Week 1: Introduction: What is Cinema?

Warm up: What is cinema?
Write a sentence answering the question set out above.

How might we answer the question?

Aesthetics - Technology - History - Psychology - Biology - Philosophy - Sociology
1. Film theory is almost as old as the medium itself. The cinema developed at the end of the nineteenth century from advances in photography, mechanics, optics, and the scientific production of serialized images (chronophotography), but also has its roots in centuries of popular entertainment, ranging from magic lantern shows and phantasmagorias, to large-scale panoramas, dioramas and optical toys. From the very beginning, inventors, manufacturers, artists, intellectuals, educators and scientists asked themselves questions about the essence of cinema: was it movement or was it interval, was it image or was it writing, was it capturing place or was it storing time?

Besides its relationship to other forms of visualization and representation, the question was: was it science or was it art? And, if the latter, did it elevate and educate, or distract and corrupt? Discussions centred not just on the specificity of cinema but also on its ontological, epistemological and anthropological relevance, and here the questions ranged from derogatory (“the cinema – an invention without a future”: Antoine Lumière) to sceptical (“the kingdom of shadows”: Maxim Gorki) or triumphal (“the Esperanto of the eye”: D.W.Griffith).


2. Why study film theory at all? Of what use is a theory of film? For one thing, theories of cinema can help us understand the medium better. By framing general questions about cinematic phenomena, theorists try to disclose the way films work, how they convey meaning, what functions they provide, and the means by which they affect us. Exploring theoretical questions about the medium helps us to grasp the phenomenon of cinema, its broad systems, structures, uses and effects – and these prototypical features can, in turn, enable us to better understand the workings of individual films.

To read film theory, moreover, is to be enlightened to cinema’s importance for this and other generations. From what angles have commentators theorized film? What questions were most pressing for the theorist at different historical junctures? How have theoretical approaches to cinema changed as the medium’s technologies and conditions of consumption have changed?