

Film as Social Practice

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Graeme Turner

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From seventh art to social practice - a history of film studies

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Early aesthetic approaches

The beginnings of motion-picture exhibition can be found in vaudeville, music-hall, amusement arcades, fairgrounds, and travelling shows. It commences almost simultaneously in France, Britain, and the USA. Commercial development of the technology began almost immediately after the first exhibitions. The French pioneers, the Lumières, sold their commercial interests to Charles Pathé in 1900, and this paved the way for large-scale commercial development and for initial domination by French film production. In France, the audience for the medium spread across the classes, but it remained working class for some time in the USA and Britain. In the US it began in penny arcades ('penny gaffs' in Britain) and in vaudeville houses as featured support to live acts, but within the first decade of exhibition it had moved into store-front theatres in, primarily, working-class neighbourhoods across America. In Australia, the travelling picture show man was also important, bringing his films to country towns and projecting them in local halls or marquees. In all cases, it was a medium that went as directly to its audience as possible.

The first films were not structured narratives, but brief one-shot recordings of everyday scenes, such as the Lumières' famous film of workers leaving their factory at the end of a shift. The models provided by vaudeville skits (performed in the same locations as the pictures were projected in) soon revealed what could be done with the addition of some fictional or comic structure. The brevity of these early films – some lasted for less than a minute – fitted music-hall 'sight' gags rather well, and the link between the feature film and vaudeville was often explicit and direct.

The French producer George Méliès is usually credited with the development of the narrative feature film, and he commenced commercial production in 1896. His most important contribution was to free 'screen time' (the amount of time taken to project the film on to the screen) from 'real time' (the amount of time actually taken to perform the actions or complete the events depicted on the screen). We take it for granted now that a screen representation of a war which lasted five years does not actually take that long; early feature

film, however, did not immediately grasp the possibility of intervening between the reality being filmed and its representation on the screen. Joining separate pieces of film – editing – made this intervention possible. The use of *editing* was pioneered by Méliès, and it enabled the film-maker to orchestrate the sequence of images on the screen rather than allowing this to be dictated by the subject matter itself. Méliès is also credited with the invention of other practices which made it possible for narratives to be structured – that is, speeded up, slowed down, in short, composed – with some economy. Such techniques as the *fade-out* (the disappearance of the image into black) as a method of transition or closure, and the *lap-dissolve* (a fade-out coinciding with the gradual superimposition of a new image) as a more elegant method of transition, have assisted all narrative film-makers since. They are early examples of the development of techniques which became formalized into a system of conventions that determines both film-making practice and the audience's 'decoding' or understanding of the narrative as they watch it. We will talk more about these conventions and this process of decoding in later chapters.

The date of the first narrative feature film is a perennial source of nationalist argument: England, France, the USA, and Australia all have contenders. What *is* clear is that within ten years of the beginnings of production and exhibition in Europe and America, the feature film industry had established the concept of the narrative feature and the means of composing it through shots and editing, and the first western had been produced (*The Great Train Robbery* (1903)). This immediate success and rapid development are perhaps less surprising than the rapidity with which this form of mass entertainment came to be seen as a new aesthetic form, a companion to sculpture, painting, or literature: the 'seventh art'.

In 1915, two events occurred which are worth linking in that they represent a kind of turning-point for the place of film within Western cultures. D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* was released to an extraordinary popular and critical response; in its epic scale (it was the longest feature so far) and the personal quality of its vision seemed to lie the potential of great art. The same year, 1915, also saw the publication of Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving*

Picture. Whereas prior to *Birth of a Nation* movies had been the subject of middle-class condescension, Lindsay, an American poet, used his intelligent, prescient, and clearly polemical book to stake film's claim to the status of the seventh art form. With very little in the way of existing feature films to support his position, Lindsay announced his intention of convincing the cultural institutions of America that the 'motion picture is a great high art'. Lindsay was not the only one to hold such a view, and much of the theory which succeeds him for the next forty or fifty years happily accepts this proposition. While the legal and governmental discussion of film concentrates on issues of class, entertainment, and morality, much early film theory argues over the definitions of, or prescriptions for, the aesthetic characteristics of film.

Griffith's next film, *Intolerance* (1916), failed to repeat his popular and critical success and thus he lost some of his pre-eminence in the US as the film 'artiste'. However, his influence spread beyond America and was particularly strong in the 1920s in Germany and Russia. There, state-funded film industries were producing films into which 'the film-maker as artist' was clearly inscribed. German expressionism and Soviet montage were fashionable and respected as developments of film's aesthetic potential, and came close to challenging Hollywood's leadership in the formal development of the silent feature. There seems to have been a strong prejudice against local films among the American intelligentsia in the 1920s, and a strong preference for the more 'expressive' (that is, more clearly the statement of an artist) films from Europe.

The 'expressive' use of film is usually defined as the reshaping of the raw material printed on celluloid, using images of the real world to 'make a statement'. The images become something else: art. Like the nineteenth-century novel, the expressive film sets out to create *its own* world rather than simply reproduce the one we know. Possibly the most important of the figures exploiting the potential of film as an expressive art at this time was the Russian exponent of montage, Sergei Eisenstein.

Eisenstein is an influential figure, and a customary starting-point for histories of film technique and film theory. As a theorist, Eisenstein is notable for attempting to understand the language of

film. As a film-maker, he used editing as his major tool to transform exposed film into a statement. According to his theory, the meaning of film is produced by the audience's contrasting or comparing the two shots which make up a montage (the physical joining together of two separate shots by splicing the film). Eisenstein was not interested in simply reproducing the reality he had filmed; he wanted to use the images he had filmed to create something new. As he saw it, two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality arising out of the juxtaposition. That new quality is constructed by the viewer. So, one shot of a face, followed by another of a loaf of bread, might create the idea of hunger through the *combination* of shots. The meanings generated by montage are more than the sum of their parts, and the editing technique which produces montage is the basic structuring technique behind film composition.

The idea that film simply recorded or reproduced images of the real world came under attack here. Instead, film was proposed as a medium which can *transform* the real, and which has its own language and its own way of making sense. And as far as this went, it was accurately understood. Montage *does* work as Eisenstein suggested; as a tool of Soviet education it was effective, its didacticism a political benefit. An irony is that its most common use in contemporary capitalist societies now is in advertising; this irony is lessened a little by the fact that it is also widely used in rock-music video clips. As we shall see, however, when we deal with subsequent critiques of Eisenstein and montage, it is only one way of communicating through film, not the basis of its language.

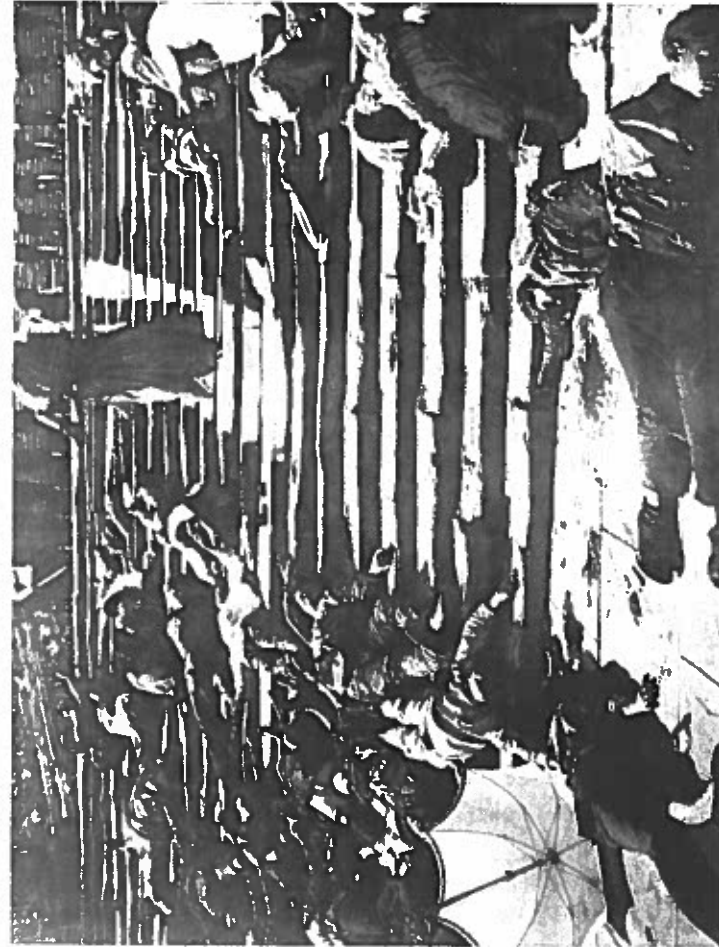
Eisenstein was not alone in his rejection of any view of film that would relegate it to the category of a simple recording agent. A number of theorists argued, in fact, that the very *limitations* of film as a recording agent were the factors which determined its artistic potential. Although many such positions are expressive, the extreme aestheticism which underlies them separates them from Eisenstein. When sound comes to the movies in 1927, such theories emerge in something of a rush. Rudolph Arnheim's *Film as Art* (1958, first published in 1933) is only one such argument which sees the silent film as a superior medium for aesthetic purposes; for Arnheim, the

silent film's inability to reproduce the world entirely realistically is the source of its artistic potential. The idea that art is an imitation of the real, a conventional literary and aesthetic tenet, is denied in order to propose film's special qualities as an art form. A by-product of such arguments was an attack on the 'lust for the complete illusion' of sound and colour on the movie screen. Realism and art were thus placed in opposition to each other, with the silent film being given the status of art while the sound film was dismissed as crass and vulgar.

Such approaches as we have been examining in the last few pages are usually considered under the label of 'formalism' in film histories. Formalist approaches see a film's forms of representation (its specific manipulation of vision and sound) as more important in the production of meaning than its 'content' or subject matter. The dubious distinction between form and content is thus blurred by the assertion that the form is the content. Formalism is an approach which examines the film text for its own intrinsic interest, without necessitating reference to its realism or its 'truth' to some version of the real world. Formalism is opposed to any view of film as the *capture* of the real world; instead it proposes film as a *transformation* of the real.

Realist approaches

The coming of sound to the feature film reinforced the trend towards greater realism of narrative form and structure which was already becoming apparent in the silent film. Sound was held to enhance greatly the illusion of reality. Further, within the individual film, the use of dialogue of some complexity and detail now made possible greater intricacies of motivation, more psychological versions of character, and complexities of tone such as irony or sarcasm. As pointed out in Chapter 1, the changes which followed the advent of sound were incorporated into the narrative feature's progressive imitation of the classic nineteenth-century novel, with its individualistic delineation of character, social world, and notions of personal and moral conflict.



6 Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*

If expressive or formalist views of film dominated the European silents, the advent of sound contributed to the conditions which favoured a revival of realism in European cinema after the Second World War. A further contributing factor may have been the brief burst of social realism in Hollywood films of the early 1930s (*Smart Money* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), or *Scarface* (1932)) – a mode quickly scotched by the industry's self-censorship mechanisms. However, a key factor in the post-war interest in realist film may well have been the success of the documentary movement in the 1930s and 1940s, initiated in the UK and led by John Grierson. The movement became known beyond the UK as documentary units were set up in Canada and Australia with Grierson's assistance, and later as wartime documentaries were made and shown. Now it is the most developed form of film-making after the narrative feature and probably the most respected.

This respect was won early. Under Grierson's leadership, the documentary film was seen to offer a social service in dealing with problems and issues of national importance (at a time, it may be said, when there was an unusually high degree of consensus about what was important). At the same time it offered itself as an aesthetic object: Basil Wright and Harry Watt's *Night Mail* (1936), for instance, has been representatively described as an 'aural and visual poem to man, machine, and the work they perform' (Sobchack and Sobchack 1980: 345). The documentary movement had a profound influence on British film, particularly the products of Ealing Studios, during the next thirty years. Britain's achievement of a reputation for 'quality' during the 1960s, a reputation largely drawn from the modes of documentary realism employed in films such as *This Sporting Life* (1963), has had an influence on the social realism in Hollywood films since. British television is probably the major beneficiary of this tradition, though, with the realist docu-drama (*Days of Hope*, *Boys from the Blackstuff*) becoming recognizable as a British genre. The social impact of film is also reinforced by the documentary movement, pushing aesthetics to one side in the face of social movements and upheavals that make art film seem a little self-indulgent. Such an effect is also reinforced by the major realist movement of the period, the

'neo-realism' of the post-war Italian directors, Rossellini, de Sica, and Visconti.

Neo-realist films look like documentary: they have a grainy, under-lit look, rather than the evenly lit, glossy image of the classic fictional film of the period. Neo-realists distrusted the use of narrative as a contrived structuring device; they often dispensed with actors and replaced them with 'real people' under the assumption that this would be more true to life, and they made extensive (for the time) use of location rather than studio shooting. The movement distanced itself as far as possible from the staged confections of previous Italian films – the epics and the sophisticated farces called 'white telephone' films – and dealt with social and political issues affecting everyday life in occupied and post-war Italy. For Italians in the mid-1940s, everyday life was a more than sufficient subject, and the aim of the neo-realist cinema was to deal with it as directly as possible – to capture 'the illusion of the present tense', as one director put it (Cook 1981: 391).

Neo-realism is a film movement – a body of films loosely directed towards similar formal or social ends – as well as a theory of what the cinema should be as an art form. Although the movement died out within five or six years, its influence has been profound in suggesting what relations film might have to the real world. Its influence on the French New Wave of the 1950s and 1960s is widely acknowledged, and there are a number of significant Hollywood directors who admit to its influence. Industrially, it exposed new acting styles and revealed the greater possibilities of location shooting.

We have been talking about European films and film theory at a time when Europe was not the dominant force in world feature film production, distribution, or exhibition. The 1930s and 1940s are the heyday of Hollywood, of the star system. The war's gutting of the competing European cinemas of France, Italy, Germany, and Britain had once again left the market open to American domination. Yet much film theory of the time ignores Hollywood, and concentrates on the realist aesthetic being developed in Europe. Eventually, as we shall see, it is through the arguments around realism that the renovation of interest in Hollywood and in American popular film occurs.

Bazin

André Bazin is the next key figure. Through his writings and his involvement with the French journal he founded in 1951, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Bazin is seen as a centre of realist approaches to film. Although he never developed his position in fully argued form, he has been extremely influential. Firstly, he consigned Eisenstein to the past. In contrast to Eisenstein, who saw the intrinsic nature of film lying in the *combination* of shots, Bazin saw the intrinsic quality of film in the *composition* of the shot itself – its specific representation of the real world. For Bazin, it is the real world which is the subject of film art. For Eisenstein, shots were only raw material, the ‘fragments of reality’ constructed into art through montage. Bazin found montage too manipulative, too distorting of the real, too much of an imposition of the film-maker upon the viewer. Instead, as he saw it, the shot and, particularly, the long uninterrupted take allow the viewer to scan the frame, to read and interpret what it represents.

Bazin looked to the movement and arrangement of elements within the frame or the shot in order to examine how meaning might be generated. The movement and placement of figures, camera position, lighting, set design, the use of deep focus, all merit greater attention from this perspective. Significantly, all these features also enhance the illusion of reality and thus constitute the ‘art’ of the film. For Bazin, the real and the aesthetic were not separable. As Brian Henderson (1971b: 397) has said, for Bazin ‘film art has no overall form of its own, but that of the real itself. Bazin has a theory of the real, he may not have an aesthetic.’

The term used to describe the arrangement of elements within the frame or the shot is *mise-en-scène*. The term itself has been more influential than Bazin’s wider theories, possibly because it inspired the rejection of Eisenstein’s claim to have established montage as the basis for a grammar of film composition. Further, the notion of *mise-en-scène* is useful in that it allows us to talk about the way in which elements within a frame of film, or a shot composed of many consecutive frames, are placed, moved, and lit. Since significance can be communicated without moving the camera or editing – for instance through a character moving closer to the camera or

throwing a shadow over another’s face – the concept of *mise-en-scène* becomes an important means of locating the process through which such significance is communicated. It is also widely used as a means of analysis of visual style in particular films or groups of films. Today, montage and *mise-en-scène* are no longer seen as mutually exclusive terms, but are contained within a notional grammar of film language.

The shift from montage to *mise-en-scène* can be seen as a shift towards an emphasis on visual style. Most importantly, emphasis on the interpretative role of the viewer in *mise-en-scène* prefigures a reorientation in film theory. It eventually results in a revaluation of popular film; more significantly, it begins the movement away from an examination of the relations between film and reality and towards an examination of the relationship between film and the viewer.

Auteurs and genres

Auteur theory is usually credited with having given the feature film an ‘author’. Instead of being a co-operative industrial project, a film became identified with its director, who was seen as its ultimate creator. This is something of a distortion of the *auteur* position, but an understandable one because the *auteur* theory *does* attempt to insert an author – in the literary, expressive sense – into films which had hitherto been regarded as the faceless, standardized products of a studio system. As such it is an odd theory to discuss while charting the decline of aesthetics; nevertheless, in my view, that is where it belongs.

A polemical article by French film-maker François Truffaut, published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1954, marks the beginning of *auteur* ‘theory’. Although its specific points were almost entirely enclosed within industrial and political conflicts in the French film industry at the time, it led to a position which was aesthetic in that it argued for the necessity of a personal vision or style in a director’s films; even some films produced under the most industrialized conditions (Hollywood) were held to bear the mark of an artist/*auteur*.