FILM 279: INTRODUCTION TO FILM HISTORY

EAST 389: GLOBAL SCIENCE FICTION CINEMA & MEDIA

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OBJECTIVES:

FILM 279 introduces key historical moments and cinematic movements, styles, and techniques, as well as historiographical and theoretical debates in the history of world cinema. The course maps out diverging trajectories and merging paths of exemplary filmmakers and filmmaking practices in various nations and geo-political regions against the backdrop of the changing technological media environments. Students will read both historical and contemporary texts to gain a broad sense of the seminal debates in film studies, reception and criticism. This course aims to foster a critical understanding of cinema as an international, distributed, and polycentric process. To foster dialogue across the films and to bring questions of film historiography to the fore, the course is structured around 'ssfff' or 'speculative or science fiction and fantasy films.' Thus it is cross-listed with EAST 369: Global Science Fiction Cinema and Media (this year only).

METHODOLOGY:

The course will alternate between in-class film screenings, lectures, and discussions of the films within the conceptual framework provided for each week. Attendance throughout lectures and screenings is mandatory. Students are expected to read the materials before class and to be prepared to discuss them; the lectures will directly address those readings. Due to the Friday schedule this year, we are short one class in comparison with prior years (twelve instead of thirteen), and so the first two to three weeks will include a pile of recommended readings that are normally included but were cut this year. Readings in the course packet are thus slightly out of order for weeks 1 & 2.

COURSE MATERIALS:

All readings are in the course pack available through McGill Bookstore at the Parc Av. Location 3544 Parc Avenue. The films listed for primary screening for each class will be placed on reserve at the library.

Handouts and Powerpoints will be posted at http://lamarre-mediaken.com/Site/Film_279_0.html

MEDIA POLICY:
No cell phones during class and screenings. Students may use laptops for taking notes during lectures, however no screen devices are allowed during screenings.

EVALUATION:

1/ Two in-class quizzes (**15 % each**)   **30 %**
The in-class quizzes will cover the materials from both lectures and required readings. The quizzes will be held on **February 2** & **April 6**.

2/ Midterm essay and final essay (**30 % each**)   **60 %**
The take-home midterm essay and the take-home final essay will cover the materials from both lectures and required readings for the course. Details will be provided in class. Prior to the due date for this assignment, we will offer review sessions led by TAs. Dates and locations for the review sessions will be announced. The midterm take-home essay is due on **February 23.** The final take-home essay is due on **April 18.**

3/ Attendance and Participation   **10%**
Attendance is mandatory and students will sign into class and out of class. If you attend all the classes after add-drop, you receive the full 10%. Each class missed will result in 5% off the final grade. We also hope to hold review sessions the week before quizzes and papers.

SCHEDULE

WEEK 1

1895-1905:   Attractions

George Méliès, *Le voyage dans la lune* (A Trip to the Moon, 1902)

1905-1915:   Narrative 1

1915-1925:   Narrative 2

Yakov Protazanov, *Aelita* (Aelita: Queen of Mars, 1924; Soviet Union)

WEEK 2

1925-1935:   Sound Cinema and Classical Film Form

Film: Karl Hartl, *F.P.1 anwortet nicht* (F.P.1 Doesn't Answer, 1932; Germany)

WEEK 3

1935-1945   Classical Animation Form and Colour

The Wan Brothers, *Tie shan gong zhu* (Princess Iron Fan, 1941; China)

SCHEDULE

WEEK 4
1945-1955:   Classical Film Form, Expanded
Karel Zemen, *Vynález zkázy* (The Fabulous World of Jules Verne, 1958; Czech)
Jiri Trnka, *The Hand* (1965; Czech)

WEEK 5
1955-1965:   Genre Cinema and Television
Kurt Maetzig, *Der Schweigende Stern* (Silent Star, 1962; East Germany, Poland)

WEEK 6
1965-1975:   New Waves
Andrei Tarkovsky, *Solyaris* (Solaris, 1972; Soviet Union)

WEEK 7
1975-1985:   Blockbusters and Indies
Tsui Hark, *Do ma daan* (Peking Opera Blues, 1986)

SCHEDULE

WEEK 8
1985-1995:   Video and Cinema
Oshii Mamoru, *Kōkaku kidōtai* (The Ghost in the Shell, 1995; Japan)

WEEK 9
1995-2000   Media and Cinema
Gustavo Mosquera, *Moebius* (1996; Argentina)

WEEK 10
2000-2010:   Digital Effects Cinema 1
Joon Ho Bong, *Gwoemul* (The Host, 2006; Korea)

WEEK 11
2000-2010:   Digital Effects Cinema 2
S. Shankar, *Enthiran* (Robot, 2010; India)

WEEK 12
2005-2015:   Plasmatic Cinema-Media Worlds
Janelle Monae & Wondaland, "Many Moons," "Queen," & "Dance Apocalyptic" (USA)
Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi* (2009; Kenya)

Show or Tell?

Cinema of Attractions and Narrative Cinema

1895-1925

Different ways of understanding the history of cinema

1. Gunning: Cinema of Attractions
2. Bordwell: Narrative Cinema
3. Sobchak: Genre

PART 1: Attractions and Narration

In 1985, film scholar David Bordwell published *Narration in the Fiction Film*. The first chapter, "Mimetic Theories of Narration," was assigned for today.

Bordwell's history of cinema is one in which both film and film theory becomes more and more sophisticated, paving the way for the emergence of classical film form or the classical film style in the 1920s and 1930s, which he associates primarily with Hollywood cinema.

His history is developmental, even teleological. Everything prior to the emergence of classical film form is a precursor, and of value primarily as a precursor, not in its own right.

--*1895*----------------------Birth of Cinema

1900s   Attractions

1910s   Moving Pictures

1920s   Cinema

1930s   Classical Film Form

In 1986, Tom Gunning published his famous essay on the cinema of attractions, also assigned for today.

Gunning contests and undermines Bordwell's developmental history of cinema, in which early cinema is seen as nothing but an unsophisticated precursor that disappears with the emergence of narrative cinema, that is, classical film form.

Gunning develops a series of contrasts between the cinema of attractions (emerging 1895-1906) and narrative cinema (emerging 1907-1913).

The source of Gunning's notion of attractions is

Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948)

Eisenstein considered attractions to be powerful sensory stimuli operating independently of narrative to shock spectators, evoking strong emotions or sparking new concepts, which triggered an experience of ecstasy.

Cinema of Attractions	Narrative Cinema
showing	absorbing
exhibitionist	voyeuristic
actuality & trick films	diegesis
story is just a frame	story is everything
exhibition practices are visible	exhibition practices are invisible
the close-up is an attraction	the close-up punctuates narrative
fairground sideshow	legitimate theater
variety format	movie theater
direct simulation	indirect sublimation
eyes and voices directed at us	averted eyes and voices
popular & avant-garde venues	mass entertainment

What is the historical relation between cinema of attractions and narrative cinema?

Gunning wishes to avoid a 'developmental' history. He also wishes to avoid a simple categorization of film as being either cinema of attractions or narrative cinema.

Thus he offers a history of 'assemblings' of the two tendencies.
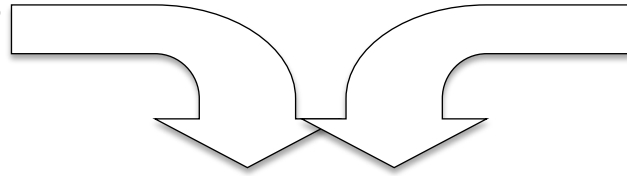
He gives two examples:
    1. The Chase Film (1903-1906)
    2. The Cinema of Effects associated with Lucas, Spielberg, Coppola (1974-1986)
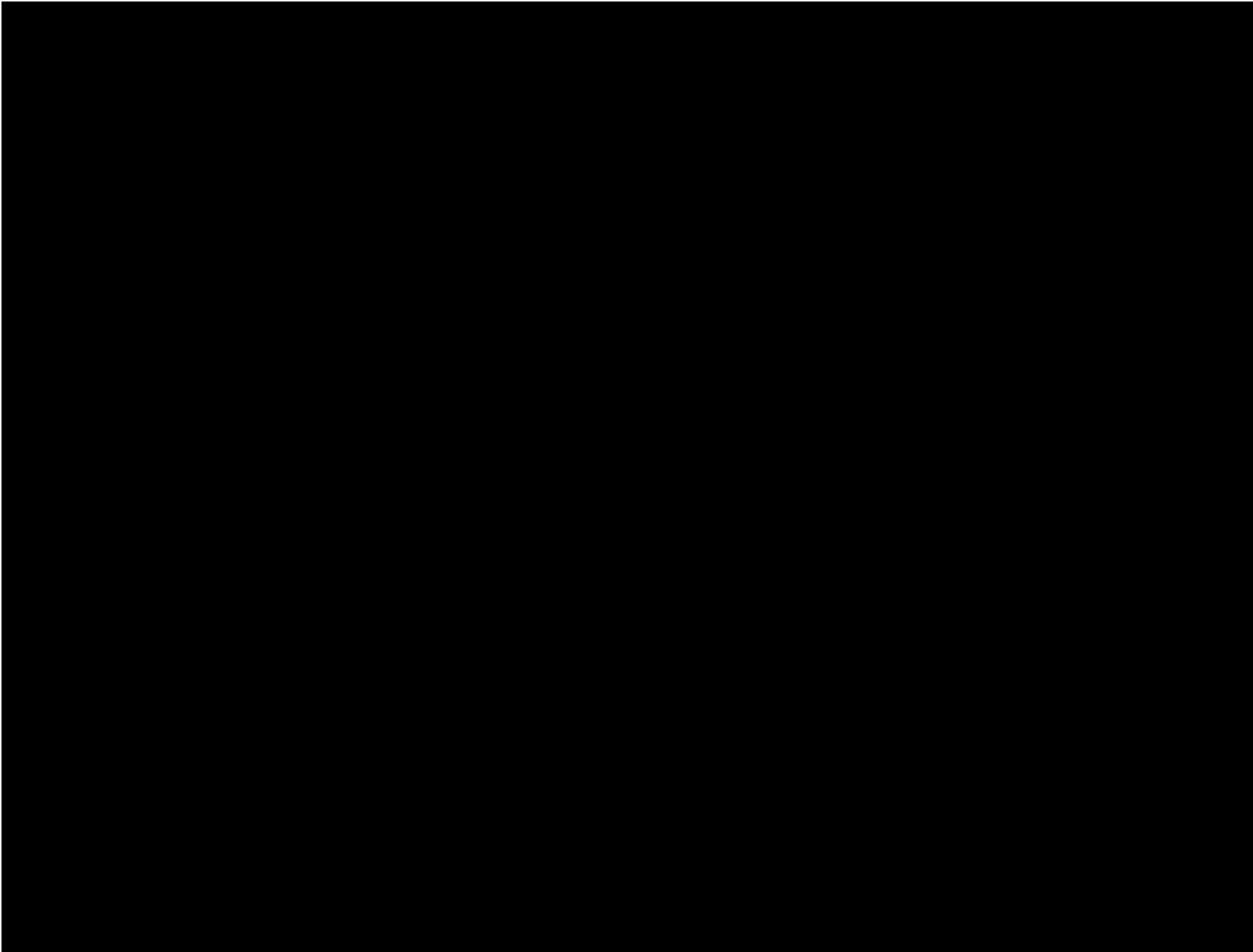
Attractions ⟷ Narrative

"dialectic"

Chase film, 1903-1906
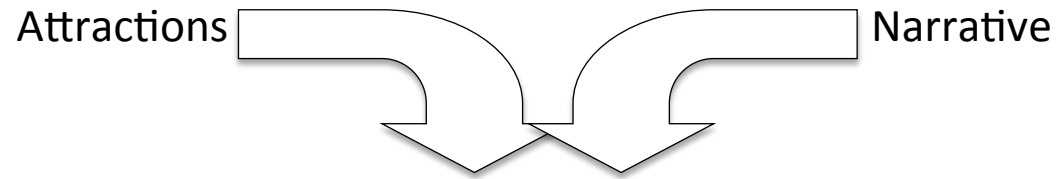
Attractions
1895-1906

Narrative
1907-1913

Le voyage dans la lune
"A Trip to the Moon"
(George Méliès, 1902)

George Méliès, *Le voyage dans la lune* (A Trip to the Moon, 1902)

Attractions ⟶ ⟵ Narrative

The Cinema of Effects
associated with Lucas, Spielberg, Coppola (1974-1986)

Francis Ford Coppola, *Dracula* (1992; USA)

PART 2: Narrative Cinema

In "Mimetic Theories of Narration," Bordwell develops a contrast between "mimesis" and "diegesis," which he initially glosses as "showing" and "telling."

The aim of this chapter is to show that mimetic theories of narration are inadequate for understanding films, and so he writes more about mimetic theories than about diegetic theories.

Still the chapter reveals a good deal of his general contrast he develops between mimesis and diegesis.

Mimesis	Diegesis
showing	telling
spectacle	narrational
shock to the body	story world
dramatization	plot construction
the act of vision	diverse stylistic devices used to tell story
claims to mimic natural perception	addressing and positioning viewer
ideal observer	addressed and positioned viewer
passive reception	absorption into narrative

Bordwell's explicit aim is to show that mimetic theories are not as good as diegetic theories when it comes to understanding narrative, especially narrative cinema. But his account introduces a normative stance that affects his view of film history. Not only does film theory become more 'advanced' and sophisticated as it moves beyond mimetic theories and develops diegetic theories. Also, earlier film forms feel less sophisticated than later forms, more mimetic, less diegetic. This is how his cinema history takes on a developmental or teleological bias.

He claims that Sergei Eisenstein pushes the mimetic to its extreme, but still Eisenstein remains somewhat trapped in it.

This is also why Bordwell's approach is often criticized for being highly normative. A certain kind of narrative cinema (usually classical Hollywood cinema) becomes the standard for evaluating all forms and eras of film production.

In contrast, Gunning's approach is explicitly counter-normative. He is writing against the standards of evaluation inherent in Bordwell's account. Where Bordwell encourages us to *subordinate* attractions to narration, Gunning invites us to consider attractions and narration in terms of a tension within cinema.

It is worthwhile noting that Bordwell's bias has precedence in the actual history of film theory and practice.

Filmmakers began to push against theatre in the 1910s, to argue for 'pure film' based on the potentiality of the apparatuses used in film production. Discourses about, and practices based on, the specificity of cinema were dominant by the 1920s.

In 1917, for instance, in "The Present and Future of Moving Pictures," Japanese novelist, playwright, and filmmaker Tanizaki Jun'ichirō argued against basing cinema on theater and argued for highlighting techniques specific to moving pictures — such as closeups.

In 1926, French filmmaker and theorist Jean Epstein tried to describe the specificity of cinema in terms of *photogénie*, especially evident in closeups.

To what extent do these writers on cinema adopt a mimetic stance or a diegetic stance? Or, if they combine them, how do they combine them? Do they subordinate an 'attraction' like the closeup to narration?

Yakov Protazanov, *Aelita* (Aelita: Queen of Mars, 1924; Soviet Union)

Earth (Soviet Union)	Mars
Los (engineer)	Gol (energy tower guardian)
Natasha (Los' wife)	Aelita (Queen of Mars)
Spiridinov (Los' friend)	Ihoshka (Aelita's maidservant)
Gusev (soldier)	Tuskub (ruler of Mars)
Masha (Gusev's wife)	
Victor Ehrlich (profiteer)	
Kravtsov (detective)	

Earth (Soviet Union)	Mars
'social realism'	'constructivism' (Aleksandra Ekster)
tendency toward narrative absorption	tendency toward attractions
messages	images
everyday life	scientific and military adventure
petty crime, corruption, dissatisfaction	class oppression
post-revolutionary crises	pre-revolutionary

Yakov Protazanov, *Aelita* (Aelita: Queen of Mars, 1924; Soviet Union)

Part 3: Genre

In "Images of Wonder: The Look of Science Fiction," Vivian Sobchak argues that iconic objects in science fiction films, such rockets and robots, do not have stable meanings from film to film. Rockets and robots are very malleable or 'plastic,' both in their appearance and their meaning. She concludes that the iconic objects of science fiction cinema do not serve to ground narrative in way that they do in genres like the Western.

Sobchak's account of invites some new lines of inquiry.

First, it invites to begin to track some of the iconic objects of science fiction films across our films: (1) technologies of transportation such as rockets and spaceships; (2) technologies of communication such as radio, television, telephones, computers; (3) alien modes of existence such as extraterrestrials, robots, AI, cyborgs; (4) urban design and city media.

—How do these iconic SF elements differ in *A Trip to the Moon* and *Aelita*?

First, Sobchak invites us to begin to track some of the iconic objects of science fiction films across our films: (1) technologies of transportation such as rockets and spaceships; (2) technologies of communication such as radio, television, telephones, computers; (3) alien modes of existence such as extraterrestrials, robots, AI, cyborgs; (4) urban design and city media.

—How do these iconic SF elements differ in *A Trip to the Moon* and *Aelita*?

Second, Sobchak focuses on how malleable and plastic SF iconic objects are across films. Also, as Brian Willems points out in his account of *A Trip to the Moon*, the iconic object (for instance, the moon) may even be malleable and plastic in its look and feel within a film.

—Do you think these SF icons are operating more as attractions than as narrative elements, or as both, or neither?

Third, Gunning observes, "the cinema of attractions does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative, more evident in some genres (e.g. the musical) than in others" (382). The genre of science fiction did not exist as such at the time of *A Trip to the Moon* and *Aelita*. What we see as science fiction would probably be considered fantasy or maybe science fantasy or futurism. Still, we can ask a couple questions.

—Is science fiction and fantasy a genre prone to using attractions? Does the contemporary boom in SF-inflected entertainments change how we think of film history?

Yakov Protazanov, *Aelita* (Aelita: Queen of Mars, 1924; Soviet Union)

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-------------------------------------------------------------------1895-----------------------Birth of Cinema
1895-1905        Attractions (Vaudeville, Magic Acts, Sideshows)
-------------------------------------------------------------------1902------------------A Trip to the Moon


1905-1915        Narrative 1 (Classical Theatre, Popular Drama)


1915-1925        Narrative 2 (Literature, Poetry, Novel, Avant-Garde Theatre)
-------------------------------------------------------------------1917------------------Tanizaki 'Pure Film'
-------------------------------------------------------------------1924----------------------------------Aelita
-------------------------------------------------------------------1924----------------Epstein 'Photogénie'
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-------------------------------------------------------------------1985----------Bordwell 'Mimetic Theories'
-------------------------------------------------------------------1986-----Gunning 'Cinema of Attractions'
-------------------------------------------------------------------1992----------------------------------Dracula
-------------------------------------------------------------------1995---------100th Anniversary of Cinema
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