

The Recondite Revolution in Film Criticism, 1955-1970

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Özet

1960'lar, film eleştirisinin doğasında ve işlevinde daha önceki birçok şeyin etkili bir şekilde reddini içeren radikal bir değişime tanıklık etti. Bu makale, bu değişimin doğasını, dönemin politik ve ideolojik gelişmeleriyle ilişkisini, daha önceki eleştirel yaklaşımlara yönelik çıkarımları, dönemin en etkili film dergisi olan Cahiers du Cinéma'nın özellikle yazı işleri pozisyonundaki belirgin değişiklikleri vurgulayarak inceleme konusu yapar. 1950'lerin özelliği olan öznel ve daha saf sinemasal yaklaşımlardan bir sonraki on yılın semptomatik ve kuralcı eleştirisine doğru olan değişim, büyük ölçüde, 1960 sonlarının entelektüel ve sanatsal mayalanması için itici gücü sağlayan Paris üniversitelerindeki disiplinlerarası etkiden kaynaklanmaktadır. Bu makale, 'derin devrimin' devam eden mirasının, filmin doğasına ve etkisine dair önemli özelliklerin eleştirel literatürde dikkate alınmamasına neden olup olmadığını sorgulamaktadır ve bunun, uygunsuz bir biçimde yapısalılık-öncesi metinlere yönelik küçümseyen bir yaklaşıma yol açıp açmadığı konusunu dikkate almaktadır.

anahtar kelimeler: film eleştirisi, film çalışmaları tarihi, cahier du cinéma

Résumé

Les années 60, ont témoigné un changement radical qui consistait en un refus des approches précédentes sur la nature et la fonction du film. Cet article examine la nature de cette variation, sa relation avec les développements politiques et idéologiques de la période et les inférences à l'usage des approches critiques précédentes. Il met en relief les modifications apparentes particulièrement au niveau de la rédaction de la revue de cinéma la plus importante de cette époque: Les Cahiers du Cinéma. Le changement des approches cinématographiques subjectives et plus naïves, caractéristique des années 50, vers la critique symptomatique et impérieuse de la prochaine décennie, procède en majorité de l'effet interdisciplinaire des universités parisiennes qui étaient une propulsion pour la fermentation intellectuelle et artistique des années fin 60. Cet article interroge si l'héritage persistant de la "révolution ambiguë" a causé le mésestime des traits importants relatifs à la nature et à l'effet du film dans la littérature critique. Il prend aussi en considération la question de savoir si ceci a donné lieu d'une façon inappropriée, à une approche méprisante sur les textes pré-structuralistes.

mots-clés : critique du film, histoire des études filmiques, cahiers du cinéma

Abstract

The 1960s witnessed a radical shift in the nature and function of film criticism which effectively implied a rejection of much that had gone before. This essay examines the nature of the shift, its relations to the political and ideological developments of the period and the implications for previous critical approaches, highlighting in particular the changes evident within the editorial position of the Cahiers du Cinéma, the most influential film journal of that time. It is pointed out that the change from the subjective and more purely cinematic approach characteristic of the 1950s to the symptomatic and prescriptive criticism of the following decade was largely due to interdisciplinary influences, especially at the Parisian universities, which provided the primary impetus for the intellectual and artistic ferment of the late 1960s. The essay questions whether the enduring legacy of the 'recondite revolution' has caused significant aspects of the nature and impact of film to be overlooked in the critical literature and also considers whether it has led to an inappropriately condescending attitude to pre-structuralist writings.

keywords: film criticism, history of film studies, cahiers du cinéma

The object is an object for the subject,
 The subject is a subject for the object;
 Know that the relativity of the two
 Rests ultimately on one emptiness.

[Buddhist Sutra]

Introduction: Film Criticism in the 1950s

In 1954, the film critic Robert Warshow claimed: 'The Westerner presents an image of personal nobility that is still real for us.' In *Shane*, he suggested, the hero is 'hardly a man at all', he has become 'an aesthetic object, with some of the universality of a piece of sculpture' (Warshow, 1992: 457,463). In an echo of this, three years later, Roland Barthes wrote: 'Garbo's face represents this fragile moment when the cinema is about to draw an existential from an essential beauty, when the archetype leans towards the fascination of mortal faces' (Barthes, 1992: 631). André Bazin, founder of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the most influential movie journal of the 1950s, argued that the western had achieved 'a definitive stage of perfection', comparing *Stagecoach* to 'a wheel, so perfectly made that it remains in equilibrium in any position', and judging *The Naked Spur* 'the most beautifully true western of recent years' (Bazin, 1971: 151). It was in *Cahiers du Cinéma* that Jacques Rivette claimed the 'genius' of Howard Hawks to be 'a marvellous blend of action and morality'. Of *Monkey Business*, he wrote: 'The smooth, orderly succession of shots has a rhythm like the pulsing of blood, and the whole film is like a beautiful body, kept alive by deep, resilient breathing' (Rivette, 1953). Claude Chabrol concluded his article on *Rear Window* with these words: 'the inexpressible poetry which is the love of two human beings brings ... a fleeting vision of our lost earthly paradise' (Chabrol, 1955). In the same periodical a year later, Eric Rohmer commented on *Rebel without a Cause* that 'the word honour, out of the mouths of these apathetic, petit-bourgeois juveniles ... loses none of its pure, dazzling brilliance' (Rohmer 1956).

Fifty years later, despite the illustrious sources (Bazin, Chabrol, Barthes), such comments have an antique, decorative quality and seem naïve in their enthusiasms. Today, not one of these observations (camera shots like the pulsing of blood; a film like a perfect wheel; the noble cowboy; an actor's face with the universality of sculpture; the *leaning* of the archetype; marvellous genius; dazzling brilliance; inexpressible poetry) would appear in serious film criticism. They would be impermissible on two related counts: the subjectivity of the judgment and the lyricism of the expression. Yet such personal opinions, often lyrically expressed, were a commonplace in film literature in the 1950s. During the 1960s, the lyricism tended to disappear, but the subjectivity did not. In 1968, Andrew Sarris thought that 'film history devoid of value judgments

would degenerate into a hobby, like bridge or stamp collecting' (Sarris, 1968/1976: 239), and as late as 1973 Andrew Tudor concluded: 'the greater our analysis, the greater the invitation to judge' (Tudor, 1973: 125).

Towards Objective Analysis

In *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (1969), Peter Wollen argued for more rigorous standards of objectivity. He could still declare: 'Ford's work is much richer than that of Hawks', but added: 'this is revealed by a structural analysis'. In other words, the backing of an 'objective' methodology was held to legitimise the judgment. When Wollen described John Ford as 'a great artist', the reader was therefore to consider the judgment as based on narrative and thematic structures. Yet the process by which 'auteurism' was wedded to 'structuralism' seems forced, for the two critical approaches ostensibly had little in common. It was as if auteurism, the dominant approach to film studies in the 1960s, was obliged to accommodate the structuralist approach pioneered in the study of language and myth. The emphasis shifts from the personal imprint of the *auteur* to an analysis of the 'distinctive patterns' of the narrative and thematic structures. In this, Nowell-Smith's book on Visconti was seminal, with its insistence that 'loose indications' scattered throughout a text must be 'deciphered'. One sentence in particular has been widely quoted: 'The purpose of criticism thus becomes to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a hard core of basic and often recondite motifs' (Nowell-Smith, 1967: 10). The assumption that a 'motif' - the clue to, or trace of, a theme - can be both basic and recondite placed the critic in the privileged position of identifying significant patterns unrecognised by the film's director, editor and art director combined. Starting from this assumption, the critic was to become a kind of textual sleuth in what Ricoeur termed 'the hermeneutics of suspicion'.

Ideological Prescription

In the *New Left Review* of 1966, Wollen had conducted a debate with Robin Wood on the subject of Godard (Wollen 1966; Wood 1966). Where Wood saw one underlying theme to Godard's work - the search for a valid humanist tradition - Wollen identified a set of structural oppositions. But he also used his article to assert that Godard should be more political in his approach, indeed that the task of the artist was to 'contribute to social change through the political activity of critical filmmaking'. By implication, the task of the critics was also elevated, since it fell to them to define the theory on which the practice of filmmaking would be based. This development was given a powerful boost by the politicisation of the arts associated with events of the late 1960s, including the death of Che Guevara in Bolivia, the imprisonment of the French intellectual Régis Debray, the emergence of the Black Power movement, the US anti-war demonstrations, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy,

and, especially, the May 1968 events in Paris, an unprecedented element of which was the alliance of students and workers in a revolutionary movement (Calvocoressi, 2001: 227). When Andrew Lovell recommended in a 1969 article in *Screen* that criticism should be descriptive rather than evaluative, collaborative rather than individualistic and provisional rather than assertive (Lovell, 1969), his stipulations were in line with the ideas of the 'workers' collectives' which according to the critics then dominant in both *Screen* and *Cahiers du Cinéma* would replace the exclusive and privileged notion of the individual critic.

'Cinema and art are branches of ideology ... it is the job of criticism to help change the ideology,' wrote Comolli and Narboni in a 1969 *Cahiers du Cinéma* editorial (Comolli and Narboni, 1969). They proposed a sevenfold categorization of films according to whether the films in question upheld or attacked the prevailing ideology. In effect, this was a ranking system based on ideological correctness and, specifically, an attack on what had become known as the classic realist text. Critical attention was expected to focus on those texts where there was some ideological doubt or ambivalence. Under the fifth category, 'if one reads the film obliquely, looking for symptoms, if one looks beyond its apparent formal coherence, one can see that it is riddled with cracks: it is splitting with an internal tension that is simply not there in an ideologically innocuous film.' This is a significant moment in the history of film criticism. The function of the critic was not to only to understand and to illuminate, but to diagnose the 'symptoms' and *prescribe*. Thus at the end of the 1960s, the function of the film critic underwent a radical redefinition which derived from two distinct developments: the emergence of what became known as symptomatic criticism 'which was to an extent a predictable outgrowth of the structuralist approach, strongly influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis; and secondly the resurgence of radical politics in the universities and the arts and, in particular, the dominant influence in these spheres of the ideological hypotheses of Althusser.

The May events in Paris constituted the one enduring mark on the historical record of a decade of student radicalism in universities (boycotts, sit-ins, demonstrations, 'agit-prop', revolutionary agendas). One of the effects was to reinforce the position of Parisian intellectuals at the centre of theoretical developments of art, including film. Althusser was a professor of philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, with Derrida as colleague and Foucault as student. Levi-Strauss was for twenty-four years (to 1974) a director of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, where Roland Barthes lectured and where Lacan held his weekly seminars during the 1960s and '70s. Thus the five leading intellectuals of the structuralist and semiological movements, as well as the leading contemporary interpreter of Marxism, were simultaneously lecturing in the Paris universities. Levi-Strauss, Althusser, Derrida and Foucault all attended

Lacan's seminars, and all were associated with the Tel-Quel group founded by Philippe Sollers, who later married Julia Kristeva (Tredell, 2002: 144). This circle of academics was to exercise a powerful influence on the history of film studies from 1970. Various factors contributed to the emergence of this influence: the prior importance of the directors associated with the *Nouvelle Vague* and *Cahiers du Cinema* (Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette), which had put Paris at the centre of the avant-garde in film; the existing tradition in Parisian universities (unlike their Anglo-Saxon counterparts) of attaching real significance to theory; and the events of 1968. The common ground among the French thinkers was an agreement that 'classical' theory required radical revision in line with the contemporary versions of Marxist and Freudian thought, and a conviction that the production of meaning in a given cultural practice depends on its underlying structures. Although there were differences as to specific solutions, some of them profound, these men spoke the same language, acknowledged the significance of each others' work, studied and taught at the same universities, and adopted a broadly similar position to the political issues of the time. Whereas the *Cahiers du Cinéma* writers of the 1950s and 1960s were concerned exclusively with cinema, including its technical aspects, the Parisian professors were working in fields such as philosophy, linguistics, psychology and political science. The impact on film of their work was incidental, in the sense of not being directly intended or foreseen by the authors.

The Radicalisation of Film Criticism

It was the *Cahiers du Cinéma* article on John Ford's *Young Mister Lincoln* in 1970 that most clearly demonstrated the sea-change that had taken place within the editorial policy of the periodical and, more gradually, within film studies as a whole. The article was reprinted in *Screen* two years later and was the subject of several leading articles in *Screen*, *Film Quarterly* and *Cahiers du Cinéma* itself in the period 1972 - 75. It continues to be regarded as seminal in university film studies departments internationally. Written as a 'collective text', it carefully defines its critical purpose: 'What will be attempted here through a re-scansion of these films in a process of active reading, is to make them say what they have to say within what they leave unsaid, to reveal their constituent lacks'. What is the use of such a work? The 'structuring absences' reveal a 'double repression - politics and eroticism (which) allows the answer to be deduced; and this is an answer whose very question would not have been possible without the two discourses of overdetermination, the Marxist and the Freudian' (Editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1972). In effect, the article defined and demonstrated a method of 'reading' films which involved the revelation of 'what is already there, but silent ... to make them say not only what this says, but what it doesn't say because it doesn't want to say it.' The article referred to the works of Derrida, Barthes, Althusser and Lacan, among others. The language

employed included overdetermination, complementarity, intertextuality, meta-language, signification, decentring, modalities and other terms, which were to be a commonplace in film criticism thereafter. *Young Mr. Lincoln* was to be only the first of a series of films, chosen not 'for their value as external masterpieces but rather because the negatory force of their writing provides enough *scope* for a reading ... because they can be re-written.' For our present purposes, what should be highlighted is the requirement for the critic to 'read' the films so as to detect and analyse the 'absences' and actually to 'double their writing' (i.e. the writing of the films) by saying what they have left unsaid but are 'obliged to say'. The use of the word 'obliged' predicates a rule, which in turn relies on the authority of the two discourses specified above. The logical consequences of insisting that a film say more than it wants to, or perhaps can, need no elaboration. The emphasis is to be on the 'internal shadows of exclusion' at the expense of the 'external shadows' which can be 'purely and simply dismissed'. 'We do not hesitate to force the text, even to rewrite it,' the article affirms, 'insofar as the film only constitutes itself as a text by integration of the reader's knowledge.'

By this period (1970), cinema found itself at the heart of a movement of intellectual and political ferment which extended far beyond the streets of Paris. The radicalism of the time affected cinema especially among the arts because of the immediacy of cinema's polemical impact through its capacity to cut through barriers of class and education, a capacity well documented from the early Soviet and Nazi eras. Never had film occupied such an important place on the international political agenda and the line between 'mainstream' cinema and 'art' cinema was temporarily blurred. In 1968 Costa Gavras' *Z* drew large audiences and Marlon Brando, at that time Hollywood's highest paid actor, played the lead in *Queimada*, directed by Pontecorvo, whose previous film was *The Battle of Algiers*. *MASH* (Altman, 1969) and *Catch 22* (Nichols, 1970), mainstream movies by established directors, appealed to anti-war sentiment in the US. The portrayal of the legendary warrior saint in *Antonio das Mortes* (Glauber Rocha, 1969) offered a (Brazilian) model for revolutionaries; *The Battle of the Ten Million* (Marker, 1970), financed in France and Belgium, presented a pro-Castro account of the Cuban revolution. Costa Gavras tends now to be dismissed as a liberal (and *Z* as a 'potboiler'), while Altman's *MASH* is largely viewed as comedy, but such verdicts ignore the political impact that these films had at the time of their release.

The politicisation of cinema and the radicalisation of the universities had the effect of installing ideological concerns at the core of film theory. Lacan's *Ecrits* appeared in 1966, Derrida's *L'Écriture et la Différance* and *De la Grammatologie* in 1967, Foucault's *L'Archéologie du Savoir* and Kristeva's *Séméiotique* in 1969, and Barthes' *S/Z* in 1970, which also saw the completion of Levi-Strauss' four-volume *Mythologiques*. One of the characteristics of these

works was considerable - in some cases, extreme - textual difficulty. Lacan declared that his *Écrits* was 'not to be understood' but would reveal its meaning to the reader more in the way of a mystical scripture. The meaning of Foucault's *Les Mots and les Choses* (1966) was notoriously hard to grasp, while *S/Z* comprised a highly detailed analysis of a single novella by Balzac. Even for Francophones schooled in the relevant disciplines, the mastery of what would prove to be seminal theoretical texts involved a sterner intellectual challenge than the works of Eisenstein, Münsterberg, Kracauer, Arnheim or Bazin which together constituted the earlier theoretical basis for the study of film. It is arguable whether or not this reflects the gradual sophistication of film studies, with greater complexity signifying greater analytic profundity, but what is not arguable is that post-1970 academic film critics were obliged to be conversant not only with the technical aspects of filmmaking and the elements of *mise-en-scène*, but also with evolving psychoanalytical, linguistic, philosophical, sociological, political and economic theory. One result has been that academic critics acquire a working knowledge of these disparate fields the slightness of which is concealed behind a declared methodological approach and an abundance of quotation. A second result has been the growing divide between serious criticism and popular (journalistic) review. The latter continues to use the currency of opinion, taste and expressiveness, impermissible to the former. More and more, the audience of the academic critic is restricted to other academics. This divide in a sense matches the divide in film itself between art film and mainstream commercial film, the one low-budget, independent and experimental and the other concerned primarily with the maximization of profit.

Conclusion

Since the early 1970s, the ideological and methodological positioning of the critic has replaced the subjective opinion of earlier times. There may still be an implied judgment: a film may be judged 'regressive', 'flawed', 'incoherent'. Its narrative may be 'fragmented' or 'dislocated' or 'impaired'; its closure 'partial' or 'unsatisfactory'; its message 'obscure'. Its ideology may be 'innocuous' or not, as above. But, as Wollen had suggested, the judgment should be rooted in 'objective' analysis, or as the editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma* put it: 'Scientific criticism has an obligation to define its field and methods,' implying 'a rigorous analysis of the proposed field of study' (Comolli and Narboni, 1969). This begs the question: can any methodological analysis be truly objective, in particular where ideology is involved? Even a cursory study of a century of film theory would suggest not. The debates between montage and *mise en scène*, realism and expressionism, genre and the auteur, structuralism and deconstruction, belong to history. Nothing is more certain than that the debate over 'the subject' will alter its terms of reference, merge with other issues, transform itself and finally disappear. The principle of relativism should be applied to theory itself. A theory is relatively true, or relatively useful, for the

epoch that hatches it, the films that give rise to it, the ideological purposes it serves. In film studies, the 'revolution' of the late 1960s initiated a period of structuralist dominance the legacy of which was an altered definition of the critic's function, one of diagnosis and prescription. It is harder to define the function that was replaced. Insight and illumination?

The 'hermeneutics of suspicion' is a telling phrase, and its most significant casualty in film criticism is *emotion*, by definition irrational. Even some structuralist practitioners were aware of the inability of the methodology to capture or explain the emotional impact of a given film, a shortcoming to which Rohdie drew attention at the apogee of structuralist influence (Rohdie, 1970). Structuralism has since been the object of powerful attacks, notably in Carroll and Bordwell's *Post Theory* (1996), which exposed the oversimplifications and misapplications of the 'symptomatic' method. Film criticism and its theoretical framework have meanwhile evolved, with the cognitive approach, as outlined for example in Grodal's *New Theory of Film Genres, Feeling and Cognition* (1997), establishing itself as a radical alternative, more alert both to history and to the emotions. What is argued here is that the 'recondite' revolution has left behind it a 'recondite' legacy - traces of what may be termed an ideological correctness bearing the authoritative signature of Parisian academic circles of the late 1960s.

The response of most viewers to most films is still primarily emotional. This is what provoked Chabrol to write of 'inexpressible poetry' in *Rear Window*, or Rohmer of 'pure, dazzling brilliance' in *Rebel without a Cause* or Bazin to describe *The Naked Spur* as a 'beautifully true western'. What are we to make of these comments now? Are we to say that because their authors knew nothing of post-structuralism, postcolonialism or postmodernism, they cannot be taken seriously? There is a tendency, more marked in the contemporary era than in previous eras, and more marked in the West, with its talent for innovation and its relish for change, than in the old East, to regard the past as the childhood of the present - involving an element of intellectual condescension which when objectively examined (without any more or less ephemeral ideological agenda) may be found inappropriate to a profound understanding of how cinema works.

However the proper function of the critic is defined, there must be a relation between filmmaking and film criticism, and it must be close. If criticism is essentially a prescriptive function, films should have become ideologically sounder - the 'fissures' narrower, the unconscious concealments and the role of the 'dominant ideology' reduced. If criticism is concerned with providing insights to viewers, then audiences should have become more perceptive, more demanding. In the present critical climate, neither seems likely.

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