6

Classic film theory and semiotics

Anthony Easthope

from Hill + Church, Film Studies: Critical Approaches (NY: Oxford U Press, 2000)

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

CRITICAL APPROACHES

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.

> **Formalist theory (Arnheim) and realist theory (Bazin) appear to oppose each other. But *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.**

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

51

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 . . .'.

> **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.**

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 Mac-Cabe, 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.

> **'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'**

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 Quattrocentro 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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arnheim, Rudolf (1933/1958), *Film*; repr. corr. as *Film as Art* (London: Faber).

Barthes, Roland (1953/1968), *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill & Wong).

*Bazin, André (1967), *What is Cinema?*, 2 vols., trans. Hugh Gray, i (Berkeley: University of California Press).

Bellour, Raymond (1969/1972), 'The Birds: Analysis of a Sequence, trans. Ben Brewster (London: British Film Institute).

Brecht, Bertolt (1964), *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen).

Bryson, Norman (1983), *Vision and Painting: the Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan).

Comolli, Jean-Louis, and Jean Narboni (1969/1993), 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism (1)', trans. Susan Bennett, in Antony Easthope (ed.), *Contemporary Film Theory* (London: Longman).

Cook, Pam (ed.) (1985), *The Cinema Book* (London: British Film Institute).

Heath, Stephen (1976a), 'Jaws, Ideology and Film Theory', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 26 Mar.

54

—— (1976b, 1993), 'Narrative Space', in Antony Easthope (ed.), *Contemporary Film Theory* (London: Longman).

Jakobson, Roman (1960), 'Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', in T. A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language* (Cambridge: Mass.: MIT Press).

Kant, Immanuel (1790/1952), *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Lacan, Jacques (1964/1977), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth).

*Lapsley, Rob, and Mike Westlake (1988), *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

*MacCabe, Colin (1974/1993), 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', in Antony Easthope (ed.), *Contemporary Film Theory* (London: Longman).

*Metz, Christian (1971a/1974a), *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press).

—— (1971a/1974b), *Language and Cinema*, trans. D. J. Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton).

—— (1977/1982), *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton (London: Macmillan).

Propp, Vladimir (1928/1968), *The Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press).

Reisz, Karel, and Gavin Millar (1968), *The Technique of Film Editing* (New York: Hastings House).

Saussure, Ferdinand de (1916/1959), *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library).

Scharf, Aaron (1968), *Art and Photography* (London: Allen Lane).

Wollen, Peter (1976/1982), 'North by North-West: A Morphological Analysis', *Film Form*, 1/1: 19–34; repr. in *Readings and Writings* (London: Verso).