seen, the ones that send me to sleep, contain ten or fifteen marvelous minutes. The best films I've ever seen only contain 10 or 15 valid minutes' (Hammond 1978: 84).

Like the Surrealists, Bazin could occasionally find what he valued in forgettable movies. He devoted, for example, a page-long footnote in 'The Virtues and Limitations of Montage' to what he called 'an otherwise mediocre English film', *Where no Vultures Fly* (GB, 1951), praising a single moment that abandoned a 'tricky' and 'banal montage' to show parents, child,

and a stalking lioness 'all in the same full shot' (1967: 49–50). In general, however, Bazin preferred to associate his cinematic ideal with a particular set of strategies deliberately employed by an elect group of filmmakers. Jean Renoir, Vittorio De Sica, F. W. Murnau, Robert Flaherty, William Wyler, and Orson Welles were great because in relying on long takes and deep focus, they had modestly permitted reality to speak for itself.

• **At the heart of the Cahiers position lay a privileged term that evoked both photogénie's ineffability and the Surrealists' 'objective chance'. That term was 'mise-en-scène'.**

With this argument, Bazin was retreating from his thought's most radical implication, his sense of the fundamental difference between previous representational technologies and the new 'random generators' like the camera. In the hands of his followers, the *Cahiers* critics, Bazin's attitude towards intentionality became even more ambivalent. *La politique des auteurs* seemed to renounce altogether the Surrealist faith in chance, celebrating even Bazin's beloved 'reality' less than the filmmaking geniuses who could consciously summon its charms. But at the heart of the *Cahiers* position lay a privileged term that evoked both *photogénie's* ineffability and the Surrealists' 'objective chance'.

That term was 'mise-en-scène'. As the *Cahiers* critics used it, *mise-en-scène* quickly left behind its conventional meaning ('setting') to become a sacred word, shared by friends who could invoke it knowing the others would understand. (This point, and other important contributions to this chapter, come from Christian Keathley.) At first, it appeared to be simply another version of *photogénie*, a way of talking again about the untranslatable 'essence of the cinema'. Hence, Jacques Rivette on Otto Preminger's *Angel Face* (USA, 1953): 'What tempts [Preminger] if not . . . the rendering audible of particular chords unheard and rare, in which the inexplicable beauty of the modulation suddenly justifies the ensemble of the phrase? This is probably the definition of something precious . . . its enigma—the door to something beyond intellect, opening out onto the unknown. Such are the

contingencies of *mise-en-scène*' (Hiller 1985: 134). Auteurism's basic problem, however, involved just this kind of attribution. More than even most theoretical groups, the *Cahiers* critics had a sense of themselves as a visionary, well-educated, sensitive elect. As long as they were associating the delights of *mise-en-scène* with filmmakers like Jean Renoir, they could continue to insist on the conscious aspect of a director's decisions. Renoir, after all, was aesthetically well-bred, politically liberal, and personally sympathetic. But the auteurist position increasingly prompted them to celebrate directors who had often made bad films, and who sometimes seemed neither particularly smart nor especially nice. Directors, for example, like Otto Preminger. Faced with this situation, the *Cahiers* writers revised their praise, directing it less at individual filmmakers than at the medium itself. Thus, the *Cahiers's* American operative Andrew Sarris (1965: 13) could explicitly modulate *la politique des auteurs* into a revival of Surrealism's praise of automatism:

For me, *mise-en-scène* is not merely the gap between what we see and feel on the screen and what we can express in words, but is also the gap between the intention of the director and his effect upon the spectator. . . . To read all sorts of poignant profundities in Preminger's inscrutable urbanity would seem to be the last word in idiocy, and yet there are moments in his films when the evidence on the screen is inconsistent with one's deepest instincts about the director as a man. It is during those moments that one feels the magical powers of *mise-en-scène* to get more out of a picture than is put there by a director.

The roots of this move lay in Bazin's tacit renewal of the Impressionist–Surrealist branch of film theory. This achievement usually goes unnoticed, since Bazin, after all, remains famous for so many other things: his championing of realism and the Italian post-war cinema, his editorship of the *Cahiers*, his spiritual fathering of the *Nouvelle Vague*. Nevertheless, Bazin's ability to reroute film theory, at least temporarily, amounted to a rare instance of a discipline escaping from what economic historians call 'path dependence' (David 1985; Passell 1996).

Path dependence developed as a way of explaining why the free market's invisible hand does not always choose the best products. Beta and Macintosh lose to inferior alternatives, while a clumsy arrangement of keyboard symbols (known as QWERTY, for the first six

letters on a typewriter's upper left) becomes the international standard. Although an initial choice often occurs for reasons whose triviality eventually becomes evident (momentary production convenience, fleeting cost advantages), that decision establishes a path dependence almost impossible to break. Superior keyboard layouts have repeatedly been designed, but with every typist in the world using QWERTY, they have no chance.

Bazin recognized that film theory was especially prone to path dependence. The vagaries of film preservation, the industry's encouragement of amnesia (before television, only a handful of films were regularly and widely revived), the small size of the intellectual film community—these factors all encouraged theoretical consensus. While the Impressionist and Surrealist films, with a few exceptions, had disappeared from sight, Eisenstein's had remained in wide circulation, serving as advertisements for his position. (And vice versa: Jean-Marie Straub once observed that everyone thinks that Eisenstein was great at editing because he had so many *theories* about it; Rosenbaum 1982.) As a result, Eisenstein's rationalist, critical branch of film theory had triumphed, establishing a path dependence that Bazin challenged with all his energy.

Bazin attacked on two fronts. First, he challenged the Eisenstein tradition's basic equation of art with anti-realism. Second, he encouraged, without practising himself, a different kind of film criticism: the lyrical, discontinuous, epigrammatic flashes of subjectivity-cum-analysis that appeared in the *Cahiers du cinéma*. A few now famous examples from Godard (1972: 64, 66) suggest this form's tone:

There was theatre (Griffith), poetry (Murnau), painting (Rossellini), dance (Eisenstein), music (Renoir). Henceforth there is cinema. And the cinema is Nicholas Ray.

Never before have the characters in a film [Ray's *Bitter Victory*, France, 1957] seemed so close and yet so far away. Faced by the deserted streets of Benghazi or the sand-dunes, we suddenly think for the space of a second of something else—the snack-bars on the Champs-Élysées, a girl one liked, everything and anything, lies, the treachery of women, the shallowness, of men, playing the slot-machines. . . .

How can one talk of such a film? What is the point of saying that the meeting between Richard Burton and Ruth Roman while Curt Jurgens watches is edited with fantastic

brio? Maybe this was a scene during which we had closed our eyes.

In many cases, this different critical strategy evolved into filmmaking itself, with Godard (1972: 171) again providing the explanation:

As a critic, I thought of myself as a filmmaker. Today, I still think of myself as a critic, and in a sense I am, more than before. Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed. I think of myself as an essayist, producing essays in novel form or novels in essay form: only instead of writing, I film them.

The film theory sponsored by Bazin would receive its best explanation only after its own moment had passed. Writing in 1973, Roland Barthes (1973/1981: 44) proclaimed, '*Let the commentary be itself a text. . . . There are no more critics, only writers.*'

Bazin's moment lasted only fifteen years. The events of May 1968 discredited both his ideas and the critical practice he had fostered, stimulating different questions about the cinema's relationship to ideology and power. The post-1968 period coincided with the development of academic film study, and although auteurism briefly persisted as a way of doing film criticism (aided by its explicit analogy to literary authorship), its apolitical concern with aesthetics suddenly seemed reactionary. Comolli and Narboni's 1969 *Cahiers* editorial 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' (Nichols, 1976) represented the transition, an attempt to preserve the old auteurist heroes (Ford, Capra, et al.) in terms of the new political criteria. But as film studies spread through the universities, it organized itself around a theoretical approach having more to do with Eisenstein than with Bazin.

That approach has come to be known as 'semiotic', using that term as a shorthand way of summarizing the structuralist, ideological, psychoanalytic, and gender theory it encompassed. Committed largely to a species of critique defined by the Frankfurt School, this paradigm accomplished wonderful things, above all alerting us to popular culture's complicities with the most destructive, enslaving, and ignoble myths. It taught us to see the implications of those invisible operations that Brecht had called 'the apparatus', the relation, for example, between Hollywood's continuity system, apparently only a set of filmmaking protocols, and a world-view eager to conceal the necessity of choice (see Ray 1985).

These gains did not come free of charge. The Impressionist–Surrealist half of film theory fell into obscurity, banished for its political irrelevance. Indeed, ‘impressionistic’ became one of the new paradigm’s most frequently evoked pejoratives, designating a theoretical position that was either ‘untheorized’ or too interested in the wrong questions. The wrong questions, however, frequently turned on the reasons why people went to the movies in the first place, the problem so vital to the Impressionists. In 1921 Jean Epstein had announced that ‘The cinema is essentially supernatural. Everything is transformed. . . . The universe is on edge. The philosopher’s light. The atmosphere is heavy with love. I am looking’ (Abel 1988: 246). In the new dispensation, occasional film theoretician Fredric Jameson (Jameson and Kavanagh 1984: 3–4) would acknowledge that the appeal of beautiful and exciting storytelling is precisely the problem: ‘Nothing can be more satisfying to a Marxist teacher’, he admitted, ‘than to “break” this fascination for students’. Also rendered suspect was formally experimental criticism, deemed irresponsible by rationalist critique. The *Cahiers*-inspired auteurist essay receded, as did the New Wave film, that hybrid of research and spectacle, Lumière and Méliès.

⋮ **Can the rational, politically sensitive  
 ⋮ Eisenstein tradition reunite with the  
 ⋮ Impressionist–Surrealist interest in  
 ⋮ *photogénie* and automatism?**

Twenty-five years ago, Roland Barthes recognized what was happening to criticism. The semiotic paradigm that he himself had done so much to establish—‘it too’, Barthes (1977: 166) lamented, ‘has become in some sort mythical: any student can and does denounce the bourgeois or petit-bourgeois character of such and such a form (of life, of thought, of consumption). In other words, a mythological doxa has been created: denunciation, demystification (or demythification), has itself become discourse, stock of phrases, catechistic declaration.’ The problem, Barthes (1977a: 71) wrote four years later, is ‘Where to go next?’ In the next decade, the most important debates in film theory will turn on the extreme path dependence Barthes saw constraining the humanities. At stake will be our disciplines’ ability to pro-

duce information, defined by information theory as a function of *unpredictability*. (The more predictable the message, the less information it contains; Ray 1995: 10–12). Film studies, in particular, should ask these questions: (1) Can the rational, politically sensitive Eisenstein tradition reunite with the Impressionist–Surrealist interest in *photogénie* and automatism? Can film theory, in other words, imitate filmmaking and recognize that, at its best, the cinema requires, as Thalberg understood, a subtle mixture of logical structure and untranslatable allure? (2) Can film theory revive the *Cahiers*–Nouvelle Vague experiment, learning to write differently, to stage its research in the form of a spectacle? American theoretician Gregory Ulmer (1994) has specified that this new writing practice would provide a complement to critique. It will not be hermeneutics, the science of interpretation. It will look to photography, the cinema, television, and the computer as the source of ideas about invention. It is called ‘heuretics’.

A heurctic film studies might begin where *photogénie*, third meanings, and fetishism intersect: with the cinematic detail whose insistent appeal eludes precise explanation. Barthes maintained that third meanings, while resisting obvious connotations, compel ‘an interrogative reading’. In doing so, he was implicitly suggesting how Impressionist reverie could prompt an active research method resembling the Surrealists’ ‘Irrational Enlargement’, a game in which players generate chains of associations from a given object (Jean 1980: 298–301; Hammond 1978: 74–80). Here would be the instructions for such a project: *Select a detail from a movie, one that interests you without your knowing why. Follow this detail wherever it leads and report your findings.*

Here is an example of what this Impressionist–Surrealist model might produce. Studying MGM’s Andy Hardy movies, I was struck by the occasional presence of a Yale pennant on Andy’s wall. Following Barthes’s ‘instructions’, I ‘interrogated’ this object, producing the following response:

In Andy’s bedroom, only two pennants appear: *Carvel High* and *Yale*. In the 1930s, when the best of the Hardy films were made, Yale’s two most famous alumni were probably Cole Porter (author of the college’s football cheer) and Rudy Vallee (popularizer of ‘The Whiffenpoof Song’). *Andy Hardy’s Private Secretary* [USA, 1941] gives Porter’s ‘I’ve Got My Eyes on You’ to Kathryn Grayson, who uses it to satisfy Andy’s request (and the audience’s) for something



besides opera. But with his urbanity, dandyism, aristocratic wit, and cosmopolitan allusiveness, Porter is the Hardy series's antonym. Vallee's deportment, on the other hand—a studied juvenescence deployed to conceal a prima donna's ego—seems more like Rooney's own. In bursts of manic exuberance, Andy is given to expressions of self-satisfaction addressed to his bedroom mirror, pep talks descended from Franklin's *Autobiography*. Although the Hardy films unquestioningly accept Poor Richard's vulgarized legacy (chambers of commerce, boosterism, faith in 'Progress'), those values will eventually be satirized by even popular culture, especially in 1961's *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, whose hero-on-the-make serenades his own mirror image with the show's hit, 'I Believe in You.' Making a Mickey-Rooney style comeback, that play's costar, in the part of corporation president J. B. Biggley, was Rudy Vallee.

And yet: with the series making no other mention of it, the choice of the Yale pennant seems particularly arbitrary. Andy, after all, eventually follows his father's footsteps to 'Wainwright College,' whose plentiful coeds, accessible teachers, and intimate size represent the Ivy League's opposite. Obvious answers, of course, present themselves: 'Yale' as the best known college name, 'Yale' as a signifier of 'class.' Then why not 'Harvard' or 'Princeton'? If we acknowledge instead another logic (more visual, more cinematic), we might begin to see 'Yale' as an unusually valuable *design*—bold (the rare capital Y), concise (the shortest college name), memorable (the locks), available for multiple rhymes (including *hale*, the inevitable companion of *Hardy's* near-homonym 'heartly'). From this perspective, the Yale pennant signals a relaxation of filmmaking's referential drive, a turn toward the possibilities inherent in shapes, movements, and sounds. In the Hardy series, 'Yale' suggests the cinema's revision of Mallarmé's famous warning to Degas—movies are not made with words, but with *images*. (Ray 1995: 173–4)

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# Film and psychoanalysis

Barbara Creed

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Psychoanalysis and the cinema were born at the end of the nineteenth century. They share a common historical, social, and cultural background shaped by the forces of modernity. Theorists commonly explore how psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the importance of desire in the life of the individual, has influenced the cinema. But the reverse is also true—the cinema may well have influenced psychoanalysis. Not only did Freud draw on cinematic terms to describe his theories, as in ‘screen memories’, but a number of his key ideas were developed in visual terms—particularly the theory of castration, which is dependent upon the shock registered by a close-up image of the female genitals. Further, as Freud (who loved Sherlock Holmes) was aware, his case histories unfold very much like popular mystery novels of the kind that were also adopted by the cinema from its inception.

The history of psychoanalytic film criticism is extremely complex—partly because it is long and uneven, partly because the theories are difficult, and partly because the evolution of psychoanalytic film theory after the 1970s cannot be understood without recourse to developments in separate, but related areas, such as Althusser’s theory of ideology, semiotics, and feminist film theory. In the 1970s psychoanalysis became the key discipline called upon to explain a series of diverse concepts, from the way the cinema functioned as an apparatus to the nature of the screen—

spectator relationship. Despite a critical reaction against psychoanalysis, in some quarters, in the 1980s and 1990s, it exerted such a profound influence that the nature and direction of film theory and criticism has been changed in irrevocable and fundamental ways.

## Pre-1970s psychoanalytic film theory

One of the first artistic movements to draw on psychoanalysis was the Surrealist movement of the 1920s and 1930s. In their quest for new modes of experience that transgressed the boundaries between dream and reality, the Surrealists extolled the potential of the cinema. They were deeply influenced by Freud’s theory of dreams and his concept of the unconscious. To them, the cinema, with its special techniques such as the dissolve, superimposition, and slow motion, correspond to the nature of dreaming.

André Breton, the founder of the movement, saw cinema as a way of entering the marvellous, that realm of love and liberation. Recent studies by writers such as Hal Foster (1993) argue that Surrealism was also bound up with darker forces—explicated by Freud—such as the death drive, the compulsion to repeat, and the uncanny. Certainly, the films of the greatest exponent of cinematic Surrealism, Luis Buñel (*Un chien andalou*, France, 1928; *The Exterminating Angel*, Mex-

ico, 1962; and *That Obscure Object of Desire*, France, 1977), explore the unconscious from this perspective.

Not all theorists used Freud. Others drew on the ideas of Carl Gustav Jung, and particularly his theory of archetypes, to understand film. The archetype is an idea or image that has been central to human existence and inherited psychically from the species by the individual. Archetypes include: the shadow or the underside of consciousness; the anima, that is the feminine aspect in men; and the animus, or the masculine aspect in women. But generally, Jungian theory has never been widely applied to the cinema. Apart from Clark Branson's *Howard Hawks: A Jungian Study* (1987) and John Izod's *The Films of Nicolas Roeg: Myth and Mind* (1992), critical works consist mainly of articles, by authors such as Albert Benderson (1979), Royal S. Brown (1980), and Don Fredericksen (1980), which analyse archetypes in the film text. Writers of the 1970s who turned to Freud and Lacan—the two most influential psychoanalysts—were critical, however, of what they perceived to be an underlying essentialism in Jungian theory, that is a tendency to explain subjectivity in unchanging, universal terms.

Many of Freud's theories have been used in film theory: the unconscious; the return of the repressed; Oedipal drama; narcissism; castration; and hysteria. Possibly his most important contributions were his accounts of the unconscious, subjectivity, and sexuality. According to Freud, large parts of human thought remain unconscious; that is, the subject does not know about the content of certain troubling ideas and often much effort is needed to make them conscious. Undesirable thoughts will be repressed or kept from consciousness by the ego under the command of the super-ego, or conscience. In Freud's view, repression is the key to understanding the neuroses. Repressed thoughts can manifest themselves in dreams, nightmares, slips of the tongue, and forms of artistic activity. These ideas have also influenced film study and some psychoanalytic critics explore the 'unconscious' of the film text—referred to as the 'subtext'—analysing it for repressed contents, perverse utterances, and evidence of the workings of desire.

Freud's notion of the formation of subjectivity is more complex. Two concepts are central: division and sexuality. The infantile ego is a divided entity. The ego refers to the child's sense of self; however, because the child, in its narcissistic phase, also takes itself, invests in itself, as the object of its own libidinal drives, the ego is both subject and object. The narcissistic

ego is formed in its relationship to others. One of the earliest works influenced by Freud's theory of the double was Otto's Rank's 1925 classic *The Double* which was directly influenced by a famous movie of the day, *The Student of Prague* (Germany, 1913). In his later rewriting of Freud, Lacan took Freud's notion of the divided self as the basis of his theory of the formation of subjectivity in the mirror phase (see below), which was to exert a profound influence on film theory in the 1970s.

Sexuality becomes crucial during the child's Oedipus complex. Initially, the child exists in a two-way, or dyadic, relationship with the mother. But eventually, the child must leave the maternal haven and enter the domain of law and language. As a result of the appearance of a third figure—the father—in the child's life, the child gives up its love—desire for the mother. The dyadic relationship becomes triadic. This is the moment of the Oedipal crisis. The boy represses his feelings for the mother because he fears the father will punish him, possibly even castrate him—that is, make him like his mother, whom he now realizes is not phallic. Prior to this moment the boy imagined the mother was just like himself. On the understanding that one day he will inherit a woman of his own, the boy represses his desire for the mother. This is what Freud describes as the moment of 'primal repression'; it ushers in the formation of the unconscious.

The girl gives up her love for the mother, not because she fears castration (she has nothing to lose) but because she blames the mother for not giving her a penis—phallus. She realizes that only those who possess the phallus have power. Henceforth, she transfers her love to her father, and later to the man she will marry. But, as with the boy, her repressed desire can, at any time, surface, bringing with it a problematic relationship with the mother. The individual who is unable to come to terms with his or her proper gender role (activity for boys, passivity for girls) may become an hysteric; that is, repressed desires will manifest themselves as bodily or mental symptoms such as paralysis or amnesia. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (USA, 1960) and *Marnie* (USA, 1964) present powerful examples of what might happen to the boy and girl respectively if they fail to resolve the Oedipus complex.

Freud's theories were discussed most systematically in relation to the cinema after the post-structuralist revolution in theory during the 1970s. In particular, writers applied the Oedipal trajectory to the narrative structures of classical film texts. They pointed to the

fact that all narratives appeared to exhibit an Oedipal trajectory; that is, the (male) hero was confronted with a crisis in which he had to assert himself over another man (often a father figure) in order to achieve social recognition and win the woman. In this way, film was seen to represent the workings of patriarchal ideology.

In an early two-part article, 'Monsters from the ID' (1970, 1971), which pre-dates the influences of post-structuralist criticism, Margaret Tarratt analysed the science fiction film. She argued that previous writers, apart from French critics, all view science fiction films as 'reflections of society's anxiety about its increasing technological prowess and its responsibility to control the gigantic forces of destruction it possesses' (Tarratt 1970: 38). Her aim was to demonstrate that the genre was 'deeply involved with concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis and seen in many cases to derive their structure from it' (38). In particular, science fiction explores the individual's repressed sexual desires, viewed as incompatible with civilized morality. Utilizing Freud's argument that whatever is repressed will return, Tarratt discusses Oedipal desire, castration anxiety, and violent sadistic male desire.

### 1970s psychoanalytic theory and after

One of the major differences between pre- and post-1970s psychoanalytic theory was that the latter saw the cinema as an institution or an apparatus. Whereas early approaches, such as those of Tarratt, concentrated on the film text in relation to its hidden or repressed meanings, 1970s theory, as formulated by Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, and Laura Mulvey, emphasized the crucial importance of the cinema as an apparatus and as a signifying practice of ideology, the viewer-screen relationship, and the way in which the viewer was 'constructed' as transcendental during the spectatorial process.

Psychoanalytic film theory from the 1970s to the 1990s has travelled in at least four different, but related, directions. These should not be seen as linear progressions as they frequently overlap:

The first stage was influenced by apparatus theory as proposed by Baudry and Metz. In an attempt to avoid the totalizing imperative of the structuralist approach, they drew on psychoanalysis as a way of widening their theoretical base.

The second development was instituted by the fem-

inist film theorist Laura Mulvey, who contested aspects of the work of Baudry and Metz by rebutting the naturalization of the filmic protagonist as an Oedipal hero, and the view of the screen-spectator relationship as a one-way process.

The third stage involved a number of feminist responses to Mulvey's work. These did not all follow the same direction. In general, they included critical studies of the female Oedipal trajectory, masculinity and masochism, fantasy theory and spectatorship, and woman as active, sadistic monster.

The fourth stage involves theorists who use psychoanalytic theory in conjunction with other critical approaches to the cinema as in post-colonial theory, queer theory, and body theory.

### Apparatus theory: Baudry and Metz

The notion of the cinema as an institution or apparatus is central to 1970s theory. However, it is crucial to understand that Baudry, Metz, and Mulvey did not simply mean that the cinema was like a machine. As Metz explained, 'The cinematic institution is not just the cinema industry . . . it is also the mental machinery—another industry—which spectators "accustomed to the cinema" have internalized historically and which has adapted them to the consumption of films' (1975/1982: 2). Thus the term 'cinematic apparatus' refers to both an industrial machine as well as a mental or psychic apparatus.

Jean-Louis Baudry was the first to draw on psychoanalytic theory to analyse the cinema as an institution. According to D. N. Rodowick, one 'cannot overestimate the impact of Baudry's work in this period' (1988: 89). Baudry's pioneering ideas were later developed by Metz, who, although critical of aspects of Baudry's theories, was in agreement with his main arguments.

Baudry explored his ideas about the cinematic apparatus in two key essays. In the first, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus' (1970), he argued that the cinema is ideological in that it creates an ideal, transcendental viewing subject. By this he meant that the cinema places the spectator, the 'eye-subject' (1986a: 290), at the centre of vision. Identification with the camera-projector, the seamless flow of images, narratives which restore equilibrium—all of these things give the spectator a sense of unity and control. The apparatus ensures 'the setting up of the "subject" as the active centre and origin of meaning'

(1986a: 286). Further, according to Baudry, by hiding the way in which it creates an impression of realism, the cinema enables the viewer to feel that events are simply unfolding—effortlessly—before his eyes. The ‘reality effect’ also helps to create a viewer who is at the centre of representation.

To explain the processes of identification at work in the viewing context, Baudry turned increasingly to the theories of Jacques Lacan. Baudry argued that the screen–spectator relationship activates a return to the Lacanian Imaginary, the period when the child experiences its first sense of a unified self during the mirror stage. ‘The arrangement of the different elements—projector, darkened hall, screen—in addition to reproducing in a striking way the *mise-en-scène* of Plato’s cave . . . reconstructs the situation necessary to the release of the “mirror stage” discovered by Lacan’ (1986a: 294).

According to Lacan, there are three orders in the history of human development: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. It is this area of Lacanian theory, particularly the Imaginary and the Symbolic, that is central to 1970s film theory. Drawing on Freud’s theories of narcissism and the divided subject, Lacan proposed his theory of subjectivity. The mirror stage, which occurs during the period of the Imaginary, refers to that moment when the infant first experiences the joy of seeing itself as complete, and imagines itself to be more adult, more fully formed, perfect, than it really is. The self is constructed in a moment of recognition and misrecognition. Thus, the self is split.

Similarly, the spectator in the cinema identifies with the larger-than-life, or idealized, characters on the screen. Thus, as Mulvey (1975) later argued, the viewing experience, in which the spectator identifies with the glamorous star, is not unlike a re-enactment of the moment when the child acquires its first sense of selfhood or subjectivity through identification with an ideal self. But, as Lacan pointed out, this is also a moment of misrecognition—the child is not really a fully formed subject. He will only see himself in this idealized way when his image is reflected back through the eyes of others. Thus, identity is always dependent on mediation.

For the moment, the spectator in the cinema is transported back to a time when he or she experienced a sense of transcendence. But in reality, the spectator is not the point of origin, the centre of representation. Baudry argued that the comforting sense of a unified self which the viewing experience re-enacts does not

emanate from the spectator but is constructed by the apparatus. Thus, the cinematic institution is complicit with ideology—and other institutions such as State and Church—whose aim is to instil in the subject a misrecognition of itself as transcendental.

In his 1975 essay ‘The Apparatus’, Baudry drew further parallels between Plato’s cave and the cinematic apparatus. The spectators in both are in a state of ‘immobility’, ‘shackled to the screen’, staring at ‘images and shadows of reality’ that are not real but ‘a simulacrum of it’ (1986b: 303–4). Like spectators in the cinema, they mistake the shadowy figures for the real thing. According to Baudry, what Plato’s prisoners—human beings desire—and what the cinema offers—is a return to a kind of psychic unity in which the boundary between subject and object is obliterated.

Baudry then drew connections between Plato’s cave, the cinematic apparatus, and the ‘maternal womb’ (1986b: 306). He argued that ‘the cinematographic apparatus brings about a state of artificial regression’ which leads the spectator ‘back to an anterior phase of his development’. The subject’s desire to return to this phase is ‘an early state of development with its own forms of satisfaction which may play a determining role in his desire for cinema and the pleasure he finds in it’ (1986b: 313). What Baudry had in mind by this ‘anterior phase’ was an ‘archaic moment of fusion’ prior to the Lacanian mirror stage, ‘a mode of identification, which has to do with the lack of differentiation between the subject and his environment, a dream-scene model which we find in the baby/breast relationship’ (1986b: 313).

After discussing the actual differences between dream and the cinema, Baudry suggested that another wish lies behind the cinema—complementary to the one at work in Plato’s cave. Without necessarily being aware of it, the subject is led to construct machines like the cinema which ‘represent his own overall functioning to him . . . unaware of the fact that he is representing to himself the very scene of the unconscious where he is’ (1986b: 316–17).

In 1975 Christian Metz published *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (translated in 1982), which was the first systematic book-length attempt to apply psychoanalytic theory to the cinema. Like Baudry, Metz also supported the analogy between screen and mirror and held that the spectator was positioned by the cinema machine in a moment that reactivated the pre-Oedipal moment of identi-

cation—that is, the moment of imaginary unity in which the infant first perceives itself as complete.

However, Metz also argued that the cinema-mirror analogy was flawed. Whereas a mirror reflects back the spectator's own image, the cinema does not. Metz also pointed out that, whereas the cinema is essentially a symbolic system, a signifying practice that mediates between the spectator and the outside world, the theory of the mirror stage refers to the pre-symbolic, the period when the infant is without language.

Nevertheless, Metz advocated the crucial importance of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory for the cinema and stressed the need to theorize the screen-spectator relationship—not just in the context of the Imaginary, but also in relation to the Symbolic. To address this issue, Metz introduced the notion of voyeurism. He argued that the viewing process is voyeuristic in that there is always a distance maintained, in the cinema, between the viewing subject and its object. The cinematic scene cannot return the spectator's gaze.

Metz also introduced a further notion which became the subtitle of his book: the imaginary signifier. The cinema, he argued, makes present what is absent. The screen might offer images that suggest completeness, but this is purely imaginary. Because the spectator is aware that the offer of unity is only imaginary, he is forced to deal with a sense of lack that is an inescapable part of the viewing process.

Metz drew an analogy between this process and the experience of the (male) child in the mirror phase. (Metz assumes the spectator is male.) When the boy looks in the mirror and identifies for the first time with himself as a unified being he is also made aware of his difference from the mother. She lacks the penis he once thought she possessed. Entry into the Symbolic also involves repression of desire for the mother and the constitution of the unconscious in response to that repression. (Here, Lacan reworks Freud's theories of the phallus and castration.) Along with repression of desire for the mother comes the birth of desire: for the speaking subject now begins a lifelong search for the lost object—the other, the little 'o' of the Imaginary, the mother he relinquished in order to acquire a social identity.

As the child enters the Symbolic it acquires language. However, it must also succumb to the 'law of the father' (the laws of society) which governs the Symbolic order. Entry into the Symbolic is entry into law, language, and loss—concepts which are inextricably

bound together. Thus, entry into the Symbolic entails an awareness of sexual difference and of the 'self' as fragmented. The very concept of 'I' entails lack and loss.

When the boy mistakenly imagines his mother (sisters, woman) is castrated, his immediate response is to disavow what he has seen; he thinks she has been castrated, but he simultaneously knows that this is not true. Two courses of action are open to the boy. He can accept her difference and repress his desire for unification with the mother on the understanding that one day he will inherit a woman of his own. He can refuse to accept her difference and continue to believe that the mother is phallic. Rather than think of her lack, the fetishist will conjure up a reassuring image of another part of her body such as her breasts or her legs. He will also phallicize her body, imagining it in conjunction with phallic images such as long spiky high heels. Hence, film theorists have drawn on the theory of the phallic woman to explain the femme fatale of film noir (*Double Indemnity*, USA, 1944; *Body Heat*, USA, 1981; *The Last Seduction*, USA, 1994), who is depicted as dangerously phallic. E. Anne Kaplan's edited collection *Women in Film Noir* (1978) proved extremely influential in this context.

The Oedipal trajectory, Metz argued, is re-enacted in the cinema in relation not only to the Oedipal nature of narrative, but, most importantly, within the spectator-screen relationship. Narrative is characteristically Oedipal in that it almost always contains a male protagonist who, after resolving a crisis and overcoming a 'lack', then comes to identify with the law of the father, while successfully containing or controlling the female figure, demystifying her threat, or achieving union with her.

The concept of 'lack' is crucial to narrative in another context. According to the Russian Formalist Tzvetan Todorov, the aim of all narratives is to solve a riddle, to find an answer to an enigma, to fill a lack. All stories begin with a situation in which the status quo is upset and the hero or heroine must—in general terms—solve a problem in order for equilibrium to be restored. This approach sees the structures of narrative as being in the service of the subject's desire to overcome lack.

Furthermore, the processes of disavowal and fetishism which mark the Oedipal crisis are—according to Metz—also replayed in the cinema. In terms of disavowal, the spectator both believes in the existence of what was represented on the screen yet also knows

that it does not actually exist. Conscious that the cinema only signifies what is absent, the (male) spectator is aware that his sense of identification with the image is only an illusion and that his sense of self is based on lack. Knowing full well that the original events, the profilmic diegetic drama, is missing, the spectator makes up for this absence by fetishizing his love of the cinema itself. Metz sees this structure of disavowal and fetishism as crucial to the cinema's representation of reality.

• **Apparatus theory emphasizes the way the cinema compensates for what the viewing subject lacks; the cinema offers an imaginary unity to smooth over the fragmentation at the heart of subjectivity. Narrative structures take up this process in the way they construct stories in which the 'lost object' (almost always represented by union with a woman) is recovered by the male protagonist.**

Thus, apparatus theory emphasizes the way the cinema compensates for what the viewing subject lacks; the cinema offers an imaginary unity to smooth over the fragmentation at the heart of subjectivity. Narrative structures take up this process in the way they construct stories in which the 'lost object' (almost always represented by union with a woman) is recovered by the male protagonist. In her 1985 essay 'Feminism, Film Theory and the Bachelor Machines', in which she critically assessed apparatus theory as theorized by Baudry and Metz, Constance Penley made the telling point that Metz's 'imaginary signifier' is itself a 'bachelor apparatus'—a compensatory structure designed for male pleasure.

As *The Imaginary Signifier* began to exert a profound influence on film studies in many American and British universities, problems emerged. Critics attacked on a number of fronts: they argued that apparatus theory was profoundly ahistorical; that, in its valorization of the image, it ignored the non-visual aspects of the viewing experience such as sound; and that the application of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory was not always accurate. The most sustained

criticism came from feminist critics, who argued correctly that apparatus theory completely ignored gender.

### Psychoanalysis, feminism, and film: Mulvey

Psychoanalytic film theorists, particularly feminists, were interested in the construction of the viewer in relation to questions of gender and sexual desire. Apparatus theory did not address gender at all. In assuming that the spectator was male, Metz examined desire in the context of the male Oedipal trajectory.

In 1975 Laura Mulvey published a daring essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which put female spectatorship on the agenda for all time. As Mulvey later admitted, the essay was deliberately and provocatively polemical. It established the psychoanalytic basis for a feminist theory of spectatorship which is still being debated. What Mulvey did was to redefine, in terms of gender, Metz's account of the cinema as an activity of disavowal and fetishization. Drawing on Freudian theories of scopophilia, castration, and fetishism, and Lacanian theories of the formation of subjectivity, Mulvey introduced gender into apparatus theory.

In her essay, Mulvey argued that in a world ordered by sexual imbalance the role of making things happen usually fell to the male protagonist, while the female star occupied a more passive position, functioning as an erotic object for the desiring look of the male. Woman signified image, a figure to be looked at, while man controlled the look. In other words, cinematic spectatorship is divided along gender lines. The cinema addressed itself to an ideal male spectator, and pleasure in looking was split in terms of an active male gaze and a passive female image.

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Marlene Dietrich (here admired by Cary Grant) as fetishised spectacle (*Blonde Venus*, 1932)

She argued that, although the form and figure of woman was displayed for the enjoyment of the male protagonist, and, by extension, the male spectator in the cinema, the female form was also threatening because it invoked man's unconscious anxieties about sexual difference and castration. Either the male protagonist could deal with this threat (as in the films of Hitchcock) by subjecting woman to his sadistic gaze and punishing her for being different or he could deny her difference (as in the films of Joseph von Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich) and fetishize her body by overvaluing a part of her body such as her legs or breasts. The narrative endings of films, which almost always punished the threatening woman, reinforced Mulvey's argument about the voyeuristic gaze, while the deployment of the close-up shot, which almost always fragmented parts of the female form for erotic contem-

plation, reinforced Mulvey's argument about the fetishistic look.

Whereas Freudian and Lacanian theory argued that the castration complex was a universal formation that explained the origins and perpetuation of patriarchy, Mulvey demonstrated in specific terms how the unconscious of patriarchal society organized its own signifying practices, such as film, to reinforce myths about women and to offer the male viewer pleasure. Within this system there is no place for woman. Her difference represents—to use what was fast becoming a notorious term—'lack'. However, Mulvey did not hold up this system as universal and unchangeable. If, in order to represent a new language of desire, the filmmaker found it necessary to destroy pleasure, then this was the price that must be paid.

What of the female spectator? In a second article,

'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)' (1981), Mulvey took up the issue of the female spectator. Since the classic Hollywood text is so dependent upon the male Oedipal trajectory and male fantasies about woman to generate pleasure, how does the female spectator experience visual pleasure? To answer this question, Mulvey drew on Freud's theory of the libido, in which he asserted that 'there is only one libido, which performs both the masculine and feminine functions' (1981: 13). Thus, when the heroine on the screen is strong, resourceful, and phallic, it is because she has reverted to the pre-Oedipal phase. According to Freud, in the lives of some women, 'there is a repeated alternation between periods in which femininity and masculinity gain the upper hand' (quoted in Mulvey 1971: 15). Mulvey concluded that the female spectator either identifies with woman as object of the narrative and (male) gaze or may adopt a 'masculine' position. But, the female spectator's 'fantasy of masculinisation is always to some extent at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes' (in Mulvey 1981: 15).

It is this aspect of her work that became most controversial amongst critics, such as D. N. Rodowick (1982), who argued that her approach was too reductive and that her analysis of the female character on the screen and female spectator in the auditorium did not allow for the possibility of female desire outside a phallogocentric context.

### Developments in psychoanalysis, feminism, and film

Mulvey's use of psychoanalytic theory to examine the way in which the patriarchal unconscious influenced film form led to heated debates and a plethora of articles from post-structuralist feminists. Theorists such as Joan Copjec (1982), Jacqueline Rose (1980), and Constance Penley (1985) argued that apparatus theory, regardless of whether or not it took questions of gender into account, was part of a long tradition in Western thought whereby masculinity is positioned as the norm, thus denying the possibility of a place for woman. They argued that there was no space for the discussion of female spectatorship in apparatus-based theories of the cinema. Responses to Mulvey's theory of spectatorship followed four main lines: one approach was to examine the female Oedipal trajectory; another approach, known as fantasy theory, drew

on Freud's theory of the primal scene to explore the possibility of a fluid, mobile or bisexual gaze; a third concentrated on the representation of masculinity and masochism; and a fourth approach, based on Julia Kristeva's (1986) theory of the 'abject maternal figure' and on Freud's theory of castration, argued that the image of the terrifying, overpowering woman in the horror film and suspense thriller unsettles prior notions of woman as the passive object of a castrating male gaze.

### The Oedipal heroine

Drawing on Freud's theory of the libido and the female Oedipal trajectory, feminists extended Mulvey's application of the theory to argue for a bisexual gaze. Perhaps the spectator did not identify in a monolithic, rigid manner with his or her gender counterpart, but actually alternated between masculine-active and feminine-passive positions, depending on the codes of identification at work in the film text.

In a reading of Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (USA, 1940), Tania Modleski (1982) argued that when the daughter goes through the Oedipus complex—although she gives up her original desire for her mother, whom she blames for not giving her a penis, and turns to the father as her love object—she never fully relinquishes her first love. Freud also argued that the girl child, unlike the boy, is predisposed towards bisexuality. The girl's love for the mother, although repressed, still exists. In *Rebecca* the unnamed heroine experiences great difficulty in moulding herself to appeal to the man's desire. When she most imagines she has achieved this aim, the narrative reveals that she is 'still attached to the "mother", still acting out the desire for the mother's approbation' (1982: 38). Recently, the notion of the female Oedipal trajectory has been invoked in a series of articles published in *Screen* (1995) on Jane Campion's *The Piano* (New Zealand, 1993), which suggests that these debates are still of great relevance to film theory.

Other work raised related issues. In *The Desire to Desire* (1987), Mary Ann Doane turned her attention to the 'woman's film' and the issue of female spectatorship. Janet Bergstrom, in 'Enunciation and Sexual Difference' (1979), questioned the premise that the spectator was male, while Annette Kuhn, in *The Power of the Image* (1985), explored cross-dressing, bisexuality, and the spectator in relation to the film *Some Like it Hot* (USA, 1959).

## Fantasy theory and the mobile gaze

The concept of a more mobile gaze was explored by Elizabeth Cowie in her article 'Fantasia' (1984), in which she drew on Laplanche and Pontalis's influential essay of 1964, 'Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality'. Laplanche and Pontalis established three original fantasies—original in that each fantasy explains an aspect of the 'origin' of the subject. The 'primal scene pictures the origin of the individual; fantasies of seduction, the origin and upsurge of sexuality; fantasies of castration, the origin of the difference between the sexes' (1964/1986: 19). These fantasies—entertained by the child—explain or provide answers to three crucial questions: 'Who am I?' 'Why do I desire?' 'Why am I different?' The concept of primal fantasies is also much more fluid than the notion of fantasy permitted by apparatus theory, which inevitably and mechanically returns to the Oedipal fantasy. The primal fantasies run through the individual's waking and sleeping life, through conscious and unconscious desires. Laplanche and Pontalis also argued that fantasy is a staging of desire, a form of *mise-en-scène*. Further, the position of the subject is not static in that positions of sexual identification are not fixed. The subject engaged in the activity of fantasizing can adopt multiple positions, identifying across gender, time, and space.

Cowie argued that the importance of fantasy as a setting, a scene, is crucial because it enables film to be viewed as fantasy, as representing the *mise-en-scène* of desire. Similarly, the film spectator is free to assume mobile, shifting modes of identification—as Cowie demonstrated in her analysis of *Now Voyager* (USA, 1942) and *The Reckless Moment* (USA, 1949). Fantasy theory has also been used productively in relation to science fiction and horror—genres in which evidence of the fantastic is particularly strong.

## Masculinity and masochism

Richard Dyer (1982) and Steve Neale (1983) both wrote articles in which they argued against Mulvey's assertion that the male body could not 'bear the burden of sexual objectification' (1975: 28). Both examined the conditions under which the eroticization of the male body is permitted and the conditions under which the female spectator is encouraged to look. Neale explored three main structures examined by Mulvey: identification, voyeurism, and fetishism. He concluded that, while the male body is eroticized and objectified, the viewer

is denied a look of direct access. The male is objectified, but only in scenes of action such as boxing. Mainstream cinema cannot afford to acknowledge the possibility that the male spectator might take the male protagonist as an object of his erotic desire.

In her book *In The Realm of Pleasure* (1988), Gaylyn Studlar, however, offers a completely different interpretation of spectatorship and pleasure from the voyeuristic-sadistic model. In a revision of existing feminist psychoanalytic theories, she argues for a (male) masochistic aesthetic in film. Studlar's original study was extremely important as it was one of the first sustained attempts to break with Lacanian and Freudian theory. Instead, Studlar drew on the psychoanalytic-literary work of Gilles Deleuze, and the object-relations school of psychoanalytic theory.

Object-relations theory, derived from the work of Melanie Klein and, more recently, D. W. Winnicott, is a post-Freudian branch of psychoanalysis that places crucial importance on the relationship between the infant and its mother in the first year. Klein placed the mother at the centre of the Oedipal drama and argued for a primary phase in which both sexes identified with the feminine. She argued for womb-envy in boys as a counterpart to Freud's penis-envy in girls. In particular, she explored destructive impulses the infant might experience in its relationship with the mother and other objects (parts of the body) in the environment. During this early formative phase, the father is virtually absent.

Focusing on the pre-Oedipal and the close relationship formed during the oral phase between the infant and the dominant maternal figure, Studlar demonstrates the relevance of her theory in relation to the films of Marlene Dietrich and Joseph von Sternberg. In these Dietrich plays a dominant woman, a beautiful, often cold tyrant, with whom men fall hopelessly and helplessly in love. Titles such as *The Devil is a Woman* (USA, 1935) indicate the kinds of pleasure on offer. Studlar argues that the masochistic aesthetic has so many structures in common with the Baudry-Metz concept of the cinematic apparatus, in its archaic dimension, that it cannot be ignored and constitutes a central form of cinematic pleasure which had been previously overlooked.

Kaja Silverman also developed a theory of male masochism in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992). Silverman's aim was to explore what she describes as 'deviant' masculinities, which she sees as representing 'perverse' alternatives to phallic mas-

culinity. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian theory, and concentrating on the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, she examined the misleading alignment of the penis with the phallus and the inadequate theorization of male subjectivity in film studies. Silverman explored a number of different forms of male masochism, from passive to active. Her analysis of 'male lack' is particularly powerful, and her book, in which she argued that the spectator can derive pleasure through passivity and submission, made an important contribution to growing debates around psychoanalytic interpretations of spectatorial pleasure.

### The monstrous woman

Perhaps it was inevitable, given analyses of the masochistic male, that attention would turn towards the monstrous, castrating woman. Feminist theorists argued that the representation of woman in film does not necessarily position her as a passive object of the narrative or of viewing structures. Mary Russo's essay 'Female Grotesques' (1986), which drew on the Freudian notion of repression, was very influential. So, too, was the Kristevan notion of the abject as a structure which precedes the subject-object split. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories of woman—particularly the mother—as an abject monster, writers such as Modleski (1988), Lurie (1981–2), and Creed (1993) adopted a very different approach to the representation of woman in film, by arguing that woman could be represented as an active, terrifying fury, a powerfully abject figure, and a castrating monster. This was a far cry from Freud's image of woman as 'castrated other'.

### Criticisms of psychoanalytic film theory

Psychoanalysis exerted a powerful influence on models of spectatorship theory that emerged during the 1970s and early 1980s. One of the dominant criticisms of the apparatus theory was that, in all of its forms, it invariably constructed a monolithic spectator. In the Baudry model the spectator is male and passive; in the Mulvey model the spectator is male and active. Psychoanalytic criticism was accused of becoming totalizing and repetitive. Film after film was seen as always representing the male character as in control of the gaze, and woman as its object. Or woman was

invariably described as 'without a voice', or as standing outside the Symbolic order.

Rejecting the role of ideology in the formation of subjectivity, some critics were more interested in the actual details of how viewers responded to what they saw on the screen. Given that 1970s theory developed partly in reaction to this kind of empiricism, it is significant that, in recent years, there has been a renewal of interest in the area. This is evident in the work of David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, whose edited volume *Post-Theory* (1996) sets out to challenge the dominance of 1970s theory and to provide alternative approaches to spectatorship based on the use of cognitive psychology. Their interest is the role played by knowledge and viewing practices in relation to spectatorship. According to Carroll, 'Cognitivism is not a unified theory. Its name derives from its tendency to look for alternative answers to many of the questions addressed by or raised by psychoanalytic film theories, especially with respect to film reception, in terms of cognitive and rational processes rather than irrational or unconscious ones' (1996: 62). Judith Mayne argues that, while cognitivists have formulated a number of important criticisms of psychoanalytic film theory, 'the "spectator" envisaged by cognitivism is entirely different from the one conceptualized by 1970s film theory' (1993: 7). The latter addressed itself to the 'ideal spectator' of the cinematic process, while cognitivism speaks to the 'real viewer', the individual in the cinema. Mayne argues that all too often cognitivists, such as Bordwell, ignore the 'attempts that have been made to separate the subject and the viewer' (1993: 56) and recommends the writings of Teresa de Lauretis in *Alice Doesn't* (1984) as 'illustrating that the appeal to perception studies and cognitivism is not necessarily in radical contradistinction from the theories of the apparatus (as in the case with Bordwell and others), but can be instead a revision of them' (1993: 57).

Second, psychoanalytic theory was charged with ahistoricity. As early as 1975 Claire Johnston warned that 'there is a real danger that psychoanalysis can be used to blur any serious engagement with political-cultural issues'. The grand narratives of psychoanalysis, such as the Oedipus complex and castration anxiety, dominated critical activity in the 1970s and early 1980s, running the real danger of sacrificing historical issues in favour of those related to the formation of subjectivity and its relation to ideology. These critics proposed the importance, not of the grand narratives

of subjectivity, but of 'micro-narratives' of social change such as those moments when cultural conflict might reveal weaknesses in the dominant culture. They argued that film should be studied more in its relationship to history and society than to the unconscious and subjectivity.

Third, some attacked the centrality of spectatorship theory and its apparently exclusive interest in the ideal spectator rather than the actual viewer. Spectatorship theory did not take into account other factors such as class, colour, race, age, or sexual preference. Nor did it consider the possibility that some viewers might be more resistant to the film's ideological workings than others. Political activists argued that psychoanalytic criticism did not provide any guide-lines on how the individual might resist the workings of an ideology that appeared to dictate completely the formation of subjectivity as split and fractured. Furthermore, they argued, not all individuals are locked into roles determined by the way subjectivity is formed.

Cultural studies has developed partly in response to these problems. It sees culture as a site of struggle. It places emphasis, not on unconscious processes, but on the history of the spectator (as shaped by class, colour, ethnicity, and so on) as well as on examining ways in which the viewer might struggle against the dominant ideology. Whereas the cognitivists have clearly rejected psychoanalysis, the latter's status within cultural studies is not so clear as cultural critics frequently utilize areas of psychoanalytic theory.

Fourth, empirical researchers argue that the major problem with psychoanalysis is that it is not a science, that psychoanalytic theories are not based on reliable data which can be scientifically measured, and that other researchers do not have access to the information pertaining to the case-studies on which the theories have been formulated.

Psychoanalytic theories reply that by its very nature theoretical abstraction cannot be verified by 'proof'. Furthermore, the entire thrust of 1970s psychoanalytic film theory was based on the fact that there is no clear or straightforward relation between the conscious and the unconscious, that what is manifested on the surface may bear no direct relation to what lies beneath, that there is no cause-and-effect relation, which manifests itself in appearance, between what the subject desires to achieve and what takes place in reality. Only via psychoanalytic readings can one explore such things as displacement, disguise, and transformation.

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## Recent developments

Although psychoanalytic film theory has been subject to many forms of criticism over the past twenty years, it continues to expand both within and outside the academy. This is evident, not only in the work of cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, but also in the relatively new areas of post-colonialism and queer theory, and in writings on the body. Scholars working in these areas do not use psychoanalytic theory in the totalizing way in which it was invoked in the 1970s. Rather, they draw on aspects of psychoanalytic theory to illuminate areas of their own special study. The aim in doing so is often to bring together the social and the psychic.

Post-colonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha and Rey Chow have drawn on psychoanalytic theories in their work. Whereas earlier writers on racism in the cinema tended to concentrate on questions of stereotyping, narrative credibility, and positive images, the focus of post-colonial theorists is on the process of subjectification, the representation of 'otherness', spectatorship, and the deployment of cinematic codes. In short, the shift is away from a study of 'flawed' or 'negative' images ('positive' images can be as demeaning as negative ones) to an understanding of the filmic construction of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, the flow of power between the two, the part played by gender differences and the positioning of the spectator in relation to such repre-

sentations. In order to facilitate such analyses, theorists frequently draw on aspects of psychoanalytic theory.

In 'The Other Question', Homi K. Bhabha uses Freud's theory of castration and fetishism to analyse the stereotypes of black and white which are crucial to the colonial discourse. He argues that the fetishized stereotype in film and other cultural practices works to reactivate in the colonial subject the imaginary fantasy of 'an ideal ego that is white and whole' (1992: 322). Drawing on these concepts, he presents a new interpretation of Orson Welles's *A Touch of Evil* (USA, 1958). In his writings on the nation, Bhabha draws on Freud's 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', in which Freud refers to the 'cultural' unconscious as a state in which archaic forms find expression in the margins of modernity. Bhabha also uses Freud's theory of doubling, as elaborated in 'The Uncanny', to examine the way in which colonial cultures have been coerced by their colonizers to mimic 'white' culture—but only up to a point. Difference—and hence oppression—must always be maintained. Throughout his writings, Bhabha uses many of Freud's key theories, reinterpreting them in order to theorize the colonial discourse.

This approach has been adopted by other critics. In *Romance and the 'Yellow Peril'* (1993), Gina Marchetti focuses on Hollywood films about Asians and interracial sexuality. Adopting a position informed by post-colonial theory, Marchetti draws on psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship and feminine masquerade, refiguring these concepts for her own work on race.

In a similar vein, film critics, drawing on queer reading strategies, have carefully selected aspects of psychoanalytic theory to analyse film texts 'against the grain'. As in post-colonial theory, queer theory represents a methodological shift. It, too, rejects an earlier critical emphasis on praising 'positive' and decrying 'negative' images of homosexual men and lesbians in film. Instead, queer theory sees sexual practices—whether heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, autosexual, transsexual—as fluid, diverse, and heterogeneous. For instance, the practices of masochism, sadism, or coprophilia may be adopted by homosexual and heterosexual alike: the belief that only heterosexual relationships (or any other type of relationship, for that matter) are somehow 'normal' is patently incorrect.

As a critical practice, queer theory seeks to analyse film texts in order to determine the way in which desire, in its many diverse forms, is constructed, and how cinematic pleasures are instituted and offered to the spectator. Previously reviled films such as *The Killing of*

*Sister George* (GB, 1968), have been re-examined, and the history of the representation of gays and lesbians in film is being rewritten. In some films the homosexual and/or lesbian subtext, previously ignored, has been reinscribed.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), which presents a queer critique of the psychoanalytic concept of fixed gender identities, has exerted a strong influence on film theorists seeking to analyse the representation of gays and lesbians in film. Wary of the 1970s approach to psychoanalytic theory, because it largely ignored the question of the gay and lesbian spectatorship, film theorists have turned to the work of writers such as Butler, Diane Fuss, Teresa de Lauretis, and Lee Edelman (see Smelik and Doty, Part 1, Chapters 14 and 15).

A number of essays in *How do I Look? Queer Film and Video* (Bad Object-Choices 1991) discuss the fact that psychoanalytic approaches to the cinema have avoided discussions of lesbian sexual desire. In her article 'Lesbian Looks' Judith Mayne criticizes the way in which feminist film theory has employed psychoanalysis while also drawing on, and reinterpreting, aspects of psychoanalytic theory in her own analysis. Valerie Traub's article 'The Ambiguities of "Lesbian" Viewing Pleasure' (1991), on lesbian spectatorship and the film *Black Widow* (USA, 1987), provides a good example of a queer reading.

Another area in which film theorists have drawn on a rereading of psychoanalytic theory is that of the body. Contemporary interpretations of the horror film have generally favoured a psychoanalytic reading with emphasis on the workings of repression. Since the mid-1980s writers have paid particular attention to the representation of the body in horror—the grotesque body of the monster. Based on psychoanalytic theories of abjection, hysteria, castration, and the uncanny, such an approach sees the monstrous body as intended partly to horrify the spectator and partly to make meaning at a more general level, pointing to the abject state of the social, political, and familial body.

Other approaches to the body take up the issue of the actual body as well as the cinematic body. Steven Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body* (1993) presents a thorough attack on apparatus theory, arguing instead for 'an active and affirmative reading of the masochism of cinematic experience' (1993: 60). Drawing on the early work of Gilles Deleuze, he suggests that what 'inspires the cinematic spectator is a passion for that very loss of control, that abjection, fragmentation and subversion

of self-identity that psychoanalytic theory so dubiously classifies under the rubrics of lack and castration' (1993: 57). Shaviri is highly critical of what he sees as the conventional use of psychoanalysis to construct a distance between spectator and image; he wants to use psychoanalysis to affirm and celebrate the power of the image, and of the visceral, to move and affect the viewer.

I have referred briefly to aspects of post-colonial, queer, and body theory to demonstrate that film theory, in its current use of psychoanalysis, has become more selective and nuanced. While no one would suggest a return to the totalizing approach of the 1970s, it would be misleading to argue that application of psychoanalysis to the cinema is a thing of the past. If anything, the interest in psychoanalytic film theory is as strong as ever. And the debates continue.

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## Post-structuralism and deconstruction

Peter Brunette

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Post-structuralism is a rather vague generic name for a host of disparate theoretical developments that have followed in the wake of structuralism and semiotics. The term has been applied occasionally to the work of Michel Foucault and the later Roland Barthes, but most especially to the challenging and innovative revision of Freud propounded by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and to the work of Jacques Derrida, a kind of 'anti-philosophy' that has come to be known as deconstruction. Since the Guide contains a separate article (by Barbara Creed, Part 1, Chapter 9) detailing the crucial influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis on film studies, this chapter will concentrate on the application of Derridean thought to the cinema.

**Deconstruction is not a discipline or, even less, a methodology, but rather a questioning stance taken towards the most basic aspects of the production of knowledge. Like Lacanian psychoanalysis, it tends to concentrate on the slippages in meaning, the gaps and inconsistencies, that inevitably mark all understanding.**

If the mission and focus of film studies is seen as the formal and thematic interpretation of individual films, deconstruction has little to offer. Deconstruction is not a discipline or, even less, a methodology, but rather a questioning stance taken towards the most basic aspects of the production of knowledge. Like Lacanian psychoanalysis, it tends to concentrate on the slippages in meaning, the gaps and inconsistencies, that inevitably mark all understanding. As such, deconstruction has been seen by its critics as part of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that has developed out of the anti-foundationalist investigations of Freud and Nietzsche.

The specific application of deconstruction to film has been far less evident than that of Lacanian psychoanalysis, but Derrida's influence on such thinkers as (to name but two) Judith Butler, a gender theorist, and Homi Bhabha, a specialist in post-colonial studies, has been profound. These theorists have in turn had a tremendous impact on recent writing on film, and thus, in this sense, it is probably correct to say that the application of Derridean thought to film has been important but largely indirect. A further complication is that some on the left have denounced deconstruction because it tends to call *all* thinking into question, even that which presents itself as progressive and liberatory. In fact, Derrida's writings can be seen as thoroughly political in nature when they are properly understood as a critique of the out-

moded 'logocentric' thinking that has led to numerous political impasses now and in the past.

Nevertheless, several key deconstructive notions have been applied directly to film by a number of theorists in France and elsewhere. For example, a deconstructive perspective can challenge the historiographical assumptions that allow us conveniently to divide film history into specific, self-identical movements such as German Expressionism, Italian Neo-Realism, and so on. The notion of film genre as well is vulnerable to a deconstructive analysis, as is auteurism, and authorial intentionality, already much challenged anyway (see Crofts, Part 2, Chapter 7). Most importantly, perhaps, deconstruction challenges the very basis of interpretation itself, revealing the institutional and contextual constraints that necessarily accompany all attempts at reading.

Deconstruction can be approached from any number of different directions, but perhaps it can be most easily seen as a radicalization of the basic insights, developed around the turn of the century, of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure, considered the father of structuralism and semiotics, argued that there are 'no positive terms' in language; in other words, that meanings do not stem from something inherent in the words and sounds themselves, but rather from their *difference* from other words and sounds. Thus, all alone, the sound 'p' could never be functional, nor could the word 'truth' carry any meaning, but only in so far as they differed from 't' or 'r' or 's' on the one hand, or 'error', say, on the other. If this is the case, it becomes clear that 'error' is, in some strange way that defies traditional Western logic (which, Derrida claims, is based upon a 'metaphysics of presence'), part and parcel of the meaning of its supposed opposite, truth. Paradoxically, in other words, truth cannot be thought, and thus cannot even exist, without error. Error is thus both there and not there 'within' truth, both present and absent, thus casting doubt upon the principle of non-contradiction (the very basis of Western logic), that a thing cannot be A and not-A at the same time.

It can easily be seen that Western thought has, since the beginning, relied upon a set of self-identical concepts that align themselves as binary oppositions, such as truth-error, good-evil, spirit-body, nature-culture, man-woman, and so on. In each case, one term is favoured or seen as primary or original; the second term is regarded as a (later) perversion of the first, or in some way inferior to it. The principal work of decon-

struction has been to reverse and—since a mere reversal would not disturb the underlying binary logic—to displace these ostensible oppositions as well.

Since deconstruction builds upon the insights and terminology of semiotics, one of the first binary oppositions that is called into question is that founding distinction between signifier and signified. From a post-structuralist perspective, it is easy to see the latter as a transcendent, almost spiritual entity that is privileged over the 'merely' material signifier, which is usually seen as a dispensable container with no effect on the contained. Derridean thought tends rather to focus on the 'free play' between signifier and signified that constitutes all meaning, and to show that the marks of the material signifier never really disappear in the face of the signified.

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Furthermore, deconstruction, like Lacanian psychoanalysis, points out that meaning effects occur as a result of the sliding within chains of signifiers, rather than because a signifier leads inevitably to a signified. After all, when one looks up a word in the dictionary, what is found is not a fixed signified, but rather more signifiers, which must be looked up in turn. Despite this similarity in viewpoint, Derrida has criticized Lacan for the impermissible originary grounding that he seems to offer in his founding triad of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. (For deconstructionists, there can be no fixed ground or origin, since such concepts, once again, are symptoms of the metaphysics of presence.) For the same reason, deconstructive theorists have also tended to agree with the feminist critique of Lacanian film theory concerning its privileging of the phallus as the primary signifier from which all meaning arises.

In his early work, especially in *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida concentrates on deconstructing the symptomatic binary opposition that privileges, throughout the history of Western philosophy, speech over writing. In this book, Derrida shows that as far back

as Plato and as recently as Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss, speech has been associated with the living breath and the speaker's 'true' meaning, guaranteed by her presence, whereas writing has been seen as dead, misleading, always the sign of an absence. This is largely the result of the curious biological fact that when we speak (and listen), meaning seems to be an unproblematic, 'natural' event with no intermediary. Signifier and signified merge effortlessly, whereas in writing their relationship is always more problematic. Naïvely we seem to feel that if we could only have a writer speaking to us in person, in other words, *present*, we would know exactly what she meant. Derrida shows in this book that the supposed immediacy and directness of speech is a fiction, and that all the negative features associated with writing are characteristic of speech as well. In a familiar move, he reverses the hierarchy, putting writing before speech, and then displaces the hierarchy altogether by rewriting the term 'writing', as 'Writing', with an expanded, purposely contradictory meaning that encompasses both writing (in the conventional sense) and speech. As such, the term joins a host of other key terms that Derrida has developed over the last thirty years, including trace, hinge, hymen, supplement, and *différance* (he purposely misspells this French word to highlight its difference from itself, a difference that is reflected in writing but not in speech)—terms which attempt to name an impossible 'space', to express presence and absence simultaneously, without, however, becoming a new ground. In a (to some extent quixotic) attempt to circumvent the metaphysics of presence, Derrida declares that these terms are neither 'words nor concepts'.

This newly expanded sense of Writing can be easily applied to film, since, after all, the word *cinematography* clearly points to its 'written' nature. Like written words, whose meanings, according to Derrida, are always 'disseminated' in multiple directions rather than being strictly linear, the image can never be constrained to a single set of meanings. In fact, meanings that are located/constructed will inevitably be contradictory. Nor can authorial intentionality, already notoriously weak in film, be said to anchor meaning, for intention will always be divided, never a unity. In fact, film itself is fundamentally split between a visual track and an audio track, which actually occupy different physical locations on the strip of celluloid, but which are artificially brought together to achieve an effect of wholeness and presence. In all these senses, it can be

said that the image is thus fundamentally 'incoherent', since any attempt to make it cohere will always necessitate a more or less violent epistemological effort of repression of 'secondary' meanings.

Thinking of film as a kind of writing also complements the anti-realist bias of recent film theory, for it works against the idea that film can ever be a 'copy' of its referent. André Bazin and other realist theorists insisted upon the intrinsic relationship or similarity between reality and its filmic representation, but from a deconstructive perspective, once it is admitted that reality and its representation must always be *different* from each other (as well as similar), then difference has just as much a claim as similarity to being the 'essential' relation between the two.

More generally, deconstructive thinking can lead us away from a conventional idea of cinema, and its relation to reality, as an *analogical* one based on similarity, to an idea of cinema, as Brunette and Wills (1989: 88) have put it, as 'an *anagram* of the real', a place of writing filled with non-natural conventions that allow us to understand it as a representation of reality.

Broadly speaking, cinema itself is, as a medium, clearly produced through negation, contradiction, and absence. It depends for its effect on the absence of what it represents, which is also paradoxically present at the same time in the form of a 'trace' (which in the original French also means 'footprint', thus carrying the simultaneous sense of absence and presence). Similarly, the photographic process is based on a negation which is reversed in a positive print. And through the application of the (now partially discredited) notion of the persistence of vision, we can understand that we literally could not even see the cinematic image unless it were, through the operation of the shutter, just as often *not* there. (One film theorist has pointed out that the screen is completely dark about half the time we are watching a film.) The screen itself, as a material of support of the image, must also be there and not there at the same time, for if we can actually see it, we can see nothing else.

Deconstruction also calls into question the 'natural' relation between original and copy (for example, we never speak of an 'original' of a document, unless there is also a 'copy' in question; thus, in a sense, the copy can be said to create the original), and this has a profound effect on a mimetic or imitative theory of artistic representation. It is clear, for example, that a documentary, though it ostensibly 'copies' the reality it focuses upon, also helps to individuate that aspect of reality, to

bring it specifically to our attention, and thus to 'create' it.

This is closely related to another idea that Derrida has explored at great length, the notion of iterability (repeatability). Here, he has pointed out that each repetition of the 'same' must, by definition, also be different (otherwise, it could not be individuated). Similarly, each time something is quoted, it has a different meaning depending on its context, something that Derrida has shown is never fully specifiable. Here the idea of the 'graft', which is closely related to Roland Barthes's notion of intertextuality, is also important. All texts are seen as being made up of innumerable grafts of other texts in ways that are never ultimately traceable. For example, when we see an actor in a film, our response is inevitably conditioned by his or her appearances in other films; yet in a conventional, logocentric form of criticism such meanings would not be considered part of the film, properly speaking, and thus 'improper'.

This leads to another crucial binary distinction that deconstruction challenges, that between the inside and the outside. During the heyday of formalist literary analysis, Marxist and Freudian critics were chastised for 'importing' discourses that were seen as 'extrinsic' into a poem or novel. In regard to film, we might ask, for example, whether the opening or closing credits are 'in' the film, thus a part of it, or 'outside' the film proper, external to it. (Is a book's preface—usually written last—part of the book proper or not?) Similarly, one wonders whether Alfred Hitchcock's famous cameo appearances in his films mean that he is a character in them. Our inability to answer these questions points precisely to a problem in the logic of inside–outside binary thinking itself.

The larger question here, one that is explored at great length in Derrida's book *The Truth in Painting* (1978), is the question of the *frame*. In Derrida's famous formulation in that book, 'there is framing, but the frame does not exist' (1978/1987 81; translation modified). This means that the location of the frame (both a physical frame, say, of a painting, or an interpretive frame or context, or any sort of boundary marker) can never be precisely determined, though its effects can be seen. In film, the cut is similarly a function with clear effects, but no physical existence. Because it is a kind of relational absence rather than an explicitly present entity, it too serves to call into question the metaphysics of presence. With this ambiguity in mind, some deconstructive film theorists have suggested that, in

fact, it makes as much sense to base a film aesthetics on the cut (absence) as on the individual image (presence).

In any case, this idea of the frame is obviously paramount in film as well, and, though focused in a somewhat different manner, just as ambiguous. What is curious about this word in its cinematic usage is that it means two opposite things at the same time (and thus can be added to Derrida's list of key words): it is both the 'outside' boundary (one speaks of the 'frame-line'), and the entire *inside* of the image as well (Godard said that cinema is 'truth twenty-four frames per second'). More widely, the film frame can also be seen as that set of understandings of genre, or of the so-called 'real world', or of cinematic conventions, and so on, that we bring to a film—in other words, that context, ever changeable, that both allows and constrains meaning.

This frame, this image that is framed, can, furthermore, be seen both as heterogeneous (think of how many discrete elements within it must be repressed in order to 'interpret' it) and graphic (again, in the sense that it is *written*), as well as pictorial. Much of Derrida's later work has been involved with exploring the pictorial nature of writing (in the conventional sense) and, conversely, the graphic nature of the image, and these investigations are directly applicable to a study of how meaning is created in film. (See especially *The Truth in Painting* and Ulmer 1985, 1989).

The most important work done thus far in relating Derrida and film has been that undertaken by the French theoretician Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, notably in her book *Le Texte divisé* (1981). There, *inter alia*, she brilliantly compares Derrida's discussion of the hybrid form of the hieroglyph (which is made up of phonetic, that is, graphic marks that represent speech, as well as pictorial elements) with Eisenstein's development of montage theory. In both, meaning is seen as a complicated operation that comes about partially through representation, but also through the very disruption of the image itself in the form of juxtaposition. (For a provocative application of Derrida to television, see Dienst 1994.)

Perhaps the most far-reaching consequence of a deconstructive perspective on film concerns the act of interpretation. Ultimately, deconstruction shows that it is, strictly speaking, impossible to specify what a 'valid' interpretation would look like. (See Conley 1991 for the most adventurous application of this principle to the interpretation of individual films.) In this

sense, it might be said that deconstruction's most important work has been the investigation of the institutions that both allow and restrict reading, or meaning-making of any sort. It is important to note, however, that Derrida himself is no propounder of an 'anything goes' theory of reading, despite the impression given by his detractors and some of his more enthusiastic followers. Instead, he has always insisted upon the double nature of his work: to push beyond the bounds of conventional logic, all the while remaining rigorously logical.

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As film studies evolves more fully into cultural studies, deconstruction will provide a corrective by revealing the ultimately metaphoric nature of much of the terminology that surrounds the relating of cultural artefacts to an

economic or social 'base'. As such, its influence will continue to be powerful, if subterranean.

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# Film and postmodernism

John Hill

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The concept of 'postmodernism' is a notoriously problematic one, given the diverse ways (in both academia and popular discourse) in which it has been used. The term itself has been applied to an almost bewilderingly wide range of economic, social, and cultural phenomena, with the result that many commentators on postmodernism are not necessarily referring to, or focusing upon, the same things. Moreover, the epithet 'postmodern' is used not only to identify particular socio-cultural and aesthetic features of contemporary life, but also to designate new forms of theorization which are held to be appropriate to making sense of the new 'postmodern' condition. So, while postmodern theory and the analysis of postmodernism may go hand in hand, it is not necessary that they do so. Fredric Jameson, for example, is one of the most influential analysts of postmodernism; but he himself is not a postmodern theorist, given his commitment to conventional forms of social analysis and explanation (especially Marxism).

It is also fair to say that in relation to film, postmodernism has not led to a theoretical approach or body of critical writings in the way that other theoretical perspectives, such as psychoanalysis of feminism, may be seen to have. This is because it is in the character of postmodernism to be suspicious of unified theoretical frameworks and, if postmodern ideas have had an influence on film study, it has often been through unsettling the knowledge claims or ontologi-

cal assumptions of earlier theory (as in the theory of 'the subject' which has underpinned much psychoanalytic and feminist film theory). Moreover, the interest in postmodernism as an object of study has often been directed towards cultural shifts which go beyond a narrow attention to film, and if film has commonly been linked with the experience of modernity, then it is generally television, rather than film, which is seen to embody the postmodern.

In order to locate some of the ways in which ideas about the postmodern have influenced the study of film, it is therefore helpful to distinguish three main strands of thinking about postmodernism. Hence, the term can be seen to have been used in philosophical debates concerned with the scope and groundings of knowledge; in socio-cultural debates concerned to assess the significance of economic and social shifts in contemporary life; and in aesthetic debates concerned with the changing character of artistic practices in the wake of the 'decline' of modernism. These three sets of debates are not, of course, unconnected, but they are sufficiently distinct to make it useful to consider them separately.

## Philosophical debates

In philosophy, debates about postmodernism may be seen to demonstrate a growing suspicion towards

'universal' or all-embracing systems of thought and explanation. An influential source, in this respect, has been Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). For Lyotard 'the postmodern condition' may be defined in terms of a growing 'incredulity' towards what he calls 'les grands récits' or 'metanarratives' of Western thought (1979/1984, p. xxiv). In this respect, the 'modern' which the 'postmodern' is seen to be superseding is not the artistic modernism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century but the 'modern' system of thought associated with the Enlightenment (and philosophers such as Voltaire, Locke, and Hume) and its association with a project of 'scientific' explanation and mastery of the natural and social world. For Lyotard, the idea of progress characteristic of Enlightenment thought is no longer tenable, and he argues that it is now impossible to believe in either the progressive advancement of thought—the emancipation of reason—or the social and political emancipation to which it was once believed such reason might contribute. 'What kind of thought', Lyotard asks, 'is able to sublimate Auschwitz in a general . . . process towards a universal emancipation?' (1986: 6).

Lyotard's work, in this respect, may be linked to more general strains of post-structuralist thinking and to share with them a number of features. In general terms, these may be seen to include a suspicion of totalizing theories and explanations which attempt to offer comprehensive and all-embracing accounts of social and cultural phenomena; an anti-foundationalism that rejects claims to 'absolute' or 'universal' foundations for knowledge; a rejection of the 'false universalism' of ethnocentric or Eurocentric systems of thought; and an anti-essentialism that rejects both 'depth' epistemologies which seek to lay bare 'hidden' or 'essential' realities as well as ideas of a fixed notion of identity or human 'essence'. In this last respect, a critique of Enlightenment reason is likened to a critique of the unified self which was assumed to underpin it and provide it with its foundations. Thus Stuart Hall draws a distinction between 'the Enlightenment subject', which is based upon 'a conception of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action', and 'the postmodern subject', which is conceptualized as having 'no fixed, essential or permanent identity' but rather as assuming 'different identities at different times' (Hall 1992: 277).

Postmodern theory, in this regard, lays stress on the heterogeneity and fragmented character of social and

cultural 'realities' and identities as well as the impossibility of any unified, or comprehensive, account of them. As such, postmodernism is often seen as, and criticized for, embracing both a relativism which accepts the impossibility of adjudicating amongst different accounts of, or knowledge claims about, reality and an 'idealism' or 'conventionalism' which accepts the impossibility of gaining access to 'reality' other than via the 'discourses' through which 'realities' are constructed. Moreover, it has also been a tendency of many postmodern arguments apparently to belie their own precepts and 'universalize' their claims concerning the 'postmodern condition' or erect precisely the 'grand narratives' of the transition from 'modernity' to 'postmodernity' which it is otherwise argued are no longer possible. As Gregor McLennan suggests, 'the progressive decline of the grand narratives' is itself 'an alternative grand narrative' (1989: 177). In this respect, it may be helpful to distinguish the scepticism towards grand theory which is a feature of postmodern philosophy from the more substantive sociological and cultural claims which have been made concerning the character of postmodernity and postmodern culture, even though these are often interlinked (as in Lyotard's work, which is both an investigation into the status of knowledge in post-industrial society and a polemic against totalizing theory).

### Socio-cultural debates

Thus, in sociological debates, postmodernism has been used to identify the emergence of what is often believed to be a new economic and social order. This is sometimes linked to the idea of 'post-industrialism' (Rose 1991) and designated as either 'postmodernity' (Lyon 1994) or 'postmodernization' (Crook *et al.* 1992). 'Postmodernism' (or 'postmodernity') is, in this respect, seen to be following a period of 'modernity'. However, this is a term which is itself disputed and whose periodization is not always agreed. Thus, while 'modernity' may be seen to have emerged with the break with 'tradition' (and feudalism) represented by the advent of capitalism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it is more commonly identified with the economic and social changes characteristic of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and especially those ushered in by industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of mass social movements. Accordingly, the main features of the emerging 'post-

modern' social order are usually identified in terms of a transition from an old industrial order to a new 'post-industrial' one which is, in turn, characterized by a number of features: a decline in manufacturing and the increased importance of service industries (be they business and financial or heritage and tourism); the replacement of old models of standardized, or 'Fordist', mass production by new flexible and geographically mobile forms of 'post-Fordist' production involving batch production and the targeting of specific consumer groups, or market segments; a decline in the traditional working class and the growth of white-collar workers and a 'service class' (whose attitudes and tastes, some accounts claim, postmodernist culture expresses); and therefore a diminution of the significance of class identities and divisions and an increased importance of other forms of social identity such as those related to age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and region. In this respect, the shift away from the politics of mass movements towards a 'politics of difference' may be seen to link with postmodern arguments concerning the increasing contingency and fluidity of social identities in the contemporary era.

Such shifts are also identified with the growing importance (and convergence) of the new computing and communications technologies to the changing economic and social order. Media output and information services not only provide a major 'force of production' of the 'post-industrial' economy, but also increasingly exemplify 'post-Fordist' economic practices (Lash and Urry 1994). Even more importantly, the media and the new technologies are seen to be significantly reshaping social experience and subjectivity. Two main themes can be identified. First, the speeding up of the circulation of information and images through computer-linked systems and satellites, for example, has been seen as responsible for an increasing compression of time and space, a 'de-territorialization' of culture and the construction of forms of identity which are no longer strongly identified with place (Harvey 1989; Meyrowitz 1985). These processes may in turn be linked to arguments about 'globalization' and the mixing, and pluralization, of cultural perspectives and influences which the accelerated flow of people, goods, services, images, ideas, and information is presumed to permit (albeit that this is still characterized by acute imbalances of power). A second theme emerging from the analysis of postmodernism concerns how the media, and media images and signs, are increasingly identified as a key, if not the

key, reality for the modern citizen. The controversial French theorist Jean Baudrillard is particularly associated with this position.

In common with post-industrial theorists, Baudrillard identifies a transition from an old industrial order based upon labour and the production of goods to a new social reproductive order based upon communication and the circulation of signs (Baudrillard 1975). However, for Baudrillard, this change also provides the basis of a new cultural condition. It is not simply that we live in a world increasingly dominated by images and signs, but that these have become our primary reality. We now live, he suggests, in a world of *simulations*, or hyperreality, which has no reality beyond itself. Indeed, for Baudrillard (1983: 41), it is 'now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real': all that we have access to are signs and simulations. This provocative line of argument was pushed to extremes when, in 1991, Baudrillard examined the representation of the Gulf War as a 'virtual' event and declared that 'the Gulf War did not take place'. Although it is possible to read this as an argument about the changed character of contemporary warfare in the postmodern era, it also suggests some of the weaknesses of a postmodern perspective that both displays an indifference to the actuality of events beyond the 'simulacrum' and, under the guise of radicalism, simply joins a lengthy tradition of social commentary in attributing an exaggerated power and effectivity to media imagery.

Although the Baudrillardian vision of a media world of simulations is undoubtedly overstated, it does none the less direct our attention to the omnipresence within contemporary culture of media signs and images and their increasing detachment from exterior realities. However, it is television—given its continuous availability and presence within contemporary culture—that is most commonly associated with the postmodern condition rather than film. Thus, for Kroker and Cook it is television that is 'in a very literal sense, the real world . . . of postmodern culture, society and economy' (1986/1988: 268). This is not, of course, to say that arguments about film have not been informed by postmodern ideas. However, they have tended to be applied to individual films rather than, in the case of television, to the medium as a whole (albeit that this has then led to gross generalizations about the functioning of television 'in general'). At this point, it is therefore appropriate to look at the artistic context in which debates about postmodern film have occurred.



## Aesthetic debates

If postmodern philosophy may be linked to a failing confidence in 'universal reason' and ideas of progress, it is also possible to see certain kinds of cultural practice—designated as 'postmodern'—emerging as a response to a growing lack of confidence in the value or progressiveness of modernism in the arts and design. Much of the early debate about postmodernism was linked to a consideration of architecture, and it is in relation to architecture that some of these ideas emerge most clearly.

Putting it in general terms, modernism in architecture (as, for example, in the work of Le Corbusier, the Bauhaus group, Mies van der Rohe, and the International Style) has placed a particular emphasis on function and social utility. Modern architecture, in this respect, may be seen to have demanded a 'truth to function', involving a rejection of ornament and decoration in favour of a laying bare of the materials employed and clear display of their purpose. These architectural principles were also linked to 'modern' social objectives such as the provision of mass housing (even if they were not always implemented by politicians and planners with the appropriate degree of financial investment) and seen, as in the International Style, to be 'universal' in application. For Charles Jencks, postmodernist architecture should be seen as a response to the failure of this modernist project. Indeed, he associates the 'death' of modern architecture with such events as the collapse of the Ronan Point tower block in 1969 and the blowing up of high-rise blocks in St Louis in 1972. Such events, he argues, not only signalled the failure of modern architecture as 'mass housing', but also its failure to appeal to, or communicate with, its inhabitants (Jencks 1986: 19). Thus, for Jencks, postmodernist architecture seeks to reconnect with its occupants by rejecting the functionalism of modernism, making use of decoration and ornamentation and mixing styles from different periods and places (including the vernacular). As such, Jencks defines postmodernism in terms of the concept of 'double coding', involving 'the combination of modern techniques with something else (usually traditional building) in order to communicate with the public and a concerned minority, usually other architects' (14).

Jencks acknowledges that while 'double coding' may be a feature of postmodern culture more generally, the 'failure' of modern architecture is not directly

analogous to other arts. Andreas Huyssen (1986), however, suggests that the emergence of postmodern art, especially in the United States, may be linked to a certain kind of failure, or 'exhaustion', of modernism (or, more specifically, the version of modernism which became institutionalized in the United States in the 1950s). Postmodernism in this regard may be seen as a response to what Russell Berman (1984–5: 41) describes as the 'obsolescence of shock' and the corresponding loss of modernism's transgressive power. Due to its incorporation into the art market and its institutionalization as 'high art', modern art, it is argued, has lost its capacity to challenge and provoke as well as its capacity to communicate to a public beyond a small élite.

For Huyssen, the origins of this challenge may be found in pop art of the 1960s with its reaction against the dominant aesthetic of abstract expressionism and challenging of conventional notions of art through the incorporation of elements from popular culture. As such, pop art may be seen to embody a number of features which are now commonly associated with postmodern cultural practice. These may, loosely, be identified as eclecticism, an erosion of aesthetic boundaries, and a declining emphasis upon originality. Thus, just as postmodern philosophy and postmodern culture have been associated with pluralism, so the most commonly identified feature of postmodernism has been its eclecticism—its drawing upon and mixing of different styles, genres, and artistic conventions, including those of modernism. Postmodernism, in this regard, is to be understood as a movement beyond modernism which is none the less able to make use of modernist techniques and conventions as one set of stylistic choices amongst others. It is in this sense that Featherstone describes postmodernism as demonstrating 'a stylistic promiscuity' (1988: 203), while other critics have placed an emphasis upon its strategies of 'appropriation' and 'hybridization' (e.g. Wollen 1981: 168; Hassan 1986: 505).

A central component of this process has been a mixing of elements from both 'high' and 'low' culture (which may in turn be seen as an example of 'de-differentiation', or the breaking down of boundaries, which has been identified as a feature of postmodernism more generally). As Jameson has argued, artists of the 'postmodern' period have displayed a fascination with popular forms of culture such as advertising, the B movie, science fiction, and crime-writing. He suggests, however, that postmodern art does not simply 'quote'

popular culture in the way that modernist art once did, but that this quotation is incorporated into the works to the point where older distinctions between 'modernist and mass culture' no longer seem to apply (Jameson 1988: 113). It is worth noting, again, that the 'break' between modernism and postmodernism is in this sense relative rather than absolute. Thus, as a number of commentators have noted, many of the features associated with postmodernism (such as the appropriation and juxtaposition of diverse materials) were also a characteristic of modernism even if they did not possess quite the same significance for the work as a whole (e.g. Callinicos 1989: 12–16; Wolff 1990: 98–9).

Finally, the borrowing of styles and techniques characteristic of postmodern art may be linked to a declining premium upon originality and the personal imprint of the 'author' (who, in parallel with the 'Enlightenment subject', is seen to have undergone something of a 'death'). Thus, for Dick Hebdige, the postmodern use of 'parody, simulation, pastiche and allegory' may be seen 'to deny the primacy or originary power of the "author"', who is no longer required to 'invent' but simply 'rework the antecedent' or rearrange the 'already-said' (Hebdige 1988: 191). However, the opposition between modernist originality and postmodernist appropriation and replication is not as clear-cut as it is sometimes argued and, even in popular culture, the 'author' has remained curiously resilient. Thus, while a film like *Blue Velvet* (USA 1986) clearly exemplifies such postmodern features as eclecticism, the mixing of avant-garde and popular conventions, and an ironic play with surface signifiers, it has still been very much in terms of the presumed 'author', David Lynch, that the film has been put into circulation, discussed, and interpreted.

## Postmodernism and film

However, while individual films such as *Blue Velvet* and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) have figured prominently in debates about postmodernism and film, the identification of what constitutes postmodern cinema has not been straightforward. Three main kinds of concern have been in evidence. First, the organization of the film industry itself has often been taken to exemplify 'postmodern' features. Thus, it has been argued that Hollywood has undergone a transition from 'For-

dist' mass production (the studio system) to the more 'flexible' forms of independent production (the 'New Hollywood' and after) characteristic of 'postmodern' economies, while the incorporation of Hollywood into media conglomerates with multiple entertainment interests has been seen to exemplify a 'postmodern' blurring of boundaries between (or 'de-differentiation' of) industrial practices, technologies, and cultural forms (Storper and Christopherson 1987; Tasker 1996). Second, films have, in various ways, been seen to exemplify postmodern themes or to offer 'images of postmodern society' (Harvey 1989: 308–23; Denzin 1991). Thus, the dystopian character of the contemporary science fiction film might be seen to be connected with a 'postmodern' loss of faith in the idea of progress or the changing film representations of men with a breakdown of confidence in the 'grand narratives' surrounding masculinity and patriarchal authority (Kuhn 1990; Modleski 1991). Finally, films have been seen to display the aesthetic features (such as eclecticism and the collapse of traditional artistic hierarchies) that are characteristically associated with postmodernist cultural practice. However, the identification and assessment of such aesthetic features has not been without its complications.

This is partly to do with the diversity of films to which the label has been attached (including both mainstream Hollywood films as well as 'independent' or 'experimental' film and video) and partly to do with the difficulty of clearly differentiating a 'postmodern' filmmaking practice in relation to an earlier 'modern' one (especially in the case of Hollywood). These problems have been further compounded by the differing interests that have conventionally underpinned the concern to identify postmodernist film. On the one hand, the idea of postmodernism has been used to carry on a tradition of ideological criticism which has sought to identify the social conservatism of the aesthetic conventions employed by postmodern cinema. On the other, it has been used to discuss films which may be seen to continue the 'oppositional' or 'transgressive' tradition of 'political modernism' but through a deployment of what is regarded as more culturally appropriate (i.e. postmodern) means. In this respect, discussion of postmodern cinema may be seen to follow in the wake of earlier distinctions between a 'reactionary postmodernism' and a 'postmodernism of resistance' (Foster 1983: p. xii) or between a socially conservative 'affirmative postmodernism' and an 'alternative postmodernism in which resistance, cri-

tique and negation of the status quo were redefined in non-modernist and non-avantgardist terms' (Huyssen 1984: 16).

These tensions can be seen at work in the ways in which Hollywood films since the 1970s have been addressed. Since the emergence of the New Hollywood in the late 1960s it has been common to note in Hollywood films an increasing stylistic self-consciousness, use of references to film history, and quotation from other styles (e.g. Carroll 1982). The significance of this development is, however, contested. For Fredric Jameson, in his ground-breaking essay 'Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984), it is clearly to be read negatively. Jameson defines postmodern culture in terms of a 'depthlessness' representative of 'a new culture of the image or the simulacrum'; a new kind of spatialized temporality and consequent 'weakening of historicity'; and the creation of a 'new type of emotional ground tone' which he describes as 'a waning of affect' (1984: 58–61). In seeking to substantiate these points, Jameson points to the 'nostalgia film' of the 1970s (such as *Chinatown* (USA, 1974) and *Body Heat* (USA, 1981)). He argues that, as a result of their use of pastiche and 'intertextual' reference, such films may be seen to exemplify a characteristically postmodern loss of historical depth. Such films, he claims, are unable to re-create a 'real' past but only a simulation of the past based upon pre-existing representations and styles (67).

In this respect, Jameson's analysis links with other critiques of recent Hollywood cinema for both its 'emptiness' and ideological conservatism. Thus, it has been common to see the formal invention and social questioning of the New Hollywood films of the late 1960s and 1970s as giving way to a more conventional and conservative Hollywood cinema from the mid-1970s onwards, especially in the wake of the success of *Star Wars* (USA, 1977) (e.g. Ryan and Kellner 1988). This has in turn been associated with a decline in what Kolker has referred to as 'the modernist project' of New Hollywood filmmaking and its replacement by the 'postmodern American film' which 'has done its best to erase the traces of sixties and seventies experimentation' (Kolker 1988: pp. x–xi). In this respect, Kolker may be seen to link postmodernism with a kind of anti-modernism (or 'reactionary postmodernism') involving a return to the 'classical' conventions or 'a linear illusionist style' (p. xi). However, it is not entirely clear whether the distinction he draws is so clear-cut. For, clearly, the New Hollywood films may themselves

be plausibly identified as 'postmodern', given their self-consciousness about film history and film technique, extensive use of reference and quotation, and mixing of 'high' and 'low' art conventions (such as those of the European 'art' film and the Hollywood genre film). Similarly, although there has been an undoubted return to the 'classical' conventions of narrative and character in many post-New Hollywood films, this has also been accompanied by a continued (and, indeed, growing) use of quotation and mixing of genre elements.

Fredric Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche may be helpful in this regard. Although both parody and pastiche are conventionally associated with postmodernism, Jameson argues that, within postmodern culture, it is pastiche which is dominant. For Jameson, while parody involves a sense of criticism or mockery of the text or texts which are being parodied, pastiche simply consists of 'blank parody': a 'neutral mimicry without parody's ulterior motives' (1984: 64–5). Although it is not an unproblematic distinction, it does have some heuristic value in discriminating between the films of the New Hollywood and after. Thus, while a New Hollywood film such as Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973) quotes from film history and reworks genre conventions with obvious parodic intent—to debunk the myth of the private eye and the values he represents—the use of film quotations and references in a 1980s 'event' film such as *The Untouchables* (Brian De Palma, 1987) is largely characterized by the use of pastiche (as in the clever, but politically and emotionally 'blank', reconstruction of the Odessa steps sequence from the revolutionary Russian film *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925). As such, the film's use of pastiche offers less a critique of the male hero (as *the Long Goodbye* does) than an 'alibi' for the film's ideological conservatism by inoculating the film against being read too straight (in much the same way as the more recent *Independence Day* (1996) also invests its conservative militarism with a measure of tongue-in-cheek knowingness).

What this suggests is that the use of 'postmodern' conventions in Hollywood cannot simply be read off as ideologically uniform (or, indeed, that Hollywood films are *all* usefully labelled as 'postmodern' given the degree of aesthetic diversity which characterizes contemporary Hollywood filmmaking). Thus, for Linda Hutcheon, Jameson's 'blanket condemnation of Hollywood' is overstated and fails to take into account the 'oppositional and contestatory' potential of postmod-



**Hollywood postmodernism—  
David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*  
(1986)**

ernism which may be found in certain Hollywood films (Hutcheon 1989: 114). Unlike Jameson, she holds out the possibility of Hollywood films making use of irony and parody both to address history (as in Woody Allen's *Zelig*, 1983) and to 'subvert' Hollywood from within by their challenge to audience expectations concerning narrative and visual representation (even in such a 'light' film as De Palma's *Phantom of the Paradise*, 1974). Nevertheless, Hutcheon also acknowledges that postmodernist films are not always 'challenging in mode', that they are often likely to be 'compromised', and that, as a result of their reliance upon irony, they may also be 'ideologically ambivalent or contradictory' (1989: 107). Hence, most of her examples are actually films which are outside the mainstream of Hollywood production (*Zelig*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, (1985), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981)) or not Hollywood films at all (Suzanne Osten's *The Mozart Brothers*, Sweden, 1986), Maximilian Schell's *Marlene* (West Germany, 1983), and Peter Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts* (UK/Netherlands, 1985)). Indeed, more generally it is typical of writing concerned to identify a 'critical' strain of postmodernism within Hollywood that it focuses on films which tend to be unusual in Hollywood's terms (e.g. *Bladerunner*, *Blue Velvet*, *Thelma and Louise* (1991)) rather than ones which can be seen as typical.

Accordingly, it has often been outside of Hollywood that the 'adversarial' qualities of postmodern cinema

have been most firmly located. Despite its extensive use of 'allusion', Noel Carroll (1982) argues against the application of the 'postmodern' label to Hollywood filmmaking and, in a subsequent essay, identifies 'postmodern' film with the avant-garde, and specifically with various reactions against structural filmmaking, such as 'deconstructionism, the new talkie, punk film the new psychodrama, and the new symbolism' (1985: 103). In this 'alternative' tradition of filmmaking, the reworking of old materials and representations by postmodernism is interpreted not simply as a kind of surface play (or 'depthlessness'), but as part of a critical project to 'deconstruct' and subvert old meanings as well as 'construct' new ones through the repositioning of artistic and cultural discourses. Thus, Laura Kipnis explains postmodernism in terms of a cultural practice of 're-functioning' (1986: 34), while Jim Collins argues it involves the use of 'juxtaposition' as a mode of 'interrogation' (1989: 138). Thus, for Collins, the bringing together of different discursive modes in a film such as Hans-Jurgen Syberberg's *Parsifal* (1984) consists of more than just pastiche, or the aimless plundering of past styles, but both a questioning of earlier traditions of representation and 'a way of making sense of life in decentered cultures' (1989: 140).

In this respect, the critical engagement with prior representations has been seen as especially attractive to filmmakers who wish to challenge the traditional ways in which particular social groups or

'others' (such as blacks, indigenous peoples, women, and gays) have been represented and to do justice to the complexities of identity in the postmodern era. Thus, for Janet Wolff, the 'promise of postmodernism' for feminism is that, by employing the tactics of 'pastiche, irony, quotation, and juxtaposition', feminist cultural practice may engage directly with 'current images, forms, and ideas, subverting their intent and (re)appropriating their meanings' (1990: 88). Similarly, Kobena Mercer identifies the work of black British filmmakers in the 1980s as constituting 'a kind of counter-practice that contests and critiques the predominant forms in which black subjects become socially visible in different forms of cultural representation' (1988: 8). Despite the use of the term 'counter-practice' by Mercer, such filmmaking should, nevertheless, be differentiated from the Godardian model of 'counter-cinema' (or 'political modernism') and its apparent prescription of one 'correct' way of making political cinema which is universally applicable. Rather, Mercer argues that such films as *Territories* (1984) and *Handsworth Songs* (1987) employ a postmodern strategy of 'appropriation' which, through a reworking of pre-existing documentary footage, found sound, quotations, and the like, involves both a 'dis-articulation' and a 're-articulation' of 'given signifying elements of hegemonic racial discourse' (1988: 11). In doing so, he also indicates how such work represents a 'syncretism' or 'hybridity' which, he argues, is appropriate to the 'diasporic conditions' of the black communities in Britain (11).

In this respect, Mercer's work interlinks with postmodern and post-colonial emphases on the 'anti-essentialist' nature of social and cultural identities and what Ella Shohat describes as 'the mutual imbrication of "central" and "peripheral" cultures' in both the 'First' and 'Third Worlds' (1992/1996: 329). Although Shohat warns against any simple celebration of post-colonial hybridity, which she argues assumes diverse and ideological varied forms, she also suggests how hybridity can be used as 'a part of resistant critique' (331). Thus, she and her collaborator Robert Stam echo a number of postmodern themes (such as the breakdown of confidence in 'grand narratives' and the problemization of representation) in their discussion of how the 'post-Third Worldist' films has moved 'beyond' the anti-colonial nationalism and political modernism of films such as *Battle of Algiers* (Algeria/Italy, 1966) and *Hour of the Furnaces* (Argentina, 1968) to interrogate nationalist discourse from the perspectives of class, gender, sex-

ual orientation, and diasporic identity, and embrace what they call 'anthropophagic, parodic-carnivalesque, and media-jujitsu strategies' (Shohat and Stam 1994: 10). In all of these cases, filmmakers in the Third World are seen to make use of First World techniques and conventions but for politically subversive ends. Thus, it is argued that, 'in their respect for difference and plurality, and in their self-consciousness about their own status as simulacra, and as texts that engage with a contemporary, mass-mediated sensibility without losing their sense of activism', the 'jujitsu' strategies of such films as the Aboriginal *Babakiueria* (Don Featherstone, Australia, 1988) and the Philippine *Mababangong Bangungot* ('Perfumed Nightmare', Kidlat Tahimik, 1977) exemplify Foster's notion of a 'resistance postmodernism' (1994: 332). However, the appropriateness of the conceptualization and periodization of postmodernism in relation to non-Western cultures remains controversial, as does its relationship to the concept of the 'post-colonial', the debate around which has now effectively overshadowed earlier arguments about the postmodern.

### Conclusion: postmodernism and film studies

Although the debates about postmodernism have led to various discussions about the usefulness of the term in relation to film, it is less easy to identify a distinctive postmodern film theory. Postmodern ideas, in this respect, have tended to inform other film theories, rather than develop as a body of theory in their own right. In this respect, postmodern polemicizing against 'universalizing' and 'totalizing' theory has led to a certain refocusing of interest on the local and the specific which may be detected in the turn away from 'Screen theory' of the 1970s towards historical research, cultural studies, and an interest in the social and cultural specificities of non-Euro-American cinemas (and a more 'multicultural' and 'dialogistic' approach to their study). One illustration of this may be found in feminist film theory.

Although feminist film theory was crucially important in the mid-1970s in introducing questions of gender into the previously sex-blind 'apparatus theory' (see Creed, Part 1, Chapter 9), it itself became criticized for an 'essentializing' conceptualization of the 'female spectator' which failed to do justice to 'the multiple

and fluid nature' of the female spectator who 'may be, and/or be constructed as, simultaneously female and black and gay' (Kuhn 1994: 202). As a result, Kuhn argues that 'the future for feminist work on film would appear to lie in micronarratives and microhistories of the fragmented female spectator rather than in any totalizing metapsychology of the subject of the cinematic apparatus' (202). In this respect, the convergence of feminism and cultural studies around the question of audiences has already moved in that direction. However, as Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1988) have argued in their discussion of the relations between feminism and postmodernism, while postmodern feminism may share a 'postmodernist incredulity towards metanarratives', it 'must remain theoretical' and hold on to some 'large narratives' if 'the social-critical power of feminism' is to be maintained. In this respect, their recommendation that postmodern feminist theory should be 'explicitly historical' and 'attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods and to that of different groups within societies and periods' (1988/1990: 34) would seem to be a good recipe for 'postmodern' analysis more generally.

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