

Lecture 5 - Film as a global and cultural form

I. Film as a cultural form

- Global vs. national cinema
- American vs. European cinema
- High culture vs. Hollywood

II. Montage vs. mise en scène

III. Eisenstein and *Potemkin* (1925)

- Film as instruction
- Film as moral fable

Disclaimer: *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's notes.*

- Films are not benign objects – they can carry the viruses of society
 - The word “entertainment” is much more complicated than it might seem. It has a deeper and more powerful experience.
 - What does it mean to “entertain” an idea? Entertainment puts us in an environment when we can entertain new ideas.
 - The space of entertainment is in many ways a freer and more psychological space than the ordinary space that we live in every day.
 - This idea is something that we’ll return to repeatedly in the course. When we entertain an artistic space we enter a space of greater possibility. We watch our fantasies, our cultural fears, and an investigation of our own value systems.
 - I hope this course makes you more alert to those unexamined assumptions.
 - Film speaks to a certain greater consensus of culture: they reveal our own societal and psychic assumptions, values, and pathologies.
- We’re going to be finishing the silent era soon, but I hope you don’t forget its importance.
- This course largely focuses on American film. However, we shouldn’t forget that there are other nations that also have deeply robust film histories.
 - One could trace a very similar history, for example, in France, Germany, and Italy to the history that we’ve examined in the U.S.
 - Figures like Chaplin’s Tramp, however, had a universal effect, and film all over the world reacted to his work.
 - The connections across nations and cultures were even larger in the silent era, when language wasn’t a barrier within the films.
 - At the same time, the films created by different cultures are particular expressions of the distinctiveness of those particular cultures.
 - There is a broad divergence between American and European cinema.

- It is important that class holds less importance in American culture – it's a less hierarchic culture.
- There's also a sense of American culture being more futuristic, less interested in the past.
 - The consequence here is that the ancestral effect of past forms and technologies on the development of film was more extensive in Europe than in the U.S.
- Very soon the center of American film became Hollywood – at the opposite geographical extreme from the previous centers of American culture: New York (potentially Washington and Boston as well).
 - Yet culture in general was less centered in any one place in the U.S. than they were in Europe. Culture and art always developed all over the place in the U.S., and they were much less centered in any one place
 - The centers of film creation in Europe were located more often in cities that were already centers of cultural development.
 - The fact that Hollywood was cut off from previous cultural centers provided it with a kind of freedom early on, so that it developed particularly cinematic effects more quickly.
 - Early European film ambitions were artistically grander than American ones. There was a sense much earlier on that it could be a great form of art, and much less interested in it as a money-maker.
 - Americans were fascinated by film's capitalist potential from the beginning. It was about entertainment, not Art with a capital A.
 - The artistic expectations of film in German and European film was a great burden in some ways. It kept their film more theatrical and less cinematic for sometime.
 - Hollywood developed largely free from the high culture establishment, which was technically advantageous in some ways.
- Some important terms: Montage vs. Mise en Scene
 - Montage: comes from Monter – to assemble, edit
 - Thus the word conveys a film's system or rhythm of editing.
 - For example, how quickly it's edited, and the consequent emotional effect.
 - Mise en Scene: "put or placed in a frame"
 - Thus it conveys what's happening in the frame: foreground, background, motion, framing.
 - It's the equivalent of what the stage set is like, what the composition looks like
 - Every film has both of these elements.

- However, some directors focus more on one of them than the others. A film might get its most fundamental, signature effects from one or the other. It allows for two different sorts of styles of film creation.
 - Mise en Scene style is associated with realism, and looks more like what an observer might actually see. It's often what you would see in more political or ethically-centered films.
 - Montage style is more emotionally fascistic, like Hitchcock – it plays with your emotions more directly. The camera sits at more unusual, disorienting angles, moving faster. This brings you inside the moment faster, giving less ability to sit back and think about what you're seeing. This style is associated with horror films in general.
 - Jean Renoir is an example of this sort of director
- Most great directors today are masters of both styles, and all directors in all periods used at least some of both.
- These terms are helpful methods of distinguishing between different methods, outlooks, and philosophies of film.
- Eisenstein: A great director
 - Arguably the greatest Russian director
 - The particular nature of Russian film in this era is particularly distinctive.
 - This difference has a great deal to do with the unique economic and political situation of Russia in this period.
 - Art was very culturally connected to the creation of a great socialist utopia in this time and place. There was much less of a sense of art as individual expression.
 - Film (and art in general) was a form of exalted propaganda, although they wouldn't have called it that.
 - This is not to say that the motives were entirely contemptible. They were emerging from a highly oppressive czar-run society.
 - *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)
 - Some background: there was a historical story of a mutiny on a Russian battleship. The officers had allegedly been being inappropriately cruel to the poor proletariat sailors. The sailors mutinied and brought the ship into the port at the city of Odessa. The people of the city welcomed them, but then the czarist forces came in and massacred them.
 - Eisenstein had a theory of “typage” – that you could recognize a person's type, personality, etc by looking at his/her outward appearance.
 - This has racist overtones.
 - However, he's setting up a kind of montage of the whole population of the city.
 - In some ways this might be a little heavy-handed. However, we shouldn't underestimate the horrors of the czarist regime.
 - In the most terrible moments, he sometimes slowed things down, enhancing the great horror of them.

- You can see the power of his method of montage.
- Clip played: from the czarist forces attack in *Battleship Potemkin*
 - Note the many images that are reflected and alluded to in modern movies: The falling baby carriage, the shot through the man's eyeglasses.
 - This form was enormously influential. Above all else, it demonstrated the enormous emotional power of editing.
 - This Russian film example reverberated globally on almost the level that Chaplin's work was.
 - Eisenstein also studied Griffith's work
 - This clip might seem easy to make fun of today, but we mustn't underestimate its effect at the time.
 - You certainly don't have to live in a democratic society to investigate the potentials of art.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21L.011 The Film Experience
Fall 2012

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.