

CIN105  
FINAL

name  
student  
tutorial

part A  
part B

Xinze Zhao  
1002897261  
TUT0101

A1A2  
B1B2B3

## A2

Experimental film, or avant-garde cinema, is distinguishable by its unique, stylistic touch at self-expression and/or experimentation outside of the mainstream cinema and at the same time endeavoring to expand its possibilities (Bordwell et al. 373). There're generally three major forms for avant-garde films; first, the *narrative* ones that create a fictional story just like other conventional narrative films but transform its narrative into something alien in order to subvert its signification and challenge the spectators; then come the ones of *abstract* forms that fiercely underline no more than the sheer pictorial qualities of the shots through presentation and re/arrangement of the on-screen materials (373); finally, the films that're *associational* in form, characteristic of assembling and associating sometimes logically incoherent images and sounds to convey ideas and emotions (380).

This three-minute-long experimental film *Surface*, made by Varathit Uthaisri, is a perfect example of the associational type for its *four* prominent features. The first characteristic being the *groupings* of images and sound into distinct sections. There're roughly six sections, each concentrating on a different locale of a different framing from close-up to extreme long shot orderly as the film unfolds, except that they're all shot through the perspective from underneath the ground which is totally unconventional. The first section is filled with the montage of numerous close-up shots, each consisting of everyday objects, ranging from a drip of water to a bag of oranges, dropping onto the ground (0:00 ~ 0:33). The second one is a collection of medium close-up shots of mostly private space like kitchen and dinner table (0:33 ~ 0:54). Then comes the sequence of medium framings of people walking on a pedestrian, a public space (0:54 ~ 1:09). The short quickly moves to the fourth section in which people are shown engaging

vibrantly in a variety of activities in a park through long shots (1:09 ~ 2:10). The fifth one switches to an even wider framing, and only in this section the previous locales and a fuller view in context of different groups of people participating in different activities are now revealed to the spectators because of the extreme long shots (2:10 ~ 2:33). Finally, the film ends abruptly with the rapid montage of a car accident (2:33 ~ 2:53).

These sections are stylistically amalgamated using *variations* from one part to another and changing tempo to suggest the interval of distinct blocks, which constitute the second notable feature. As briefly suggested from the listings above, each section is a variation of some former sections in terms of the subjects portrayed. Take, for instance the falling spray paint can from the first section (0:22), it's featured again in the fourth section (1:46), however it's varied and altered in a way, instead of being depicted exclusively, now being placed under a larger narrative context achieved by a broader framing in which a graffiti artist is being busted by a cop (1:49), additionally this "police chasing scene" is in turn featured in the second section for a very short period of time (1:05). Apart from the different framing techniques, each block is perceptibly varied in other stylistic features as well. The first section is notable for its slowly dissolving vignetting to reveal the falling objects, the second section is distinguishable by its frequent use of jump cuts, the third one features abrupt alteration of percussion instruments in the non-diegetic accompanying music, the fourth section's saturated by complex mise-en-scene due to its extensive framing, etc.

Despite that each block is distinguished by its own aura of variation, there're consistent styles throughout the whole film serving as *repeated motifs* to reinforce the associations – this being the third prominent feature. The motifs are observable mainly through sound – the rhythmic percussion-like diegetic sound at the beginning of each section, though varying,

dominates the flows of editing and subsequent non-diegetic music in each particular section. Additionally, all sections are demarcated by an abrupt varying of tempo, in terms of both visual and sound. For example, the transition between the first and second section is unusually prolonged (0:29), and the rhythmic diegetic sound of various objects falling onto the ground gradually diminishes to give away to the emergence of non-diegetic background music in the next section.

The final feature that's notable is the invitation of *different interpretations* from the spectators, as the short film is generally void of any specific significations. It's true that it creatively renders an episodic cross-section of the busy modern life from an unusual angle, but it's still unclear why the author chooses to film from this uncommon perspective – the sixth dimension that's rarely captured in most films. Maybe it calls for a re-evaluation of our current live/activities from a distanced and alienated standpoint, or maybe it's simply a fascinating idea to be able to observe the everyday life from such an angle; both ways, they leave the spectators to interpret and set no designated answer.

# B1

The dynamic tension between aesthetics and politics has always been presented in cinema, like Walter Benjamin indicated as early as 1935, that “the instant the criterion of genuineness in art production failed, the entire social function of art underwent an upheaval. Rather than being underpinned by *ritual*, it came to be underpinned by a different practice: *politics*.” (12) This dispersion of “genuineness”, as Comolli and Narboni elaborate in their essay, corresponds to the cinematic/mechanic reproduction of “reality”, the ideology, and its floating signifiers (814, 815, 817). They further declare that all films are political, for cinema in its unaltered form and unconscious state of mind, serves as nothing but a stylistic expression of this prevailing ideology (815). This political quality of cinema, according to them, stems from three dimensions – the on-screen reality as the representation of ideology, the producers (director, cinematographer, etc.) as agents of the reproduction of this reality, and the consumers (spectators, film critics, etc.) as the perceivers and objects of this reality (815).

Based on this assertion that all films are in nature political, the filmmakers who correspond to the producers above now have only two options, either comply with this ideological narrative of “reality” depiction or transgress and attack it. According to Comolli and Narboni, the former – the reinforcement and reassuring of dominant ideology – is attained by their accommodating and appeal to the audience demand, and the unreflective acceptance of the “established system of depicting reality” at the level of artistic form (816). Since what the public demands is essentially what the prevalent ideology demands, by complying with the public, the artists voluntarily give themselves up to the thought-patterns of the ideology (815). However, this is not the case for those conscious artists who loathe the ideological assimilation of the status

quo. Instead of intentionally pleasing the spectators, they challenge the aesthetic and ideological concepts of their time to break down the traditional system of signs and reality depiction, either through directly dealing with a signified political subject or shattering the cinematic syntax from within (816).

Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) is a good example of a conscious ideological instrument, more specifically, a device reinforcing the dominant sexist ideology by depicting female characters through male gaze and meticulously constructing the femaleness as passive and awaiting male protagonist's salvation. Especially in the dining car scene where the protagonist, Thornhill, first meet the heroine, Eve Kendall (46:24). The dialogue in this scene, not only establishes the mystified persona of Kendall, which is commonly found in film noir, but more importantly reveals her nature, narratively speaking, as a mean of seduction to some end. For Thornhill, she is the object of a romantic relationship; for Vandamm, the villain, she is just one of his collections to accompany his criminal achievement; and for "professor", the chief of government agency, she serves as a double spy with sexual appeal. Through these power relations, the character of Kendall is stripped away of any potential agency and relegated to become a mere apparatus of the narrative, of the film and more generally of the sexist ideology. This only reassures for the audience that there's no difference between the heterosexual and gender unequal (in the sense of female's powerlessness) ideological essence of the everyday life and the one on-screen.

On the contrary, the postmodern film we've watched this term, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* by Pedro Almodóvar, overtly criticizes and even mocks this compliance to sexist ideology. Notably in the beginning of the film (3:24), the sequence of Ivan's fantasies during his work of dubbing a foreign-language film unveils the sexist nature of this character, as

his objectification of women from all around the globe is depicted through a style with black-and-white texture similar to that found in Fellini's *8 1/2*. This parody of masculine daydreaming consciously and sarcastically restores the sexist ideological spectacles that can be found in both Hollywood films and European art films, drawing spectators' attention to this system of sexual significations so that it can be clearly seen from within itself, and "condemn itself out of its own mouth" (816).

## B3

The fourth wall is defined as an imaginary veil between the image's diegetic space of three dimensions, and the reality wherein spectators are situated. Thus, "breaking the fourth wall" refers to the deliberate emphasizing of this barrier in which director or characters directly address the audience. This technique is rarely adopted since it's often thought that it will disrupt viewers' focusing on the diegetic narrative by enabling them to realize that they're in fact only alienated outsiders of the story. However, I will argue that this self-reflexive technique doesn't affect perceivers' sense of emergence at all, instead it calls for true engagement and conversations, by comparing and contrasting two films that we've studied in this course, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Tout Va Bien* (1972) which both feature this self-reflexive technique repeatedly.

A representative sequence of utilizing this self-reflexivity, in *Do the Right Thing*, is the first appearance of Radio Raheem (49:28 ~ 51:10). In this almost three-minute-long take, the spectators are left alone to confront with Raheem directly. Feelings of intensity are created by unsteady swaying of the handheld camera and its framing of medium shot wherein this energetic young man throws punches at spectators telling a story about how his left hand, hate, though prevails initially, at last concedes to the counterattack from the right hand, love. This scene is especially powerful also due to the diegetic rap music – *fight the power* (1989) by Public Enemy – from his boombox, the symbol of awakening (his carrying it all day roaming in the street could be seen as spreading the values though others, like Sal, may find it bothering). Here, the breaking of the fourth wall, not only serves to highlight Raheem's reflection or confession in order to depict the conflicting inner world of a character – this conflict is also intertextually connected to



the contrasting quotes on love and hate by MLK and Malcom X, but it also, by breaking the boundary of virtuality and reality, tears down the vast veil and double consciousness that obscures African American people's true identity and forces them to look at and understand themselves through others' eyes (Du Bois, 5), spectators' eyes, and the ideology's eyes. This self-reflexive device is scattered throughout the whole film, just to name a few: the scene that directly follows it, in which Raheem is seen standing in fierce opposition with Sal, the Italian pizzeria owner, because of his loud music (51:10); juxtaposed dolly-zooms of individuals cursing the stereotypical prejudice about people of different descents (47:09); another confrontation seen between Radio Raheem and Korean grocery store owners (66:11). It's not hard to see that Spike Lee uses this technique for mainly two reasons – underlining and externalizing characters' mental activities and emerging the spectators into the fierce conflict of the neighborhood, i.e., let us, the perceivers, feel it in order to understand it, understand it before we can do something about it.

While Spike Lee's film concentrates more on the sociological or ethnic conflicts, the other film, Godard's *Tout Va Bien*, focuses more on the economic condition of the class conflict. It mainly depicts workers' strike at a sausage factory during the turbulent time of May 68. The representative scene highlighted in the prompt takes place when the protest falls into stalemate, and the shop steward of French C.G.T. (General Confederation of Labour) tries to break into the factory and represent the workers to negotiate with the factory owner. In this stationary long take, the shop steward is giving an impassioned speech about the economic conditions that they're facing and how these striking workers are foregoing the chance of negotiating with the owner (and capitalists in general) in order to get a greater share rightfully from a larger cake, hence jeopardizing the interest of the workers as a whole (18:14 ~ 23:19). In this particular

scene, the shop steward is staged as being interviewed by a journalist from a neutral standpoint, this long take, although being less emotionally affective than those breaking-the-fourth-wall shots from Spike Lee, leaves a greater space for the spectators to reflect upon the event – to question whether these workers are being too radical and detached from the realities – by prolonging the shot duration and avoiding overt direction (although this speech may be considered outright reactionary for leftists since it seems to state nothing than warning the workers to conform to the status quo). Additionally, different from the *Right Thing*, this film is established in its entirety on the basis of various self-reflexive techniques like the renouncement of the continuity editing and desynchronization of image and sound (3:06). In fact, the entire set of the artificially built factory, like a doll house, is deliberately shown in a horizontal tracking shot (11:52) in which ladder and some other props can be seen. This radical rejection of any traditional styles and forms, suggests no less than the total politicization of art against the appropriation of wage-labour, the capitalist economic system that determines its necessity, and the ideology that reinforces this social and political inequalities. But at the same time, this film is aware, not only of its ideological surroundings but also of itself and its radical quality.

Overall, traditional films are essentially one-dimensional when conveying the message, i.e., only a single storyteller is present and all spectators are passive receivers, while the political films above do it in two-dimensional manner by allowing spectators to actively engage in the conversation and encouraging us to constantly reflect upon the spectacles in front of us. This self-awareness is also, according to my discussion in B1, indispensable to the struggle against prevailing ideology, be it racially or economically.

## Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin Books, 2008.
- Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson and Jeff Smith. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2020.
- Comolli, Jean-Luc and Jean Narboni. "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism." *Film Theory and Criticism* (2004): 812-819.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2015.