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| Art Cinema |
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| Although the term circulates widely in popular and academic discourse, ‘art cinema’ is a notoriously difficult concept to define, conjuring a wide range of associations and assumptions concerning the aesthetics and politics of film practice. At its most basic level, the term is typically used to denote feature-length narratives structured according to a specific set of aesthetic codes that position them in opposition to mainstream films. In this sense, art cinema exists somewhere between commercial and avant-garde cinema, foregoing the tight causal logic of the former in favour of techniques that emphasise stylistic expression, ambiguity, and self-reflexivity, while still remaining within the general sphere of narrative cinema. The term is typically used to signify films — usually made outside the major studios — in which the personal artistic vision of the director takes precedence over narrative intelligibility and marketability. Alongside these formal traits, art cinema is identified through a specific exhibition environment (independent art house theatres, film festivals, and college campuses) that similarly differentiates it from commercial cinema. These non-mainstream qualities, coupled with the challenging nature of the films themselves, have resulted in the common association of art cinema with ‘high art,’ as a body of quality films for a more sophisticated and discerning audience. |
| Although the term circulates widely in popular and academic discourse, ‘art cinema’ is a notoriously difficult concept to define, conjuring a wide range of associations and assumptions concerning the aesthetics and politics of film practice. At its most basic level, the term is typically used to denote feature-length narratives structured according to a specific set of aesthetic codes that position them in opposition to mainstream films. In this sense, art cinema exists somewhere between commercial and avant-garde cinema, foregoing the tight causal logic of the former in favour of techniques that emphasise stylistic expression, ambiguity, and self-reflexivity, while still remaining within the general sphere of narrative cinema. The term is typically used to signify films — usually made outside the major studios — in which the personal artistic vision of the director takes precedence over narrative intelligibility and marketability. Alongside these formal traits, art cinema is identified through a specific exhibition environment (independent art house theatres, film festivals, and college campuses) that similarly differentiates it from commercial cinema. These non-mainstream qualities, coupled with the challenging nature of the films themselves, have resulted in the common association of art cinema with ‘high art,’ as a body of quality films for a more sophisticated and discerning audience. Theorizing Art Cinema Perceptions of art cinema arise from two highly influential essays: David Bordwell’s ‘The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice’ (1979) and Steve Neale’s ‘The Art Cinema as Institution’ (1981). Bordwell’s and Neale’s interventions remain key; combined, they lay out a persuasive aesthetic and institutional characterization of art cinema.  Bordwell’s essay positions art cinema as a historically identifiable mode characterized by a particular set of formal conventions and implicit viewing procedures that distinguish it from classical Hollywood. Whereas classical Hollywood narratives are motivated by a clear cause-and-effect structure that subsumes style to the demands of the narrative in order to formulate a coherent story, art cinema is motivated by the fundamental principles of realism and authorial expressivity. Unlike classical narratives, in which realism is only significant to the extent that it produces a believable story world, art cinema is invested in realism as a means of exploring the nature of ‘real life’ and the ‘real world,’ telling its stories in real locations and focusing on real problems told from the perspective of psychologically complex characters. Like classical cinema, then, art cinema retains the individual as the driving narrative force but, in contrast, its characters lack clearly defined desires and goals. This absence of definition results in drifting and episodic narratives tied to character subjectivity — narratives that offer no clear-cut resolution and favour reflection over action.  At the same time, art cinema is also characterized by a sense of authorial expressivity where the film’s director, operating outside the restrictions of the studio system, and less constrained by commercial imperatives, operates as a formal component in the film, providing it with a sense of aesthetic and symbolic unity. This means that art films repeatedly violate classical norms as the emphasis shifts from the story (what is being told) to the plot (how the story is being told and why it is being told in this way). Ultimately, these two potentially contradictory impulses lead to a cinema of ‘maximum ambiguity’ where motivations remain unclear and uncertainties persist.    Like Bordwell, Neale argues that art films share a set of particular textual characteristics, but for him such a formalist definition is incomplete. To this end, Neale’s essay supplements Bordwell’s textual analysis with a description of the economic and cultural infrastructures of art cinema (Neale; see also Betz). Focusing, as Bordwell does, on post-war European cinema, Neale attempts to develop a definition of art cinema that takes account of its ‘sources of finance, modes and circuits of production, distribution, and exhibition, its relationship to the state, the nature of the discourses used to support and promote it, the institutional basis of these discourses, the relations within and across each of these elements and the structure of the international film industry.’ This leads Neale to regard art cinema as a series of post-war attempts to counter Hollywood’s international domination through the institutional development of artistically meaningful and culturally valuable national film industries. In this way, Neale positions art cinema’s aesthetic codes in relation to the cultural discourses (institutional definitions and value judgments about high art and specific national cultural traditions) and economic infrastructures (subsidies, trade agreements, tax systems) that supported them. This conception of art cinema entails both a national and an international dimension. Because the codes of production, distribution, and exhibition operate within national boundaries, the prevalence of Hollywood films on European screens is understood as a specifically national concern, leading to the institutionalization of a range of national cinemas as localized responses to the problem. At the same time, however, art cinema circulates internationally as a niche within the international film market, where it functions as a ‘mechanism of discrimination’ that enables and perpetuates a series of economic, ideological, and aesthetic distinctions concerning art, culture, and value. It is at both the cultural and economic, as well as the national and international levels, then, that art cinema operates as an institution.  Both Bordwell and Neale indicate that, although the idea of cinema as art can be traced back to classical film theory and to early debates about film as the ‘seventh art,’ the concept of art cinema as a distinct mode of film practice gains currency in the post-WWII era, when, in the wake of the Hollywood divorcement decrees, commercial American cinema no longer overwhelmed domestic and international screens. These dramatic changes combined with the re-establishment of international trade, a renewed investment in the development of national cinemas, and the expansion of alternative modes of exhibition, produced the necessary conditions for a mode of film practice that was economically sustainable in the international market. While the origins of art cinema can be traced through the German Expressionist, French Impressionist, and Soviet Montage movements of the 1920s all the way back to early European films d’art, art cinema as a distinct generic category materializes with Italian neorealism. Thus Roberto Rossellini’s *Rome Open City,* which won the Grand Prize at Cannes in 1946, is typically thought to mark the emergence of art cinema as a specific practice. History, Geography, and Aesthetics: from European toward Global Art Cinema The neorealist aesthetic has come to typify a significant portion of art cinema: the emphasis on reaction and feeling over action and accomplishment, long shots and long takes, dead time, slow pacing, and empty narrative spaces. However, it is possible to identify another trend within art cinema that overlaps with what Peter Wollen has described as ‘counter cinema.’ Films belonging to this category are similarly defined through their opposition to Hollywood aesthetics; they cultivate an anti-realism of fragmentation and distanciation, and challenge the ideological codes embedded in classical narrative techniques. An interesting question arises here in relation to the political investments of art cinema. Underscoring Bordwell’s and Neale’s focus on Europe as the centre of art cinema production lies Solanas and Gettino’s famous distinction between second and third cinema that separates out a specific set of non-Hollywood films according to their political ideologies. Thus, while the aesthetic codes of second and third cinema may overlap, post-war European art cinema’s commitment to the bourgeois individual marks it as distinct from the politically committed cinemas of Latin America and Africa, more invested in collective protagonists and historical processes. However, both third and counter cinema landmarks, such as *Weekend* (Godard 1967), *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Gutiérrez Alea 1968), and *Xala* (Sembène 1975) have typically been distributed and exhibited, in the west at least, through the art house circuit. Indeed, recent scholarship has examined the extent to which various postcolonial national cinemas gained international prestige thanks to their attempts to emulate European art cinema, which provokes a re-evaluation of such divisions.  The question of art cinema’s political investments highlights another issue concerning the national geography of art cinema. The first wave of art cinema is considered to be the late 1950s to the mid 1970s; a period seemingly dominated by various European movements unified though their shared opposition to Hollywood’s international dominance. For many, this is, in fact, what the term ‘art cinema’ refers to, encompassing as it does the works of such art house giants as Ingmar Bergman, Alain Resnais, and Federico Fellini. Thus, with a handful of distinguished exceptions like Satyajit Ray, Miloš Forman, and Akira Kurosawa, art cinema originally emerged as a predominantly Western European film practice. During the 1990s, however, a second wave of art cinema surfaced as directors Béla Tarr, Abbas Kiarostami, Tsai Ming-liang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, and Theo Angelopoulos rose to international prominence. Consequently, the locus of attention has shifted away from Western Europe toward Eastern Europe and Asia and, in so doing, it has prompted a reconsideration of the concept of art cinema from a global perspective. At the same time, the global scope of contemporary art cinema has triggered a similar reassessment of its post-war landscape, with more consideration now being given to non-Western filmmakers, such as Rhitwit Ghatak, Sergei Parajanov, and Dariush Mehrju’i. Indeed, recent scholarship on art cinema has attempted to take into account the global scope of this mode of film practice and has consequently challenged the binary opposition between Hollywood and its others that has tended to characterize conceptualizations of art cinema up to this point (Galt and Schoonover). Given that, as Betz points out, art cinema today has been subsumed by the notion of ‘world cinema,’ (Betz 2009: 3), contemporary scholarship is under pressure to bring critiques of the concept of world cinema to bear on our understandings of the dynamics of art cinema.  While art cinema still retains its currency as a designator for a certain kind of post-war narrative cinema, the earlier relationship between art cinema and Le film d’art remains important, as it is where the association of art cinema with high art and a corresponding elite intellectualism first developed. Commonly described as ‘filmed theatre,’ early films d’art, such as *The Assassination of the Duke of Guise* (Le Bargy and Calmettes 1908), were designed to promote a literary and theatrical aesthetic that would appeal to a high-class and/or cultured audience that deemed itself separate from, and more sophisticated than, cinema’s mass public. It is in this moment, when cinema directly targets the educated and moneyed classes, that the concept of film as art separates itself off from a populist cinema. Vestiges of this distinction persist in definitions of art cinema that understand it in opposition to Hollywood, as does the implicit assumption that art cinema is, therefore, of more value culturally and intellectually than commercial cinema. In this sense, the term ‘art’ has come to denote more than a set of specific formal and aesthetic properties; it also operates as an evaluative term that, on the one hand, aligns art cinema with a sense of quality and, on the other, with a sense of elitism.  Although the distinction between art cinema as creative, non-commercial, quality cinema and Hollywood as formulaic, commercial, mass entertainment has waned somewhat, the informal assumption of art cinema’s cultural elitism remains, and recent debates about the merits of slow cinema (James) indicate the persistence of this tension in current discourse. In response to such logic, contemporary scholars like David Andrew have posited revised definitions that preserve the idea of art cinema as high art while at the same time open it up to other alternative modes of film practice. Similarly, scholars such as Joan Hawkins and Mark Betz have demonstrated the overlap between art cinema and cult film in terms of marketing and exhibition, as well as narrative structures and political investment, while Willinsky’s analysis of the art house theatre deconstructs the structuring opposition between mainstream and alternative film culture by positioning art cinema as an industry operating within the logics of commercial film practice. More recently, Adam Lowenstein has attempted to broaden the definition of art cinema by thinking through its relationship to new media and gaming. As these new theorizations indicate, the definition of art cinema as a label for a body of post-war European films has been radically revised and expanded. Thus, ‘art cinema’ is best understood as a historically contingent and therefore flexible concept, determined as much by cultural discourse, mode of production, marketing, exhibition context, and audience response as it is by a fluid set of aesthetics codes. |
| Further reading:  (Andrew)  (Andrew, Theorizing Art Cinemas: Foreign, Cult, Avant-garde and Beyond)  (Galt)  (Hawkins)  (James)  (Betz)  (Betz, Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema)  (Bordwell)  (Lowenstein)  (Nagib)  (Neale)  (Solanas)  (Willinsky)  (Wollen) |