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| Modernist Film Criticism |
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| Criticism is one of the fundamental concepts in modernism and is defined by ‘the intensification, almost exacerbation, of [a] self-critical tendency’ that began with Kant, ‘the first to criticise the means itself of criticism’ (Clement Greenberg). Modernism makes use of a multiplicity of approaches and techniques in order to reflect on the means of representation by focusing on its methods. That is, instead of trying to describe, thoughts, feelings, relationships, or the world in a realist way, the modernist artist and critic focuses on the way representation articulates experience, turning, at the same time, art into a reflection of itself. In this sense, modernist discourse operates as a statement, ‘by the specific practices of art criticism, by the art activities implicated in the critic/author’s formulations and by the institutions which disseminate and disperse the formulations as events’ (Laura Marcus)[See all related content](http://screen.oxfordjournals.org/content/22/3/undefined" \t "_blank).  Earlier film theory ‘was unformed and impressionistic’, and its major concern was, as Robert Stam points out, to define whether or not the cinema was art as linked or opposed to the other arts. An early theorist, Riccioto Canudo, in his manifesto ‘The Birth of the Sixth Art’ (1911), understood cinema as the conjunction of ‘the three spatial arts (architecture, sculpture, and painting), and the three temporal arts (poetry, music and dance), transforming them into a synthetic form called ‘Plastic Art in Motion’ (Abel, 1988, I. 58-66)’ (Stam 28). |
| Jean Epstein claims, for his part, for a ‘pure cinema.’ With the attempt ‘to advance the specific potentiality of the ‘seventh art’,’ emerges the notion of *photogénie*, considered the essence of cinema, and was developed by French filmmakers such as Epstein in the effort to differentiate the cinema from the other arts (Stam 26-27). Epstein defines *photogénie* as ‘any aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction’ (Stam 34). Stam points out that ‘the generation of new knowledge linked the cinema to artistic modernism as a project of challenging conventional perception and understanding’ (34).  Modernist film criticism became consolidated during the rise of the welfare states in Europe (1950-1980), which had as one of its corollaries the institutionalization of the arts. The French film magazine *Cahiers du cinema,* foundedin 1951 by André Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, played an instrumental role in redefining modernist film criticism, by focusing their critical analysis on a film's articulation of aesthetics with reality. In 1954, François Truffaut, one of the critics of *Cahiers* and a filmmaker himself writes the article ‘Une certaine tendance du cinéma français’ (‘A Certain Trend of French Cinema’) assessing the quality of French cinema. The article, which is also a re-evaluation of Hollywood cinema and directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, Robert Aldrich, Nicholas Ray, and Fritz Lang, becomes a manifesto for ‘*la politique des auteurs*’ that Andrew Sarris will later translate as ‘the auteur theory’.  Modernist film criticism emphasises authorship consciousness, that is, the directors’ ability to leave their personal signatures on their films, turning the filmmaker into an author—main creator of what was, in actuality, the product of teamwork. Modernist film criticism also values the filmmakers’ critical reflection on the cinema, a reflection often produced by transgressing the rules of classic cinema, such as breaking the fourth wall, highlighting the visibility of the filmmaking apparatus, and employing discontinuous editing, freeze frames, strong colour filters, confusing various levels of diegesis (‘reality’, fantasy, and dream), and disrupting chronological sequence. In a discursive level, modernist film criticism prizes outspoken political or social criticism as an instrument of a critical self-reflection on the part of the filmmaker. Some notable modernist film critics include André Bazin, Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, and Sergei Eisenstein.  Modernist film criticism analyses, evaluates, and interprets films from a perspective often informed by film theory based on the Frankfurt School, which is considered the original source of what is known as critical theory. Among the core members of the school are philosophers Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm. Important thinkers associated with the School, but playing a peripheral role in its day-to-day activities, were Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin. The particular version of critical theory developed by these thinkers combines Marxism and psychoanalysis, which they applied to the analysis of traditional philosophical problems as well as of current cultural developments—cinema among them. The outstanding contributions to the study of this medium were Kracauer’s and Benjamin’s.  Kracauer observes the ability of cinema to capture the mechanized surfaces of modern life and understands that the most important function of film was to provide a picture of reality. In the preface of his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960), he discusses whether photography is an art, and to what extent film is an art form. He proposes that ‘film is essentially an extension of photography and therefore shares with this medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us. … And since any medium is partial to the things it is uniquely equipped to render, the cinema is conceivably animated by a desire to picture transient material life, life at its most ephemeral.’ He realizes that ordinary life such as ‘street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions are its very meat’ (Kracauer ix).  Walter Benjamin, for his part, in his article ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936) studies the new ‘technological reproduction of artworks’ and ‘the impact which its two different manifestations- the reproduction of artworks and the art of film-are having on art in its traditional form’ (20-21). He discusses the significance of film as a medium and claims that photography and the cinema create new artistic paradigms ‘conditioned not only by nature but by history’ (23). Benjamin propounds that film’s most important social function ‘is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus [mechanical reproduction]. Film achieves this goal not only in terms of man's presentation of himself to the camera but also in terms of his representation of his environment by means of this apparatus’ (31). For Benjamin, film had the ability to shape the perception of the modern technological society, and ‘could therefore transform and energize the masses for purposes of revolutionary change’ (Stam 66).  The Frankfurt School is one of the central intellectual sources in the development of modernist film criticism and film theory. It contributed to placing film analysis within larger scholarly debates in order to reveal the medium’s social and epistemological resonances, which well exceed its aesthetic significance or its function as a mere source of entertainment. Useful Links: Andre Bazin: <http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k27441&pageid=icb.page124046> .  David Bordwell: <http://www.davidbordwell.net/>  François Truffaut: <http://www.criterion.com/explore/21-francois-truffaut>  Jean Epstein: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2010/great-directors/jean-epstein/>  Jean-Luc Godard: <http://www.criterion.com/explore/12-jean-luc-godard> .  *Les Cahiers Du Cinéma*: <http://www.cahiersducinema.com/>  Robert Ray: <http://www.english.ufl.edu/english/faculty/rray/index.html>  Sergei Eisenstein’: <http://www.russianarchives.com/gallery/old/eisen.html>  Truffaut, François (1951).’A Certain Trend of French Cinema’: <http://www.newwavefilm.com/about/a-certain-tendency-of-french-cinema-truffaut.shtml> |
| Further reading:  (Abel)  (Benjamin)  (Kracauer)  (Marcus)  (Stam) |