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In Pursuit of *the* Cinematic: Film Theory in the Silent Era

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Introduction

We say this is the century of steam, the century of electricity, much as we say the stone-age, the iron age, the bronze age, but we will soon be saying it is the age of the cinema.

Edmond Benoit-Lévy, 1907 (cited by Abel 1993: 4)

The cinema was created in the last decade of the nineteenth century. It was not the only technical novelty developed at the time, but belonged to a range of other late-industrial inventions, such as the telephone (1876), the phonograph (1877) and the automobile (1880s and 1890s) (Bordwell; Thompson 2010: 3). It soon became part of the nineteenth-century entertainment industry. More specifically, it belonged to the late-Victorian visual culture, along with circuses, freak shows, music halls, vaudeville shows, world expositions and panoramas.

A history of the medium

Cinema was not created on the spot. Rather, it was a combination of different nineteenth-century and some older inventions. All of them fulfilled one of the conditions necessary for the development of film. A first prerequisite was the recording of images, or photography. The principle of the *camera obscura* had already occupied scientists before the Christian Era and was an important basis for photography. Eventually, some nineteenth century scientists succeeded in recording an image on the vast material, like Joseph Niépce's heliography (1826) and Louis Daguerre's daguerreotype (1838). In due course, Kodak finally developed the first camera. The second requirement was the creation of the illusion of movement. The fascination with movement is age-old as well, as film historian Kevin Brownlow illustrates:

Attempts to represent movement are as old as cave paintings. Shadowplays, images thrown in silhouette upon a white screen, preceded the theater itself. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, various optical toys created an astonishingly convincing illusion of movement, depicting birds flying, figures leaping, and horses galloping (1996: 6).

This, originally scientific, fascination led to different types of optical devices, such as the Stereoscope and the Zoetrope. These were also sold on the market as toys for children. The third prerequisite was the projection of images, which had also interested scientists for ages. The magic-lantern for instance was already used in the seventeenth century. It made the organisation of public exhibitions possible. More people could enjoy the projection, contrary to the previous optical toys. Initially, these inventions were displayed at people's homes, but they were soon incorporated in the

entertainment industry. Accordingly, nearing the end of the nineteenth century, all the requirements for cinema were available.

As I have already pointed out, it is not easy, if not impossible, to peg the invention of the cinema down to one particular year of birth. The same holds for attempting to decide at what point it moved from a curiosity to an industry. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson propose the year 1897: 'By 1897, the invention of the cinema was largely completed. There were two principal means of exhibition: peepshow devices for individual viewers and projection systems for audiences' (2010: 11). By that year, the novelty had waned. Especially the popularity of peepshows had faded rapidly. Filmmakers had to think more carefully about what they were going to film and exhibitors about what they were going to programme. In other words, the novelty had become an industry.

A history of the industry

The cinema was popular. It attracted the lower classes, mainly because of its low price. Illiterate workers or immigrants who could not speak English were particularly drawn to it, because intertitles were read aloud and translated into various languages. Immigrants were also offered the chance to learn about American culture and its way of life; a chance the theatre did not offer them. Not only the working class found its way to the movie theatres, the middle classes as well. They were mainly attracted by the cinema's solutions for some disadvantages they experienced in the theatre: it was indeed cheaper, did not last as long and it did not matter where your seat was, for the view on the screen was the same everywhere (Brownlow 1996: 10). Besides these advantages, the cinema was especially popular because it had something to offer for everyone. There were different kinds of films, the first genres if you will, such as the nonfictional *actualités* which covered news items or scenes of foreign countries. Fiction films were initially short skits, but soon longer films were made as well.

In Europe, cinema also attracted large audiences, but still mainly remained the projects of individual or small groups of filmmakers. In the United States, it turned into an organised industry. Initially, there was no regulation at all. It was still new and had become popular at great speed, not giving it the time to properly become constant. Films were frequently copied since there were no copyright regulations. From 1898 on, the American film industry started to stabilise and by 1904 the market had taken a firm shape:

By 1904, major changes were taking place in the new medium and art form of the cinema. Fiction films [such as Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*] were becoming the industry's main product. Increasingly, movies were rented to exhibitors, a practice that established division among production, distribution, and exhibition that was to shape the expansion of the film industry. Exhibitions were

spreading internationally, so films would soon be seen in most countries (Bordwell; Thompson 2010: 21).

Besides the United States, the other leading countries were France and the United Kingdom. France did not only play a central role in the production of films; it was also the place of birth of film theory and criticism.

A history of film theory and criticism

The first writings on film are as old as the medium itself. Dudley Andrew states that no art was pursued by intellectuals who tried to pin it down so soon after its birth (1976: 11). It, nevertheless, took these primal writings a couple of years time to develop into film *theory*. As is the case with the development of cinema, it is also arbitrary to attach a starting date to the origin of film theory. This does not mean that film historians refrain from attempting to do so. Noël Carroll claims that, 'proportionally speaking', film theory began in 1909 (1988: 4). Richard Abel, on the other hand, starts his anthology *French Film Theory and Criticism* in 1907:

The choice is determined by a number of factors. Prior to that date, the cinema still often was considered as an extension or derivative form of photography, just as it had been at the 1900 Universal Exposition in Paris. By then, however, the transformation of the French film industry into a major new institution of spectacle entertainment, dependent upon the continuous production and exhibition of fiction films, had begun in earnest and was well established by 1908-1909 (1993: xv).

Most writings on film from 1907 on have one thing in common: their claim that it should be regarded as an art form. Initially, film theorists were still concerned with the new medium's nature, but once established, they were primarily interested in finding out which aspect factually made it an art. Carroll compares it to psychology: both disciplines originated around the same time and both had to prove their legitimacy; the one as a science, the other as an art (1988: 4). This explains why the number of these writings is so extensive. It may be a relatively new art, but it has been more widely discussed than dance or theatre (Ibid.).

All these discussions took shape in the area of the press. First of all, the daily newspapers quickly picked up on the popular new medium. Initially, they still limited their coverage devoted to it, but after the end of the war nearly all the major newspapers in Paris published a weekly page, and some even a daily column, on film (Abel 1993: 195). The new concept of the film review, Émile Vuillermoz's *Le Temps* for instance, soon became a common section in the papers (Abel 1984: 243). From the 1920s on, literary journals too started to discuss the cinema, indicating its acceptance as a legitimate art form (Abel 1993: 196). Next, specialised film journals came into being, such as *Phono-*

Ciné-Gazette (1905), *Ciné-Journal* (1908) and *Cinéa* (1921). Related to these magazines were the first books and manuals on film, especially on filmmaking.

In addition to the press, two other phenomena functioned as central forums. Firstly, the ciné-club movement, which was for a long time uniquely French, invited cinéphiles to discuss the possible advancement of cinema art. Even though its initial aim was to attract the masses, it remained rather elitist. Linked to the ciné-clubs were specialized cinemas, which attempted to provide a more daring programme than that of the commercial movie theatres.

All these phenomena together formed the foundation of early film theories, with Paris as its prime centre. For that reason, my research will primarily devote attention to French film theory. Abel, for instance, argues that the development of independent film journals and criticism was unique to France and far from comparable to the ideas formulated in other European countries or the United States (1984: 251). From the moment these writings became film theory, two tendencies can be distinguished. On the one hand, critics compared it to other (established) art forms. On the other hand, people focused on its medium specificity. I will primarily devote attention to the second tendency, which is governed by another opposition. Some writers believed that the new medium was unique because of its ability to make a truthful copy of reality. Others argued that the specific cinematic characteristics invited artists to use them creatively. The most explicit examples of this idea are the avant-garde movements, such as French Impressionism, German Expressionism, the Soviet Montage-movement and to a lesser extent Dadaism and Surrealism. Again, my attention will mainly go to French avant-garde. I have left out German Expressionism entirely, for the simple reason that it is not really regarded as a film theory, rather as a film practice. Even though it is an excellent example of creative cinema, there is no real theorist to speak for it, nor an extended theory to grasp it (Andrew 1976: 13). After exploring this 'Realism versus Creativity'-debate, I will devote some extra attention to a key term used by both types of theorists, *photogénie*.

Early Film Theory: General

After the early experiments of pioneers Auguste and Louis Lumière and Georges Méliès, the French film industry expanded. Even though the statistics are not entirely reliable, about 90 percent of all films exhibited throughout the world before World War I were of French origin (Abel 1984: 6). The film critics writing in this pre-war period attempted 'to clear space for something distinct but not yet autonomous' (Abel 1993: xvi). As *flâneurs*, they created a new network of criticism by drawing on various discursive practices, such as scientific and industrial fields, educative and moral institutions, popular spectacles and established arts (Ibid.). This makes discussing this early phase somewhat complicated. Since these *flâneurs* had different backgrounds, they use different terminology to

discuss the same phenomenon. Moreover, these first writings are not yet genuine film theories for the simple reason that 'film as such' did not exist yet.

In 1914, the French dominant position collapsed (ibid.: 9). As a result, France was obliged to import American films, which proved to be very popular. This is, for instance, evident from the fact that the French filmmakers started to imitate American formulas, such as the serial. Also the adoration of American movie stars, like Pearl White, Charlie Chaplin – or 'Charlot', his French nickname – and Rio Jim, demonstrate the ease with which the French embraced the new movies from across the ocean (Bordwell 1974: 37). The surrealist poet Philippe Soupault has given a fine description of this French enthusiasm:

We walked the cold and deserted streets seeking an accidental, a sudden, meeting with life. To distract ourselves we found it necessary to yoke the imagination to sensational dreams. For a time we found distraction in lurid periodicals – those papers which are more highly-colored than picture postcards. We scoured the world for them, and by means of them we participated in marvelous and bloody dramas which illuminated for an instant various parts of the earth.

Then one day we saw hanging on the walls great posters as long as serpents. At every street-corner a man, his face covered with a red handkerchief, levelled a revolver at the peaceful passerby. We imagined that we heard galloping hoofs, the roar of motors, explosions, and cries of death. We rushed into the cinemas, and realized immediately that everything had changed. On the screen appeared the smile of Pearl White – that almost ferocious smile which announced the revolution, the beginning of a new world (1930: 13-14; cited by Abel 1984: 10).

After 1915, an important turning point according to Bordwell, cinema was for the first time accepted as a popular modern art and the importation of American films played a significant role in this acceptance (1974: 34).

Not only the general public was enthusiastic; most French film critics accepted the American films with open arms as well. Theatre and film director André Antoine, for instance, celebrated the American cinema because it had successfully detached itself from the theatre and had so improved the medium in general:

America, to whom we presented the cinema once having invented it, has largely repaid us through an exemplary development and initiative that is beginning to free the new art from the inarticulate barbarism which has gripped it for far too long. The absence of cumbersome and pernicious theatrical traditions has allowed our rivals to outdistance us (1919; cited by Abel 1993: 192).

Along the same lines, critic Elie Faure argued that American cinema was more relevant than its old-fashioned French equivalent: 'The French film is only a bastard form of a degenerate theater and seems for that reason to be destined to poverty and death if it does not take a new turn. The American film, on the other hand, is a new art, full of immense perspectives, full of the promise of a great future' (1922; cited by Abel 1993: 262-263). When Antoine and Faure made these comments, they were mainly objecting to commercial French filmmaking. Nevertheless, in the 1920s the independent film production was expanding as well. Even though these films mainly made losses from an economic point of view, they were very profitable for early film theories from an artistic one.

From 1913 to 1925, the general and artistic public accepted the cinema as a modern art (Bordwell 1974: 25). Before, the artistic world had always considered the new medium as an enemy of the book and so the rapidity with which this attitude changed is rather extraordinary. The avant-gardes in particular were, for several reasons, aroused by it. Firstly, the popular arts were in general re-evaluated by these movements, especially by Surrealism. Secondly, the fascination with physical movement — central to quite a few modern art movements, such as Futurism, Constructivism, Vorticism and Dadaism — was in no other art form as perfectly executed as in the cinema. Thirdly, the new art epitomised the arrival of the new century and modernity at large (Ibid.: 48-49).

Two Tendencies in Early Film Theory: A New Art or on a Par with Tradition?

The first film critics' main attempt was to prove that the cinema was not only a new medium, but also, and more importantly, a new art. The fact that they regarded it from various perspectives resulted in a great deal of different arguments. Most of them can be classified into two main categories.

On the one hand, critics insisted that the cinema was unique and in no way bearing a resemblance with any other art. Frequently, they focused on and experimented with cinematic techniques, such as camera movement and editing. As a result, the avant-garde movements were important adherents of this point of view, but the most extreme example of this line of thinking was the idea of 'pure cinema'. A last argument frequently given in this respect was *photogénie*. Tom Gunning states that even though the concept was a contested one, *photogénie* was often used to define the uniqueness of the cinema (2012: 17).

On the other hand, some critics pointed attention to its similarities with other forms of art. In other words, the argument for claiming that the cinema was as valuable as the other established arts was made by comparing it to them:

Other theorists and filmmakers proudly asserted cinema's links to the other arts. Griffith claimed to have borrowed narrative cross-cutting from Dickens while Eisenstein found prestigious literary antecedents for cinematic devices: the changes of focal length in *Paradise Lost*; the alternating montage of the agricultural fair chapter in *Madame Bovary*. The often-cited definitions of cinema in terms of other arts – “sculpture in motion” (Vachel Lindsay); “music of light” (Abel Gance); “painting in movement” (Leopold Survage); “architecture in movement” (Elie Faure) – simultaneously established links with previous arts while positing crucial differences: cinema was painting, but this time in movement, or it was music, but this time of light rather than notes (Stam 2000: 33).

These kinds of arguments were actually very logical. In a way, the ‘purist’ conception seems to make a lot of sense; film was new and modern, so the best way to defend it was by focusing on those new elements. Nevertheless, these arguments were bold and radical deviations from the then-current artistic conception, which was determined by the established arts and entertainments. For obvious reasons, it was commonly assumed that cinema was a new form of theatre. This explains why most films at the time were literary and theatrical adaptations. Next, cinema was frequently compared to photography by those who saw it as a faithful representation of reality, and to painting by those who considered it a transformation of reality. Griffith, for instance, stated that he drew inspiration for his chiaroscuro lighting techniques from Rembrandt's paintings (Ibid.: 32). Then, cinema was closely allied to language. Cinematic techniques were seen as punctuation signs, shots as words and editing as the grammar combining them to meaningful ‘sentences’. Also frequent was the metaphor of film as a ‘universal language’. Even more often was film compared to music, with a specific focus on rhythm. Lastly, film was at times seen as a ‘sixth’ art or a synthesis of all previous arts.

One theorist in particular is worth mentioning here, because he embodied this tendency in a way. Poet Vachel Lindsay's aim was to prove cinema's medium specificity, but he did so by referring to and comparing it with other arts. In 1915, he published the first American theory of film: *The Art of the Moving Picture*. The names of the three types of filmmaking between which he distinguished are self-evident: ‘sculpture-in-motion’, ‘painting-in-motion’ and ‘architecture-in-motion’. He also stressed that he wanted to attract an audience with an interest in the history of art in general. In what follows, I will expound on medium specific film theories alone.

Medium Specificity

A medium specific or essentialist approach to film studies assumes two things. First, it argues that film is capable of certain things, but not of others. Second, it claims that film should only follow its own logic and refrain from following that of other arts or media (Ibid.: 12). As from the First World War, more writings were dedicated to the question of both the artistic nature of cinema and its

function in society, which resulted in various definitions of this cinematic logic. Some referred to the artistic genius of its creator, while others believed that it was experienced in a unique way by the spectator. There were also critics who tried to find a purely cinematic definition, apart from other art forms. This mostly resulted in a fascination for the medium's technical abilities (Abel 1993: 209). At the time, Germaine Dulac gave one of the most elaborate overviews of such techniques. In a lecture she gave at the Musée Galliera in 1924, "Les Procédés expressifs du cinématographe", she discussed the juxtaposition of images, camera placement, the close-up, superimposition, dissolves, soft focus and distortions. This is an excellent example of what Bordwell refers to as 'the "specifically cinematic" domains' of filmmaking, which many writers regarded as *the* arguments for claiming cinema's medium specificity:

In cinematography and editing many writers thought they had found the answer to the problem of defining film as a distinct art. For these techniques unmistakably mediated between what was put in front of the lens and what the viewer eventually saw. They shaped and stylized photographed reality in order to create an artistic effect (1997: 33-34).

This basically means that the filmmaker used cinematic techniques to alter reality and so created a unique work of art. However, this does not mean that adherents of a realist concept of art ignored the abilities of the camera. In their view, the camera was a powerful device because it could render reality perfectly. In other words, cinematic techniques were used as arguments for cinema's medium specificity by both expressive and realist film theorists.

When this fascination with technique was carried to the limit, it often resulted in a 'pure' concept of cinema. Opponents of 'pure cinema', like Henri Fescourt and Jean-Louis Bouquet, focused on the narrative and argued that the story is the basis for all art, including film. They claimed that the purists' focus on technique was a misconception on their part, because editing and close-ups were mostly used to strengthen the plot. To put it another way, technique for the sake of technique is pointless and the avant-garde theories based on such ideas are destined to fail:

Is the "avant-garde" an end in itself or rather a movement destined to produce a mature aesthetic? If it is an end in itself, let's talk no more about it: it's redoing the story of Saturn devouring his own children. If it constitutes a movement whose aim is an aesthetic, admit that the results are disappointing. We have come full circle and can sum up with a brief catalogue of technical terms. Since the methods of filming are fallacious, because of their facility, your famous avant-garde movement can only lead to a massive miscarriage (Henri Fescourt and Jean-Louis Bouquet 1925; cited by Abel 1993: 382).

This also means that, according to Fescourt and Bouquet, there was no need to feel threatened by the relation between the cinema and other forms of art.

On the other side of the debate, the advocates of 'pure cinema' did not believe that the foundation of the cinema was narrative, but cinematic. Their arguments could be regarded as the most extreme examples of a medium specific conception of cinema. However, a number of different definitions of 'pure cinema' can be distinguished (Abel 1993: 330). Frequently, cinematic qualities were linked to rhythm. Dulac, for instance, believed that the cinema was finally starting to develop according to its own cinematic personality and was so developing its own rhythm. In "Les Esthétique, les entraves, la cinégraphie integrale" (1926), she explained that this is the result of a long process. In the beginning, artists were not prepared for the new art form. As a result, they started to incorporate conventions and ideas from other arts, namely literature. This led to the dominance of the realist narrative tradition. The climax of this tradition was marked by Louis Delluc's *Fièvre*. Besides its perfect realism, Dulac also found that the film revealed an interest in the world of dreams: 'But over *Fièvre*'s realism hovered a bit of a dream that went beyond the dramatic line and rejoined "the inexpressible" above its unambiguous images. The cinema of suggestion came into view' (cited by Abel 1993: 393). The development from realist narrative to psychological and impressionist cinema was an important step towards 'pure cinema'. This is because the psychological film was no longer similar to literature, but to music: 'In this way, despite our ignorance, the cinema, by freeing itself from its initial mistakes and transforming its aesthetics, drew nearer in technique to music, leading it to the claim that a rhythmic visual movement could not provoke a feeling analogous to that aroused by sounds' (Dulac 1926; cited by Abel 1993: 395). To put it another way, the words in the intertitles, which substituted the spoken words on stage, were replaced by a rhythmic succession of images. Eventually, Dulac believed, the images would even replace the need for words.

Along the same lines, Henri Chomette argued in "Seconde étape" (1925) that the cinema's main development since its original phases was the creation of a sort of rhythm which opened up a new range of potentialities, which replaced the need of narrative to focus solely on the images on the screen (cited by Abel 1993: 371-372):

Thanks to this rhythm, the cinema can draw from itself a new potentiality, which, leaving behind the logic of events and the reality of objects, engenders a series of visions that are unknown – inconceivable outside the union of the lens and the moving reel of film. Intrinsic cinema – or, if you will, pure cinema – since it is separate from all other elements, whether dramatic or documentary – that is what certain works by our most personal directors permit us to foresee. That is what offers the purely cinematic imagination its true field and will give rise to what has been called – by Mme Germaine Dulac, I believe – the "visual symphony" (1925; cited by Abel 1993: 372).

It may seem paradoxical to refer to another art form, music, in order to argue for cinema's specificity. Here however, *visual* rhythm was seen as a substitute for the focus on narrative.

Like Dulac and Chomette, Fernand Léger also believed that the scenario was 'the error of cinema' (1925; cited by Abel 1993: 373). If cinema tried to imitate theatre, it would just be 'bad theatre' (1922; cited by Turvey 2011: 48). However, he did not define 'pure cinema' as visual rhythm, but as plastic art. In cinema too, it was not the subject, but the object that should be the main concern of filmmakers: 'True cinema involves *the image of the object* which is totally unfamiliar to our eyes and which is in itself moving, if you know how to present it' (1925; cited by Abel 1993: 373). In that sense, cinema attempts '*to make us see everything that has been merely noticed*' (1922; cited by Turvey 2011: 49). He attempted to do this himself in *Ballet Mécanique* (1924). In this film, Léger juxtaposed various objects of everyday life in such a way that they lose their original meaning or function. Instead, he foregrounded their plastic features through the use of close-ups and other techniques (Turvey 2011: 49). Accordingly, these objects do not only refrain from telling a coherent story; they also lose their own meaning, leaving the spectator with nothing but a visual pattern of forms (Andrew 1976: 81).

Another medium specific answer to the question 'What is cinema?' is given by Revelationism. In short, this film theory claims that 'the cinema's most significant feature is its capacity to reveal truths about reality invisible to the naked human eye' (Turvey 2008: 10). Bordwell links this belief to Impressionism and gives a similar definition: '[T]he shared, broadly "idealist" assumption of some realm beyond matter which the film artist can reveal and express' (1974: 113). In a way, Revelationism is also similar to realist film theories. Both cling to the camera's microscopic abilities. Nevertheless, there are significant differences. The most important one is Revelationism's distrust of human vision. As a result, these theorists focus on those cinematic techniques which do *not* resemble human sight, such as slow motion and close-ups (Turvey 2008: 11). So, cinema reveals parts of reality, or a new kind of reality, normally invisible and because of this it can and should be regarded as a unique art. Malcolm Turvey explores Revelationism as one answer to the question 'What is cinema?'. However, he notices that there are two answers more common in film studies and criticism:

It is commonly assumed that two answers to this question have dominated film theory and filmmaking since they began. The first answer is that the cinema's most significant artistic property is "its capacity to manipulate reality, that is, to rearrange and thereby reconstitute the profilmic event (the event that transpires in front of the camera)." This answer is identified as modernist because it is predicated on conceptions of art prevalent in modernism, particularly antimimetic conceptions. (...) The second of

the historically dominant answers to the question, what is cinema, is that the cinema's most significant artistic property is its capacity to reproduce, rather than manipulate, reality (2008: 9).

In what follows, I will explore these realist and modernist, or creative as I will refer to it, answers in the first writings on cinema.

The 'Realism versus Creativity' -Debate

Peter Wollen has stated that there is both an 'extroverted' and an 'introverted ontology of film', 'one seeking the soul of cinema in the nature of the pro-filmic event, the other in the nature of the cinematic process, the cone of light or the grain of silver' (1982: 97). It is commonly assumed that the introverted, or creative, tendency was dominant in the 1920s and the extroverted, or realist, tendency after the introduction of sound. According to Bordwell, the early film critics did not want to focus on the recording aspects of the camera. Otherwise, one might as well argue that the telephone and the telegraph are also forms of art (1997: 27). As Paul Souday put it in 1917: 'The cinema, as a perfecting of photography is fated to reproduce reality mechanically. Yet art is not a mechanical copy but an intelligent interpretation of that reality' (cited by Bordwell 1997: 27-28). In this sense, Souday and his colleagues were similar to the defenders of photography; both paid attention to the creative possibilities of the medium which the artist could use to make this 'intelligent interpretation of reality.

The way Carroll has composed his book *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* indicates that he agrees with this opposition. There are three parts and the first two are devoted to Rudolf Arnheim and André Bazin, respectively embodying the 'silent-film paradigm' and the 'sound-film paradigm'. In other words, Arnheim represents the creative tendency which is associated with silent cinema; Bazin represents the realist tendency which is associated with sound-films. This formulation indicates a belief in a clear turning point in film theory. Carroll for instance claims that the sound-film theorists 'celebrate what the silent-film theorist represses' (1988: 8). Similarly, Andrew clearly marks this turning point around the introduction of sound: 'Paradoxically, the coming of sound seems to mark the decline of the great age of formative film theory' (1976: 13). Even though I concede that creative film theory was more dominant in the silent era, I still prefer not to talk about it as a turning point. This would indicate that there were no realist film theories at all in the silent era. Rather, I believe that both are present throughout the history of film criticism and that both originated in the first writings on film.

My first argument for stating this is that almost all artistic disciplines in the first decade of the twentieth century were dominated by a formative tendency. Therefore, it logically influenced the

critical conception of the new medium as well. Most early film critics had a cultural background and explored cinema from their discipline. So, to put it bluntly, a dadaist poet interested in film logically formulated a dadaist film theory. These were the people who wrote their ideas down in specialised magazines and so these ideas were passed on. This does not mean, however, that everyone one-sidedly agreed with this. The general audience was much more familiar with realist films, since these were mainly programmed in movie theatres. Moreover, there were also critics, like Louis Delluc and Léon Moussinac, who adhered a realist film theory.

Secondly, documentaries and newsreels were very popular, especially during the war. This could be regarded as a reflection of the scientific interest dominant in the first years of cinema.

Lastly, these two lines of thinking were already present in the first days of cinema, embodied by the 'founding fathers of film theory'. To borrow Jean-Luc Godard's pithy description: 'Cinema is spectacle – Méliès – and research – Lumière' (1972; cited by Ray 1998: 68). Siegfried Kracauer investigated these two prototypes of the main tendencies a bit more extensively. Lumière was a 'strict realist' and '[t]he bulk of his films recorded of the world about us for no other purpose than to present it' (Braudy; Cohen; Mast 1992: 11-12). Méliès then, 'gave free rein to his artistic imagination' by creating 'his illusions with the aid of techniques peculiar to the medium' (Ibid.: 11-14). In what follows, I shall explore the legacies of these pioneers.

Realism

Science and industry were among the first disciplines to develop an interest in cinema. The microscopic abilities of the camera were used for technological research. Film companies like Gaumont and Pathé were involved in these kinds of researches (Abel 1993: 9). Later, they would exploit their knowledge for the production of their films. These films can be seen as examples of Méliès' first two of his four 'categories of cinematographic view': 'natural views', which were scenes of ordinary life, and 'scientific views', which used the camera to study movement (1907). Both genres indicate an interest in film's ability to capture reality. For a number of early film critics this was an essential feature of the new medium.

Early realist film theorists

Journalist Jacques De Baroncelli believed that the main asset of the cinema was its ability to convey a perfect illusion of truth:

Because the cinema is more truthful or, and this comes to the same thing in art, because it better provides the illusion of truth, which alone is beautiful, as they say, as well as pleasing. To our

spectators' eyes, the cinema is much more than the shadow of reality; it is the incandescent photograph of a reality that lives again (1925; cited by Abel 1993: 126).

He also believed that the story was central, hence the important role of the scriptwriter, and that every shot was supposed to contribute to the development of the plot (Abel 1993: 103). To put it another way, De Baroncelli believed that film was an excellent medium to tell a story because it was able to render reality perfectly. Along the same lines, essayist Rémy De Gourmont briefly touched upon the merits of the illusion of verisimilitude created on the screen: 'Such is the power of the illusion that a series of photographs projected on the screen can stimulate our passions just as reality can' (1907; cited by Abel 1993: 48). Another early realist film theorist and -maker was Louis Feuillade.

Feuillade aspired to create a reality effect in his production of *Scènes de la vie telle qu'elle est* (1911): 'They represent, for the first time, an attempt to project a realism onto the screen, just as was done some years ago in literature, theater, and art' (cited by Abel 1993: 54). He did this by closely observing life and by combining realistic themes (with scenes as 'slices of life'), characters (people 'as they are and not as they should be'), natural performances and down-toned photography (cited by Abel 1993: 54-55). Noticeable in this respect is that he did not adduce the camera's ability to capture reality, but that he mainly focused on theme and tone. Although this goal was no longer the point of departure of his later serials *Fantômas* (1913-1914) and *Les Vampires* (1915-1916), they too have realistic traits:

Although the films produced within these series contained many uncanny and bizarre motifs which would later be highly prized by the surrealists, they also included a considerable amount of footage which was shot within the streets of Paris, and which presented a poeticised urban landscape, suffused with mystery and uneasiness (Aitken 2001: 73-74).

The use of real locations, instead of studio sets, would later become a distinctive preference of realist filmmakers.

Another realist filmmaker was André Antoine. In spite of his theatrical background, he emphasised the differences between the two media. He even stated that the cinema is superior, because it is more successful in creating an expression of verisimilitude. In "Propos sur le cinématographe" (1919), he lays down a couple of principles necessary for the creation of the reality effect. Firstly, he distinguishes between the stage actor and the cinema actor (cited by Abel 1993: 190). Since cinema actors do not have the instrument of the spoken word, they have to focus on 'their "envelope" of expression' rather than intonation or diction (Ibid.). Furthermore, real locations

were preferred to sets, especially to those that were actually made for theatre, camera movements had to be mobile and actors were supposed to ignore the cameraman (Abel 1993: 104-105).

Along the same lines, Delluc too argued that actors should contribute to the illusion of verisimilitude. In fact, he did not merely prefer actors who were unattached to the theatre; he wanted 'normal' people: 'Peasant, soldiers, charwomen, milkmaids, and railway workers should, if and when they wish to, become cinema actors, not extras but actors' (1917; cited by Abel 1993: 141). The subjects he preferred, were also banal stories of ordinary life: 'the future of cinematic drama lies in themes of simple humanity' (1921; cited by Abel 1993: 257). However, the actor and the plot were not as important as the natural landscape or urban milieu in which the action evolved. The landscapes in which these simple stories took place were supposed to add a new thematic dimension to the film:

When I say nature, I mean *nature morte*. Vegetation or everyday objects, exteriors or interiors, physical details, anything material, in the end, offers a new dimension to the dramatic theme. Already modeled or shaped, this lifeless or silent nature can be animated according to where and how the composer of the film chooses to use it. This prior dimension of things diminishes the character of the actor, the human element. He himself is no more than a detail (Ibid.; cited by Abel 1993: 255)

Here, the landscape is so overwhelming that the actor is no longer an individual, but another detail of the scenery. Lastly, Delluc stated that cinema was not an elitist art, but intended for the masses. Watching films was a craft anyone could learn and conversely, filmmakers and critics could learn from the audience.

This democratic attitude was shared by Moussinac, who saw cinema as a way to bring people of all classes together. He was involved in the French Communist Party and also very well aware of the Soviet film industry. This led him to believe that the cinema too awaited a communist revolution: 'In order for the cinema to realize its potential, it has to be freed from the domination of capital. What will do that? The system of production of a socialist economy. And since this socialist economy is only possible through revolution, we await the Revolution' (1927; cited by Abel 1993: 416). The filmmaker, as a spokesman for the community, would then be free. In Europe, this artistic freedom led to several avant-garde movements. Since 'pure cinema' was only understandable for a small, intellectual group of people, Moussinac tolerated it, but only as 'a laboratory experiment, useful of course, but contrary to the real destiny of cinema' (1928; cited by Abel 1993: 421). Filmmakers should instead follow the examples put forward by Soviet filmmakers who saw the cinema correctly as a collective medium (Ibid.; cited by Abel 1993: 420).

André Bazin's precursors

Besides Kracauer, André Bazin is seen as one of the chief representatives of realist film theory. According to Bazin, people long to see 'real' realism on the screen. Contrary to previous forms of art, photography and cinema could actually satisfy 'our obsession with reality' (Bazin 1960). Even if a painter attempts to give a faithful representation of his model, he will never succeed where a filmmaker does. The painter will always interpret reality first, before painting it on a canvas. In film, however, there is only a non-living instrument between the model and its reproduction, minimising the degree of subjectivity:

The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking, in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model (Ibid.).

This means that the artistic creation does not occur in the process of filming, but in the process of finding the model. Artists then become *auteurs* when they are able to locate this model in their environment. In addition, the audience becomes its own editor. Rather than zooming in on important details, the director gives the spectators the chance to look actively at the screen themselves. This also explains why Bazin preferred long takes to the rapid editing of, for instance, the Soviet montage-filmmakers.

Preceding Bazin, Delluc too believed that the real beauty of a film originated from the external world: 'The cinema is rightly moving toward the suppression of art, which reveals something beyond art, that is, life itself' (1917; cited by Abel 1993: 137). Along the same lines as Bazin's *politique des auteurs*, Delluc trusted that a talented cameraman had the ability to see the beauty in the pro-filmic event in order to record it: 'There, that's beauty, real beauty – I would say the beauty of chance, but the cameraman must be given his due. He has learned how to *see* with such skill that we have exactly the same experience of the sea, sky, and wind as he himself had' (Ibid.; cited by Abel 1993: 138).

Nevertheless, most film theorists refrained from pointing attention to the connection between film and photography. Quite the contrary, they did their utmost to prove that cinema was different from photography because it was more than a simple 'mechanical reproduction'. Other theorists, however, were able to refrain from these rather naive definitions. Ricciotto Canudo, for instance, gave a more sophisticated response to this matter:

The way to transpose “truth” into art does not merely depend on what a camera can capture of reality. This truth lies fundamentally in the artist’s mind, it is his *parti pris*, just like his own style. To be content with pointing the camera at some characters or landscape arranged more or less artfully is *not* doing the work of an artist, but is a vulgar and mediocre art. The cinema, far from being a stage in photography, is an altogether new art. The *écraniste*’s mission is to transform objective reality into his own personal vision (1926; cited by Abel 1993: 298).

Accordingly, Canudo demonstrated that cinema is indeed a new art and his main argument for claiming this is an early version of Bazin’s *politique des auteurs*.

Similarly, some of Jean Epstein’s writings correspond to Bazin’s ideas. This passages from “Le Sens I bis” (1921) exemplifies this:

To see is to idealize, abstract and extract, read and select, transform. On the screen we are seeing what the cinema has already seen once: a double transformation, or rather raised to the power of two, since it is multiplied in this way. A choice within a choice, reflection of a reflection. Beauty is polarized here like light, a second generation beauty, the daughter – though prematurely delivered and slightly monstrous – of a mother whom we loved with our naked eyes (cited by Abel 1993: 244).

In other words, we eventually prefer the daughter – the filmed reality – , but if the mother – the physical reality – is not beautiful, no chance the daughter will be. Like Delluc and Bazin, Epstein believed that a lot of the final result depends on the talent of the filmmaker to *see* reality. Only Delluc and Bazin focused on respectively the cameraman and the director, whereas Epstein concentrated on the technical abilities of the camera: ‘The Bell and Howell is an artist, and only behind it are there other artists: director and cameraman’ (Ibid.). The idea is nevertheless the same and similar to the romantic concept of the artistic genius.

Another concept Bazin is known for is that of the *mummy complex*. The Egyptians mummified their corpses in order to preserve the lives of the dead. Bazin observed that people make art for the same reason: ‘It is this religious use, then, that lays bare the primordial function of statuary, namely, the preservation of life by a representation of life’ (1960). Since the camera is best at creating the most faithful representation of life, it is also best at preserving it. This ‘religious’ power of the cinema can work therapeutically. Bazin compared it to the ‘charm of family albums’:

Hence the charm of family albums. Those grey or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny; not, however, by the prestige of art

but by the power of an impassive mechanical process: for photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption (Ibid.).

A couple of decades before Bazin, Epstein also referred to this therapeutic power of the cinema in one of his attempts at defining *photogénie*. According to him, people hold on to certain objects for personal reasons. They then no longer see those objects as what they really are, but as what they mean to them. *Photogénie* functions in the same way: 'Now, this is the cinematographic mystery: an object such as this, with its personal character, that is to say, an object situated in a dramatic action that is equally photographic in character, reveals anew its moral character, its human and living expression when reproduced cinematographically' (Epstein 1925; cited by Abel 1993: 352). *Photogénie* can, in other words, also elicit certain memories and so 'embalm time'.

As almost nothing about Epstein's writings is straightforward, neither is his position on Realism. I am not trying to claim here that Epstein was a realist 'pur sang'. I also admit that Epstein considered cinema's capture of reality primarily as a starting point for the artistic creation, especially in his earliest writings, and not as an end product. There are also quite a few similarities between his films and writings and those of the avant-gardes. All the same, there are definitely some things about Epstein's realism that are worth mentioning here.

Jean Epstein's realism

Epstein's realism, and at the same time his visual scepticism, was mainly influenced by his own medical training, Henri Bergson's philosophy and Romanticism (Turvey 2008: 23-25). As a student of medicine, and laboratory assistant to the Lumière brothers, Epstein was obviously familiar with the workings of a microscope. As a result, he frequently pointed attention to its similarities with the camera. Both revealed things about reality which were invisible to the human eye: 'Mechanically speaking, the lens alone can sometimes succeed in revealing the inner nature of things in this way' (1924; cited by Abel 1993: 317).

Bergson's influence on Epstein is less straightforward. According to Bergson, human sight does not reveal reality as it really is (Turvey 2008: 24). Similarly, Epstein believed that there was a wide gap between reality as it is and reality as it appears to the human eye (Ibid.: 23). An example of such a thing is the fourth dimension of time (Ibid.: 4):

By general agreement it is said that the dimensions deriving from our sense of direction are three in number: the three spatial dimensions. I have never really understood why the notion of a fourth dimension has been enveloped in such mystery. It very obviously exists; it is time. The mind travels in time, just as it does in space (Epstein 1924; cited by Abel 1993: 315).

The camera could help human sight in revealing that which is normally invisible. Moreover, it could reveal a new reality: 'A new reality is revealed, a reality for a special occasion, which is untrue to everyday reality just as everyday reality is untrue to the heightened awareness of poetry' (Ibid.; cited by Abel 1993: 318). Close-ups in particular were able to give new denotations to the filmed object, for instance to a revolver: 'And a close-up of a revolver is no longer a revolver, it is the revolver-character, in other words the impulse toward or remorse for crime, failure, suicide' (Ibid.; cited by Abel 1993: 317). However, such a new reality is not always created from the moment the camera is turned on; it requires special talent.

Contrary to Bazin and most other realist film theorists, Epstein did not refrain from using the expressive devices film techniques offered. He did not, to put it very bluntly, prepare the location he had chosen as the setting of a scene and then just turn on the camera; he still 'used' it:

Epstein's cinema continues to intervene in the world, to present a world transformed rather than familiar. We could say Epstein felt that cinematic techniques failed if they obscured our contact with reality, but succeeded if they revealed new layers of the structures of the world, supplementing ordinary human perception (Gunning 2012: 18).

In other words, Epstein used the expressive methods favoured by creative filmmakers for his own realistic ideas on filmmaking. To understand the essence of this argument, it is interesting to examine Epstein's description of his ascent of the erupting Mount Etna:

As we climbed on our mules' backs toward the active crater parallel to the lava flow, I thought of you, Canudo, who threw so much of your soul into things. You were the first, I think, to have sensed how the cinema unites all the kingdoms of nature into a single order, one possessing the most majestic vitality (1926; cited by Bullot 2012: 246).

Thus, the physical world has a soul and film, when used properly, has the ability to reveal it. This is the animistic power of cinema. In Epstein's view, it functioned in the same way as lava does: 'Just as lava fuses different states of matter, the cinematic image produces dissimilarity without rupturing its resemblance to its referent. *Photogénie* hinges upon the existence of a gap between resemblance and difference' (Bullot 2012: 246). It is indeed a reflection of a reflection. From this passage we can also derive how Romanticism further influenced Epstein's thinking on cinema, besides the concept of the romantic genius: '[B]y equating the experience of the volcano's force at a distance with the cinema's signifying force that also occurs at a distance, Epstein begins to transform the classic Romantic paradigm of a solitary, sublime encounter with nature into a treatise on modern aesthetic

experience' (Wild 2012: 116). The solitary romantic wanderer has become a solitary member of the audience and each watching experience is personal and unique.

In accordance with most other realist film theorists though, Epstein believed that the story was inferior to the images projected on the screen. A filmmaker should not waste his time concocting an intricate plot, but should rather keep his eyes open to be inspired by everyday life:

Thus we see that not only is Epstein interested in the film avoiding a strong narrative which would be at odds with the way that everyday life is, but he also wants the filmmaker to be able to respond to the coincidental rhythms present in everyday life. There is a sense that it is not through a deliberate exaggeration of the everyday that Epstein's art is created, but simply through paying attention to what occurs naturally, the chance encounters and synchronicities (Farmer 2010).

In order to recreate the rhythms of everyday life on screen, Epstein preferred simple situations to stories: 'There are no stories. There have never been stories. There are only situations, having neither head nor tail' (1921; cited by Abel 1993: 242). In the same article, he ironically expressed his frustration of the melodramatic plots in most commercial films: 'Well now, do you really want so much to know if they get married in the end? Because NO FILMS end unhappily, and bliss descends at the appointed hour in the programme' (cited by Abel 1993: 242). Even though Epstein was still interested in human drama, and so required a minimal narrative, he did insist that it did not primarily derive from the plot. Instead, it was rooted in the creation of *photogénie*, which was not even possible in highly plot driven films (Farmer 2010). *Photogénie*, on which I will expound later on, is thus an a-narrative concept of cinema, which instead focuses on the visual representation in films. It is therefore often linked to creative film theories, but it was initially a realist concept.

Realist definitions of photogénie

Delluc did not coin the term *photogénie*, but he was the first to introduce it into French writings on cinema. The application of the camera as an apparatus to convey an almost perfect illusion of reality was no longer appreciated for its cognitive power alone, but it was also considered the medium's main asset in creating *photogénie*. From this point of view, the camera functioned as a mediator between the spectator and a certain reality projected on the screen:

Even in the fiction films, however, it was nature or reality – as a subject of meditation, in the Romantic tradition – and not the story or the author's intentions or emotions that served as the basic raw material in this conception of the cinema. Here, then, the camera functioned as a mediator between the spectator and a certain reality or "world" and as an instrument of revelation (Abel 1993: 107).

The basis of a film is the 'real' or the authentic world. However, the 'real' also undergoes a transformation when it is registered on film and projected on the screen. Important for this transformation are the unique features of the camera, such as framing and lighting. Nevertheless, its 'realness' is not eliminated, but changed into something different and unique, contrary to photography which merely renders reality, but similar to poetry and painting. The important effect of *photogénie* was its *defamiliarization* of the familiar: 'to make us *see ordinary things* as they had never been seen before' (Ibid.: 110). In *Photogénie* (1920), Delluc pleaded for simple, rather than bombastic films. Unfortunately, filmmakers did not always understand this and so cinema often made the same mistakes as photography:

Le cinéma souffre des mêmes erreurs. Depuis qu'on lui a découvert une possibilité de beauté, on a tout fait pour l'encombrer et l'alourdir au lieu d'aller toujours vers la simplicité. Nos meilleurs films sont parfois très laids pour être dus à trop de conscience laborieuse et factice. Que de fois – et tout le monde sera de mon avis – le meilleur d'une soirée devant l'écran est dans les « actualités » (1920: 8).

He also pitied the fact that only few people are able to understand or recognise *photogénie*: 'La photogénie, voyez-vous, est la loi du cinéma. Il faut, pour la connaître, des yeux, — qui soient réellement des yeux' (Ibid.: 94).

According to Robert B. Ray, Surrealism's concept of *photogénie* is in the first place linked to realist, rather than formative or creative filmmaking. André Breton's proposed dictionary entry for Surrealism is exemplary:

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern (Breton 1972: 26; cited by Ray 1998: 71).

The impressionists believed that *photogénie* was the intentional creation of the artist. The surrealists on the other hand, argued that it was accidental and that it could appear everywhere, at any time (Ray 1998: 71). In this sense, they predicted Bazin's stress on automatism, only the surrealists did not believe in his *politique des auteurs*, since art was a product of chance, not intention.

On the verge of creativity

In some cases, it is hard to draw a line between realism and creativity. A first example of this is naturalist pictorialist filmmaking. Pictorialism was 'the movement that sought to legitimize photography by disguising its images as paintings' (Ibid.: 68). So, it was a theory of photography

which attempted to defend itself from being condemned as a mere mechanical reproduction of reality. Film theories adopted the idea, claiming that a film was a series of different paintings. According to Ian Aitken, it was one of the first French important alternative schools of film-making (2001: 69). Even though it did not share Realism and Surrealism's trust in automatism, the subject matter was usually drawn from the naturalist literary tradition, Émile Zola in particular (Ibid.).

A second 'dubious' case is the documentary film. Documentaries were very popular in the silent era, for instance the newsreels made during the war. In the 1920s, the genre further developed into an *avant-garde* documentary, both in practice and in theory. These were short, non-narrative films produced outside of the industry from 1924 to 1929 (Abel 1984: 279). These documentaries could be seen as a synthesis of Impressionism and Realism. On the one hand, they were impressionistic in their use of cinematic techniques to transform reality and their concern with the representation of the subjective experience. On the other hand, they were realistic because of their concern with external realities and urban locations such as Paris (Aitken 2001: 73).

Creativity

The first prototypical figure of the creative tendency was Georges Méliès (Braudy; Cohen; Mast 1992: 11). After the interest in the Lumière brothers' scientific developments waned, Méliès' creative use of cinematic techniques was welcomed: 'Drawing on both photography and the stage, he innovated many techniques which were to play an enormous role in the future – among them the use of masks, multiple exposure, superimposition as a means of summoning ghosts, the lap-dissolve, etc' (Ibid.: 14). I have already mentioned two of the four genres between which Méliès distinguished. The other two are 'scenic genres' and the 'so-called transformation views' or *fantastic views*. The films of this last genre, which was invented by Méliès himself, consist of scene changes, metamorphoses, trick effects of theatrical machinery, optical illusions and *trick shots* (Méliès 1907; cited by Abel 1993: 38). They are the prototypes of creative films, which make extensive use of cinematic techniques in order to change reality, rather than reproduce it.

Film theorists who supported this expressive concept of cinema usually rejected Realism. In order to defend the cinema as a new art form, they explicitly attempted to disprove the argument that it was 'merely' a mechanical reproduction of reality. Moreover, art in general was moving away from the dominance of *mimesis*, which had controlled all art disciplines since Aristotle had developed it in his *Poetics*:

The authority of imitation theories of art deteriorated apace with the prestige of mimetic painting and sculpture. Various new theories of art – including formalism, reflexive modernism, and expressionism

– arose to replace the defunct imitation theories. These newer theories differed in many respects from each other, but they also had one thing in common – a shared avowal that a work of art was not essentially a copy, a duplicate, or a reproduction of reality. There had to be a discernible difference between the artwork and the brute real thing it might portray – a difference marked by the addition of form or expressiveness. In short, the artwork must in some detectable way – specified by the theory in question – diverge from the real thing (Carroll 1988: 24).

Since the first film theories arose around the same time, they were automatically influenced by this general development. Two film theorists who explicitly referred to cinematic techniques in their argumentation are Hugo Münsterberg and Rudolf Arnheim. Even though they made different points, there are also noticeable similarities between their theories. Both disagreed with the idea that film was an advanced copy of reality and used similar arguments for doing so. They believed that the projection on the screen is in essence far from the physical reality and that it is also perceived differently.

***Hugo Münsterberg, The Film, A Psychological Study, the Silent Photoplay in 1916*¹**

In 1916, the German-American psychologist Münsterberg published one of the first film theories: *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*. This book was ignored for a long time by film aesthetes, but is nevertheless significant for this discussion and unique in its kind. Münsterberg was different from his predecessors because his justification of the new art form was simultaneously a psychological report of the audience's experience whilst watching the film. *The Photoplay* is one of the first works that provides founded arguments that are not based on how the cinema appears different from other art forms, but on how it is perceived differently.

By the time *The Photoplay* was published, both the film industry, or 'outer developments' as Münsterberg referred to it, and the medium itself, 'inner developments', had already undergone some pioneering transformations. These were essential for its deviation from the theatre. The innovations that the camera allowed for - such as the use of natural backgrounds, the rapid change of scenes, crosscutting, special effects and close-ups - were simply not possible on stage:

They show that the progress of the photoplay did not lead to a more and more perfect photographic reproduction of the theater stage, but led away from the theater altogether. Superficial impressions suggest the opposite and still leave the esthetically careless observer in the belief that the photoplay is a cheap substitute for the real drama, a theater performance as good or as bad as a photographic reproduction allows. But this traditional idea has become utterly untrue. *The art of the photoplay has developed so many new features of its own, features which have not even any similarity*

¹ Originally published as *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*.

to the technique of the stage that the question arises: is it not really a new art which long since left behind the mere film reproduction of the theater and which ought to be acknowledged in its own esthetic independence? This right to independent recognition has so far been ignored (Münsterberg 1970: 16).

While the technological developments are important, they are not decisive as such. According to Münsterberg, the cinema and the theatre are essentially different because they are perceived differently in the mind of the audience, as a result of these technological possibilities.

First of all, Münsterberg amplified the purpose of art in general. It is necessary to answer this question in order to find out how the cinema pursues this aim on the one hand, and other forms of art on the other. Common sense seems to dictate that art aspires the imitation of nature. From that perspective, the theatre is indeed more valuable; the actors on stage are real human beings and the performance is live. The cinema on the other hand, gives a colourless and silent projection of the outside world that is far from reality. However, Münsterberg believes that this idea of the aim of art is fundamentally wrong:

[W]e find that the central esthetic value is directly opposed to the spirit of imitation. A work of art may and must start from something which awakens in us the interests of reality and which contains traits of reality, and to that extent it cannot avoid some imitation. But *it becomes art just in so far as it overcomes reality, stops imitating and leaves the imitated reality behind it*. It is artistic just in so far as it does not imitate reality but changes the world, selects from it special features for new purposes, remodels the world and is through this truly creative. To imitate the world is a mechanical process; to transform the world so that it becomes a thing of beauty is the purpose of art (Ibid.: 62).

In making this argument, Münsterberg demonstrated that the theatre and the cinema are both valuable, because they attempt to transform the world, but that they do this in different ways. The most important difference between the theatre and the cinema, as I have already mentioned, is the fact that they are perceived differently. The theatre is an objective reality, performed and perceived as it occurs on stage at that moment. The cinema on the other hand, is further away from the physical reality, which brings it closer to the mental world of the audience. As a result, the cinema is a 'product of our mind which binds the pictures together' (Ibid.: 74).

Rudolf Arnheim, Film as Art

Rudolf Arnheim was an exemplary expressionist. Strictly speaking, he was not a silent film theorist. *Film as Art* was published for the first time in 1933. Nevertheless, he is relevant for this research

because in his view, the introduction of sound was the end of cinema. His theory is, in other words, a silent-film theory.

In *Film as Art*, he disapproved of technological improvements, such as the introduction of sound, because these made the filmed reality closer to the physical reality and so further away from art. The first part of the book is a rejection of Realism. Here, he points attention to all the 'flaws' in cinema, such as the restricted frame, the reduction of depth and the absence of sound. Because of these imperfections, cinema could never be regarded as realistic. Next, he goes on to show how these flaws can, when used properly, lead to art:

Challenged by the favorite argument of people who dislike film – that it is nothing but the mechanical reproduction of nature and therefore not art – we have examined in detail the various aspects of filmic representation and have found that even at the most elementary level there are significant divergences between the image that the camera makes of reality and that which the human eye sees. We found, moreover, that such differences not only exist, but that they can be used to mold reality for artistic purposes. In other words, that what might be called the “drawbacks” of film technique (and which engineers are doing their best to “overcome”) actually form the tools of the creative artist (Arnheim 1971: 127).

The margins of the screen, for instance, can be used artistically by selecting what is visible and what is not. Unimportant things can be omitted, important details can be given special significance and, conversely, suspense can be built up by leaving other key details off-screen (Ibid.: 73). In that sense, a filmmaker has to think of the 'drawbacks' of film technique as artistic challenges. Besides Münsterberg's and Arnheim's, other creative theories of film arose. The most distinct ones were those formulated by the avant-garde movements.

The avant-garde movements

The earliest films that could be regarded as avant-garde were already made in Italy and Russia in the 1910s. Nevertheless, it was not until the 1920s that the term 'avant-garde' began to be applied consistently to a new kind of cinema (Christie 1998: 449). In the literature, various terms are used to describe this kind of cinema. Wollen discriminates between two different currents of 'avant-gardism': one is apolitical and concerned with the development of a purist film aesthetic; the other is political, such as the Soviet montage directors (Smith 1998: 398). Ian Christie proposes a tripartite division. The first category is the notion of Impressionism, which experiments with conveying the subjective experience, but is still commercially exhibited. The second sort is concerned with the abstract exploration of cinematic possibilities and referred to as 'cinéma pur'. The last one groups the surrealists and originates from the Dada-movement (Ibid.: 399). Abel distinguishes between three

avant-garde movements. The 'First Avant-Garde' is the group of filmmakers including Abel Gance, Marcel L'Herbier, Delluc, Dulac and Epstein. The 'Second Avant-Garde' are the 'pure cinema' advocates and the Dada/surrealist films. The 'Third Avant-Garde' then are the documentaries I have already referred to (1984: 279). Bordwell also suggests a tripartite grouping and distinguishes I-impressionist filmmakers from 'abstract-film' or 'pure-film' on the one hand, and from commercial filmmakers on the other (1974: 12).

On occasion, some avant-gardes are described as a-narrative film theories. Murray Smith argues that most avant-gardes explicitly attack realist and narrative filmmaking because of their dominance in commercial filmmaking. Realism is then associated with the accurate rendering of physical realities and narrative with the traditional nineteenth-century novel and Hollywood cinema (1998: 397). However, those who also worked as filmmakers in the alternate circuit often made use of the same formulas as their commercial colleagues. The responses to Feuillade's films are exemplary: 'As critics, the impressionists had dismissed Feuillade's serials as lowbrow, but as filmmakers they often adopted a general atmosphere of mystery and alienation hovering above modern city life' (Andrew 1995: 27). The impressionists wanted to attract an elite audience, while Feuillade saw his films as part of mass entertainment. For that reason, the surrealists, contrary to the impressionists, did celebrate his serials.

In France, the chief proponents of the alternate circuit were Delluc, Epstein, Gance, L'Herbier, Dulac and Chomette and their main preoccupation was film's 'specificity' and the exploration of the optical and psychological power of cinema (Christie 1998: 449). In what follows, I will first discuss Impressionism and afterwards other, more radical French avant-gardes.

The French avant-garde: Impressionism

Like 'avant-garde', 'Impressionism' is also a contested term. For a long time, it was simply referred to as 'avant-garde'. Only when Dulac identified it as 'Impressionism' in 1927, was it explicitly distinguished from the other avant-garde movements (Bordwell 1974: 3). She used the term to refer to films in which rhythm was emphasised over narrative (Guido 2012: 148). However, some film historians² prefer to use terms as 'narrative avant-garde' to distinguish it from, what in their view are, 'non-narrative' avant-garde movements. Abel, for instance, prefers this term, because he believes that the common focus on impressionistic techniques to convey subjectivity is too simplistic (1984: 280-281). Apart from these conflicts, the study of impressionist cinema is in general based on the some 'core' assumptions. Bordwell briefly summarises:

² Andrew, Dudley. *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995. Print. ;

Abel, Richard. *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915-1929*. Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1984. Print. ;

Abel, Richard, ed. *French Film Theory and Criticism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993. Print.

Previous historians' treatments of the movement, then, substantially agree about several assumptions. Impressionism is assumed to be a movement. As such, its films are distinct both from the standard cinema of its day and from the abstract or "pure" cinema or another contemporary avant-garde group. Impressionist film style is characterized by extensive use of "subjective" optical devices and rhythmic editing. Impressionist film theory emphasizes "*photogénie*" or self-conscious pictorialism as the essence of cinema (1974: 8).

Even though film practice and film theory can sometimes be different, in the case of Impressionism, both focus on the use of cinematic techniques to convey subjectivity. In fact, Impressionism was one of the first film theories that focused on the film medium's uniqueness (Ibid.: 5). Impressionists argued that '[s]ince every art is distinct by virtue of a unique range of material constituting its medium, cinema as an art is distinct and should be treated as distinct from other arts, especially theatre, in that its primary material is moving images' (Ibid.: 105). So, cinema is a visual art and should use its medium-specific techniques to create art. In other words, the impressionistic conception of cinema is a creative one.

Before Dulac, the term 'impressionism' was already used in the early 1920s to describe realistic films set in the provinces. These films were said to evoke the landscape's atmosphere through a series of visual 'impressions' (Abel 1984: 279). Eventually, the term began to be applied to a romantic rather than realistic concept of cinema: 'Broadly speaking, Impressionist film theory holds that art is expression. Like Romantic theories, the Impressionists assume that art resides in the transformation of nature by the imagination and that art yields not discursive truth but an experiential truth anchored in feelings' (Bordwell 1974: 94). So, like the realists, the impressionists saw the filmmaker as a modern romantic genius, only for different reasons: a filmmaker did not need to *see* the physical reality, but needed to *transform* it. To do this, the impressionist experimented with the medium-specific properties of the camera. Sometimes this was done for its own sake, but mostly for the interpretation and revelation of the subjective (Aitken 2001: 81-82).

One of the first critics who proposed a subjective cinema was Ycham. Although he was convinced that cinema was best at giving a truthful representation of the action, he did believe in a subjective cinema. Moreover, he paid attention to the technical options the cinema provided to convey the characters' subjectivity, such as soft-focus, superimposition and lighting (Abel 1993: 21-22).

During and after the war, the chief proponent was Émile Vuillermoz. He argued that the cinema was magnificent because it could make jumps in time, point of view and space (1917; cited by Abel 1993: 132-136). In that sense, cinema was similar to a human brain:

The thousands of tiny frames in a moving filmstrip act like the cells of the human brain: the same overwhelming rapidity of perception, the same multiplicity of many-faceted mirrors which effortlessly juxtapose the farthest horizons, suppress distances, abolish the bondage of time and space, embrace all the cardinal points [of the compass] simultaneously, and transport us in a fraction of a second from one extreme point of the universe to another! (Ibid.; cited by Abel 1993: 133).

According to Vuillermoz, who was heavily influenced by symbolist aesthetics, the cinema was different from theatre, because it was able to show the true soul of things: 'One of the first cinematic discoveries consisted of bringing this soul of things to light, something the theater could not begin to externalize. The screen showed us that things were capable of seeing, thinking, suffering' (1923; cited by Abel 1993: 277). In the same way, Canudo believed that the cinema had the ability to show intense inner life: 'It will be a lucid and vast expression of our internal life, infinitely more vibrant than all previous forms of expression. Cinema will be able to construct the synthesis-temple of our intense inner life' (1923; cited by Abel 1993: 293). In fact, Canudo stated that the cinema has the unique ability to explore the unconscious of its characters. That is, the drama is occupied with dialogues between different characters, but the cinema has developed a range of stylistic devices to visualise a character's memory or thought (Ibid.; cited by Abel 1993: 300). An even more detailed account of these cinematic devices can be found in Dulac's lecture "Les Procédés expressifs du cinématographe". Since the cinema is silent, it has to make use of other expressive techniques: juxtaposition of images, camera placement, the shot and the close-up, superimposition, dissolves, soft focus and distortions. These techniques, or 'the whole syntax of film', convey the inner reality of a character on the screen (1924; cited by Abel 1993: 306).

Nearing the end of the 1920s, the symbolist influence became even more evident. Paul Romain believed that the cinema was dream-like and dreams were cinematic, because both cannot be expressed in words, only in images. In fact, both are visual translations of the subconscious. Some films, and these are the most artistic according to Romain, even make the explicit effort to create a dream-like sensation. Furthermore, the techniques used in films also occur in dreams: '*All the expressive and visual processes of the cinema are found in dream*' (1925; cited by Abel 1993: 363).

Originally, *photogénie* was a realistic concept. But eventually more impressionistic definitions were formulated. Then, the screen no longer projected a perfect illusion of some external reality, but this reality was experienced in a new and at the same time mysterious way. This alienating nature of the film image was then defined as *photogénie*. Even though it was considered as the source of cinema, its meaning is never exactly defined (Bordwell 1974: 106-107). The technical capacities of the camera play a central role here. It is through the manipulation and positioning of the camera that

photogénie is created, rather than by means of the arranging of the pro-filmic mise-en-scène, as the German expressionists tended to do (Ibid.: 119). In other words, according to the impressionists, cinema is a creative manipulation of reality and the camera is the chief transforming power. This also means that the result represents the artist's vision of or personal attitude towards that reality. This is in fact suggested in the term *photogénie*, with 'genie' referring to 'genius' (Ibid.: 113-114).

Other, 'radical' avant-gardes

In general, French avant-garde cinema is immediately associated with Impressionism. However, the art scene of the 1920s was also made up of other, more radical trends, such as Dadaism, Surrealism, Abstractionism and Machinism, which embraced cinema as well. All of them shared an interest in modernity at large and in experimenting with the new medium. In what follows, I will expound on dadaist and surrealist film theory.

Dada emerged after the end of the First World War and its aesthetics could be regarded as an immediate reaction against the destruction brought forth by it. In the dadaists' view, the war was the result of different modernising forces and it revealed how bourgeois modernity was in reality morally corrupt. In order to root out this corruption, they developed an anti-bourgeois attitude (Turvey 2011: 78). Violent, anarchic and anti-traditional on the one hand, irrational and meaningless on the other, Dada films were clueless on purpose. The movement is probably best summarised by one of its founding members, Tristan Tzara: 'DADA MEANS NOTHING' (1981; cited by Turvey 2011: 79). This means that it doubted everything, including Dada itself (Turvey 2011: 79). At times, this even led to an extremely nihilistic attitude. Tzara's colleague Francis Picabia famously proclaimed:

DADA smells like nothing, it is nothing, nothing, nothing
It is like your hopes: nothing
like your paradises: nothing
like your idols: nothing
like your politicians: nothing
like your heroes: nothing
like your artists: nothing
like your religions: nothing (2007; cited by Turvey 2011: 80).

Picabia was besides a poet and a painter also the scriptwriter of Dada's most exemplary film: *Entr'Acte* (1924). It is 'a film born in the spirit of negation' and an excellent illustration of this nihilistic attitude (Carroll 1998: 27). For instance, the position of the viewer is frequently assaulted; one time by a boxing glove punching at the camera, another by a rifle pointing at the audience's direction

(Turvey 2011: 81). In general, Dada films were very aggressive towards morality and conventions, such as narrative, in commercial cinema.

When Dada went into decline, surrealist filmmakers were there to take over (Aitken 2001: 79). And even though the definition of Surrealism formulated by Breton is rather realistic than expressionistic, surrealist film theory is certainly of a creative nature. Similar to Dada film theorists, the surrealists were also hostile towards Impressionism's 'pretentious' fixation with film as art, at a cost of its popular and entertaining appeal (Andrew 1995: 43). Contrary to Dadaism, Surrealism was a more formal movement. It had a dominant leader, André Breton, and a more sophisticated film theory. Another difference is Surrealism's preoccupation with psychoanalysis. More specifically, the surrealists did not refrain from freely reinterpreting Freud's ideas of the subconscious and sexuality (Smith 1998: 400).

The surrealists were mainly attracted by the cinema because of its ability to overrun reality, create dreamlike sensations and so penetrate into the core of the unconscious (Abel 1993: 205). Surrealist poet Robert Desnos believed that people feel drawn to the cinema because they desire to dream: '[W]e go into the dark cinemas to find artificial dreams and perhaps the stimulus capable of peopling our empty nights. I would like a filmmaker to fall in love with this idea. On the morning after a nightmare, he notes down exactly everything that he remembers and reconstructs it in detail' (1923; cited by Abel 1993: 283). This idea led him to believe that the cinema was essential for his distressed generation, who longed for art without constraints and could not possibly be satisfied with novels anymore:

That's why we refuse to consider the spectacle of the screen other than as the representation of the life we desire, with the same status as our dreams; why we refuse to believe that any rule, any constraint, any realism could relegate it to the low level to which writing has fallen ever since the novelists, as good businessmen, threw public discredit on the poets; why we demand that the cinema exalt what is dear to us and only what is dear to us; why we wish that the cinema would be revolutionary (1927; cited by Abel 1993: 399).

The films that best represented the life they desired were crime serials. They had the same spirit as their age, contrary to most experimental avant-garde films.

A second, more sophisticated and less naive, line of thinking can be found in the, as far as known only, essay on cinema by Jean Goudal, "Surréalisme et cinéma" (1925). Contrary to Desnos, he did not believe that cinema was a literal reproduction of a dream (Abel 1993: 338). He explained that the surrealist artist's main aim is 'to search for a reality in the dream superior to that which the logical, therefore arbitrary, exercise of thought suggests to us' (1925; cited by Abel 1993: 354). The

main objection made against surrealist art is concerned with the method used by these artists. From a practical perspective, it is simply impossible to communicate between the unconscious world of dreams with the conscious world of art (Ibid.). This is a valuable objection to most art forms, but according to Goudal, it does not hold for the cinema. He demonstrated that the cinema is unique, because the projected image 'corresponds exactly to a *conscious hallucination*' (Ibid.; cited by Abel 1993: 355). In other words, when we enter a movie theatre, the outside world no longer exists. Instead we enter a new world in which we can no longer distinguish between the real and the imagined. In the theatre for instance, it is impossible to lock out the outside world, because the physical presence of the actors and the decor do not allow for this. The images on the screen differ in this respect, because 'the camera aspires to give the illusion of reality by means of a simulacrum of a uniquely visual kind' (Ibid.; cited by Abel 1993: 356).

So far, I have discussed Surrealism as an avant-garde movement. However, the surrealists themselves did their utmost to prevent this from happening. Despite the similarities with some avant-gardes, Surrealism explicitly distanced itself from them. The movement's first authentic film *Un chien andalou* (Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, 1929) for instance, was an explicit attempt to break with the avant-garde tradition. The tactics used to accomplish this however, were to a large extent inspired by that very tradition (Christie 1998: 450). The movement did openly express its appreciation of commercial cinema, especially serials, crime films, American comedies and westerns (Abel 1993: 205). It is therefore not surprising that Feuillade had a much stronger hold on the surrealists than on the impressionists.

The Soviet avant-garde: Montage-cinema

In the second half of the 1920s, both the French and German avant-gardes declined in importance. The new centre of film criticism then moved to Moscow. The names most often associated with the movement are Lev Kuleshov, Dziga Vertov, V.I. Pudovkin and especially Sergei Eisenstein (Andrew 1976: 13). Around the same time, the Moscow linguistic circle dominated literary criticism. The formalist idea of *defamiliarization* was picked up by the montage filmmakers (Ibid.: 81-82). In a sense, they could also be regarded as 'structuralists *avant la lettre*' (Stam 2000: 38). Structuralism, which would later on evolve from Russian formalism, states that language is a system made up of differences. An element in that system does not have a meaning on its own, but only when it is used in connection to other elements of the same system. In the same way, the Russian Montage film critics believed that a shot is only meaningful in connection to other shots and that montage defined the relation between them (Ibid.). As the name of the movement predicts, montage was in their eyes the chief argument for claiming that cinema was a new and unique form of art. They were especially interested in how the combination of two shots could change the meaning or add new

interpretations to the two separate shots. Kuleshov elaborated on this idea and that is why his name is best remembered through the *Kuleshov-effect*. Today, this generally refers to ‘cutting together portions of a space in a way that prompts the spectator to assume a spatial whole that isn’t shown onscreen’ (Bordwell; Thompson 2012: 228).

Photogénie

Throughout my research, I have frequently referred to *photogénie*. Here, I would like to reflect on this key term and expound on the concept itself, its history and its main theorists.

The term was coined by Arago, an astronomer who used it for a model or object suitable for photographic capture (Wall-Romana 2012: 51). It first appeared in print in the 18/4 edition of the *Larousse* dictionary (Willemen 1994: 126). In 1919, it was reintroduced by Delluc to describe the nature of the filmic image. After that, it was soon adopted by other early film critics, leading to numerous different definitions. At the same time, it was frequently considered to be too mysterious and impenetrable and so indefinable. According to Robert Farmer, there are two ways in which the concept operated in early writings on cinema, the cultural and the aesthetic:

In the cultural sense it proposes to legitimise the medium of film, arguing that film can transcend its photomechanical/mechanical base, and, in the right hands, become art. Within this cultural sense it also offers ways of marking out those filmmakers who are artists from those who are not, prefiguring the later *politique des auteurs* division between *auteurs* and *metteurs-en-scène*. In addition to dividing filmmakers, *photogénie* also divides audiences, separating those who can see and appreciate the art of film from those who cannot. In the aesthetic sense we can see *photogénie* variously associated with transformation, expression, the close-up, movement, temporality, rhythm, and the augmentation of the senses (2010).

In such a way, it was used as an argument for film’s medium specificity. *Photogénie* is the unique magical power emanating from the screen. Sometimes this power resulted from the camera’s capturing of reality on screen, at other times it was the personal creation of the filmmaker. Frequently, it was defined as a viewer’s aesthetic, meaning that *photogénie* could distinguish the ‘sensitive’ viewers from the ‘normal’ ones (Willemen 1994: 126).

Adherents of this viewer’s aesthetic were especially concerned with the intimate screen/spectator relationship. The camera was seen as a mysterious device for revealing the ‘essence’ of actors, who had by now become proper celebrities, and the ‘spirit’ of things (Abel 1993: 108). It was in other words not only a scientific device revealing physical reality, but also a magical device revealing a spiritual reality. In “La Beauté au cinéma” (1917), Delluc not only expressed his

love for cinema, but also for Sessue Hayakawa and Charlie Chaplin, who were ‘two expressions of beauty’ (cited by Abel 1993: 138). According to Delluc, these actors did not just function as characters in the fictional story world, but rather as ‘detached mirror images for the spectator,’ revealing an ‘essentially modern human condition, of suffering and unspoken alienation’ (Abel 1993: 109). Contrary to Vuillermoz’s idea of an intimate friendship between the actors and the audience, Delluc’s ideas inclined to a psychoanalytical system of perception, which would later be further developed by Epstein (Ibid.). Delluc’s observations of the cinematic landscape on the other hand, can be regarded as a precursor of the impressionist film theory (Ibid.). Besides Delluc, Epstein was another chief theorist of *photogénie*.

In his writings of the early 1920s, Epstein frequently attempted to coin a sound definition of *photogénie*. However, he knew he was attempting the impossible, because he regularly claimed that the concept was indefinable: ‘The philosophy of the cinema remains to be formulated. Art remains unaware of the eruption which threatens its foundations. *Photogénie* is not simply a fashionably devalued word. A new leavening; dividend, divisor, and quotient. One runs into a brick wall trying to define it’ (1921; cited by Abel 1993: 243). Nonetheless, we can derive some conclusions from the various attempts he did make.

Epstein too believed in a viewer’s aesthetic. In that sense, *photogénie* entails an emotional response by the perceiver. Christophe Wall-Romana briefly summarises: ‘Let us sum up provisionally. Epsteinian *photogénie* is at minimum a triadic relation between the perceiver as embodied, the profilmic as hyper-aestheticized, and the filmic as a kinesthetic condition of and ethical potential for the relation of perceiver to profilmic’ (2012: 53). This does not mean however that every filmed object can be ‘hyper-aestheticized’. Epstein laid down some conditions.

In “De quelques conditions de la *photogénie*” (1924), his attitude is initially very lenient: ‘I would describe as photogenic any aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction. And any aspect not enhanced by filmic reproduction is not photogenic, plays no part in the art of cinema’ (cited by Abel 1993: 314). This means that cinema should indeed refrain from being moralising or instructive, but that apart from that all objects can be photogenic. Later on in the same article, the number of possibilities is narrowed down. First of all, these aspects should be mobile in both time and space (cited by Abel 1993: 315). Second of all, each aspect should have a personality of its own (cited by Abel 1993: 317).

The conditions show Epstein’s interest in rhythm and mobility in films. In general, it was frequently claimed that *photogénie* could not be effective without rhythm. (Guido 2012: 145). In the case of Epstein, this is linked to his fascination with the close-up. He did not believe that close-ups were photogenic *per se*, but because they were able to reveal movement (Farmer 2010). Movement was not so much created through an Eisensteinian kind of montage. Instead, Epstein appreciated the

spontaneous rhythms of everyday life. Later on, under the influence of Gance's *La Roue*, his idea of photogenic rhythm does expand to include the movement between different shots (Ibid.).

Besides these two theorists, other film critics made frequent use of the concept as well. Both realist and creative uses can be found in reviews, articles and theoretical writings. I have discussed *photogénie* here, but there are plenty of other examples that demonstrate how silent film critics used the same key terms as arguments for their point of view, but defined them differently. At times, these definitions even contradicted each other. In the end, however, most of these critics did agree that film was new and that it was art. So perhaps, the most succinct way to conclude early film theory, is by saying that its nature was contradictive. There were not only differences between nations, critical movements and critics, but even individual theorists, like Delluc and especially Epstein, were not able to formulate an unambiguous theory of film.

Conclusion

Therefore, concluding this research on silent film theory is not a simple task. Neither the primary, nor the secondary literature on this subject is unambiguous. Silent film theorists argued for the acceptance of cinema as a new art, but their arguments often contradicted each other. The use of terms is exemplary in this respect. Silent film critics often used key terms, like *photogénie*, but defined them differently in order to make their point. In the same way, contemporary film historians use different definitions in their researches and they apply different terms for the same phenomenon. Moreover, my research is for the most part made up of two contradictive tendencies.

In order to defend cinema as a new art, critics generally compared it to other established arts or they focused on its uniqueness. I have not devoted much attention to the first trend, but this does not mean it cannot lead to a thorough and interesting research, quite the contrary. Particularly since this relationship remains present throughout the twentieth century. Constantin Stanislavski's method acting formed the basis of the Actors Studio, Bertolt Brecht's techniques were frequently copied by Nouvelle Vague film makers and it has become almost impossible to imagine theatrical performances today without the use of video art. In other words, different forms of art almost naturally influence each other in order to create a new work of art, and this was not different in the silent era. The second trend, on the other hand, was medium specific and argued that film was new and so refuted all comparisons with other arts.

The second contradictive tendency around which I have organised my research is part of this medium specific approach to film theory. Film is unique either because of its ability to capture reality, or because the cinematic techniques can be used creatively to change reality. I have stated that many film historians do not describe this as a tendency, but as transition. From that perspective,

silent film theorists attempted to ignore the camera's capacity to capture reality and instead focused on its creative potential alone. Though I concede that realist film theories became particularly dominant after the introduction of sound, I still insist that Realism already played a central role in the silent era. I tried to exemplify this by pointing attention at the early scientific interest in cinema and at those critics who already formulated ideas similar to those of André Bazin. The creative trend then, was for a large part made up of avant-garde theorists.

To bring my dissertation to a close, I would like to make some suggestions for further research. To begin with, an extensive research into and an overview of the early writings on cinema is necessary. I am very grateful to Richard Abel and his thorough study. His anthology *French Film Theory and Criticism* has been my prime source for primary literature and it is frequently referred to by film historians as well. Besides Abel's work, David Bordwell's PhD dissertation *French Impressionist Cinema: Film Culture, Film Theory, and Film Style* was helpful too, but almost uniquely concerned with French Impressionism. Nonetheless, as Abel himself points out, this is not enough to get a full grasp of early French film theory: 'What is needed now is a historical study that (...) can take as its subject the sheer plenitude of early French writing on cinema – with all of its contradictions – as well as the unusually sustained continuity of its development as a discourse over several decades' (1993: xiv).

Next, I would suggest a more thorough study of the, as I have called it, 'Realism vs. Creativity' –debate. I have stated that this debate has been present throughout the history of film criticism and is still dominant today. For that reason, it seems necessary to pursue the question of its origins in greater depth. Particularly, I would like to put forward an explicit focus on Realism, since its presence in film theory before the introduction of sound is often ignored by contemporary film historians.

Then, a more elaborate investigation into the concept of *photogénie* would be a valuable contribution to this study. This investigation could then demonstrate whether the term is just used or whether it is possible to formulate a definition. I have noticed that this term is not only mysterious in the primary literature, but in the secondary sources as well. Even film critics today do not seem to be able to fully grasp the nature of this concept.

Lastly, I have not further examined the silent precursors of later film theories. However, this could be very interesting to illustrate that early (French) film theory is definitely not irrelevant. For instance, the French Nouvelle Vague's *politique des auteurs* already has its roots in silent French film criticism. Critics like Lindsay and Delluc applied the idea to distinguish mere literary adapters from those able to make genuine art with the new medium. They appreciated directors like Griffith, Gance, Eisenstein and Pudovkin. It can even be said that the arrival of a *politique des auteurs* was predicted in the early names given to cinema, which were frequently variants on 'graph', Greek for 'writing' (Stam 2000: 23). Precursor of linguistic film theories can also be distinguished. The Soviets'

early version of Structuralism and Semiotics and the many comparisons made between film and language are examples of this. The interest in the relation between the spectator and the screen is then a forerunner of psycho-analytic film theories. Lastly, the roots of genre theories lie in reviews of early genre films, such as westerns and crime serials.

In conclusion, the first decades of cinema are not only worth researching because of the birth of the medium, but also because of the birth of film theory. It may be easy to dismiss all French publications on film preceding Bazin's as irrelevant, but I hope to have proven that this approach lacks a deeper understanding. Silent film criticism was not only an attempt at grasping a new phenomenon, but also the foundation of contemporary film studies. For that reason, it deserves to be pursued by film scholars with the same eagerness as their silent predecessors pursued the medium for the first time.

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