FLM003 What is Cinema? Critical Approaches

Week 4: Cognitive Approaches:
Narrative comprehension and character identification

Key Reading:


David Bordwell (1989), ‘A Case for Cognitivism’ [and ‘Cognitive Film Theory’] Iris, 9, Spring, pp. 11-40. Available on QM+

See especially pp. 29-47 and pp. 48-73.


Further Reading on cognitive approaches:


Viewing:

Marsville (Angela Schanelec, 2004)

Rear Window (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)
Lecture Structure

1. **How do we make sense of a film? How do we make sense of an opening sequence?**

   The opening of the film *Marseille* (Angela Schanelec, 2004) challenges us as it refuses to give much information about the relationship of its protagonist(s) to other people, to locations, to specific events. What do we expect from a conventional film narrative? How does *Marseille* use camera positioning, lighting, framing, sound, performance, dialogue etc. to challenge our expectations in the first sequence? How do we make sense of the opening? What kind of filmic world is created? How does this opening cue us in to understanding what will be the central issues of the film?

2. **Definition of ‘cognition’**

   Basically, it is concerned with our mental processes, with our beliefs, desires, and intentions, and particularly about how we process information—a key element in cognitivist-influenced approaches to the cinema.

3. **Cognitive approaches to film**

   Cognitive theory can be seen as a model of the norms, principles and conventions that explain how spectators routinely make sense of films. Cognitive approaches attempt to explain how we make sense of narratives and how we identify with characters on screen.

4. **Cognitivism versus psychoanalysis**

   Psychoanalytic theorists would argue that consciousness is only a small part of our identity, as so much (drives, desires, fantasy, trauma etc.) remains hidden or repressed. For cognitive scientists on the other hand, consciousness is not just a small part, but the whole key to our identity.

5. **Cognitivism and perceptual psychology**

   Cinema is visual—perceptual accounts of film viewing suggest that we make sense of the cinematic world in similar ways to our understanding of the world around us. No need to think of film as a language as semiotics had suggested.

6. **Cognitive theories of narrative**

   Spectators do not simply absorb passively a finished pre-existing narrative, but work actively to construct its meaning from information and clues given in the unfolding of the film. See overleaf for Bordwell’s key terms.

7. **The limits of cognitive approaches**

   How would cognitivism evaluate films? Is cognitivism a backwards step in its bracketing out (ignoring) the ‘location’ of the viewer? Do we simply go to the cinema to make inferences and test hypotheses? Is cinema ultimately concerned with rational processes?
Seminar questions

1. How do we make sense of a film? How do we make sense of an opening sequence?

   The opening of the film *Marseille* (Angela Schanelec, 2004) challenges us as it refuses to give much information about the relationship of its protagonist(s) to other people, to locations, to specific events. What do we expect from a conventional film narrative? How does *Marseille* use camera positioning, lighting, framing, sound, performance, dialogue to challenge our expectations in the first sequence?

   How do we make sense of the opening? What kind of filmic world is created? How does this opening cue us in to understanding what will be the central issues of the film?

2. What are the main characteristics of a 'cognitive' approach to questions of the cinema?

3. Why do cognitive theorists generally define their work as antithetical to psychoanalytic film theory?

4. Why do cognitive theorists generally ignore questions concerning the 'location' (i.e. class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity etc.) of the spectator in their analyses?

5. What does David Bordwell mean by the terms *fabula* and *syuzhet*? How does Bordwell define narration in terms of *fabula*, *syuzhet*, and film style?
6. How useful is Bordwell’s approach overall to analysing a film like Marseille? At which points in that film, if any, does Bordwell’s approach seem unhelpful?

7. What does Murray Smith mean by the three different levels of character engagement, namely ‘recognition’, ‘alignment’ and ‘allegiance’? Does this proposal help us to understand the challenges of engaging with the characters in Marseille, particularly with Sophie?

8. Roger F. Cook argues that Marseille and similar recent films ‘deliberately avoid cues that signal the significance of events with respect to the unfolding story. Plot structures that normally convey meaning and generate intensity are reduced to a minimum, and filmic strategies conventionally employed to build a narrative intrigue are avoided. Their films consist of frequent long takes without a central event or climax to serve as a dramatic focal point. [... ] Minimalist styles of acting further dedramatize the plot, and the films provide little background information that might help the viewer understand the characters’ motives or goals.’ (154-55)

The directors might argue that this allows them space to move away from the clichés of mainstream cinema, and to allow them to find images that help viewers resee ‘the film world and [their] own contemporary reality’ - did the film Marseille work for you in this way?
Bordwell's terms (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, pp. 49-62): Narrative films cue spectators to make hypotheses or inferences.

canonical story format

fabula

syuzhet

style

curiosity hypothesis

suspense hypothesis

probable/improbable hypothesis

temporary/permanent gap

flaunted/suppressed gap

diffused/focused gap

syuzhet knowledgeability

syuzhet self-consciousness

syuzhet communicativeness