AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

Motifs of movement and modernity

In 'Modernity and Cinema: A Culture of Shocks and Flows', Tom Gunning proposes a dialectical approach to modernity, contrasting experiences of 'chaotic dissolution' with patterns of 'systematic organization' (2006: 310). My audiovisual essay takes this intriguing idea as a point of departure, contrasting two distinct motifs of camera movement. In the first motif, the camera follows one or more characters as they wander across a dangerous city street. In the second, the camera dollies along a row of similar people or objects, evoking the repetitiveness of mass production. Although these motifs were transnational, most of my examples come from Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s, suggesting that the dialectical culture of modernity shaped even the most classical filmmaking tradition.

Some scholars, such as Charlie Keil, have argued that 'modernity' is too broad a context to be of much use to film historians, especially for those looking to explain the 'fine-grained' nuances of stylistic change (2004: 63). In a thoughtful response to Keil's thorough critique, Gunning points out that much of the best scholarship on the relationship between modernity and cinema remains deeply committed to the methods of close analysis (2006: 312). My own 'motivic' approach shows how Hollywood filmmakers expressed ideas about modernity by manipulating historically identifiable strategies of camera movement. Just as an art historian might track the shifting meanings of a recurring pictorial strategy across a series of paintings, so might a film historian chronicle the diverse but related ways of representing particular spaces and story situations across several films. Striking a balance between the close analysis of individual scenes and a broader history of cinema as a generalised manifestation of modernity, a history of motifs shows filmmakers working within a complex and shifting tradition, developing a shared iconography of modernity to address both sides of the dialectic that Gunning has discussed. The crossing-the-street shot allows filmmakers to address the vitality of the modern city by producing unusually dynamic images; the seriality shot gives filmmakers an equally flexible resource to address modernity's mass repetitions.[1]

I develop this argument at greater length in an ongoing manuscript, but this audiovisual essay is designed as a stand-alone work. Indeed, the audiovisual essay seems like an ideal tool for a 'motivic' approach to film history. By juxtaposing several instances of each motif, we see how the meaning of each motif may be repeated, revised, or even reversed with each new iteration.

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Works cited

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Keil, Charlie (2004) 'To Here from Modernity: Style, Historiography, and Transitional Cinema' in Keil, Charlie & Shelley Stamp (eds) *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Whissel, Kristen (2008) *Picturing American Modernity: Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

[1] For more on the representation of traffic in the cinema, focusing on earlier examples, see Kristen Whissel (2008).

Watch the audiovisual essay here:
https://vimeo.com/170535380

ABOVE Detail from *Sunrise* (1927).