

Chapter 1

Cinema and Modernism

Objectives: The aim of this chapter is to make students aware of the trends of modernism, and related themes and techniques.

Key words: cinematography, expressionism, montage, surrealism, cinemascope

Background

Modernism deals with questions of aesthetics and art, and attempts to steer clear of the verisimilitude of realism; this will be discussed in detail in the chapter on modernism. *La Coquille et le clergyman* (1927) by Germaine Dulac was one of the earlier films to combine surrealist and avant-garde elements. The American avant-garde of the 1960s to the mid-1970s follows the French avant-garde period, with its ideals of pure cinema. The first few decades of the 20th century witnessed revolutionary changes in the traditional arts: the art of Picasso and Dali; the music of Stravinsky; the literature of James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. Cinema too was not way behind.

Cinema began with the efforts of Auguste Lumière (1862-1954) and Louis Lumière (1864-1968). Louis worked on a machine to compete with Edison's Kinetoscope and invented the Cinematograph, which was a camera and projector in one. Their first film was *Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory* (1895), along with *The Arrival of a Train at a Station* (1895). The Lumieres are also noted for introducing the first ever special effects on screen in *The Demolition of a Wall* (1895) in which reverse motion was used to "rebuild" a wall.

George Melies (1861-1938) is regarded as the first to use the trick photography and developed devices such as superimposition and stop motion. His adaptation of Jules Verne's *Le Voyage dans la Lune* or *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and *The Melomaniac* (1903) were among the early landmarks in the history of motion pictures. Ricciotto Canudo (1877-1923), an Italian writer in Paris, fervently pursued the concept of the relationship between film and theatre and wrote the essay, 'The Birth of a Sixth Art', first published in *Les Entretiens Idealistes* (1911), where he places cinema alongside music, painting, poetry, sculpture and architecture. He argues that in cinema one finds a conciliation of rhythm of space and the rhythms of time.

According to the authors of *Film Histories*, from its beginnings, "cinema was international in scope and development. The period between 1895 and 1907 was specific in terms of the industrial make-up of the film industry and the style and exhibition of its product. This was a period of ferment and change that would give rise to the frameworks that would later shape motion-picture practice. However, it also revealed a strikingly

different understanding of cinema industrially, aesthetically and in terms of exhibition. With regard to film style, this was especially apparent between 1894 and 1902 where the majority of films consisted of one-shot 'actualities.' These were often non-fictional scenes, short travelogues, offering views of exotic locales..." (Graigne et al 2009: 7).

Cinema soon became a source of entertainment for the masses, particularly the working class. One of the important 'fiction' films of the early period was *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903) which uses twenty separate shots, excluding the famous close-up of a bandit firing at the camera. The story unfolded over nearly a dozen different locations, indoor, in or on the train, beside the train, and so on. This was the first film to have used a variety of movements and scenes shifting from one location to another. The audience were treated for the first time to the possibilities of speed and spaciousness in this medium.

Some of the pioneer filmmakers who directed the course of cinema are:

- *DW Griffith* (1875-1948)

DW Griffith started his career with the Edison company, and later on moved to the Biograph. He brought about several technical changes including making use of selective point of view, rather than the fixed point of view of the audience. His introduction of introducing a new cinematic language included finding a balance between long shot, medium shot and close up.

The Prussian Spy(1909), for instance, set during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, tells the story of a French officer, consumed by suspicion and sexual jealousy surmises that the woman he loves has concealed his Prussian rival in a closet the door of which he thereupon proposes to use for target-practice. Mise-en-scene conveys all of this essential narrative information during a single lengthy shot. The second half of the film cross-cuts between the room containing the closet and a room above where the maid is attempting to pull the Prussian spy to safety through a trapdoor.

Griffith's magnum opus, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) modeled itself on *The Clansman*, a novel by Thomas W. Dixon. The book glorified the Ku Klux Klan of the post-Civil War South, and rubbished the idea of Black Reconstruction and political rights for the black people. In spite of its racist overtones, the film is noted for its visual artistry. Griffith used several separate sequences and shots, for instance, the battle scene, the assassination of Lincoln, the homecoming scene, and several other incomparable ones.

Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov: This was the period when montage editing came out of the Soviet experimental cinema of the 1920s. Lev Kuleshov's significant contribution was the idea that each shot is like a building block and it derives its meaning from its context, that is, the shots placed around it.

During his workshop sessions at the state film school, VGIK, Kuleshov and his students would systematically dissect D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), viewing it several times, editing, reediting, assembling and reassembling it. Kuleshov further felt that juxtaposition must be inherent in all film signs. Shots therefore acquire meaning when juxtaposed with what comes before and after them. (For more details, please refer to the chapter on Editing).

Carl Dreyer, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton

For these modernist filmmakers, refer to the lectures from the course *Contemporary Literature*, the link is given below:

<http://nptel.ac.in/courses/109106054/11>

- *Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau*

After Germany's defeat in World War I (1914-18) the artistic form captured the mood of the generation. Germany had lost land, people and pride in the Versailles Treaty. This setback to the collective confidence gave way to general feelings of despondency, paranoia and morbidity. The impact of expressionism as an artistic movement was soon realized in cinema. UFA (Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft), the principal film studio in Germany, was a major force in promoting avant-garde cinema, and supported the endeavors of filmmakers like Wiene, FW Murnau and Fritz Lang. (For more details on these two German masters and expressionism, please refer to the chapter on German Expressionism).

- *Jean Renoir* (1894-1979)

In terms of technique, politics and themes, Renoir's films roam far and wide, from the outrageous farce *Boudu Saved From Drowning* (1932) to the lyrical, impressionistic *Partie de campagne* (*A Day In The Country*, 1936). But even as early as *La chienne* (*The Bitch*) in 1931 we find Renoir seeking to transcend the artificial divisions between comedy and tragedy in a vividly detailed, spontaneous-seeming rendering of the ongoing chaos and confusion of everyday life. (Renoir has been discussed at length elsewhere in this course, for more details, please refer to the chapter on Jean Renoir).

- *Jacques Tati (1907-1982)*

A silent comedian who worked as a mime as a young man, Tati worked as a screenwriter, director, producer, and an actor. Although pantomime as an art dominated the silent films for over two decades, yet with the advent of sound, mime lost favor with its most steadfast practitioners. Even Chaplin, who never thought much of sound, succumbed to it. Tati however carried on the tradition till the fifties, with considerable success. His first major film was *Holiday*, where he plays a simple postman on his small bike in the countryside. *Mr Hulot's Holiday* (1953) tells the story of Mr Hulot's vacations by the sea (Rowan Atkinson's 2007 *Mr. Bean's Holiday* is patterned after this film). It is a series of hilarious vignettes and funnily enough there is hardly any close-up shot of him. He arrives in his little car, and meets a motley group of characters, most of whom are mere types (the smiling blonde, a harried waiter, a belligerent general). While the crowd entertains itself with various activities, Hulot does not quite fit in and bumbles through the setting. His next Hulot film, *Mon Oncle*, is a satire of the French bourgeois society.

The Beginnings of Sound

The idea that sound could complement cinematic image had always prevailed since the inception of cinema. However, since only a handful of exhibitors in major cities could afford full-scale orchestra, filmmakers continued their search for effective means of recording sound.

Dr Lee de Forest, an American inventor, patented a sound-on-film system in 1923. He made several one and two reel phono films and by 1924, around 34 theatres in the US were equipped with the required sound system.

Vitaphone was a sound system used to provide synchronized sound for films, and the Al Jolson starring *The Jazz Singer* (Warner Brothers, 1927) became the first film to use synchronized dialogue on film. The film, a part-talkie was a huge success. Warner Brothers next came up with *Lights of New York* (1928), a film having the distinction of being 100% all-talkie.

- *Max Ophuls (1902-57)*

For Ophuls, style is meaning. His first film was *Liebelei* (1932), about the ecstasy and despair of a young couple in love. With his romantic sensibilities, he is considered an expert of the doomed love story. A German Jew, Ophuls became a French citizen in 1938. He was forced to flee to Hollywood when France fell to the Nazis; and in the USA, he made stylish melodramas for Paramount Pictures: *The Exile* (1947), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Caught* (1949), and *The Reckless Moment* (1949). Ophuls returned to France after the War, and made four elegant classics: *La Ronde* (1950), *Le Plaisir* (1952), *The Earrings of Madame de...* (1953) adapted from a novel by Louise Leveque de Vilmorin, and *Lola Montes* (1955).

Lola Montes is Ophuls' masterpiece. Lola Montes was a nineteenth-century dancer with mediocre talent, who became the mistress of the composer Franz Liszt, and later of Ludwig I, deposed king of Bavaria. She ends up in a circus, where she sells kisses to earn a living. In circus, she is displayed as an object, an image presented for voyeuristic gaze. The character of cinema as a spectacle is established from the outset as the ringmaster, an alter ego of Ophuls (Peter Ustinov), addresses the audience in the circus (or us), "The most sensational act of the century! Spectacle! Emotion! Action! History! A creature...A monster!...will answer the most indelicate questions, the most intimate questions, the most indiscrete questions." All this while, Lola remains motionless, as the camera revolves around her. Filmed in Eastmancolor and Cinemascope, *Lola* was an extravaganza, where Ophuls' mastery of the craft is on full display. Ophuls uses color nonnaturalistically especially in flashback sequences, where each tint goes according to the tone of the episode. As in his other works, the camera never seems to stop its circular track, a technique later used successfully by Martin Scorsese.

- *Jean Cocteau* (1889-1963)

Cocteau was not just a filmmaker, but also a poet, painter, sculptor, novelist and dramatist. Among his everlasting films are: the surrealistic *Blood of a Poet* (1930); the myth-inspired *Orpheus* (based on his own play; 1950); and the magical "children's fairytale" *Beauty and the Beast* (1946). Cocteau succeeded in creating a series of images of astonishing beauty with Beauty gliding, and not waking; mirrors transforming into pools of water; and candles lodged in humanoid arms affixed to the walls of the castle. So impressive was Jean Marais as the furry and fanged beast, that when he transforms into the handsome prince, Greta Garbo famously called out, "Give me back my beast!" A contemporary of Bunuel and Dali, Cocteau's works are notable for astonishing effects and beautiful images.

Films and cinemascope

In the early 50s, Hollywood faced major competition from TV, resulting in decreasing box-office returns. The studio bosses realized that there must be more apart from the introduction of color to combat the television. Cinemascope, devised by Henri Chretien, was purchased by 20th century Fox. The technique involved using an anamorphic lens that, mounted on an ordinary camera, photographed images that were horizontally squeezed. Next, these images would be unsqueezed during projection resulted in an image wider than the film frame. Fox chief, Daryl F. Zanuck, after viewing the rushes of the first two Cinemascope production, *The Robe* and *How to Marry a Millionaire* (both in 1953), announced that henceforth 20th Century Fox productions will only concentrate on subjects suitable for Cinemascope. In spite of some reservations from directors, the new fad had caught on. Cinemascope went on to become one of the most important devices to impact cinema.

Films for viewing: Jean Epstein's *Photogenies* (1924); Rene Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924); Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1965).

Suggested readings

1. Bazin, André. "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema." *What is Cinema?* Ed. and trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.
2. Bellos, David. *Jacques Tati: His Life and Art*. NY: Vintage, 2001.
3. Graigne, Paul et al. *Film Histories: An Introduction and Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
4. Giovacchini, Saverio. *Hollywood Modernism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.
5. Sierek, K. 'Emblems of Modernism in the Early Films of Max Ophuls.' *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture and Theory*. Vol 60 no 5, 2004, pp. 211-222.
6. Smith, Bernard. *Modernism's History: A Study in Twentieth Century Art and Ideas*. New South Wales: University of New South Wales, 1998.
7. Trotter, David. *Cinema and Modernism*. NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007.

Suggested websites

- http://www.dvdjournal.com/reviews/b/beautyandthebeast_cc.shtml
- http://quintessentialpublications.com/twyman/?page_id=26
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biograph_Company
- <http://www.filmsite.org/birt.html>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_modernism

Quiz

1. Answer the following:

- i. What is the major contribution of the Lumiere Brothers towards cinema?
- ii. What are the key features of Jean Cocteau's films?
- iii. Write a short note on Max Ophuls' *Lola Montes*.

2. State whether the following are true or false:

- i. The first two Cinemascope productions were *The Robe* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.
- ii. The *Great Train Robbery* is directed by DW Griffith.
- iii. Jacques Tati started his career as a mime artist.

3. Match the following:

i	<i>Orpheus</i>	a	Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu
ii	<i>Carmilla</i>	b	Louise Leveque de Vilmorin
iii	<i>A Trip to the Moon</i>	c	Jean Cocteau
iv	<i>The Earrings of Madame de....</i>	d	Jules Verne

Answer key

2. i.-False (*How to Marry a Millionaire*) ; ii.-False (Edwin S. Porter); iii.-True

3. i-c; ii-a-; iii-d; iv-b