FLM003 What is Cinema? Critical Approaches

Week 3: Formalism I

What is cinema?:
Formalists argue that film is an important new art form.

It is more than simply the mechanical reproduction of reality. It constructs reality for artistic ends. It reconfigures space and time. Film aesthetics can have political effects and implications. Cinema can be a revolutionary medium.

Key formalists:
Hugo MUNSTERBERG  Rudolf ARNHEIM
Béla BALÁZS  Sergei EISENSTEIN

Béla Balázs:

Key Reading:

[Uploaded on QMPlus]

Key points on Balázs:

i) ‘What is Cinema?’ – for Balázs a new art form characterised by its ‘form-language’, cinematography. Film differs from theatre in its ability to reconstruct space – the position of the camera, angle, perspective etc. are variable and mobile and can all change during a scene.

ii) Film comprises ‘sectional pictures’ which are connected through ‘montage’ and made coherent by the consciousness of the film audience.

iii) Film heralds a new cultural era where gesturality and (facial) expressivity will convey (the) meaning (of the human spirit) to the watching audience, which needs to develop its capacities to ‘read’ film effectively. Film will challenge, but exist alongside and not replace, print culture and our overreliance on its conceptual frameworks.

iv) Key to film’s new powers is its ability to depict the ‘physiognomy’ and even ‘microphysiognomy’ of people and objects. Central to this process is the ‘close-up’. Balázs stresses the ‘lyrical power of the close-up’.

v) Audiences are drawn in to watch films through techniques of ‘identification’ – seeing people and objects through atypical points of view – ‘We are in the picture’.
CLIP: Scene from *Siegfried* (Fritz Lang, 1924) used to comment on Balázs' ideas of 'whiteness' and 'close-up'.

Sergei Eisenstein

Key Reading:


Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Dramaturgy of Film Form [The Dialectical Approach to Film Form]' (1929) reprinted as above, pp. 23-40. [Uploaded on QMPlus]

vi) Balázs concentrates on the 'close up' too much: but 'Béla forgets the scissors' – the most important aspect of film as a new revolutionary art form is editing – montage is at the heart of what cinema is and ought to be.

vii) cinema is a distinct art. The essence of cinema is the relationship between the shots. Film is like a language (like Japanese pictograms/hieroglyphics) – new meaning only emerges through the clashing [CONFLICT! COLLISION!] between two different images jarring.


CLIP: *Battleship Potemkin*: The Odessa Steps sequence: how does the editing work to create CONFLICT/COLLISION between the shots?

The screening this week will be of *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925).

Next week's lecture will move from Eisenstein's idea of a revolutionary cinema to considerations of Marxism and film more generally, with a focus on Adorno and Benjamin, and a consideration of contemporary political cinema. The screening next week will be of *Syriana* (Gaghan, 2005)