

Continuity or Contradiction?

Classical Film Form versus Vernacular Modernism

1920-1940

-----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'

1925-1935 Classical Film Form & Sound



Radio & Telecommunications

-----1932-----*FP1 Doesn't Answer*

-----1985-----Bordwell 'Mimetic Theories'

-----1985-----*Bordwell Classical Hollywood Cinema*

-----1986-----Gunning 'Cinema of Attractions'

-----1992-----*Dracula*

-----1995-----100th Anniversary of Cinema

-----1999-----Hansen 'Mass Production of Senses'

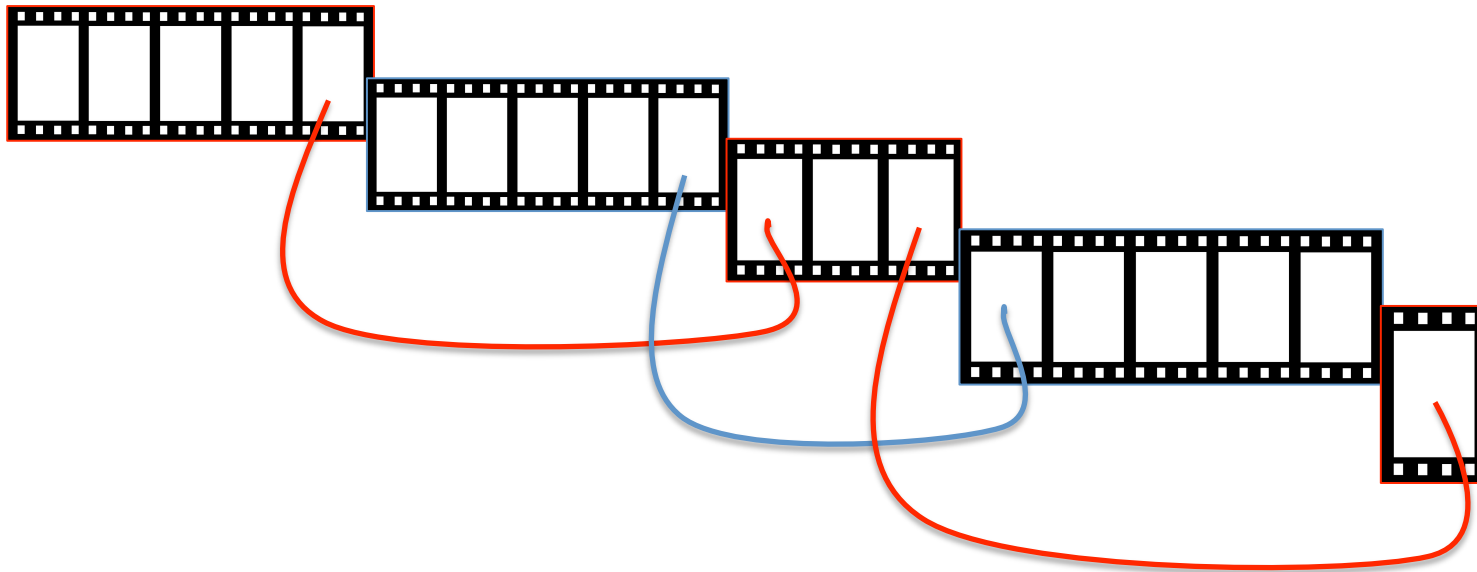
CONTINUITY EDITING 1: 'camera work'

CLOSE SHOT
AFFECT
non-conscious
sensation/feeling

MEDIUM SHOT
PERCEPTION
seeing, listening, talking
intersubjective

LONG SHOT
ACTION
cause and effect
action and reaction

CONTINUITY EDITING 2: 'cross-cutting' or 'parallel editing'





Fritz Lang, *Frau im Mond* (Woman in the Moon, 1929; Germany)

CLASSICAL FILM FORM versus VERNACULAR MODERNISM

In “Mimetic Theories of Narration” from his book *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985), David Bordwell argues for the priority of narrative (the diegetic) in understanding cinema. A similar argument is presented in his study of classical Hollywood cinema, written with Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson.

While Miriam Hansen agrees with many of their observations about the emergence of a set of global conventions for cinema between roughly 1920 and 1960, she takes issue with their interpretation of these conventions as “classical” and as cognitive universals. She proposes that we think about global cinema of this period in terms of “vernacular modernism” instead of “classical film form” or “classical Hollywood cinema.”

What are the principal differences between Hansen and Bordwell *et al.* on global impact of Hollywood cinema in the 1920s and 1930s?

CLASSICAL FILM FORM

Miriam Hansen:

“David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's monumental and impressive study, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (1985). The authors conceive of classical cinema as an integral, coherent system, a system that interrelates a specific mode of production (based on Fordist principles of industrial organization) and a set of interdependent stylistic norms that were elaborated by 1917 and remained more or less in place until about 1960. The underlying notion of classical film style, rooted in neoformalist poetics and cognitive psychology, overlaps in part with the account of the classical paradigm in 1970s film theory, particularly with regard to principles of narrative dominance, linear and unobtrusive narration centering on the psychology and agency of individual characters, and continuity editing. But where psychoanalytic-semiotic theorists pinpoint unconscious mechanisms of identification and the ideological effects of ‘realism,’ Bordwell and Thompson stress thorough motivation and coherence of causality, space, and time; clarity and redundancy in guiding the viewer's mental operations; formal patterns of repetition and variation, rhyming, balance, and symmetry; and overall compositional unity and closure” (246)

VERNACULAR MODERNISM

My focus here is more squarely on mid-twentieth-century modernity, roughly from the 1920s through the 1950s—the modernity of mass production, mass consumption, and mass annihilation—and the contemporaneity of a particular kind of cinema, mainstream Hollywood, with what has variously been labeled ‘high’ or ‘hegemonic modernism.’ (242)

...modernism encompasses a whole range of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity... (243)

...the term vernacular combines the dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, with connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity, and translatability. (243)

VERNACULAR MODERNISM

American films began to dominate Russian screens as early as 1915 and by 1916 had become the main foreign import. Films made in the following years... increasingly... the mise-en-scène is broken down according to classical American principles of continuity editing, spatio-temporal coherence, and narrative causality. (244)

VERNACULAR MODERNISM

How can we restore historical specificity to the concept of classical Hollywood cinema?

...the hegemonic mechanisms by which Hollywood succeeded in amalgamating a diversity of competing traditions, discourses, and interests on the *domestic* level may have accounted for at least some of the generalized appeal and robustness of Hollywood products *abroad* (a success in which the diasporic, relatively cosmopolitan profile of the Hollywood community not doubt played a part as well.). In other words, by forging a mass market out of an ethnically and culturally heterogeneous society, if often at the expense of racial others, American classical cinema had developed an idiom, or idioms, that traveled more easily than its national popular rivals. (251-52)

VERNACULAR MODERNISM

...the cinema was... the single most inclusive cultural horizon in which the traumatic effects of modernity were reflected, rejected, or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated. (253)

The new medium also offered an alternative because it engaged the contradictions of modernity at the level of the senses, the level at which the impact of modern technology on human experience was most palpable and irreversible. (254)

...we may find that genres such as the musical, horror, or melodrama may offer just as much reflexive potential as slapstick comedy, with appeals specific to those genres and specific resonances in different contexts of reception. (254)

...even the most ordinary commercial films were involved in producing a new sensory culture. (255)

VERNACULAR MODERNISM

...a global sensory vernacular rather than a universal narrative idiom... (256)

BORDWELL et al
CLASSICAL FILM FORM

production (industry)
one form

neoformalist poetics
continuity = unity
cognitive universals

narrative dominance
continuity = causality

characters
goal-oriented agency
goal-oriented psychology

HANSEN
VERNACULAR MODERNISM

reception (audiences)
multiple genres

psychological and social
tensions & anxiety
globalized modernity

perceptual unconscious
continuity = new sensorium

characters
slapstick
unconscious / trauma



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

Earth (Soviet Union)

Los (engineer)

Natasha (Los' wife)

Spiridinov (Los' friend)

Gusev (soldier)

Masha (Gusev's wife)

Victor Ehrlich (profiteer)

Kravtsov (detective)

Mars

Gol (energy tower guardian)

Aelita (Queen of Mars)

Ihoshka (Aelita's maidservant)

Tuskub (ruler of Mars)

Continuity editing is used to render action on both worlds, but somewhat differently. What kinds of contradictions emerge between the two worlds?

(Worksheet 1)

Earth (Soviet Union)

'social realism'

political revolution

tendency toward narrative absorption

messages (especially handwritten)

everyday life

post-revolutionary crises

petty crime, corruption, dissatisfaction

reality

reality is that revolution is over

revolution is anti-imperial

Mars

'constructivism' (Aleksandra Ekster)

cultural or aesthetic revolution

tendency toward attractions

images (cinematic)

scientific and military adventure

pre-revolutionary

class oppression

fantasy

lingering on revolution is a fantasy?

revolution feels imperialist?

How does the film try to resolve these contradictions, or is it content to stage them? To what extent can they even be resolved?



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

CONTINUITY EDITING, SOUND, TELECOMMUNICATIONS 1

Filmed in three languages (English, French, German), Karl Hartl's *F.P.1* clearly aims at an international and even global audience. Let's look at it in light of the questions raised by Bordwell *et al* versus Hansen.

—How does it use continuity editing? To what extent does it fit 'classical film form'?
How does sound affect continuity editing?

CONTINUITY EDITING, SOUND, TELECOMMUNICATIONS 2

While *F.P.1* might not be considered science fiction in the usual sense, it does highlight contemporary technologies and extrapolate from them to imagine a near-future scenario in which a massive ‘floating platform’ is built in the middle of Atlantic Ocean where airplanes can land and refuel. Thus it offers a kind of ‘two worlds’ scenario and evokes some basic modern contradictions. Much of the tension in the film concerns problems of communication and especially telecommunications.

—How does *F.P.1* try to resolve these tensions:

together
home
localized
private

far apart
distant places
non-localized
public

CONTINUITY EDITING, SOUND, TELECOMMUNICATIONS 3

Using the telephone in cinema promises to resolve the difficulties of sustaining continuity while crosscutting, and at the same time, can make them worse. Difficulties arise because a huge gap can occur between the two halves of the conversation, and the listener-speaker confronts the emptiness of that gap.

As John Durham Peters reminds us, 'In fact, the telephone evoked many of the same anxieties as radio: strange voices entering the home, forced encounters, the disappearance of one's words into an empty black hole, and the absent faces of the listeners' (365).

Consequently, as Peters remarks, 'All that separates desolation from elation is a phone call. ... The inability to distinguish inner projections from outer messages flourishes in conditions where interpreters have to bear the weight of the entire communication circuit. This inability, psychologically conceived, is called paranoia; socially conceived, we should call it mass communication' (367).

—To what extent do technologies such as the telephone, the airplane, and the floating platform resolve the contradiction or exacerbate it? The film offers a happy ending but because that happy ending is highly technologized, how conclusive is it?

In her essay, "Calling the Nation," Stefanie Harris poses similar questions about the German version of the film:

"... in *F.P. 1*, sound does not simply serve to reinforce the illusion of the film image or to heighten the effect of realism as it does in many early sound films; rather it serves as a deliberate bridge or link, connecting different geographical locations (Hamburg and the platform), social spaces (the pilots and bourgeois society, the workers and the owners), and desire (Claire and Droste), and implicating the film spectator/listener in this sonic construction" (35). But she highlights the problem of national culture: "Telecommunications technologies thus serve both to reinforce the unity of national culture by creating a community of listeners, and to contradict national coherence, thereby complicating ideas of center and periphery, interior and boundary, proximity and distance, home and away" (21).

SF GENRE (see Worksheet 1)

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* and *F.P.1*?

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?

Fourth, Hansen's "Mass Production of the Senses" invites us to read film genres in terms of contradictions, tensions, and the emergence of a new modern sensorium (audiences), instead of reading them only as formats or industrial unities (mass production). (Worksheet 2)

In his seminal discussion of science fiction literature, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre" (1972), Darko Suvin builds contradiction into his definition of modern science fiction as *cognitive estrangement* (372). He writes, "The cognitive nucleus of the plot co-determines the fictional estrangement in SF" (381). What?

Suvin builds on a narratological distinction between 'what is told' and 'how it is told.'

The 'what' is the 'science' side of SF. It has a cognitive nucleus, with a plot or story whose actions and events hinge on cognitively valid scientific paradigms, with an emphasis on cause and effect. *Cognitive*.

The 'how' is the 'fiction' side of SF. It is matter of discursive functions, aesthetic tonalities, fictionalization. *Estrangement*.

Suvin concludes: *SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (375).*

Cognition is estranged, which is to say, empiricism is expanded and altered. The strange is cogitated, which is to say, imaginaries are empirically approached.

On this basis, he offers an evaluation of SF works based on the degree of their effective usage of cognitive estrangement.

Suvin talks about some of writers whose works were adapted into the films to be screened in this course.

Jules Verne, *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and *Around the Moon* (1870)

Alexei Tolstoy, *Aelita* (1923)

Curt Siodmak, *F.P.1 Doesn't Answer* (1933)

Jules Verne, *Facing the Flag* (1896)

Stanislas Lem, *The Astronauts* (1951)

Stanislas Lem, *Solaris* (1961)

For Suvin, Tolstoy's *Aelita* would be too close to *utopian* fiction. While he likes Verne, he feels Verne does not go beyond the *extrapolation* of contemporary science into the future. The same would be true of Siodmak. Lem's *Solaris*, however, is Suvin's prime example of a genuine literature of cognitive estrangement.

Suvin largely excludes *fantasy* from the realm of cognitive estrangement and thus from SF (see Fortin). As we will see in the context of animation in subsequent weeks, however, techniques and technologies of animation might be looked at in terms of an estrangement or alternative imagination of basic physical laws such as gravity (see Csicery-Ronay).

The SF literature that Suvin considers to be inadequate due to its overreliance on extrapolation of contemporary science and technology also tends to be about empire and conquest.

The genuine literature of cognitive estrangement tends to problematize the imperial ambitions implicit in scientific and technological conquest.

Fantasy, when its utopia is not a simple extrapolation of our society but an estrangement of it, tends to destabilize our hegemonic histories and social formations — alternative modes of existence, parallel worlds, counter-factual histories.