FLM/003 What is Cinema? Theoretical Approaches

Week 2: Early Sociological Approaches: Cinema as Mass Culture

Primary Literature:


[Extracts in English available:]


- 'Photography' pp. 47-63.
- 'The Mass Ornament' pp. 75-86.
- 'The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies' pp. 291-304.
- 'Film 1928' pp. 307-320.
- 'Cult of Distraction' pp. 323-328. [See attached photocopy].

Secondary Literature:


Viewing:

*Die Austernprinzessin (The Oyster Princess)* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1919)
**Lecture**

**Key points:**

i) Modernity and the emergence of cinema - 'What is Cinema?' — the bourgeois answer would be: a new (mass/working class) site which needs to be regulated, a threat to order: immoral, unhealthy, destabilising.

ii) Altenloh's *Sociology of the Cinema*: moves beyond bourgeois critics' moral judgements and prejudices against the cinema; an attempt to answer the question, 'What is Cinema?' from the inside, from surveying audience statements about the cinema’s appeal and about the nature of the cinematic experience.

iii) 'What is Cinema?' — Altenloh tells us it is a phenomenon which creates a new set of groupings in society which are not limited to traditional class divisions; 'What is Cinema?' — a phenomenon (social space/experience) which is particularly appealing to women of all classes.

iv) Kracauer and the inversion of old hierarchies: the need to trace modernity in its ephemera, its trivialities, its surfaces – a 'phenomenology of the surface.'

v) 'What is Cinema?' — Kracauer — it is (potentially) a revolutionary medium in its representations of the truth of modernity. The importance of 'distraction' as a way of experiencing and perceiving the shocks of modernity.
Seminar questions:

1. How does Die Austernprinzessin (The Oyster Princess) specifically address an imagined female spectator?

2. How does the film work to suggest ways of being modern for women?

3. How does the film draw attention to various ways of viewing and acts of looking? How might these instances be understood as commenting on the nature of cinema itself?

4. How does Altenloh account for the emergence of cinema and for its appeal to contemporary audiences?

5. How might Altenloh’s work be useful to contemporary work on the cinema?

6. Why does Kraus see ‘distraction’ (Zerstreuung) in positive, as well as negative, terms?

7. How does the film industry negate the potentials of cinema for becoming a site for understanding modernity?