

Review: Ian Aitken (2012) *Lukácsian Film Theory and Cinema: A Study of Georg Lukács' Writing on Film 1913-1971*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 272 pp.

Angelos Koutsourakis

University of New South Wales

Nineteen years have gone by since the publication of David Bordwell and Noël Carroll's *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996). The central premise of that book was that the axioms that had pervaded politicised and psychoanalytic film criticism of the 1970s no longer held relevance on account of political and historical changes in the global sphere. In many respects, the idea of 'post-theory' accorded with the early 1990s naïve historical determinism as put forward by the advocates of 'the end of history' (see Fukuyama, 1992). According to Bordwell and Carroll, theory should leave behind the formulations of the 'grand narratives' of Marxism and other large theoretical schemas. 'Scientific' reasoning should replace abstract theorising in order to look for 'piece-meal theory' (Bordwell 1996: 29), which would offer particular answers to concrete questions. The thrust of 'post-theory' was that film theory should not rely on authority figures, but should instead investigate the narrative/representational processes that might not have any political or ideological implications. An important contradiction arises here in the sense that while Bordwell and Carroll named their book *Post-Theory* they still argued in favour of a new *theoretical* approach to film studies. One also needs to acknowledge that Bordwell's own formalist work on cinema, when at its best, can provoke remarkable theoretical questions (see, for example, Bordwell 2005).

The word 'theory' derives from the Greek verb θεωμαι, which means 'to see from above' (from the same verb derives the words θέατρο/theatre and Θεός/god). Having defined the noun, the logical question that results is 'who is the one who is theorising/viewing from above?' With regard to present concerns, the question that results is 'from which viewpoint are piece-meal film theorists going to provide answers to particular problems?' In other words, it is the very commitment to a theory grounded in political neutrality that was problematic in Bordwell and Carroll's proposition; the very word 'theory' poses the problem of 'point of view' – a term which is indubitably important for studies in film narrative. Therefore, while Bordwell and Carroll (to an extent correctly) accused 1970s film theory of being too totalising, their answer to this question was a different form of totalisation, which returned to a 'universal spectator' who processes certain narratives irrespective of cultural, political and historical differences. This

model draws on concepts of homogeneity that do not account for the very issue of viewpoint, which is the central premise not only of theory, but of the practice of problem solving, which they too considered important.

For Marxism, the issue of ‘viewpoint’ is discussed with respect to the broad-spectrum social conditions and relationships that have an effect on all aspects of social activity, including art. From this perspective, the ways in which we represent the world do not appear *ex nihilo*, nor do the ways in which we process certain objects – but both are in fact also part of particular historical and material conditions. The task, therefore, of Marxist criticism has always been the investigation of the ways in which certain objects can give precedence to these conditions and liberate human imagination and perception from the shackles of banality and conformism.

György (Georg) Lukács was one of the most important proponents of Marxist criticism and while much ink has been spilled on his writings on literature, his ruminations on film art are relatively unknown. Therefore, Ian Aitken’s *Lukácsian Film Theory and Cinema* successfully fills this scholarly gap – and one of its great merits is that it provides a clear and analytical account of Lukács’ writings on film and the ways in which they resonate with his literary essays as well as with his Marxist hermeneutics.

Before going into the book’s treatment of Lukácsian film theory, however, a series of introductory remarks on Lukács’ political and literary theory are in order. Lukács stressed that Marxism can be valid political theory on the condition that it does not simply foreground political change, but instead becomes a theory of knowledge which can bring about change. A crucial aspect of Lukács’ Marxism was his understanding of ‘totality’. Totality designates a synecdochic understanding of social reality, in which each aspect of social reality cannot be understood on its own, but as part of a series of interconnections. As he says:

Only in this context which sees the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrates them in a *totality* (sic.), can knowledge of the facts become knowledge of *reality* (sic.). This knowledge starts from the simple (and to the capitalist world) pure, immediate, natural determinants described above. It progresses from them to the knowledge of the concrete totality, i.e., to the conceptual reproduction of reality. This concrete totality is by no means an unmediated datum for thought.

The concrete is concrete, Marx says, because it is a synthesis of many particular determinants, i.e. a unity of diverse elements. (Lukács 1968: 8-9)

Lukács’ political theory shaped his reflections on art, and in a similar vein he praised objects that could expose the totality of social and political relations. How can one achieve this? According to Lukács this is feasible by

using as prototypes the bourgeois novelists of the nineteenth century, such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Honoré de Balzac. Critical to Lukács' fondness for these literary figures was their ability to represent the 'socially typical'. A writer who represents the socially typical can connect individual narratives with the broader social totality. In his formulation of Balzacian realism, Lukács quotes Friedrich Engels to define realism as 'the reproduction of typical people under typical circumstances' (cited in Aitken 2012: 50).

The modernist critique of representation argued in favour of objects that break with conventional representational forms so as to lead to new understandings of reality – and as a result to produce realism. Lukács, on the contrary, rejected modernist artefacts, including the works of Bertolt Brecht and Franz Kafka (though later he positively re-evaluated their works). What Lukács saw in modernism was 'an exaggerated concern with formal criteria' (Lukács 1962: 17), which failed to represent the social totality. Modernism was reproached for representing social alienation as a 'universal' phenomenon, while for the realists like Leo Tolstoy, against whom modernism reacted, alienation is historically defined. Reflecting on the characters of Tolstoy and Gustave Flaubert, Lukács intimates that 'the fate of such individuals is characteristic of certain human types in specific social or historical circumstances. Beside and beyond their solitariness, the common life, the strife and togetherness of other human beings, goes on as before' (Lukács 1962: 20). The modernist fragmentation produced for Lukács ahistorical narrative agents who seemingly did not develop from their interaction with the social reality, but as if they were 'thrown into the world'. It is on account of this *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) that Lukács criticised modernist negation, for he suggested that this negation could not be understood historically. It is an 'abstract gesture' which does not propose any alternatives on how to overcome the impasse (Lukács 1962: 29).

Contrary to what many scholars tend to think, Lukács was not dogmatic and he constantly reassessed his previous positions, even his critique of modernism – and both Lukács' undogmatic thinking as well as his intellectual openness are evidenced in his writings on cinema. His theory of film clarifies the fact that Lukács was not simply a committed 'anti-modernist' (as is generally maintained), nor a proponent of an Orthodox socialist realism aesthetic. Instead, Ian Aitken's fascinating book, his latest on cinematic realism (for earlier examples, see Aitken 2001 and 2006), clarifies Lukács' broader theory of realism in relation to film narrative.

One of the advantages of the book is that it brings together Aitken's thought-provoking analysis of Lukács' writings on film with Lukács' own essays/interviews on cinema, some of which have been relatively unfamiliar to English-speaking scholarship. Aitken's analysis is significant, not only because it introduces the reader to Lukácsian film theory, but also because it points to a set of contradictions within Lukács' thought. For example, in his

discussion of the philosopher's early aesthetic, Aitken elaborates on Lukács' understanding of cinematic realism, which produces knowledge. But rather than falling into the binary categories of form versus content that characterised some of Lukács' literary essays, Aitken explains how Lukács suggests that 'knowledge about reality is not gained primarily through either rational or "intuitive" reflection, but through empirical and sensual encounter with the "seamless succession" of the film images' (20). Aitken also lays out the importance of the cinematic sequence in establishing a temporal flow that gives access to the 'absolute reality of the moment' (23).

Interestingly, Lukács' early thoughts on the medium are very much concerned with medium specific issues, as well as with formal elements that have preoccupied conflicting theorists such as Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze. For instance, Aitken brings to light the importance that Lukács attributed to the '*deanthropomorphising*' specificity of the moving image, which differs from everyday perceptual experience. Film produces 'fantastic life', which shall not be discounted, but connected with the social reality. As Aitken says: 'editing techniques can overturn physical causality itself, and present an illogical and rational world' (24). But, film images can also draw attention to the concrete *Lebenswelt* (living world) so that 'even though the image in the film shot is a fantastic image it is still related to living life in this respect' (24). Later on, Aitken explains how Lukács saw cinema as a medium whose efficiency lies in the production of events and gestures and not as a medium reliant on drama communicated through language (184). Again, the connection with theorists of modernity demonstrates the complexity of Lukács' thought as well as the importance he assigned to the study of the new medium.

While the second chapter focuses on Lukács' critique of modernism and his understanding of narrative as a means of coming to terms with a concrete historical reality, the third chapter focuses on his late aesthetic and film theory. Again Aitken raises a set of interesting antinomies, foregrounding Lukács' conviction that film will overcome its propensity for fragmentation and commit itself to the depiction of social particularity and totality, thereby revealing the dialectical relationship between individuals and the *Aussenswelt* (outside world). Lukács brings as an example Charlie Chaplin, a favourite artist for Brecht and Benjamin, who praised him for the very same reasons, namely his ability to connect the inside with the outside. Lukács says that Chaplin offers an 'absolutely valid expression to the ordinary man's feeling of isolation against the context of the machinery and apparatus of modern capitalism' (97). Film's capacity to capture the real in its dialogue with social totality is also one of the reasons why Lukács extols films from the Italian neorealist tradition.

As Aitken explains, a critical concept in Lukács' theory is the notion of *Stimmungseinheit*, a term that evokes concepts of organic unity and completeness. In his formulation, Lukács argues that *Stimmungseinheit* in

cinema can link emotions with concrete ideas, and here he sets as an example the practice of Sergei M. Eisenstein and V.I. Pudovkin. Ultimately, Lukács' theory of film reflects his disappointment with the failure of the Eastern bloc alternative and with Stalinist terror. This influences his aesthetic theory, which is now orientated towards a 'socialist humanism', which is more concerned with producing 'human meaning' rather than formal experimentation. The experience of the Stalinist terror in the East along with the capitalist manipulation in the West made Lukács critical of films interested in the production of shock effects. As Aitken suggests, Lukács debunks the modernist aspiration to produce knowledge by means of shock, since shock becomes an end in itself and 'neutralises any utopian potential' (132). In this context, despite his respect for films like *Bronenosets Potemkin/Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei M. Eisenstein, USSR, 1925) and their ability to construct a counter-public sphere, Lukács argues in favour of a more standardised 'shock-free' realist aesthetics (which paradoxically belong to the modernist canon too, and which can make us rethink the realism versus modernism debate). His examples include Miklós Jancsó's *Szegénylegények/The Round Up* (Hungary, 1965) and András Kovács's *Hideg napok/Cold Days* (Hungary, 1968), both of which played a central role in the formalist/political modernist criticism of late 1960s France and early 1970s Britain.

Indeed, Lukács' dedication to texts that reveal the social totality was not only relevant then, but also now, at a time when scholarship tends to dissociate ethics from politics, and the industrial from the political, and/or when it explores the ways audiences perceive things without considering the fact that visual perception and the production of knowledge are also contingent on historical and political processes. Aitken's book outlines Lukács' theory with acute intellectual competence, making connections with the philosopher's political and literary writings and bringing to our attention a wealth of resources and secondary references. In the conclusion Aitken convincingly points out that there is not one Lukácsian theory. The latter's writings have Marxist and Leninist echoes, but there is also an idealist Lukács whose aesthetic theory wanted to put the individual at the centre, so as to assist her/him in overcoming her/his alienation. Furthermore, Aitken has generously translated Lukács' film writings, which will become a reference point for many English-speaking scholars. *Lukácsian Film Theory and Cinema* addresses both the scholarly and the university classroom markets, and can provide readings for multiple courses on film theory, politics and representation, cinematic realism and film and philosophy. This book adds to a list of recent stimulating and diverse publications on film theory, such as Robert Sinnerbrink's *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* (2011), the late Miriam Bratu Hansen's *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno* (2012), and D.N. Rodowick's *Elegy for Theory* (2014), which prove

that theory is still alive and that it can make us understand the historical, political and philosophical questions brought about by the very specificity and haecceity of film as medium.

References

- Aitken, Ian (2001) *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Aitken, Ian (2006) *Realist Film Theory and Cinema: The Nineteenth Century Lukácsian and Intuitionist Realist Traditions*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006.
- Bordwell, David (1996) 'Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory', in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds.), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 3-37.
- Bordwell, David (2005) *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bordwell, David, and Carroll, Noël (eds.) (1996), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Fukuyama, Francis (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Maxwell Macmillan International.
- Hansen, Miriam Bratu (2012) *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lukács, György (1962) *Realism in our Time: Realism and the Class Struggle*. New York, Evanston: Harper and Row.
- Lukács, György (1968) *History and Class Consciousness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Rodowick, D.N. (2014), *Elegy for Theory*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Sinnerbrink, Robert (2011) *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images*, London: Continuum.