

Introduction

Ambushes from a cinema known as Classical

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The archeologist, the nostalgia buff and the academic type

One is almost forced to start off with the question «Why should a journal that sets out to reach a high theoretical and historical level devote a monographic issue to classical cinema?» This would seem to be a rather passé subject, with no modern *raison d'être* whatsoever, or if it does indeed have any, this is limited to the humble level of a new and tardy discovery, a recent restoration, a homage of some forgotten director, operator, decorator or scriptwriter whom we intend to save from oblivion, going against the tide. In other words, it looks pedantic and, above all, unnecessary to dig up a field which, it would appear, was given its funeral rites several decades ago.

But then, this is food for thought. We can no longer affirm that classical cinema is in a stage of crisis, or even that it is dead. We find ourselves instead in a paradoxical situation with regard to the classic story; that of its death, with it being impossible to revive, since it no longer matters to any one. There is no longer anyone mourning its loss. And this situation, if we really think about it, is something radically new, since it differs from what occurred in the sixties — the years, that bore witness to the decline of classical cinema. Under the auspices of European avant garde and experimentalism, classical cinema was all the livelier when it was of use as a landmark, to be left destitute or to perpetuate its effects, already stripped of the slightest functionality. The situation today is quite another. The crisis of legitimation of metastories of which philosophy has been talking about for almost two decades now is tied to the disappearance of the horizon of classic cinema, especially that of the classical cinema as produced by the Hollywood factory. This, then, is a primary consideration that is well worth a few pages: the function of the Hollywood-type story in the universe, not that of the cinematograph, of its evolution and history, something comfortable to a greater or lesser degree, but rather that of the stories that pad out our existence. In other words, not only the syntactic and semantic function of the story, but also the pragmatic side.

Nevertheless, it is a paradoxical condition of our postmodernity that nothing disappears, but that everything lives on, or better still, lives together with its opposites, even when dressed up in the mask of sarcasm. For this reason the products of that kind of classic cinematography, so distant from the ruling trends in cinema, become thoroughly embedded in our society of treatises in spite of it all, and are allowed a place in which to live there. Besides, there is a second experience of the classical film, whether on the fringe or not, at times when audiovisual dynamics are off along other paths. We could affirm that the classic Hollywood narration and its consequences have found several different havens in which to dry dock its body, each of which appears to be reserved for a different use. The first of these is, without a shadow of doubt, television, through specialized channels and as something customary at hours that are off peak or at least not prime time. It goes without saying that this practice contradicts the essential elements of the

staging of film shows: the darkened theatre (which, by the way, we should point out is not a characteristic of the earliest cinema and, as it appears, will not be in the near future) the source of the shaft of light, the layout of the seating, the structure of the programming, the function of the posters, the trailers, the informational photos, the production magazines. Nowadays one can see a reconstruction of classical cinema (translated into electronic supports, with its format adapted, etc.) depriving this of its ritual context; a deritualization of symbols that constitutes a very eloquent symptom of the loss of that symbolic weight of which we were talking of.

The second of these spaces where a home is found attempts to make up for the loss we have just mentioned, and is embodied by film libraries, museums and specialized festivals. Here the greatest of care needed to reconstruct the ceremonial of yesteryear is taken, or at least an attempt is made to reconstruct what is the essence of the classic experience in the historian's opinion. It is thus obvious that interpretation, study, gets in the way, and so, as praiseworthy as these experiments may be, they are dragged down by an inevitable excess of mannerism. To put it in other words, it is quite clear that the reconstruction of a classic theatre playhouse or a walk through the Sistine Chapel are insufficient to relive the experience of the age, a time, as it must be said, when these artistic forms had an anthropological dimension and were not the mere effect of rhetoric.

Lastly, one has to underline the work of universities and specialized study and research centres. In these places one may aspire to analytic *post mortem*, that is, to a greater comprehension of the devices that operated in classical cinema, of its grammar and historical and social function. When all is said and done, this option is intellectual and could not indeed be any other, and here too the experience of the classic story is unavoidably interrupted, or absent. In its vacuum understanding of the same is erected. To sum up, depending on the area in which he stands, the spectator of classical cinema today, roughly sketched out, has no other fate awaiting him than that of archeologist, nostalgia buff or academic type — three categories of behaviour which often converge in the same subjects and which are decisive in holding back the loss of what was the great form of the narrative in the twentieth century, after the decomposition that the avant-garde brought on.

The definition of a style

Tied to the birth of a type of industrial production of mass spectacle, the problem arose of how to fit this in or explain it as an aesthetic phenomenon. As a fairground show, cinema would not have needed stylistics to offer reasoning subject to artistic patterns. But, at the same time as it became consolidated as an industry, Hollywood immediately chose to link the mode of representation that it was gradually constituting with a tradition that was heading farther and farther from the vaudeville or fairground world it was born in, in order to seek a reference in more respectable literary or theatrical precedents. In this way, in a most interesting correspondence that brought about the convergence of marketing and advertising with generally agreed on, but never clearly defined quality criteria, it was a basic necessity to fashion an unconscious model in which the industrial mechanism and the horizon of the artistic achievement or discovery were perfectly incorporated. The importing of European creators or intellectuals and technicians from New York theatre, the fundamental role of critics and specialized press from the middle of the second decade of the century onwards, along with the search for widely recognized models from the different artistic spheres (even from the European avant-garde) started to develop an ideological framework in which the model of representation and industry attained a degree of absolute correspondence also from aesthetic criteria. For this reason it is no surprise to find that the first two great histories of classical cinema, by Lewis Jacobs (1939) and Benjamin Hampton (1931) give a detailed analysis of the industrial fabric

to come to conclusions in an aesthetic approach, just at the time of the model's greatest maturity. Both fronts seem indissoluble for the North American scholars in a system in which even a naturalization of their evolution had been incorporated.

This process had irreparable consequences on later criticism. This adaptation, so unquestionable from the American standpoint was not so easy to assimilate for the critical patterns existing on the other side of the Atlantic, above all in France and for the first generation of the *Cahiers*. Faced with the closed model that the Americans envisaged (admittedly with some spaces for the incorporation of avantgarde responses as dealt with by Jacobs), the team of «cahierists» started to search for and give recognition to voices of their own and who apparently worked farther afield than industrial straightjackets would allow for them to be understood as artists — particularized authors as opposed to the general model. Against the instrumentalized concept of production, some voices demanded a presence that would make them stand out from the masses of craftsmen, to attain the level of artists. The inevitable consequence was the birth of a cinematographic stylistics, whose methodological foundations seemed to refer back to systems that were already archaic in similar disciplines, such as literary criticism. The psychobiography, the «fetichizing» of the technical effect as a field of transgression or legend of the artist confronting the system became the fundamental points to which all stylistic analysis was forced to head. Parallel to this process, non-particularized films were given a regrouped according to genre criteria whose roots were more pragmatic than theoretical. With no definition of systems subject to a text treatment, the first transcending of these attitudes had to come through an ideological criticism of the apparatus, of the technical and industrial structure that held it all up.

The textual road on

From the viewpoint we have today, it is strange to observe that the Metzian effort towards formalization and that of many of his disciples ran a parallel path, in an attempt to restore in films what could not be reduced to codes. This found its exceptional expression in the rediscovery by the second great generation of the *Cahiers du cinéma* of some of the Eisensteinian works, as well as of André Bazin. It does not cease to surprise one that these two figures, whose outstanding subject of study was never classic cinema, were so often referred to when handling tools for studying this kind of cinema. If Eisenstein came forward as the master of analysis and of the performative vocation of the image by means of his extremely rich concept of montage, Bazin stood up as the defender of a realism that was based on the respect of temporal and spatial unities of events. Indeed, both poetic stances cut back the two limits of classical cinema, cinema that was understood to be naturalizing, (as opposed to the enunciative visibility of the Eisenstein type montage) and director-controlled (as compared with the true to life neutrality that Bazin put forward). Along this winding path classical cinema was rescued and reproached in a double homeostatic movement. On the one hand, it was reproached for its spirit of deceit, of artifice; on the other an effort was made to revindicate all those manifestations that seemed to cast doubt on the classic programme. In this way a paradoxical situation was reached. The more the analysts of the North American cinema of the thirties, forties and fifties dug deeper into this, the more they discovered ruptures in it, or, to use the terminology of the time, transgressions.

The situation we have just described got more and more difficult to live with. If every classical text had its own density and this had to be defined against a system that embodied the opposite to what the particular text put forward, it seemed logical that the study of classical cinema could not be postponed any longer and that it was time some overall reflection was made as regards this, and not just a mere catalogue of brilliant tran-

gressions. Tied in with this process, ideological criticism of the apparatus was not enough, since it displayed an ever increasing distance from the texts that it was attempting to report on. In the idea that summed up all the attempts of the seventies, and that in a metaphoric way, we could identify with Noël Burch's term of institutional mode of representation, there was a basic flaw that would end up destabilizing it: it could not contain historical or aesthetic criteria inside it. The ghost of the Institution, which appears to haunt the whole history of the cinema, could not define profiles for its own periods, nor could it report on the weight of technological innovations, nor could it sustain the characteristics of an ideology of representation with textual analysis, something very difficult to do if one leaves history aside as a problem. The only space left was thus the automatic identification of classical cinema —representation model (going on with the unconscious model that was there at the back of it all in the work of historians of the thirties) through its negative definition, that is, of what it is not: the avant-garde or the early cinema.

Theory, criticism and history

Confronted by these postulates, and in order to overcome them, a series of reviews of critical work on classical cinema have been put forward through the integration of two essential elements that attempt to respond both to industrial and to aesthetic and stylistic criteria. On the one hand, there are the historicist type attitudes, of great importance in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, that attempt to span in detail the conditions of production, distribution and exhibition of classic cinema and its industry, the characteristics of its reception, and the way in which other mass media products were linked to this. Here we find an empirical spirit of research into direct sources such as production documents, the internal organization of the studios, the function of advertising and of the press, the determinism of technological innovations and of experimentation, conditions of exhibition and organization of the theatres, economic analysis of the monopolistic structure of the industry, etc. Linked to all this, though, problems come up that go farther than the strict work of the historian. From this point of view, observing the films as open systems (to use the expression of Gomery and Altman) their stylistic analysis cannot leave to one side the careful study of the historical, economic and technical conditions that produced these. And as an overall response to this problem, the most influential book of recent years in the field of stylistic analysis of classical cinema came out: the study by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, which will be analyzed in the articles to follow.

Nevertheless, it seems that of all these subjects, one theoretical problem of particular interest both in the historical and theoretical sphere when confronting the analysis of classical cinema has been gradually standing apart on its own. The work on the construction of the texts has started to be focused, even from certain effects of technical origin that have grown to a theoretical scale (the montage, the notion of *raccord*, the naturalization of sound) on their aspect as narrative stories and the historical repercussions of said process. Starting off from the influence itself of the work of textual analysis (such as the famous edition of fragmentary works undertaken by Raymond Bellour in 1980), narratology has little by little become a privileged area in which to support the historical work of classical cinema. The problem of the approach leading towards narrative integration (in Tom Gunning's expression) of formulas of different origins until these are consolidated in a dominant form of representation is one of the most fruitful spheres of present work on classical cinema. The detailed view of the characteristics of narrative construction of the age we are dealing with seems to have brought about the convergence, for the first time, of the researchers of both continents in the same theoretical field.

As a counterbalance to this situation, neither can we ignore the fact that the approaches tending more towards the theoretical field still separate the type of work done in the

Anglo-Saxon field from that of European, or continental study. The new tendencies for analysis with feminist, deconstructionist, sociological or empirical approaches from the Anglo-Saxon world have very little resonance in France, Germany, Italy or Spain. On the other hand, textual analysis, semiotics or rhetorics, more deeply ingrained on the continent, are looked at with scepticism by the majority of American and English researchers.

An alternative

Looking at this situation in a field of work in which the object of study no longer has any specific weight either in the mass media or in the artistic world, the different controversies seem to be consistent with the publication of know-how and the specialization that prevails more and more in academic life, and only in this sphere can it have real repercussions. In the research area in which we move, nevertheless, it seems that coming to extreme attitudes in the conception of partial studies may be one of the risks that work on classical cinema comes up against.

As regards the polarization of methodological trends, we feel that one should not go back to the empiricism that it once took such a great effort to overcome, just because linguistic models have been incapable of exhausting the subject. The arrival of theory in the study of cinema and, more particularly, that of classical cinema is a conquest cannot be given up. What is obvious today, however, is that this arrival through the chain of signifiers cannot be reduced to naive studies of a grammatical or rhetorical approach. And this is so because what is significant does not only send us on to grammar, to codes and signs of the films. Their study must imply the understanding of the basic anthropological elements that back up said texts. And, once this has been opened up, history is unavoidably called on in each analysis, in the confrontation of each textual problem that critical work gives rise to.

In these times of indecisiveness, of joint presence and coexistence of so many types of approaches to the classical cinema, it would be well worth sustaining the relationship between theory and history in order to better describe and analyze classical cinema better. Although it may well be certain that the euphoria in this field found in the studies of the late sixties and early seventies in the magazines *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Cinéthique* as well as *Tel Quel* and others may not today be recoverable, it is still necessary to point out that this has not left the relationship between theory and history destitute, but has instead tackled again from its crisis point an ideological mechanicism that came from the marxism notion of ideology itself in Marxism. In order to keep in touch with the model which one is attempting to report on theoretically, the best guide for an approach cannot be any other than that of the study of the texts. From the silence to which these have been relegated by present day culture, perhaps the academic type, the archeologist or even the nostalgia buff can manage to explain why the classic narratives can no longer be a condensed metaphor of the world and life.