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SPECTATOR AND FORM OF FILM

Spectator's sense of direction

Although there seems to be a steady increase in the introduction of semiological or linguistic approaches to film study, we should rather discuss films within the context of film history itself - above all, from the view-point of a spectator.

A linguist like G.Mounin would categorize communication into two types; one which has a monistic, unitary and definite relationship between the sender and the receiver, such as signals, and the other which has a pluralistic, compound and ambiguous relationship, such as theatre, painting, photography. Film, naturally, belongs to the latter, because one of the main properties of film lies in its vague and ambiguous form of communication as well as in an expressive and rich presentation of the world.

Looking back upon a history of film, however, we could say that the film in the silent era was aimed at the former type of communication. Various elements in silent film tended to converge on a pictorial representation, in other words, a visual unification. Not only gestures, facial expressions, eye-lines, lightings, costumes, make-ups, camera techniques (Iris In/Out, Fade In/Out, etc....), but also the story itself developed in a linear direction. A function of this visual unification was to maintain the spectator's sense of direction; one of the main examples was a so-called principle of MATCHING, which led to a conventionlization of the storytelling of film in general, especially in Hollywood-style films.

This manner of telling a story in a pictorial unification was nearly taken over by the talkie film, but the sound era tended to loosen this unification, or rather, more correctly, tended to dualize sound and image or pluralistic signification. Therefore, when the pluralistic meaning in the sound film became potential, the spectator came to have a wide choice within which to read the film text.

Form as form, or Image as such

Appreciation or reading of film is made primarily via the visual

elements, and not via themes or messages which preexist the image of a film. This means that, for the spectator, all the clues to reading lie only in the visual elements. Then, how can one find a clue to understanding the visuals? One of the clues, for instance, is lighting, or an actor's face as a front entrance of lighting. Modes of lighting as a unification of meaning is very obvious, especially in silent films. One can easily find a photogénique effect of lighting on the faces of M.Pickford, S.Hayakawa, the open-air scenes in Swedish films, or the stairs in the German expressionist films, which J.Epstein would have called THE SHINNING ESSENCE of filmed objects. This may derive from a traditional view in the West, that is, Light as God in Christianity or Light as Truth in Platonism. Paradoxically enough, this makes one take a serious view of the invisible such as the psyche, the idea, the essence and the real which are hidden behind the visible phenomena. P.Klee said the aim of art is to see the invisible through the visible. B.Balázs put it to the contrary, that, the soul dwells in the visible, saying the good film does not have any content, because the film is the core and the peel of fruit at the same time, just like painting, music, or a facial expression where the interior comes to the perceptible surface. R.Bathes' analysis of photogrammes (Ivan the Terrible by S.M. Eisenstein) should be placed in this category.

Repetition of forms, or Variant of images

The second approach of the spectator to reading a film text through the visual is to pay attention to the repetition of forms or variant of images. Two types of sub-categories, Motif and Pattern, belong here. For the present, let us call Motif that which shows a repetitive pictorial image. It is a synchronic level or a spatial dimension. Moreover, Motif could be divided into two kinds; one is always apparent in a very clear and obvious form such as the same image or the close resemblance of cliffs, stairs, trains, which appear recurrently in Hitchcock films. The second kind of Motif is the one which is neither always apparent nor shows the same pictorial images but reveals itself in the variant images such as spherical shapes in O. Welles films (as S. Hasumi pointed out). As for the Pattern, the recurrent episodes, stories, narrative styles, or characterization of personae could be included here. This

is a diachronic level, or a temporal dimension. The Pattern is mostly related to a conventional and fixed type in the linear or temporal development. Some of the remarkable examples of it are the Westerns, the Samurai, the Gangsters as genre film. The pattern is also divided into two kinds; one: a fixed type, the other: a variant of it (like a parody or a more art-oriented film which assimilates the genre film). The third sub-category should be added to the repetition of form, it has to do with a peculiarity of shooting the objects to be filmed, or of cutting-editing style in the film. Included here are three kinds: the Static, the Dynamic, and the Mise-en-scène. If we give well-known examples, the Static is the composition and construction of films by Y. Ozu; the Dynamic-films by Eisenstein; the Mise-en-scène-films by W. Wyler or Welles.

Anyway, the Motif and the Pattern tend to become a sign via a cine-semiological approach, because of their obvious form and fixed type. This kind of film which has a recurrent motif or pattern but does not have a definite theme nor message would easily turn into an object to be read or decoded. The stairs in Hitchcock films which often show us a chase scene in broad daylight, for instance, are characterized as Icarus-oriented ascent from the ground to the high place, to the air, and a potential descent from there while the stairs in the German expressionist films are characterized as an Orpheus-oriented descent from the ground to the underground, to the heretic world. A peculiarity of composition - certain objects in line, for instance - is seen in Ozu films and its style seems to coincide with a change of construction of the film, a change to a plotless flat construction in a certain period of Ozu's career. A number of people or of things in Ozu films, characterizing a daily, circulating and orderly occurrence, will make a ritual space appear in combination with other formal elements.

Recomposition of forms, or Montage of images

The signifier and the signified in the film are generally inseparable where the visual phenomenon usually indicates its substance. But in some cases, if we combine one visual image with the other, the meaning which is not shown in both images will appear. This approach leads to what A. Bazin called "A Manipulative Montage"; however, this also leads to the recomposition of objects filmed,

the creation of new meaning, that is to say: the construction of new world. It is certainly a frame of reference that Russian director-theoreticians of the twenties, Kuleshov, Vertov, Pudovkin, and Eisenstein, began to argue and develop. Although they all had different concepts of montage, we could say roughly that they had a common basic idea of neutralization of meaning in the filmic image. For Eisenstein, it meant a conflict or collision of forms, of images rather than mere rearrangement of shots. He tried to make conventionalized images strange so that our habitual and inert way of seeing could be renewed and activated. Thus, comes an idea of visual device as provocation, excitement, stimulation to the spectator.

We now re-examine the device in terms of rhetoric of images in a new light. Compared with the first two approaches - i.e. Form as form and Repetition of form-, this third approach may seem to belong to the realm of the director and expression rather than spectator and reading, but it is also the domain of spectator where more active and comprehensive readings are needed to resist a manipulative montage, or to respond to provocative rhetorics, or to interpret anew a seemingly non-stimulative composition of film, such as Eisenstein's, Hitchcock's, Kubrick's, Ozu's etc.

Needless to say, the above-mentioned is not confined to the visual elements alone. Sound, music, colour, rôle of personae, lighting, costume, camera technique and other elements have their own rights to be read in formal respects.

(This article is a summary of a presentation given at The Asahi Culture Center, in December 1980. The full text is printed in an Introduction to the Semiotics, written by ten authors, published by Nihon Britanica, September 1981.)

SEMIOSIS 29

Internationale Zeitschrift
für Semiotik und Ästhetik
8. Jahrgang, Heft 1, 1983

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