Week 4: Formalism 2 – Brecht and Political Filmmaking

Key Reading:

Journal of Film and Video, 64 (3), QM+ uploaded.

‘The Presence of Brecht’ (pp. 145-150).  
See also section on ‘The Frankfurt School’ pp. 64-72.


Useful background reading


Also widelyanthologised.  
[http://bid.berkeley.edu/bidclass/readings/benjamin.html]

Key film:

Tsuki Bouki [Journey of the Hyena] (Djibril Diop Mambety, Senegal, 1973)

Lecture clip from Kuhle Wampe (Slatan Dudow and Bertolt Brecht, 1932)
Lecture Key points:

1. Brecht: enthusiastic about Eisenstein, new forms can stimulate new political thinking. For: new ‘disruptive’/challenging political forms. Against ‘narcotic’ effects of traditional realist/naturalist dramatic forms

2. Brechtian techniques: open-ended narratives – issues are not always resolved, and episodes can be taken out and performed as mini-scenes, or reordered. Events are shown in self-contained scenes – a form of montage.

   The audience becomes a critical observer rather than pulled into thinking that the illusion is real.

   The audience is encouraged to be active in making meaning and taking decisions, rather than passively watching.

   Human beings are not fixed – they are alterable and can change – so Brecht is against the idea of the fate or destiny of characters.

   The audience is ‘distanced’ from events, it observes characters critically, not necessarily identifying with them. Brecht promotes critically reflecting on our emotions rather than indulging in them.

   Even in the 1920s, Brecht would use all kinds of media on stage to give us conflicting information and to break up the traditional flow of a theatre piece, in order to encourage the audience to think carefully about what they were seeing.

3. Frankfurt school theorists (covers period of late-1920s-late 1950s):
   Walter Benjamin (1936) - 'What is Cinema? – a new technology which will sweep away elitist art, and allow for a new, democratic politicisation of aesthetics.

4. Theodor W. Adorno: Benjamin is hopelessly naïve. 'What is Cinema?’ – part of the Culture Industry, selling its standardised products to duped consumers (‘false consciousness’). There is little real chance of a radical cinema – if there is a utopian hope for society, it comes through ‘difficult’ modernist art, not popular culture, which is commodified and ideologically reactionary.

5. Hito Steyerl, an acclaimed contemporary experimental filmmaker and a theorist, uses a theory of montage familiar from film studies to discuss how protest movements articulate themselves, in images, actions, and words: ‘what kind of montage of two images/elements would produce something beyond and outside these two images/elements, something that would not represent a compromise, but would instead belong to a different order - roughly the way that someone might tenaciously pound two dull stones together to create a spark in the darkness? Whether this spark, which one could also call the spark of the political, can be created at all is a question of this articulation.’
Formalism II

Seminar Questions

1. Why is Brecht so suspicious of realist approaches to filmmaking?

2. What kind of techniques might a Brechtian use to encourage the audience to reflect critically on what they are seeing?

3. Djibri Diop Mambety's *Touki-Bouki* (Senegal, 1973) is a complex hybrid that brings together West African oral traditions and European formalism. Outline some of the ways that the film seems to draw on ideas taken from Eisenstein and/or Brecht. Think particularly about the discontinuous editing of sound and image in the opening eight minutes of the film.

4. How does the ending of *Touki-Bouki* encourage us to think about the future facing Senegal's young population?

5. Eisenstein states that 'conflict lies at the basis of every art' (p. 21). Is this formulation the consequence of a particular Marxist way of thinking about art?

6. Robert Stam writes: 'For Eisenstein, the cinema was above all transformative, ideally triggering social practice rather than aesthetic contemplation, shocking the spectator into consciousness of contemporary problems.' Do you agree that this should be the role of cinema?

Hito Steyerl is both an acclaimed contemporary experimental filmmaker and a theorist. Here she uses a theory of montage familiar from film studies to discuss how protest movements articulate themselves, in images, actions, and words. In this short essay (uploaded on QM+), she looks at two different films that see themselves as articulating a political moment, one, the documentary Showdown in Seattle (1999) about the anti-globalization/anti-WTO protests and the other Ici et Ailleurs (Here and Elsewhere) (1975), a deliberately fragmentary film by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, that reflects on earlier footage commissioned to support the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

The approach that Steyerl uses here echoes Eisenstein to think about the effectiveness and impact of the way that these films link together their images and how they link together various voices brought together to support a particular political cause. For Steyerl, it is essential that these elements and images are not linked simply in chains and connected by an ‘and’, but that we watch the films and question, ‘how do the pictures hang on the chain?’ (p. 87).

‘What kind of movement of political montage would result in oppositional articulations, instead of a mere addition of elements for the sake of reproducing the status quo? Or to phrase the question differently, what kind of montage of two images/elements would produce something beyond and outside these two images/elements, something that would not represent a compromise, but would instead belong to a different order - roughly the way that someone might tenaciously pound two dull stones together to create a spark in the darkness? Whether this spark, which one could also call the spark of the political, can be created at all is a question of this articulation.’ (pp. 90-91).


Think about recent films that you consider to be politically effective.

How do they link their images?

How do the pictures hang on the chain?

How would you make a film if you wanted it to be politically effective?