POST-THEORY, NEO-FORMALISM AND COGNITIVISM

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Introduction: Post-theory

During the 1970s, film studies was dominated by what has come to be known as 'Grand Theory'. Grand Theories are so-called because they attempt to describe and explain broad aspects of the world, such as society, language and psychology. Prominent examples are subject-position theory (based on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis) and semiotics (based on Saussurian structuralism). The implication for film studies is that every conceivable question about the medium can be answered by appealing to a single, all-encompassing framework. Such a view is subject to potential difficulties, however. One difficulty is that scholars are at risk of approaching a given film from the 'top-down', interpreting the film so that it fits into the general theoretical framework, and thus ignoring an analysis of the film's specific qualities. Another difficulty is the questionable validity of the theory itself – psychoanalytic, for example, has been discredited by many in its home territory of cognitive science.

In the mid to late 1980s, a new type of film scholarship emerged. The initial rise of post-theory can be attributed to the work of the film scholar David Bordwell and the philosopher Noël Carroll. Bordwell (1985) proposed an alternative approach to both film analysis and film spectatorship, while Carroll (1988) argued that psychoanalytic-semiotic theory did more to mystify than to illuminate our understanding of film. Post-theory received its most forceful exposition in Bordwell and Carroll's later co-edited anthology (1996). Bordwell and Carroll advocated the practice of 'middle-level research' and 'piecemeal theorizing'. Rather than being guided by doctrine, film scholars should concentrate on specific ('middle-level') problems relating to the medium. Significantly, different questions about film require different, often interdisciplinary approaches (hence the term 'piecemeal') that have both theoretical and empirical dimensions.

Post-theoretical approaches: neo-formalism and cognitivism

In the last 20 years, two post-theoretical approaches to film have gained ground. These two approaches are interrelated in a number of ways (see Figure 1). The first post-theoretical approach goes by the name of neo-formalism or historical poetics. This approach is inspired by the work of the Russian formalists from the 1910s to 1930s, and has been argued for by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in a number of works (see Bordwell, 1985; Thompson, 1988; Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 1985). Neo-formalism addresses the following questions. How are films specifically constructed? And how do they yield their effects on audiences? (The term 'neo-formalism' is actually coined by Thompson, while the term 'historical poetics' is used by Bordwell.)

Neo-formalism can be divided into three basic areas of study. The first area is a film's form. Contrary to the standard distinction between form and content, neo-formalism regards every aspect of a film as a component of the film's formal structure. In order to make sense of this structure, neo-formalism provides a number of tools for analysis. One of the most fundamental strategies is to divide a film into two basic systems: namely, narrative and style. The narrative system can be partly understood in terms of the Russian formalist's distinction between 'fabula' and 'syuzhet'. The fabula is the story of the film: a cause-and-effect chain of events that occurs within a given space and time. The syuzhet, on the other hand, is the film's plot; that is, the sequence of information that is actually presented to the viewer, potentially in an alternative order and with various omissions. The stylistic system refers to the way in which the narrative is actually filmed – notable examples of stylistic devices include cinematography, editing, lighting and mise en scène. When two devices perform the same function within the narrative, they are said to be 'functionally equivalent'.

Figure 1: Post-theory, neo-formalism and cognitivism

The second area of neo-formalist study is a film's historical context. Neo-formalists analyse individual films and directors with respect to the concept of 'norms' and 'deviations'. One body of narrative and stylistic norms is defined as the 'classical Hollywood cinema': for example, classical narrative is centred on goal-oriented characters and filmed using