FILM 2332 — Understanding Film, Exam

https://iniyanjoseph.com | iniyanijoseph@gmail.com

Response 1

Realism is a poor standard for determining the quality of a film. This is Bazin's argument in *The Myth of Total Cinema* (Bazin, 1946). To the auteur, a visually unrealistic film is still successful in intent if the film is unable to convey the message of the film. The reverse is not true, however. A visually realistic film is unsuccessful if it cannot convey the message of the film. In short, it is *ideas* of the film that matter.

This is clear in Italian neorealist film, which highlights the dual usage of the term "realistic". Neorealist film is not always "realistic" visually. In *Rome, Open City* (Rossellini, 1945) we see the same trucks pass across the screen to convey a large number of troops. But to the auteur, this does not matter, because the audience still understands the point of the scene - that there are several trucks carrying troops. Still, it is "realistic" in a more fundamental way. It describes a similar life to the actual lived experience of the people of that time. Zavattini sets the neorealist film apart, calling it an "homage … towards what is happening and existing in the world". Although many neorealist films are fictional, the stories they tell about the world are realistic, at least from the perspective of the directors.

This can be contrasted with documentaries, which instead literally claim to be more faithful in their representation of reality. But even this is disingenuous. No cinema verite can truly ever take an "objective" view of the world. The guidance that the auteur has can only at best represent the perspectives of the director - not the objective truth. *The Thin Blue Line* (Morris, 1988) is an example of how the perspective of the director is apparent in the film. Morris's film (all the while claiming to be a documentary and thus objective) argues for Randall Adams's innocence, ultimately leading to Adams's release from prison. But Morris is not objective. The film is selective in what it shows and only highlights the view of the shooting which Morris wants the audience to see using lighting, editing, and the other elements of mise-en-scene.

Even direct cinema like *High School* (Wiseman, 1968) has the same problem. The shots shown are not a full representation of the world. They are the collection of shots deemed "interesting enough" for an audience. Conveying the message of the film, the apparent ineffectiveness of high school in its goals of preparing students for life takes greater precedence than the majority of education in the school. In other words, the film does not proportionally represent education as a part of high school, focusing instead on the select moments illustrating the contradictions of the education system.

Both genres of film are realistic in some sense. They are completely plausible in the real world and are filmed to seem representative of reality. Yet neither of the two upholds the standard of "true" realism. The failure of these "realistic" genres helps illustrate the flaw of realism as a measure of quality. These films fulfill their obligations as a means of expression of the auteur but ultimately fail to be realistic in some sense because the reality of the film can at best only be the reality of the auteur.

Even something that is "real", showing events like films of horses running, workers leaving factories, and recordings of animals in motion is not effective in capturing interest. In retrospect, being forced to see the entirety of the recorded film, a quality which Antonioni used in films like *Red Desert* (Antonioni, 1964), is boring. Although it can be used to make a statement, it does not make for an interesting film. Early moviegoers were never afraid of the things on film coming to life, because there was always the awareness that the film was only a film - that it could have been staged - and that it was a recording of reality, not intrinsically real.

Response 2

In *The Myth of Total Cinema* (1946), Bazin argues that the goal of technological innovation - although appreciable from a scientific perspective - is not the true intent of cinema. Rather, he argues that the ideas which are expressed by the film are the goal of cinema. Certainly, this is not true in the big-budget commercial film of today. Michael Schulman argues in *How the Marvel Cinematic Universe Swallowed Hollywood* (Schulman, 2023) that the current era of "cinematic universes" is about intellectual property, not stars or stories.

This is clear in the aim of the movie - to make money on intellectual property. This is doubly apparent, with the movie marketed not as a "Cary Grant" movie, but rather as a *Star Wars* movie. *Spaceballs* (Brooks, 1987) draws attention to this: Yogurt, the equivalent of Yoda, explains his purpose as "Merchandising! Merchandising! Where the real money from the movie is made". Indeed, the film's very popularity among satire films, derives its popularity from the popularity of the *Star Wars* universe - without which much of the movie would be ineffective. If the actors mattered in *Star Wars* or *Spaceballs*, the satirical elements of the film would have been ineffective, because they parody the specific characters of the film, not the actors.
Films such as *Star Wars: Episode IV* (Lucas, 1977) and *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) are interesting as they, without precedent from comics, television, or prior existing intellectual property, were able to create a new universe. Schulman says that one can't just "wish a universe into existence, Genesis style", citing the failure of Universal's failed Dark Universe. Ironically, their size today has pushed films out of the industry or out of popularity, thus helping shift the paradigm from studio-era films to film franchises. The way in which these movies became intellectual property "machines" helped establish the norms for franchise films, such as the simultaneous release of films.
Still, these films fall flat. The toolkit of the studio of today: computer generated graphics, digital film - Bazin would find these things to be (although interesting from a technological perspective), irrelevant. Indeed, although they can replicate realism, they do not inherently further the ideas of the film, only allowing more elaborate means of telling the same stories. To him, they would not drive film closer to "total cinema". Certainly, they push the boundaries of technology and give the ability to better represent or obscure reality, but this is not important. Schulman summarizes the Marvel movies' plot together, saying "keep glowy thing away from bad guy". They work "inside the box". In this world, stories are not new, and technology is not new. And thus since no ideas are new, the Hollywood of today would appall Bazin, as commercial films have grown ever farther from "total cinema".
Although the studio era had tropes and repetitive themes - which developed into genres, movies were still individual - they did not extend the same idea as the previous film, even if in some ways they were similar. Even films that were not individual, like the *Andy Hardy* (1937-1958) series did not expound on the same idea, but rather built on the stars involved, namely Mickey Rooney playing Andy Hardy, but were each allowed to have their own ideas.
Within the commercial film studio, although the genre may vary from film to film, the ideas never change - the worst fate according to Bazin. *The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice* (Bordwell, 1979) overall summarizes this as the difference in intent between the studio film (although this applies to the commercial film as well) and the art film. He argues for auteurism as defining the art film, and that its explorations as a means of expression for the auteur are the same devices that are (at least in part) adopted in Hollywood film as a mode of narration.

Response 3

Overall film provides opportunities and challenges in the use of mise-en-scene which are not present in theatre. The elements of mise-en-scene are shaped affected by distance in film. In theatre, the actors are constrained to a narrow band of distances (the size of the stage). But in film, the environment is allowed to become three-dimensional, and distance from the camera (barring limitations of image resolution) can be arbitrary.
One failure of this is in *Le voyage dans la lune* (Méliès, 1902). The film does not truly exist in three-dimensional space. Although the actors move along three dimensions, they move primarily linearly within each scene (back and forth on a stage)- and move in three dimensions across scenes. Méliès is able to use this for manipulating perspective, such as when the spaceship drops into the sea, but does not do so within the context of a single scene. The audience never knows what is happening "behind" the camera in the same way they would in a film using the continuity system and 180° system. Indeed, everything which is presented is shown at once from a fixed perspective, and while the objects in the scene establish the setting, the medium is underutilized and seems odd in retrospect. The static camera observing events is a limitation only of theater - not of cinema (with few exceptions, especially with the creation of drones and computer generated graphics).

The result of this is flexibility of movement and distance is a different understanding of the usage mise-en-scene in conjunction with the other elements of film form. It allows a shift from visually loud makeup and costuming with the intent of being seen at a distance to more subtle makeup and costuming to be seen from the near field. This by itself can tell story with more subtlety than possible in theater. When the camera does come closer to the objects it records, makeup, lighting, and costume must be treated differently. They must highlight the characters, and have meaning or contribution on its own. The makeup, lighting, and props can be used to highlight the actors (in the case of glamour lighting) or contribute to the story without the use of dialogue.

This expanded role of mise-en-scene can be seen in *Jezebel* (Wyler, 1938). Although there is no color (as it is black and white), the proximity to the actors to the camera allows the audience to see the characters' reactions to her dress. The acting gives the effect of color in the same way dramatic makeup does in theatre. The color of the dress does not have implicit meaning - so the presence of color would not change it. Indeed, it does not even exist in reality, because it does not exist on the film, but instead is given explicit meaning without dialogue, which could only be done in film, since there is no way to be close to the mise-en-scene otherwise.

Jezebel, and the acceptance show that the lack of color in early film is not inherently inhibitive. It only provides further medium by which the color can be used. The narrative use of color is replaced subtly by acting. This is not to say that color is without use however. Color, especially warm color, catches the eye and draws attention. The girl with the red dress in *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993) uses color in the same way color is used in (the colorized versions of) *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903). It explicitly draws focus towards the specific elements of mise-en-scene which the director intends.

In *Do the Right Thing* (Lee, 1989) is a different use of color. Color is not necessarily meant to highlight some elements of mise-en-scene, but by itself functions as a means of establishing the setting. The warm colors throughout the film become representative of the themes of the film: initially as a means of reinforcing the literal heatwave, but eventually evolving to represent the tension of the neighborhood. This means that color enriches the existing themes of the movie can be used to enrich the existing mise-en-scene to more effectively convey its ideas.

The contribution of film to storytelling beyond theatre is its ability to bring subtlety and dimensionality to theatrical notions. It not only has gives increased control of what is seen both in distance and clarity, but also allows the auteur to tell stories without spatial constraints and to highlight details as part of the story.