



Education in the film corpus

Domènec Font

The entrance of cinema into the university is a relatively recent fact. It is related, on the one hand, to the boom of a multidisciplinary theory model which affected all fields of knowledge at the beginning of the 70's. And it also coincides with a social and symbolic devaluation of cinema itself, between the convulsive boom of European modernity and the increasingly pregnant audio-visual dogma. The pedagogy of the film corpus is based on these contradictory variables. A confluence between theory and history, both to be understood as social knowledge, which help to think cinema before its progressive break-up in human imagination.

1. The most obvious evidence of the power of cinema (and also of its evanescence) is, without a doubt, the literature it produces. Cinema is possibly the artistic activity which has generated the most publications, a remarkable detail in a medium which is only a century old and with an artistic status verging on the precarious. We are evidently not dealing with a recent fact spurred on by cinema's anniversary waltz or by a literature of celebration whose only aim is, really, the magnification of an inevitable rite of passage. Writing about cinema is as enormous and heterogenous as cinema itself. It hovers over this zig-zag phenomenon between game and investigation, entertainment and laboratory, art and market, which has nourished cinema from the beginning. As soon as the cinematograph is placed under the umbrella of the noble arts of the 19th century equal to theatre and the novel, which is why its narrative status is defined in preference to its consideration as a fairground show, a flow of written documents emerges from the shadows trying to authenticate its internal structure and its acceptance as a cultural fact.

It is not until recently, however, that cinema's educational slant as an artistic practice has become interesting rather than its power of social and industry communication and its hypnotic nature. Thus, most published texts (at least up till the 60's) lacked a precise methodology to give them a scientific condition and to enter into what Christian Metz called "a small universe, slightly matte, slightly apart from the great roads of repercussion and the general movement of ideas (1). Empiric knowledge which definitely clashes with the great cultural contributions of the 20th century, contemporaries of cinema's development, such as psychoanalysis, linguistics or philosophy (2). Add to this the extremely ample bibliographies on aesthetic avant-gardes, and we can understand the straggling and diffuse nature of studies on an art,

cinema, which has had the intention of negotiating the cultural value of the whole 20th century.

2. Faced by these great disciplinary contributions, most literature on cinema is deployed on two fronts which, with slight modifications, still dominate at the present. I mean the cinema lover's praise and the cinema historian's work of compilation, two routes which are interested in authenticating cinema as a poetic activity and as a social document, at the same time as a fleeting dream worthy of collection.

Since entering cinema vocabulary in the 20's by means of Ricciotto Canudo and Louis Delluc, cinephilia has become a true starting-point for the study of cinema. Diverse positions search for an effusive and passionate approach to an art in a permanent state of crisis, collection fetish (photos, tapes, books, video cassettes, it's all the same) for a special adolescent regression. To be sure, cinephilic passion does have some nuances. We could speak of an "adult" cinephilia, nurtured by "the "author policies" of the 60's in specialty magazines such as *Cahiers du Cinema*, *Positif*, *Cinema Nuovo*, or *Screen*, which now has its refuge in the single sessions -a blend of initiation rite and ghostly vibration- of cinema clubs and television; or the current "adolescent" cinephilia bred in the cult to the poster and the new star fetish based on magazines with large distribution (such as *Fotogramas* or *Premiere*) and the refined fireworks of current cinema. But above the differences in "quality" (the author as demiurge and the sexy star both generate similar lyrical effusions), both cinephilic conditions suppose a capricious recognition process and a confused and fleeting perception of cinema itself. A loving approach close to the funereal dream of those adolescents in Fellini's *Amarcord* who begin an awkward dance in the misty station, evoking the private consumption of technicolour idols to colour the dull reality of fascism. As if, with the memory of the cinema and the weakness of the collective intimate object, which otherwise barely resurrects, there was a desire to compensate the ineffable characteristics of its own eclipse.

History is the other more or less compact corpus which tries to control the social and educational function of cinema. We are to understand history not as an analysis of mentalities and discursive practices (according to Foucault's epistemological model) which have marked a century of cinema, but rather the vulgata of a sum, of a chronological succession of authors, titles and films, governed by the problem of taste, with no other parameters to explain than those proceeding from the universalism of the accepted discourse. As if cinema time were an organised and lineal time (and, of course, always in the past) governed by a "natural" parade of authors and films, grossly evolutionary in techniques and forms. The enormous task of historians such as Georges Sadoul, Jean Mitry or Sigfried Krecauer (not their counterparts, including the Spanish, who always had to work with second-hand material) does not exclude criticism of these autarchic and classifying focuses on cinema which lay the foundations for an essentially liturgical concept of history, an aide to a funereal cult to which most texts on cinema seem to be doomed.

3. In the 60's, a third movement opens for texts on cinema. Coinciding with its

acceptance as a cultural fact, there is a progressive theoretical approach to the fact of film, guaranteed by the internationalisation of studies and the interdisciplinarity of theses (3). It is not as if there had been no previous special analytical sensibility (4), but the theoretic field was still a rough territory where it was difficult to distinguish the subjective gesture. Once more, Christian Metz emphasised this indetermination in the field of theory: "What has most frequently been called a cinema theorist is a kind of one-man orchestra, ideally obliged to possess encyclopedic knowledge and an almost universal methodological training: it is taken for granted that they know the main films shot in the whole world since 1895, as well as the essences of their records (and, therefore, that they are historians); they are equally obliged to possess a minimum idea about the economic circumstances of their production (here they are economists); they must also make the effort to specify why and how a film is a work of art (thus, preoccupied with aesthetics) without being forgiven a consideration of the type of discourse (this time, semiologists); they are often obliged, as well, to make diverse comments on psychological, psychoanalytical, social, political, and ideological facts directly alluded to in the films and from which they extract their own content: and here they need nothing less than total anthropological wisdom" (5).

As is well known, in the 60's Christian Metz himself worked on a (not always) reasoned task-sharing, based on disciplines -linguistics, semiology, or psychoanalysis- seemingly quite alien to cinema as an institution and which from then on strove to find a difficult adjustment. Beyond the intermittent outline of his theoretical wager, along with quite a few narcissistic pirouettes, the work of Christian Metz must be recognised as a seminal departure for modern investigation on cinema language and film analysis. One of the heuristic principles begins from his work, as well as programatic texts by Barthes, Benveniste, and Genette (6), such as the idea of the text and the problem of enunciation, which apart from displacing cinema to a condition of film fact, contribute to define the film-object not based on a combination of its contents, but rather as an open, meaningful process which must be analysed to understand its true meaning.

It is not within the scope of this article to enter into a compilation or refutation of all the discursive proposals of the last few decades. I am simply trying to point out the development of studies on cinema and its social function. And how a professional displacement takes place, once the poor impressionist reserve of the critic and/or cinephile (indirectly implicated in the industry itself through its media functions) and the historicism of the free-lance sociologist has been exhausted. The search crystallised around the idea of text implies an opening out towards an essentially University community which plunges into interdisciplinary speculation looking for a trace of science in an art which is deemed evanescent and which tends to take refuge in the recesses of memory.

4. The institutional recognition of cinema and the gap in educational programmes is, therefore recent. Actually, it took place in the 70's, exactly when cinema as an institution and as a cultural value had become relative after the compulsive, nowadays almost forgotten, burst of modern European cinema during the previous decade and vigorous audio-visual indoctrination. We are speaking, therefore, of an integration

into the University which is parallel to its moribund condition, as if the classroom could become a balsam for starvation, instead of the patrimonial location for the celebration of the nostalgic humus of a loss.

We must say, however, that cinema does not enter the classroom (in secondary school or in University degrees) by the front door, but rather sneaks its way in by a side window. At the beginning, it does so by integrating into the still ethereal content of information and communication sciences, where there is an intention to join journalism, image, and publicity in suspect harmony. After this, cinema appears diluted in the order of the audio-visual (with its corresponding rhetorical norms), a hostage of television, video, and new technology and diluted in an anonymous and brutal visual jigsaw puzzle. Finally, it is allowed to account for its existence under the condition of relying on sociology and historicist archaeology, as if it were a warehouse of magnificent rubble.

So that, after a century, cinema still has a difficult placement in University intertextual spheres and its artistic status is still precarious for art historians and *homo aestheticus* generally, in spite of having generated an enormous amount of artistic work and forcing a reconsideration of the role of art itself, its uses and its reception (7).

This difficulty of considering cinema as a dynamic reality has found, in our case, a real culture medium. Not only textual production (specialised books and magazines) are limping and menaced by quick disappearance, but also cinema rarely escapes from its role as a fair-ground attraction and aide to cultural mediatisation in the education movement. To a great degree we are still living mummified history, according to parameters of gramatical scholastic norms, if not the fundamentalism of film files, heir to the cineclub fragility on form and content. The autarchy of discipline in the Spanish University, in which empiricism is still the outstanding note, turns any theoretic intervention on film fact into a problem, beyond the intellectual and speculative prancing of a few teachers.

5. In spite of this doctrinary disdain, the convergence between the University institution and the editorial market concede a certain cultural legitimacy to cinema in the international field. This is due, to a great extent, to the appearance on the field of studies on cinema from two unique fields interested in making their own gesture: film analysis and the new historiography. Two different teaching exercises whose first uniqueness lies in clearing the underwood from their subject. Born together with modern cinema, with all the violence against the imaginary institution that this implies, both studies concentrate mainly on classical cinema, which is exactly what was anathema for years, because it was an unreal and illusory universe. Although it may be paradoxical, the greatest works of reason and rhetoric do not influence this reign of the senses introduced by modern cinema into our audience conscience, but rather on classical cinema, on this powerful narrative machine, unfortunately now in danger, where it was possible to find cracks and contradictions in the text, out-of-proportion films whose script had the print of multiple universes, genres shot through with forbidden connections and blessed with unique symbolic overtones.

The implication of film analysis in teaching is based on two coordinates. The first is of a social nature and could be formulated by means of an apparent paradox: as cinema becomes a hybrid show diluted within the fireworks of the audio-visual, it reaches the level of essential luxury for the student population. Along with cinema's loss of ability to produce an image, there is an overlap of the students' strong imaginative implication with the cinema-object, under diverse forms which are all marked by a strong social lure: from cinephilic passion to the desire for fiction rather than information, while not forgetting professional needs and the prestige scale.

The second coordinate by which cinema arrives at University levels is of a technical nature. Thanks to video media, film has become an available object which can be manipulated, and cinema history can be rewound without the need to assist at the continuous flow of a showing (otherwise impossible due to the obtuse charm of commercial distribution). The video copy and projector not only make multiple viewing possible (although in most cases it is in an infamous state and under terrible viewing conditions), but also promote a piece by piece scrutiny of detail which is a necessary condition for an analyst's unique work in open and heterogenous text processing (8).

"Analysing a film," emphasise Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie (9) , "is something any spectator, however uncritical, whatever distance felt from the object, can practice at any moment of the viewing. The view projected onto the film becomes analytical at the moment when, as the etymology indicates, there is a decision to dissociate certain elements of the film for a special interest at a specific moment, on that image or part of the image, on that situation. Thus defined, exactly and minimally, where attention leads us to detail, analysis is an attitude common to the critic, the director, and any minimally conscious member of the audience."

From a University position, analysts wish to distance themselves both from the common sense accompanying the average audience judgement and the preachy fatality of critical comment, to understand certain aspects of the meaningful function of the film camouflaged behind its apparent lineality. The idea subjacent in a film analysis is that a text can never reveal the whole of its sense and that it is the acting which has a duty to reveal that part which has been silenced. As Umberto Eco says on narrative texts (although the idea could easily be applied to the film field), "text is full of blank spaces, interstices which must be filled; whoever emitted it foresaw that they would be filled and left them blank for two reasons. Above all, because a text is a lazy (or economical) mechanism which lives on the added value of meaning which the receiver introduces. ... In the second place, because as it goes from a didactic to an aesthetic function, a text wishes to leave the initiative of interpretation to the reader, although normally wishing to be interpreted with a wide enough univocal margin. A text wants someone to help it work." (10). It seems as if it is common both to the desire of the analyst and the need of the student to ask about these absences or blank spaces, fill in the blanks which translate the film's "unconscious", and bring classic texts recognised

as having a symbolic value up to date. At an extreme, they set up a "conversation" between teacher and pupil which symbolically sets the teaching protocol as a staging or a model of fictional creation.

We must say, however, that this process of piece by piece scrutiny of a film is not free from excess. It is not only the petulance which tends to accompany the analyst in the creative practice as self-creation, dissecting the film as if it were on an editing table and fattening up a text at will as if it were an interminable palimpsest. The retinue of reference which the analyst invokes as an authority on speech is also arguable. Too often, borrowing from discipline its narrative elocutio becomes "a string of multi-purpose heuristic models which perforate films" (11) to lead to opaque virtuoso exercises which seem to be rather tangled cobwebs. We must not forget the use and abuse made of what is supposed to be the author's intention to the point of turning some classic films into symptoms of schizoid personalities (an inheritance of transverse appropriation of the Lacan school of psychoanalysis) if not into real psychiatric protocols. Fortunately, there are more theorists who more often put the finger on the restricted scheme of analysis (semiologic, narrative, psychoanalytic) based on which all communication is reduced to a purely textual phenomenon (12). The search for meaning, the real asset of text analysis, sets up the specific use which an audience makes of the film-object, but conditioned by not considering it as a simple machine to receive codes and the film as a luxury item whose enunciation is only revealed to those who know how to discover it, using the adequate analytical tools. Parallel to its condition as text, film is an object which produces emotions, and theory, freed from its pontificating trend, cannot ignore central issues such as pleasure/d displeasure as emotional charges on which some specific individuals as spectators live, feel and think.

6. It is exactly the new historiography of film fact which palliates both the ontological construction of a theory so inattentive to the act of reception and to notoriously insufficient traditional and generalised history. Protected by the cover of the University, this new, basically anglo-saxon historiography (13), sets forth an anatomy of the fact of film as a social, economic, and symbolic practice. Scattered and opening out towards the origins, not as a simple naïve historical rewinding of the cinema show but rather a re-reading of some areas of cinema which open new reference frameworks (industrial, stylistic, symbolic) for the study of the film fact. A history of forms and mentalities in which economic processes appear perfectly intertwined with cultural processes. Feeding on wide backward looks where interpreting pictures is not discarded but subordinated to a strict examination of themes, production factors, stylistic norms. And the institutional conditions for the historical subjectivity of these texts. Understanding the economy of a film as a social discourse allows considering the film audience as a true user with an ability to move between affection and intellection.

Finally, a history of the mentalities which cinema has put into play during a century of existence. Not a nostalgic exercise of cinema history, but the study of inner flow, of a great moral meta-account whose shadow extends into the present. And whose absence determines a state of orphanage (assumed or unconscious) for the present-day spectator brought up with so many domestic images and, in the end, an irrefutable proof of the

crumbling of symbolism which we are suffering from in the more and more often mediatised field of culture.

END NOTES

1 Christian Metz *Lenguaje y cine* Ed. Planeta. Barcelona. 1973. p.113

2 The unique coincidence between the birth of cinema (1895) and the appearance of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) is rarely taken into account. Also, when cinema was struggling to establish an articulation of its language, a general classification of images and signs was already known, by the American logician Charles S. Peirce. As to philosophy, we must remark that if we except the tangential contributions from epistemology, its marriage to cinema does not take place till the 80's, at the behest of Gilles Deleuze. A whole chain of confluence which cinema ignores or does not take advantage of.

3 The unique coincidence between the birth of cinema (1895) and the appearance of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) is rarely taken into account. Also, when cinema was struggling to establish an articulation of its language, a general classification of images and signs was already known, by the American logician Charles S. Pierce. As to philosophy, we must remark that if we except the tangential contributions from epistemology, its marriage to cinema does not take place till the 80's, at the behest of Gilles Deleuze. A whole chain of confluence which cinema ignores or does not take advantage of.

4 Theoretic summing-up cannot ignore how fundamental theoretic contributions from Eisenstein and the Soviet avant-garde are for defining cinema itself, and also the formalist tradition of Rudolf Arnheim and Bela Balasz in the 30's, the first halting steps in semiotisation of cinema by Jan Mukarowsky and the members of the Prague circle and the 50's film school.

5 Christain Metz, op. cit. p.28.

6 As a simple gloss, we record the contributions of Metz (especially all that refers to the idea of code), the work of Roland Barthes on textuality proposed after 1970 in his book *S/Z*, the opposition between history and narrative which feeds Emile Benveniste's linguistic exposition, and Gerard Genette's suggestions on problems in information, focalising and narrative voice in texts. Obviously, theoretic contributions to semanalysis and linguistic studies are varied. We only recored here some of the first internal lines, quite conscious of being coarsely reductionist.

7 A *compte rendu* of the art of representation in cultural formations (not yet in existence) would lead us to ask from what aesthetic presuppositions is a Renaissance portrait or Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* more "artistic" than Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, or to gauge the importance of Rossellini at the same level as Matisse (as already

noted by the French critic and producer Jacques Rivette in a splendid article on *Viaggio a Italia* 1953), to set only some canonical examples.

8 On these considerations, see Raymond Bellour, *Analyse du film*, Ed. Albatros. Col. Ca Cinema. Paris. 1980. Besides any other critical judgement, it is imperative to consider this book as one of the most elegant and systematic contributions to text analysis. Bellour's comprehensive and strict work on Hitchcock's different films is not easily surpassed even today.

9 Jacques Aumont/Michel Marie. *Análisis del film*. Ed. Paidós Comunicación. Barcelona. 1990. p.19.

10 Umberto Eco. *Lector in Fabula*. Ed. Lumen. Barcelona. 1981. p.76. A large part of contributions of European narratology is based on this interpretative cooperation in text.

11 David Bordwell. *El significado del film: Inferencia y retórica en la interpretación cinematográfica*. Ed. Paidós. Barcelona. 1995.

12 This is the case of otherwise interesting contributions by the Italians Gianfranco Bettetini (*La conversación audiovisual*. Ed. Cátedra. 1986.) and Francesco Casetti (*El film y su espectador*. Ed. Cátedra. Madrid. 1989.) referring to the enunciative strategies of film and the consideration of the audience as textual partner.

13 David Bordwell/Janet Staiger/Kristin Thompson's book *The Classical Hollywood Cinema. Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. Columbia University Press. New York. 1985, is an example in this sense. Together with the Bordwell group we must note the great historiographic contributions from Tom Gunning, Charles Musser, Douglas Gomery, Dana Polan, or Richard Koszarski, as well as analysis from European investigators such as Noel Burch, André Gaudreault, or Marc Vernet. A useful summing-up of the new cinema historiography can be found in Michel Lagny, *De l'histoire du cinema*. Ed. Colin. Paris. 1992.

WORKS CONSULTED

R.C. Allen/Douglas Gomery (1995). Teoría y práctica de la historia del cine. Ed. Paidós. Barcelona.

Aumont, Jacques (1989). Estética del cine, (various authors). Ed. Paidós. Barcelona; (1990). Análisis del film. (written with Michel Marie). Ed. Paidós. Barcelona.

Bellour, Raymond (1980). Analyse du film. Ed. Albatros. Col. Ca Cinema. Paris.

Bordwell, David (1985). Narration in the Fiction Film. University of Wisconsin Press; (1985). The Classical Hollywood Cinema. Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960. (written with Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson). New York. Columbia University

Press; (1995). El significado del film: Inferencia y retórica en la interpretación cinematográfica. Ed. Paidós. Barcelona.

Caseti, Francesco (1989) El film y su espectador. Ed. Cátedra. Madrid.

Eco, Umberto (1981) Lector in Fabula. Ed. Lumen. Barcelona.

Lagny, Michel (1992). De l'histoire du cinéma. Ed. Colin. Paris.

Metz, Christian (1973). Lenguaje y cine. Ed. Planeta. Barcelona; (1979). Psicoanálisis y cine. Gustavo Gili ed. Barcelona.

