Week 6: Realism 2: Siegfried Kracauer

Set Reading:


Primary Literature:


Secondary Literature:


Film Clips:

*Wings of Desire* (Wim Wenders, Germany, 1987)

*Alice in the Cities* (Wim Wenders, Germany, 1974)

*My Summer of Love* (Pawel Pawlikowski, UK, 2004)
Key Points:

1. **Theory of Film** - a ‘materialist aesthetics’ of cinema.
   
   : ‘My book differs from most writings in the field in that it is a material aesthetics, not a formal one. It is concerned with content. It rests upon the assumption that film is essentially an extension of photography and therefore shares with this medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us. Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality.’ (‘Preface’, *Theory of Film*, xlix)

2. Kracauer as a ‘realist’ – photography and cinema both have an ‘affinity’ with the visible world. Films ought to record and reveal physical reality.
   
   : ‘Now this reality includes many phenomena which would hardly be perceived were it not for the motion picture camera’s ability to catch them on the wing. And since any medium is partial to the things it is uniquely equipped to render, the cinema is conceivably animated by a desire to picture transient material life, life at its most ephemeral. Street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions are its very meat. Significantly, the contemporaries of Lumière praised his films – the first ever to be made – for showing the “ripple of the leaves stirred by the wind”. (‘Preface’, *Theory of Film*, xlix)

3. Kracauer interested in the recording of physical reality, but also in ‘formalist’ techniques such as editing, close-ups, and visual effects. The task of the filmmaker is to hold realist and formalist tendencies in balance.
   
   : ‘He may feature his impressions of this or that segment of physical existence in documentary fashion, transfer hallucinations and mental images to the screen, indulge in the rendering of rhythmical patterns, narrate a human interest story, etc. All these creative efforts are in keeping with the cinematic approach as long as they benefit, in some way or other, the medium’s substantive concern with our visible world. ... Everything depends on the right ‘balance’ between the realistic tendency and the formative tendency; and the two tendencies are well balanced if the latter does not try to overwhelm the former but eventually follows its lead.’ (‘Basic Concepts’, *Theory of Film*, pp. 38-39)

4. ‘What is Cinema?’ – a means to ‘reveal and record physical reality’.
   
   : ‘What is Cinematic?’ - The purpose of cinema is to reveal and record physical reality by first of all helping to ‘establish physical existence’ – that is, to allow us to see the world properly.
   
   The ‘revealing’ functions of cinema. ‘Disintegrating’ familiar objects.

   
   : ‘There are no wholes in this world; rather, it consists of chance events whose flow substitutes for meaningful continuity. (‘Film in Our Time’, *Theory of Film*, p. 297)
   
   : ‘Film renders visible what we did not, or perhaps even could not, see before its advent. It effectively assists us in discovering the material world with its psychophysical correspondences. We literally redeem this world from its domnant state, its state of virtual non-existence, by endeavouring to experience it through the camera. And we are free to experience it because we are fragmentized. The cinema can be defined as a medium particularly equipped to promote the redemption of physical reality. Its imagery permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life. (‘Film in Our Time’, *Theory of Film*, p. 300)
1. Kracauer is concerned to answer the question ‘What is Cinematic?’. What attributes might characterise a piece of filmmaking along the lines proposed by Kracauer?

2. According to Kracauer, ‘what is the good of film experience?’ What does he mean by ‘the redemption of physical reality’?

3. Would Bazin have liked My Summer of Love? Remember Bazin likes: the cinema screen as a ‘window on the world’; a passive, neutral, unobtrusive camera; deep focus cinematography; restrained continuity editing; long takes; widescreen; colour; any camera movement that is congruent with human perception/movement; shooting on location; ‘real’ actors, or ordinary people, instead of trained actors. Would Kracauer have liked this film?

4. Compare Kracauer and Bazin on realism – what similarities and differences can you identify? What are the problems of realist theory?

5. Do filmmakers have an ethical obligation to pursue the truth/reality, as Bazin claims?

6. Is Bazin’s prescription of a particular type of filmmaking practice the best way of accessing this truth/reality?

7. Do you find the ideas of the ‘formalists’ (eg Eisenstein) or the ‘realists’ (eg Bazin) more intellectually appealing? What about the films they endorse and celebrate?

8. Does the shift to digital video problematise the idea of the photographic image as index?

9. How relevant are Bazin’s and Kracauer’s writings today? How might they inform our understanding of contemporary cinematic developments?