THE EVOLUTION OF THE LANGUAGE OF CINEMA

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By : Farah Faisal
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ANDRE BAZIN

ANDRE BAZIN

- An eminent French film critic, film theorist, social activist, philosopher and humanist
- Co-founder and editor of the celebrated film magazine, *Cahiers du cinema* – founded in 1951
- His essays published in two volumes titled *What is Cinema?*
- His writings play an integral part – canon of film theory
- Advocated depiction of objective reality in films
- Interpretation to be left with spectators
- Narrative – key to great films

Andre Bazin

- Wrote for many reviews and magazines
- He wrote deeply on the role of the set and props, camera movement, use of deep focus and so on that he sought to find new dimensions to film discourse
- An early advocate or defender of Orson Welles, Jean Renoir, Italian Neo-Realism, Charlie Chaplin's post-Tramp films and William Wyler
- Realism in film very important to Bazin

Andre Bazin

- He listened to others, observe the reaction of varied audiences and was open-minded
- Does not deny the decisive progress that montage (subjective reality of films) has brought to cinematic language, but believed it was at the expense of other values.
- Preferred long takes and questioned suitability of montage as a cinematic attempt to mimic literary similie (mimicing reality of life) (language of literature and cinema different)
- Close ups and montage to him might be labeling as telling rather than showing
- Was a significant influence on many film critics

The evolution of the language of cinema

- Seminal work on historical evolution of the language of cinema and his views on montage and realism
- 1928 witnessed the zenith of silent cinema
- Practitioners of silent film thought that silence is best for cinema that sound will only bring chaos
- This proved to be wrong
- Sound films brought a fulfillment to silent forms
- When it comes to editing – a huge difference between silent and sound cinema (an additional technology gives extra work)
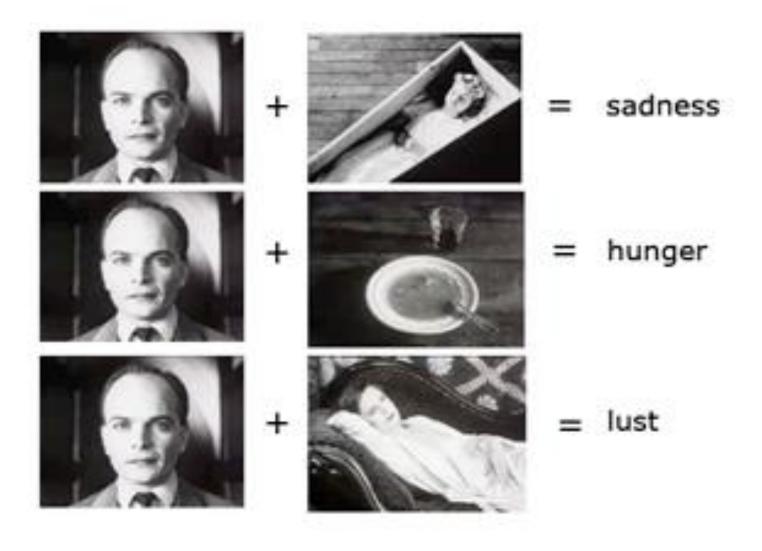
- Certain cinematic values carried over from silent to sound films
- It is rather two different concepts than two distinct families or styles of cinematographic expression
- As a proof he compares
  - Erich von Stroheim with Jean Renoir or Orson Welles
  - Carl Theodore Dreyer with Robert Bresson

- He identifies two kinds of directors
  - One who put faith in the image (virtual reality)
  - Those who put faith in reality
- Proof that there exist two categories of films
  - One which relies on the *plastics of the image
  - The other that relies on the resources of montage
- Supports films based on reality supported by factors – sound, deep focus, invisible editing
- *style of the sets, make-up, performance, lightning, framing of the shot

- Acknowledges montage's role in transforming cinema to highly complex art form and creating a language for cinema
- But against the mere juxtapositioning of images to create meanings
- Skillful use of montage helps spectators to accept the viewpoints of the director
- Mentions 3 different forms of montage
  - **Parallel montage** – conveying a sense of the simultaneity of two actions. (azhakiya ravanan)
  - **Accelerated montage** – depicting change in pace/time – accelerating speed by a multiplicity of shots of ever-decreasing length. (james bond movies)
  - **Montage by attraction** – reenforcing the meaning of one image by association with another image not necessarily part of the same episode. (flashback)

- Editing distinguishes film from animated photography and makes it a language
- Various combination of three devices exist
- Creation of meaning does not exist in the individual image themselves
- It arises from their collocation
- Famous example is of Lev Kuleshov's famous experiment with the same shot of Ivan Mozhukhin
- His smile seem to change in implication

Kuleshov's experiment

- The final meaning of the film lies in the organisation of these elements of reality than in their objective content

- The substance of the narrative arises from these relationship

- The combination of shots suggest an idea of a metaphor or an association of ideas

- These techniques create meaning not objectively by the single image (style of the sets, make-up, performance, lightning, framing of the shot), but by juxtapositioning different images
- Holds that there exist a 'transformer' b/w the real image and narrative, effected through the meaning projected by montage into the consciousness of the spectator
- Challenges the notion that "montage and the plastic composition of the image are the very essence of the language of cinema"

- For Flaherty, the important thing to show when Nanook is hunting the seal is the relationship between the man and the animal and the true proportions of Nanook's lying in wait. Editing could have suggested the passage of time; Flaherty is content to show the waiting, and the duration of the hunt becomes the very substance and object of the image. In the film this episode consists of a single shot. Can anyone deny that it is in this way much more moving than 'editing by attraction' would have been?

Three reasons behind originality of sound film or the three contributing factors to the classical perfection:

- Well defined national schools of films brought novel subject matter, which demanded introduction of new forms. Maturing of different kinds of drama

- Perfection of form (drama) inherited from silent cinema

- Stabilization of technological advancement

- Panchromatic and ultra sensitive emulsions (all modern photographic film is panchromatic – sensitive to all wavelengths of visible light) greatly influenced visual character of image
- Soft focus background gave way to deep focus with sophisticated camera
- Panchromatic film, microphone and the crane sophisticated art of cinema by generating conditions necessary for the creation of film
- Evolution of language of cinema depended on the inclusion of challenging subject matter and various style of expression

The evolution of editing since the advent of sound

- Standard pattern evolved universally by 1938
- Silent films based on plastics of the image and montage (image Vs. reality) were 'expressionistic' and 'symbolistic'
- New form of storytelling (modern era) described as 'analytic' and 'dramatic'
- Scene presented objectively and changes of point of view represent reality forcefully
- Taking the example of Kuleshov's experiments, the scene of food and the poor beggar in 1936 the breakdown might have been as follows:

- 1. General shot taking in both the actor and the table
- 2. Tracking shot forward ending in a close-up of his face which expresses a mixture of wonder and desire
- 3. A series of close-ups of the food
- 4. Back to the character (in medium shot) who walks slowly towards the camera
- 5. Slight track back to take in the actor from the knees up, seizing a chicken's wing.

There could be many variations on this breakdown, but they would all still have several things in common:

The intention and effect of this breakdown are exclusively dramatic or psychological.

The change in camera angle does not add anything

- If the scene acted on the stage and seen from the seats, it would have exactly the same meaning
- The event will still have an objective existence
- The change in camera angle does not add anything but presents reality in its most effective manner – first of all by allowing one to see it better and then emphasising what needs emphasising
- *In Battleship Potemkin,* the skillful editing of putting together the stone lions through a series of shots of different pieces of sculpture give the impression that one lion (like the people) is getting to its feet. This admirable editing device was unthinkable before1932

- In *Fury*, Fritz Lang inserted, in 1935, a shot of clucking chickens in a farmyard after a series of shots of tittle-tattling women.
- This was an example for editing by attraction
- Made the story telling more analytic
- This use of editing has its origin in silent cinema
- Sound made editing more realistic and eliminated both plastic expressionism and symbolic relationships between images

- In about 1938, films were always put together according to the same principles
- The story was told by a succession of shots, which varied very little in number (around six hundred per film)
- The characteristic technique of this type of narrative was cross-cutting, which, in a dialogue for instance, consists of alternate shots of either speaker according to the logic of the text (also known as 'shot-reverse-shot' technique)
- This type of shooting script, which perfectly suited the best films of 1930-9, was strongly challenged by the technique of composition in depth used by Orson Welles and William Wyler

- The composition in depth, whole scenes are filmed in a single shot (a device known as the plan sequence), sometimes even without the camera moving
- The dramatic effects which used to depend on the editing are all obtained here (without editing) by the movements of the actors within a chosen framing
- This cannot be called the passive 'recording' of an action photographed within a single frame, but a mere reluctance to break up an event or to analyse its dramatic reverberations
- It is a positive technique which produces better results than a classical breakdown of shots could ever have done.

- Use of montage originated with silent movies
- Addition of sound image in montage enhanced realistic nature – depended on *'shot-reverse-shot' technique
- Later challenged by the introduction of 'shot-in-depth' – coverage of whole scenes in one take (camera fixed at one place)

Shot-in-depth or deep focus

- Movements of the actors within fixed frameworks used to create dramatic effects
- Says that montage in a way contributed to progress of language of cinema
- Depth of the field major step in the history of film language
- Most economic and precise way of getting most out of the scene
- Affects the structure of film language
- Affects r/s of the mind of spectators and the image
- Helps in interpretation of the spectacle
- A more realistic view of the image
- Helps to involve actively in the production of meaning
- Montage rules out these possibility

Deep focus

- Deep focus reintroduced ambiguity into the structure of the image
- Uncertainity in the interpretation of the film rooted on the deep focus design of the images
- Presents an abstract mode of story-telling resorting to series of superimpositions contrasted with a scene presented – single take, deep focus shots, the camera remains motionless
- Eg. *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles makes use of symbolic and metaphoric montage
- *Citizen Kane* a revolutionary step in the history of language of cinema

- The placing of objects in relation to the characters is such that their meaning cannot escape the spectator, a meaning which editing would have built up in a series of successive shots.

- The action taking place in the foreground is of secondary importance, although interesting and unusual enough to demand our close attention, especially as it occupies a privileged position on the screen and a considerable amount of its surface. The real action, however, the one that at this point constitutes a decisive turning-point in the plot, is taking place almost secretly in a tiny rectangle at the back of the room, i.e. on the very left of the screen

- The link between these two dramatic zones is March, who is the only person, apart from the spectator, to know what is going on in the call box, and who, as is logical in such a situation, is also moved by the prowess of his disabled friend. From time to time, March turns his head slightly, and casts an anxious glance diagonally across the screen at Dana Andrews's gesticulations. The latter finally rings off and without looking round abruptly disappears into the street. If we reduce the real action to its elements, it consists basically of a telephone call made by Dana Andrews. The only thing which interests us at this moment is the telephone conversation. The only actor whose face we want to see in close-up is precisely the one whom we cannot distinguish clearly because he is so far away from the camera and behind the glass window of the call box. His words of course cannot be heard. The real drama is taking place in the distance in a kind of small aquarium which lets us see only the banal and ritual gestures of someone telephoning.

- The real action is overlaid with the action of the *mise en scène* itself, which consists of dividing the attention of spectators against their will, of guiding it in the right direction, and thus of making them participate in their own right in the drama created by the director.

- The means used by directors like Rossellini and de Sica are less spectacular but they are determined to do away with montage and to transfer to the screen the *continuum* of reality.
- 1940 to 1950 marks a decisive step toward the development of the language and film
- Deep focus represented the richest vein of the silent

Italian neo-realism

- Film movement lasting from 1943 to 1952
- Stories set amongst poor and working class
- Filmed long takes on location mostly poor neighbourhoods and countryside
- Used non-actors for secondary and primary roles
- Mostly contend with difficult economical and moral conditions of postwar Italy
- Reflected changes in Italian psyche and the conditions of everyday life: defeat, poverty n desperation
- Films shot outdoors, amidst devastation
- Wiped away all expressionistic techniques and dramatic effects of montage
- Brought back a sense - 'the ambiguity of reality'

Italian Neo-realism

- Subject matter involves life among impoverished and working class

- Non-acting emphasized

- Performances of mundane activities completely devoid of self-consciousness

- Generally feature children in major roles even though their roles are more observatory than participatory

Italian neo-realism

- Movement developed by circle of film critics revolved around the magazine Cinema
  - Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti, Gianni Puccini, Giuseppe De Santis, Pietro Ingrao
- Heavily influenced by French poetic realism
- First introduced to the world in 1946 with *Roma, citta aperta* (Rome, Open City) – first major film to come out in Italy after war

Characteristics and stylistics

- Characteristics
  - Emphasis on value of ordinary people (theme involving op)
  - Compassionate point of view
  - Preoccupation with Italy's Fascist past and aftermath of wartime devastation
  - A blending of Christian and Marxist humanism
  - Emphasis on emotions than abstract ideas
  - Rejects the illusory glamour and set-bound artficiality
- Stylistics
  - Avoidance of neatly plotted stories, loosely structured
  - Documentary visual style
  - Use of actual locations – exteriors than studio sites
  - Use of nonprofessional actors even for principal roles
  - Use of conversational speech than literary dialogue
  - Never aimed at any revolution in editing

Summing up - essay

- 1940 to 1950 crucial period in devlpt of lang of cinema
- Developing trend of silent film since 1930s not stopped by talking film
- Silent film not entirely dependent on montage
- Looked forward to realism of sound as natural development
- Jean Renoir – the only director b/w 1930 and 1940 – looked back beyond resources of montage
- Sound film abandoned metaphoric and symbolic significance of montage and embraced objective presentation
- Silent era montage evoked what director wanted to convey
- Now image has immense scope to manipulate reality and modify it
- Film maker now equals a novelist previously he was equalled to painter or playwright
- Film an art form – functions to convey or impose a view point on the spectator
- Bazin admits the impossibility to completely avoid technique of montage
- This shows the contradiction in his vision

Bicycle Thieves – Vittorio De Sica

- Vittorio started career as an actor
- By 1943 directed films neorealistic films
- De Sica praised by distinguished critics like Andre Bazin
- Bicycle Thieves does not beg for sympathy for Ricci
- Does not go out to make him noble or sympathetic
- Depicts a man's journey to find the culprit – encounters different characters and situations
- The heart of the story's power lies not in the style of telling but in the power of the situation it describes
- The finest achievement of De Sica is that he brought the previously ignored working class to the screen
- Used the camera to show how people lived while maintaining objective distance
- Bicycle Thieves contain all elements of typical neo-realism
- Harsh cinematography, poverty of principle characters, urban squalor, lack of judgement at the character's predicament.
- Given an honorary Oscar in 1949
- Routinely voted as one of the greatest films of all the time
- Revered as one of the foundation stones of Italian neorealism

AUTEUR THEORY

- In film criticism, auteur theory holds that a director's film reflects the director's personal creative vision, as if they were the primary "auteur" (the French word for "author")
- The auteur's creative voice is distinct enough to shine through all kinds of studio interference
- In law, the film is treated as a work of art, and the auteur, as the creator of the film, is the original copyright holder
- Auteur theory has influenced film criticism since 1954, when it was advocated by film director and critic François Truffaut

AUTEUR THEORY

- This method of film analysis was originally associated with the French New Wave and the film critics who wrote for the French film review periodical Cahiers du Cinéma

- The championed filmmakers such as Akira Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, and Jean Renoir are known as absolute 'auteurs' of their films