

# VERNACULAR MODERNISM AND HOLLYWOOD REFLEXIVITY: A HISTORIOGRAPHIC REVIEW OF 1930s CINEMA

ANA RODRÍGUEZ GRANELL

## INTRODUCTION

---

If we reconsider the history of film prior to the modernism established in the 1960s on the basis of the “new cinema” movements, we can identify some reflexive or meta-discursive approaches articulated precisely around an awareness of the mystique that Hollywood mass culture represented worldwide. This article revisits some of these reflexive practices in relation to the classical cinema institution that had become a dominant force in the 1930s. Rather than focusing merely on how Hollywood embraced avant-garde practices, I propose an inverse view, considering how the cinematic and political avant-garde, or other filmmaking practices with a similar production model and formal approach, were influenced by Hollywood mass culture.

The cases considered in this article belong to avant-garde contexts that were presumably intended to challenge Hollywood’s hegemonic mod-

el. However, as will be shown here, an eager acceptance of certain categories of classical cinema can be identified in Lev Kuleshov’s *The Great Consoler* (Velikiy uteshitel, 1933), NYKino’s *Pie in the Sky* (1935), and Jean Renoir’s *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* (Le crime de Monsieur Lange, 1936), and traces of Hollywood can even be found lurking in the background of many leftist avant-garde works of the 1930s. The destabilisation of the categories of classical or modern and certain pre-suppositions of avant-garde cinema invites us to consider some of the debates raised by the New Film History (Gunning, 1989; Hansen, 1999), as they call into question the teleological history of cinema as a quest for narrative transparency. As Carlos Losilla suggested in his wistful history of film, I will attempt to destabilise these two inventions, classicism and modernism, and to identify possible cracks in the established history (Losilla, 2012).

---

**THE HEGEMONIC IDEA OF CINEMATIC MODERNISM, OR OF THE BROADER SCOPE OF A POLITICAL AND REFLEXIVE MODERNISM BASED ON A MATERIALIST CINEMA THAT BEGAN IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY, HAS CONSTITUTED A CATEGORY OF ANALYSIS FOR ALL THOSE FILMMAKING PRACTICES THAT USED SELF-REFLECTION TO PROPOSE ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF ORGANISATION, AESTHETIC CODES OR PRODUCTION MODELS THAT PUSHED THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CINEMATIC INSTITUTION OR, AT LEAST, DESTABILISED THE NOTION OF CLASSICISM BASED ON NARRATIVE TRANSPARENCY**

---

My starting point for this analysis is based on two considerations. The first is the intimate relationship between the avant-garde, modernism and mass culture and their capacity for social transformation. This presumes a rejection of the idea of a modernism associated with highbrow culture, assuming instead a vernacular modernism that allows us to consider cultural subversions beyond exclusively avant-garde practices. The term “vernacular modernism” was coined by Miriam Hansen in a prolific text about the role of classical American cinema in the modern re-configuration of ways of seeing, regimes of visualisation and ways of consuming and experiencing modernism, since the idea of “vernacular” (as opposed to “popular”) “combines the dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, with connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity, and translatability” (Hansen, 1999: 60). And the second consideration is the idea of modernism, as it is often used in the English-speaking world, as metadiscursive reflection or self-awareness, which has been one of the cat-

egories used to point out the features of those cinematographic approaches that departed from the Hollywood narrative model and challenged the transparency and centrality of the classical subject (Monterde, 1995: 30, 43).

The first part of this article will therefore present and explore some useful parameters for this theoretical framework: what the New Film History is and what it has meant for the hegemonic history of cinema and what considerations we can take from it to analyse binaries like classicism vs. modernism or Hollywood vs. avant-garde from the perspective it offers. Then in the second part of the article, based on the cases chosen and their placement in the cultural, social and political context that shapes them, I will explore a range of practices that call these dialectics into question and consider how such cases might form part of a non-teleological history of cinema.

**CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE NEW FILM HISTORY TO THE IDEA OF CINEMATIC MODERNISM**

---

Understanding the phenomenon of filmmaking as an intersection where the symbolic codes that constitute it are shaped by ideological and historical questions, some authors contributing to film theory in the 1970s pointed to the emergence of a self-awareness, of filmmaking as a socially and ideologically determined intersection, as the starting point of modernism in film. The hegemonic idea of cinematic modernism, or of the broader scope of a political and reflexive modernism based on a materialist cinema that began in the mid-twentieth century, has constituted a category of analysis for all those filmmaking practices that used self-reflection to propose alternative methods of organisation, aesthetic codes or production models that pushed the boundaries of the cinematic institution or, at least, destabilised the notion of classicism based on narrative transparency.

Prior to the modernism legitimised by film history, in certain filmmaking practices of the 1930s, the use of meta-narratives and, therefore, of an awareness of language as a non-neutral tool, gave rise to forms of openness in the filmic image, projecting a desire for hypertextuality or even hypermediation that destabilised the idea of the centrality and transparency of the classical narrative and opened up spaces for criticism both of society and of the institutional condition of cultural production itself.

In this sense, for this research I have adopted the idea of a genealogical approach to cinematic modernism, understood as a counter-history or a history of practices and contexts not normally included in the canonical narratives (Parikka, 2011: 54).

The materialist turn that took place in historical studies in the 1980s involved the abandonment of textual analysis in favour of studying the contexts, uses, experiences and agency of the machines and devices associated with mass media. This turn was promoted by departments of cultural studies, readings of Foucault, and the rise of New Historicism in literary studies, together with the influence of studies of cultural history (Parikka, 2011: 65).

One of the foundational texts in this epistemological turn of New Film History was Tom Gunning's study of the aesthetics of astonishment (1989; 1990). The significance of Gunning's text lies in its rejection of the view of a primitive cinema that assumed a child-like audience still tied to realist forms of film and startled by the sight of an approaching train on the screen (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* [L'arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat], Lumière Brothers, 1895). Gunning foregrounded the modern era's changes in visibility based on a series of shocking, intense, technologically-mediated experiences; new experiences of time and space, like the place occupied by an audience keen for new attractions and impressions offered by the scientific, technological and industrial devel-

opments of the late nineteenth century (Gunning 1989: 126). Such considerations challenged teleological history's notion of the consecration of narrative cinema that began between 1914 and 1917 and was fully realized in the 1930s thanks to sound technology. The historiographical tradition thus assumed a maturing of the cinematic narrative whereby its modern character was a "primitive" and circumstantial space related merely to the fact that filmmaking was a consequence of modern scientific advances. This primitivism nurtured the idea of a modernism that emerged fully in the late 1950s. Based on the awareness of language, the principle of the auteur and mise-en-scene, modernism was established in the hegemonic context of an institutional tradition forged during thirty years of classicism. In this way, the progressive linearity of history was founded on the myth of an infantile, gullible audience that naively accepted the new filmic image. This supported the theory of a process of naturalisation of cinematic language and the centrality of the spectator in classical cinema (Gunning 1989: 129). On this point, the New Film History posited analysing the persistence of primitive forms of the cinema of attractions in contemporary audiovisual culture, so that the origins of cinema become the paradigm for studying contemporary practices, with classical cinema viewed as a parenthesis (Zielinski, 1999) or a parallel history (Russell, 2000), rather than the natural state of all audiovisual language.

---

**UNDERSTANDING MODERNISM AS A GREAT EPISTEMOLOGICAL RUPTURE, MIRIAM HANSEN (1999) PROPOSED A RECONSIDERATION OF CINEMA'S ROLE IN THE FORMATION AND EXPERIMENTATION OF THIS MODERN CULTURE ITSELF AND ITS CONNECTIONS TO POLITICAL HISTORY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAPITALISM**

---

Understanding modernism as a great epistemological rupture, Miriam Hansen (1999), to whom Gunning dedicated *An Aesthetic of Astonishment* (1989), proposed a reconsideration of cinema's role in the formation and experimentation of this modern culture itself and its connections to political history and the development of capitalism. Hansen thus re-framed film theory and history by blurring the boundaries between categories such as classicism and modernism. She assessed the possibility of modernism in cinema, understanding it as its own ontological entity and not as the assimilation of artistic practices foreign to the field of filmmaking (artistic modernism, for example). One of Hansen's most interesting propositions in this regard was her idea of vernacular modernism (1999), referring to filmmaking practices that propose new ways of organising visual and sensory perception, a new relationship to "things", new forms of affectivity, temporality and reflexivity in the ever-changing fabric of everyday life, sociability and leisure (Hansen 1999: 60). It is thus clear that the role of modernism extends beyond its differential relationship with the category of classical narrativity developed in traditional theory, or to all-embracing visions of classicism in studies like those of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985). Hansen called attention to new considerations of modernism: for example, she pointed out the modernist epitome of the Soviet avant-garde as the mediation of Hollywood classicism, or that film noir and pulp fiction propose aesthetics, modes of production and relationships with gender and race that break with classicism.

The aim here is to add to these reconsiderations of the history of these cinematic modernisms by analysing two early phenomena: the dialogue with the Hollywood iconography or mystique present in other film traditions of the 1930s outside the classical institution, and its reflexive potential. For this last point I will consider an aspect of the concept of modernism as self-reflexive awareness (Foucault, 2007: 57) to identify

the kinds of critiques of classical transparency or awareness that can be found within the institution itself in the period prior to World War II.

## **THE MEDIATION OF HOLLYWOOD IN THE PRODUCTS OF THE SOVIET AVANT-GARDE**

The period of the NEP (New Economic Policy, 1921-1928) and the first years of Stalin's five-year plan provide an interesting case for the analysis of these questions challenging linear history. From 1925 we begin to see the full emergence of avant-garde practices resulting from the reflexive assimilation of elements of classical cinema.

The development of revolutionary practices by certain sectors organised under the umbrella of the productivist avant-garde and through institutions like the Proletkult (which implemented an independent program of its own during this period) was governed by the pursuit of a self-constituted proletarian culture (Mally, 2004). This was a new, revolutionary culture that swept aside the bourgeois culture of nineteenth-century realism and European impressionism still present in many cultural policy initiatives and in certain circles associated with the socialist realism that would become the prevailing standard in Stalin's five-year plans. Nevertheless, within the context of theoretical debate and experimentation of those years, many of its avant-garde practices could be viewed as a form of criticism-in-dialogue rather than a rejection (as the avant-garde movements of the 1920s have been classified to differentiate them from the modern cinema of the 1960s) of the Hollywood tradition, in the same way that music hall and the circus were assimilated into popular culture. Hansen (1999: 60) pointed to this phenomenon as the mediation of Hollywood classicism in the formation of avant-garde discourse.

These groups thus rejected the industry's hierarchical organisational forms with their structure as self-organised collectives. In fact, he condi-

tions were such as to allow for the emergence of a whole range of different experiences that escaped the control of the progressive nationalisation of the film industry, albeit with financially unstable structures (Kepley, 1991). This allowed these small, productive experimental groups to be tolerated within or on the margins of a burgeoning industrial system, with studios and distributors supported by private initiatives like Mezhrapbom.

On a macro-industrial level, the Soviet cultural industry model reflected an admiration for the effectiveness of Fordist workplace organisation methods and a respect for the coordinated planning of the Hollywood studios. A process of standardisation ended up constraining the appearance of potential formal innovations and contributed

---

**ON A MACRO-INDUSTRIAL LEVEL,  
THE SOVIET CULTURAL INDUSTRY  
MODEL REFLECTED AN ADMIRATION  
FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FORDIST  
WORKPLACE ORGANISATION METHODS  
AND A RESPECT FOR THE COORDINATED  
PLANNING OF THE HOLLYWOOD  
STUDIOS**

---

to the full consolidation of the state monopoly with the subsequent appearance of Sovkino in 1929, with the aim of increasing mass production (Thompson, 1991: 76).

During the NEP, there emerged a series of small groups and studios organised under one or more individuals with considerable freedom in artistic production, such as the Kino Glaz group formed by Dziga Vertov, his wife and his brother Mikhail Kaufman. The cases of Sergei M. Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, the FEKS, or the melodramas of Fridrikh Ermler should not be understood as an outright rejection of Taylorist principles and the Hollywood tradition, but instead as a critical dialectic or a

reflexive assimilation of them. Although in these groups there was a resistance to the organised control of artistic work, the aesthetic of the machine or of assembly-line work, efficiency and modern rationalism are also present in the narrative and sensory experimentation of their films. As will be shown below, this tied in with a position of self-awareness in relation to the cinematic language established.

The significance of criticism, with a strong Nietzschean component—and its importance as a critique of language and of the idea of truth—had considerable significance thanks to Alexander Bogdanov's leadership at Moscow's Proletkult, which was home to many of the productivists and formalists of the Soviet avant-garde. One of the groups that also subscribed to this paradigm was Víctor Shklovsky's linguistic experimentation circle, OPOYAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language). As a matter of fact, this circle focused its work on the de-automation of language through the practice of defamiliarisation, an idea that would be transferred to the field of cinema through the FEKS and Lev Kuleshov in his collaborations with Shklovsky.

The practice of defamiliarisation was inspired by a passage from Tolstoy's diaries: "I was cleaning a room and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn't remember whether I had dusted it or not" (quoted in Shklovsky, 1970: 55). Thus Shklovsky explains: "and art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception" (Shklovsky 1970: 60).

It is worth bearing in mind here that the criticism of linguistic naturalisation in filmmaking, in line with the proletarian culture of the Proletkult, integrates the legacy of popular culture.

This approach can be observed in the early case of *Glumov's Diary* (1923), directed by Eisenstein for the Proletkult, which implements Tretiakov's theory of the "theatre of attractions", recovering the anti-bourgeois movement and stripping it of its highbrow patina, integrating every modern visual experience and framework, including the circus, music hall, jazz, and the comedies of Charles Chaplin (Gerould, 1974: 72).

Similarly, the FEKS' "Eccentric Manifesto" (1922) declares:

To all our appeal out of the maze of the Intellect to embrace Modernity! [...] We consider art to be a tireless battering ram shattering the high walls of habit and dogma. [...] Danger, audacity, violence, pursuit, revolution, gold, blood, laxative pills, Charlie Chaplin, catastrophes on land, sea and in the air, fat cigars, prima donnas of the operettas, adventures of all sorts, skating rinks, tap shoes, horses, wrestling, torch singers, somersaults on bicycles [...] (Kozintsev et al, 1988: 44-48).

Set apart from the European avant-garde, the FEKS saw in the experience of American cinema, French serials, detective fiction and Hollywood comedy a way of re-articulating modern cinema without adopting naturalist realism. This awareness of Hollywood's institutionalised language as false naturalism or an imitation of life in the realist theatrical tradition was already present in texts of the early 1920s, such as critic and editor Vladimir Blyum's "Against the Theatre of Fools" (1924). Blyum's text referred to the capitalist appropriation of cinematic realism, noting that "cinema had to be approached as if this *amazing device* had only just been invented today. We have, fingers crossed, just begun the history of cinema all over again as mass entertainment" (Blyum, 1994: 119).

This idea of eccentric cinema appears in films like *The Adventures of Oktyabrina* (Pokhozhdeniya Oktyabriny, Grigor Kozintsev and Leo Trauberg, 1924), produced by the nationalised studio Sevzapkino, or films that played with genres, like

*Mishki versus Yudenich* (Mishki protiv Yudenicha, 1925), *The Devil's Wheel* (Chyortovo koleso, 1926) and *Moryak s Avrory* [Sailor from the Aurora] (1926), also produced by Sevzapkino.

## LEV KULESHOV AND THE CRITIQUE OF TRANSPARENCY THROUGH THE HOLLYWOOD MYSTIQUE

---

Another of the filmmakers close to Shklovsky's circle was Lev Kuleshov, who expressed this organic connection with the modern era from a critical standpoint, not only in formal terms but also (and this is practically a one-off case in Soviet cinema) in terms of the social status of the artist himself in Stalinist Russia (Mariniello, 1998: 240).

As with the aforementioned filmmakers, Kuleshov's position with regard to popular culture is treated as a mediating element. His frequently criticised "Americanitis" is palpable in films like *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (Neobychainye priklyucheniya mistera Vesta v strane bolshevikov, 1924), a gangster film in which the adoption of the genre becomes the means of engaging in a critique of the cultural industry itself and its ability to generate myths. Juxtaposing different media such as the press and literary stereotypes, Kuleshov plays with reality and fiction in this and other films to create a space for critiquing certain political restrictions and the lack of media neutrality (Gillespie, 2000: 29).

Kuleshov suggested an idea that would be further developed in by theorists of the '68 movement, that editing was determined by ideology. In one of his writings in 1935, he noted: "Even if these events are printed without annotations, without editorial explanations or commentaries, [...] the political world-view of the editor of the newspaper still determines the way a paper is edited" (Kuleshov, 1974: 183).

Kuleshov's position distanced him from Vertov, who sought in the materiality of the image

not an ideological transformation, but the truth. It was thus a cultural praxis that was closer to meta-reflexive criticism.

In *Dura Lex/Po zakonu* (Lev Kulechov, 1926), a film based on Jack London's short story "The Unexpected", in what seems like a process of distancing (it is worth noting that Shklovsky participated in this film), the editing serves to expose the intention of cinematic transparency: it is not reality but spectacle, with no attempt to offer a realistic image (Ferro, 1988: 30). This meta-reflexive component in a commercial or entertainment context would culminate in the film *The Great Consoler*. Completely constrained by the censorship restrictions of the Stalinist period that imposed socialist realism as a dogma in 1932, Soviet montage cinema was dismissed in favour of narrative transparency.

*The Great Consoler* is a Western set in Texas in 1899, told from the point of view of Bill Porter, a Soviet prisoner who enjoys the favours of the prison warden thanks to his talent for writing short stories, which he signs with the pseudonym O. Henry. Kuleshov uses "film within a film" sequences, and the diegetic shift from Soviet prison to Western is effectuated by returning to the methods of silent films with its shots set to music, over-acted performances, 1920s-style makeup and intertitles or voiceovers narrating the action. However, Kuleshov uses the intertitle technique for more than meta-cinematic moments, such as at the end of the film when we return to a scene of the Soviet reality and a sarcastic epilogue presents us with a happy ending.

This two-way defamiliarisation could be considered an early example of institutional criticism, where the ideological nature of cultural production under a repressive regime is exposed to the spectator, who is led subtly through the fantasy/reality binary that marks the whole film, and the shifts between literary, cinematic and journalistic elements. The hyper-mediation and reflexivity are accentuated by the appearance of a character

external to the diegesis of the prison, embodied by a reader named Dulcinea (a nod by Kuleshov to quixotic fantasy). The question raised by this disorienting of the spectator is concerned precisely with the identification process itself. Is there some truth in the short stories that O. Henry publishes from prison? Is Dulcinea merely Bill Porter's daydream about his imaginary life as a writer? Bill's devastating final words in the film, reflecting on the melodramatic nature of Dulcinea as a character ("too banal for good art"), may prompt us to classify *The Great Consoler* as an unequivocal criticism of the political circumstances of the Soviet Union in the 1930s and an appraisal of genre cinema that nevertheless offers reflections on the institution of art itself: "I will never be able write what I know, what should be written. Although others may arrive someday ... Will others arrive?"

## **A HOLLYWOOD MODERNISM? REFLEXIVITY AND AVANT-GARDE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE HOLLYWOOD**

---

The debate surrounding realism also emerged in the United States of the 1930s, under the government of Franklin D. Roosevelt, although in this case it was understood as a modern tool for governance and social cohesion, imitating, in part, the Griersonian documentary project. The political program of the New Deal itself was presented as a modern technocratic program stripped of ideology in view of the threat of Bolshevism and in opposition to the effusive political aestheticisation of European fascism. Thus, the proliferation of new forms of publishing and photography was classified under headings like "the true nature of the facts" or "documentary proof" (Stott, 1986; Böger, 2001; Rabinowitz, 1994). Both Roosevelt's political communications and his cultural policies were articulated in terms of transparency, affectivity and humanism (Stott, 1986: 11) so that, with the purpose of dodging the conservative anti-communist offensive, they might invoke the paradoxical idea

of propaganda against propaganda, relying on artists, sociologists and the promotion of a neutral *documentary expression*. Outside the government institutions promoting documentarism, other militant structures emerged in response to the strong wave of social mobilisation. In 1930, after the experience of the Worker's Camera League and in reaction to the hegemonic status of the Hollywood studios' filmmaking monopoly, the Worker's Film and Photo League was created, affiliated with the Communist Party (Nichols, 1972: 108-115). By 1931, the creation of a stronger cultural front led by the hardline of the CPUSA was in the making. Members of the League thus began to generate processes of alignment with the party through the creation of the Worker's Cultural Federation under the political leadership of the Comintern's International Union of Revolutionary Writers and Artists, which promoted newsreels and direct films stripped of all artistic or experimental traces and abandoning all genres of fiction. This rejection of both avant-garde innovations and Hollywood narrative transparency would lead to the splitting off of a group opposed to such impositions. In 1934, the self-managed NYKino group was founded, a group which, despite continuing to identify themselves with militant documentary production, established a cinematic manifesto that embraced the institutional cinematic tradition but challenged the industry's working methods. In this regard, it is worth mentioning *Pie in the Sky* (R. Steiner, 1935), one of its first film experiments, which was already a long way from the proletarian newsreel. *Pie in the Sky* was made in collaboration with Group Theatre and intended as a satire of religious dogmatism. This film represents what is, in my view, one of the most innovative experiments in the leftist filmography produced on the margins of the industry. In a comedy short, an unusual genre for this type of picture, this fiction piece adheres to the codes of popular cinema to present, with a narrative structure and rhythmic use of editing, an illusory recreation of

---

**BOTH ROOSEVELT'S POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS AND HIS CULTURAL POLICIES WERE ARTICULATED IN TERMS OF TRANSPARENCY, AFFECTIVITY AND HUMANISM (STOTT, 1986: II) SO THAT, WITH THE PURPOSE OF DODGING THE CONSERVATIVE ANTI-COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE, THEY MIGHT INVOKE THE PARADOXICAL IDEA OF PROPAGANDA AGAINST PROPAGANDA, RELYING ON ARTISTS, SOCIOLOGISTS AND THE PROMOTION OF A NEUTRAL DOCUMENTARY EXPRESSION**

---

two beggars wandering around a dump after having missed out on a meal at the local soup kitchen. The two characters entertain themselves by creating an image of Mae West out of an old mannequin and taking a ride in a broken-down car body, until their imaginary game turns into the real plot of the film, blurring the boundary between dream and reality. The comedy genre, the codes of silent film and the illusory condition of the story itself suggest that the film is challenging the crude debate over the usual forms of left-wing propaganda based on the transparent nature of direct cinema or the idea of realistic documentary, while at the same time, the social protest story is articulated at an ironic distance from cinematographic symbolism. Here we can again speak of the NYKino's aesthetic approach as a self-conscious process that adopts the popular tradition of the comedy genre. Despite a freshness that gives the film the quality of a mainstream production, it was harshly criticised and marginalised by the key actors of proletarian cinema, who believed that the political function of cinema could be rendered explicit only in a "fact film" or documentary.

Meanwhile, Hollywood itself was not immune to the stylistic innovations and aesthetic approaches of the moment. The political inter-



ests of groups that were conscious of the progressive struggle included topics such as the Spanish Civil War, in films like *Blockade* (William Dieterle, 1938), and the rise of Nazism, in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (Anatole Litvak, 1939), which, although a fiction film, included montage sequences with extradiegetic material such as maps of the German expansion, newspaper headlines, documentary footage and a news-reel-style voiceover to provide information on the social context. Curiously, the inclusion of avant-garde elements in this case was not based subverting the narrative transparency but precisely the opposite.

Therefore, in analysing Hollywood's permea-

---

**IN ANALYSING HOLLYWOOD'S PERMEABILITY TO CERTAIN MODERNIST INNOVATIONS, IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO HIGHLIGHT THE USES AND RELATIONSHIPS OF THESE INNOVATIONS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF SO-CALLED CLASSICISM**

---

bility to certain modernist innovations, it would be interesting to highlight the uses and relationships of these innovations within the framework of so-called classicism. In a sense quite different from *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, there were also cases where members of the avant-garde documentary circle of the 1930s infiltrated the Hollywood studio industry. *One Third of a Nation* (Dudley Murphy, 1939) is one of the few studio productions involving a member of the militant group Frontier Films, Irving Lerner. Lerner's contact with the industry began when Frontier invited Fritz Lang to direct the production company's most ambitious project, *Pay Day*, whose script had been proposed by the novelists George Sklar and Vera Caspary and rewritten by Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand. Fritz Lang had landed

in Hollywood after coming into contact with the American left among the Hollywood New Yorkers. Unfortunately, Lang had signed a two-year contract with MGM and had to turn down Frontier's invitation (Giovacchini, 2001: 80-81). However, Lang offered Lerner the chance to work as an assistant on *You and Me* (1938), a strange romantic comedy inspired by Brechtian theatre. Ralph Steiner and Elia Kazan would also attempt collaborations with Lang, but without success. For his part, Irving Lerner (although he left Los Angeles for reasons unrelated to filmmaking) would also work on the semi-independent drama *One Third of a Nation* (the title refers to a line from Roosevelt's second inaugural speech). Shot in Paramount studios in Astoria, New York, and receiving commercial distribution, *One Third of a Nation* had been financed by Harold Orlob and directed by Dudley Murphy, a former colleague of Man Ray and Fernand Léger in the European avant-garde movement. It was a film adaptation of Arthur Arent's play of the same name, with a young Sidney Lumet acting alongside Sylvia Sidney, financed by the Federal Theatre Project. It was precisely the influence of this cultural hive of activity on the east coast that led to the idea of New York City as the alternative film production centre to the Californian hub (Koszarski, 2008).

Eastern Service Studios, Inc. (ESSI) intended *One Third of a Nation* to be one of the two most radical political films made in collaboration with Hollywood studios (Koszarski, 2008: 472). The other would be *Back Door to Heaven* (William K. Howard, 1939), a drama about the social circumstances that lead a young man to prison. In this case, the restrictions of the Hays Code and the budget cutbacks imposed by the banks that invested capital in the project would effectively repress the political excesses. However, it is worth mentioning the effort of both productions to portray the misery of life in the gutter. For some, Murphy's avant-garde influence would produce a "juxtaposition of 'kitchen sink' realism and ex-

pressionist stylization" (Koszarski, 2008: 472), resulting in a film articulated around a romantic melodrama based on the inter-class relationship between a rich boy and an underprivileged girl, a pretext that justified the bleak portrait offered of New York City's slums.

What is interesting from a historiographic point of view, and what I would like to explore here, is the work of the so-called Hollywood New Yorkers, intellectuals who moved from New York City, and the Hollywood Europeans, progressive filmmakers and refugees from Nazi Germany, who would be responsible for creating a kind of Hollywood modernism, in the sense that Hansen gives to the term (Giovacchini, 2001: 2). Historian Saverio Giovacchini explored the concept of modernism by extrapolating it based on both the avant-garde sense that had been given to the term in Europe and the concept of modernism as defined by Clement Greenberg and the strategies of the New York Intellectuals, who paradoxically made non-realist artistic practices in the United States the flagship for confronting the Soviet bloc during the Cold War.

The idea of a Hollywood modernism, according to some historians apart from Hansen and Gunning, such as Lary May or Dana Polan, serves to contend with the monolithic image of the film industry spread by critical theory. According to Giovacchini, the 1930s constituted a battleground that gave rise to a reconfiguration of the aesthetic practice of cinematic classicism with the aim of democratising avant-garde elitism through the popular culture of mainstream mass media. This revisionist view of the Golden Age of Hollywood could also be considered a historiographic trend whose aim is to balance the usual perspective on the wave of Europeans and intellectuals who migrated to Los Angeles for purely economic reasons—the so-called "Hecht Interpretation" (Giovacchini, 2001: 15-16)—and to propose an influence running in the opposite direction to the one analysed here, from

the avant-garde to the mystique of Hollywood, or Hollywood as the Mecca of the modern or of popular modernism, broadening the sense of reflexive modernism.

## **VERNACULAR MODERNISM AND THE POPULAR FRONT IN 1930S FRANCE**

---

In the French context we can find another example of self-reflexive approach in the militant period of the French Popular Front (1936-1938). Following the avant-garde debate over pure or impressionist cinema and the consequent intellectualisation of the cinematic medium, the 1930s saw the emergence of the vital importance of the social role of cinema. The general trend in aesthetic debates would also revolve around the question of a return to a proletarian realism thanks to theorists like Léon Moussinac. In view of the formation of the Popular Front as a political and cultural movement from 1934 onwards, it has often been suggested that state management of culture was not a characteristic feature of the French intellectual context, which was comprised of a heterogeneous mix of anarchists, communists and independents sympathetic to the left like Jean Renoir (Buchsbau, 1986). As was the case elsewhere, many French intellectuals would be drawn to the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, where Henri Barbusse's leadership would seek to implement Soviet policies. A trend towards a realist model based on direct sound and outdoor filming can be observed at this time, in films such as Marcel Pagnol's *Ways of Love* (Jofroi, 1933) and *Angele* (Angèle, 1934) or Jean Renoir's *Toni* (1934), whose premise was transparency as an ethical proposal (Quintana, 1998: 115) or a cinema of daily life, like documentary truth (Guillaume-Grimaud, 1986: 54).

Filmmaking initiatives associated with the left independently distanced themselves from party leaders, although this did not prevent production units from being considered in exclusive-

ly propagandistic terms. The project most commonly cited as an exponent of these filmmaking structures on the edges of the industry during the Popular Front years was the Cine-Liberté audiovisual cooperative, founded the day after the 1936 election victory as a material expression of the Popular Front's cooperative aims. Given the constraints of the conventional industry, these structures made it permissible, even as a political objective, to pursue the "freedom" defended in specialist publications through the existence of a kind of auteurship. According to historian Pascal Ory (1975), Cine-Liberté would be the only association to achieve the synthesis of artistic creation and political action. In 1936, the cooperative produced *The Crime of Monsieur Lange*, with Jean Renoir directing. This fiction film tells the story of the owner of a publishing house, Paul Batala, who fakes his own death to evade his company's bankruptcy. His workers take over the business by forming a cooperative that will prove very successful, at which time the deserter Batala will reappear. Meanwhile, Amedée Lange is a self-absorbed artist who works for the company writing a Western series of stories called *Arizona Jim*. Pressured by Batala to incorporate more advertising into the publications, Lange ends up transforming his stories with ridiculous results.

It could be suggested that like Bill Porter in *The Great Consoler*, Amedée Lange, who ends up murdering the capitalist Batala in order to protect the achievements of the workers in the cooperative, is also a nod to the social responsibility of the artist, and the element that introduces the mystique of popular culture. It thus self-reflexively underscored the status of workers in the cultural sector and the film industry as agents capable of transforming the industry's workplace relations. In Renoir's work, this self-referential issue—present in several of his other films, like *The Sad Sack* (*Tire au flanc*, 1928) and *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu*, 1939)—related to the political role of the artist introduces another element of vernacular

modernism. While Amedée embodies the process towards awareness as the story's positive hero, the conditions of production that actually governed all artistic activity are comically suggested through the anti-elitist figure of the pulp writer. This identifies the film as a reinterpretation and appropriation of hallmarks of popular culture by militant cinema as a way of overcoming the exclusiveness of the avant-garde movements and playing with the camera to open up the pro-filmic space through sequence shots and unexpected cuts, thereby also opening up the codes of classical transparency through the modernism of cinematic language. In this regard, Charles Musser stresses that Renoir's 1930s films

reveal a radical egalitarianism in their portrayal of painters (including a hobbyist), street musicians, singers, actors, a symphony conductor and a writer of pulp literature. Renoir had deep affection for popular culture and quotidian creativity whether the untutored chanteuse singing to her lover or the person who never consciously conceived of his/her creativity as artistic (Musser, 1994: 5).

## CONCLUSIONS

---

According to the challenge posed to the boundaries of historiographic categories of cinema by Gunning and Hansen or other authors mentioned above such as Giovacchini, it can be concluded that the presence of reflexive elements in some early cases prior to cinematic modernism as established in classical theory was made possible by processes of self-awareness in relation to the Hollywood institution itself. Thus, the dialogue with the icons of popular culture—in this case, the iconography of classical cinema—and, therefore, the modern sense of self-awareness, facilitates a filmic reflection on elements of the classical framework such as the transparency and centrality of the subject. These features appear in much earlier works than those associated with neorealism, as a clear precursor to modernism. We have seen how

the assimilation of certain Hollywood iconographies, and their potential vernacular modernism, influenced not only avant-garde production in the USSR but other contexts that have received very little attention in studies of the tensions between the avant-garde and the institution in the field of filmmaking (the American avant-garde and the French context). These relationships suggest that although Hollywood was able to assimilate certain innovations originating in the most experimental circles during the peak period of classicism without destabilising the idea of transparency (*Confessions of a Nazi Spy*), these elements also became canonical outside the institution (in the case of the American institutional or militant documentary). The analysis presented here thus reveals that abstract concepts such as avant-garde, modernism or classicism are mutable and marked by a multitude of variables related to each specific context, both geographical and chronological. This fact calls into question any linear history aimed at the consecration of such categories. ■

## REFERENCES

- Blyum, V. (1994). Against the Theatre of Fools - For Cinema. In R. Taylor and I. Christie (eds), *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents* (pp. 116-120). London: Routledge.
- Böger, A. (2001). *People's Lives, Public Images: The New Deal Documentary Aesthetic*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.
- Bordwell, D., Staiger, J., Thompson, K. (1997). *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. London: Routledge.
- Branston, G. (2000). *Cinema and Cultural Modernity*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Buchsbaum, J. (1986). Toward Victory: Left Film in France, 1930-35. *Cinema Journal*, 25(3), 22-52.
- Blyum, V. (1994). Against the Theatre of Fools - For Cinema. In R. Taylor and I. Christie (eds), *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents* (pp. 116-120). London: Routledge.
- Ferro, M. (1988). *Cinema and History*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Sobre la Ilustración*. Madrid: Tecnos.
- Gerould, D. (1974). Eisenstein's Wiseman. *The Drama Review: TDR*, 18(1), 71-76.
- Gillespie, D. C. (2000). *Early Soviet Cinema: Innovation, Ideology and Propaganda*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Giovacchini, S. (2001). *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of New Deal*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Guillaume-Grimaud, G. (1986). *Le Cinéma du Front Populaire*. Paris: L'herminier.
- Gunning, T. (1989). An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In) Credulous Spectator. *Art and Text*, 34, 31-45.
- (1990). The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde. In T. Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema. Space, Frame, Narrative* (pp. 56-62). London: BFI Publishing.
- Hansen, M. B. (1999). The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism. *Modernism/Modernity*, 6 (2), 59-77.
- Kepley, V. (1991). The Origins of Soviet Cinema: A Study in Industry Development. In R. Taylor & I. Christie (eds.), *Inside the Film Factory. New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema* (pp. 61-80). London: Routledge.
- Koszarski, R. (2008). *Hollywood on the Hudson: Film and Television in New York from Griffith to Sarnoff*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Kozintsev, M. et al (1988). El Manifiesto Excéntrico. In *El cine soviético de todos los tiempos, 1924-1986* (pp. 44-48). Valencia: Filmoteca de la Generalitat Valenciana.
- Kuleshov, L. (1974). The Principles of Montage (From the Practice of Film Direction). In R. Levaco (ed.), *Kuleshov on Film. Writings of Lev Kuleshov* (pp. 181-183). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Losilla, C. (2012). *La invención de la modernidad o cómo acabar de una vez por todas con la historia del cine*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Mally, L. (2004). *Culture of the Future. The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mariniello, S. (1998.) Cine y sociedad en los años de oro del cine soviético. In M. Palacio & J. Pérez Perucha (co-

- ords.), *Europa y Asia (1918-1930)* (pp. 211-258). Madrid: Cátedra (Collection Historia general del cine, Vol. 5).
- Monterde, J. E. (1995). Los orígenes del cine moderno. In J. E. Monterde & E. Rimbau (coords.), *Europa y Asia (1945-1959)* (pp. 15-45). Madrid: Cátedra (Collection Historia general del cine, Vol. 9).
- Musser, C. (1994). Social Roles/Political Responsibilities: Jean Renoir's Search for Artistic Integrity, 1928-1939. *Filmhistoria*, 4(1), 3-30.
- Nichols, B. (1972). The American Photo League. *Screen*, 13(4), 108-115.
- Ory, P. (1975). De Cine-Liberte a *La Marseillaise*: espoirs et limites d'un cinema libre, 1936-38. *Le Mouvement social*, 91, 153-175.
- Parikka, J. (2011). Operative Media Archaeology: Wolfgang Ernst's Materialist Media Diagrammatics. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28(5), 52-74.
- Quintana, A. (1998). *Jean Renoir*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Rabinowitz, P. (1994). *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*. London: Verso.
- Russell, C. (2000). L'historiographie parallaxiale et la flâneuse: le cinema pré- et post-classique. *Cinemas*, 10 (2-3), 151-168.
- Shklovsky, V. (1970). El arte como artificio (1917). In T. Todorov (ed.), *Teoría de la literatura de los formalistas rusos* (pp. 55-70). México: Siglo XXI.
- Stott, W. (1986). *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Thompson, K. (1991). Primeras alternativas al modo de producción de Hollywood: implicaciones para las vanguardias europeas. *Archivos de la Filmoteca*, 10, 76-91. Retrieved from <http://www.archivosdelafilmoteca.com/index.php/archivos>
- Zielinski, S. (1999). *Audiovisions*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

## **VERNACULAR MODERNISM AND HOLLYWOOD REFLEXIVITY: A HISTORIOGRAPHIC REVIEW OF 1930S CINEMA**

### **Abstract**

For several decades, the approaches of the New Film History have been concerned with redefining the history of cinema in non-teleological terms. In doing so, they have destabilised categories that consecrate certain stylistic models such as the notions of modernism and classicism. In this article, I propose a review of some filmmaking practices and works produced outside the Hollywood industry and the framework of classicism – *The Great Consoler* (Velikiy uteshitel, Lev Kuleshov, 1933), *Pie in the Sky* (NYKino, 1935) and *The Crime of Mr. Lange* (Le crime de Monsieur Lange, Jean Renoir, 1936) – to explore how practices associated with the avant-garde movements appropriate certain classical features and at the same time, precisely because of that appropriation, constitute self-reflexive approaches. These practices of dislocation of the classical in certain films made outside and even within Hollywood during the 1930s prompt historiographical and conceptual reconsiderations of notions such as modernism that will be explored here.

### **Key words**

Modernity; Reflexivity; Vernacular Modernism; New Film History; Avant-garde; Classicism.

### **Author**

Ana Rodríguez Granell (b. Tarragona, 1981) holds a PhD in Art History from Universidad de Barcelona (2012). She is a lecturer in the Art Studies and Humanities Department at Univeritat Oberta de Catalunya in the areas of art history and film history, and since 2013 she has been the executive director of the indexed journal *Artnodes*. Since 2008, she has participated in several funded projects and research groups related to film studies and digital culture that have given rise to various publications in scientific journals and anthologies. In 2016, she edited the book *Identitats en conflicte in the cinema català* (Editorial UOC). Contact: arodriguezgrane@uoc.edu.

### **Article reference**

Rodríguez Granell, A. (2019). Vernacular Modernism and Reflexivity before Hollywood. A Historiographic Review about the Cinema of the Thirties. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 27, 215-228.

## **MODERNISMO VERNACULAR Y REFLEXIVIDAD ANTE HOLLYWOOD. UNA REVISIÓN HISTORIOGRÁFICA SOBRE EL CINE DE LOS AÑOS TREINTA**

### **Resumen**

Desde hace algunas décadas, las aproximaciones de la New Film History se han ocupado de redefinir la Historia del cine de forma no teleológica. De este modo, han desestabilizado categorías de consagración de ciertos modelos estilísticos, como puede ser la idea de modernidad o clasicismo. En este artículo vamos a proponer una revisión de algunas cinematografías y films periféricos a Hollywood o al marco del clasicismo – *El gran consolador* (Velikiy uteshitel, Lev Kulechov, 1933), *Pie in the Sky* (NYKino, 1935) y *El crimen del Sr. Lange* (Le crime de Monsieur Lange, Jean Renoir, 1936)– para comprobar cómo, desde prácticas cercanas al vanguardismo, se dan procesos de asimilación de ciertos iconos clásicos, a la par que, precisamente por esa apropiación, asistimos a propuestas autorreflexivas. Estas prácticas de *des-ubicación* de lo clásico en algunos films fuera e incluso dentro de Hollywood durante los años treinta proponen reconsideraciones historiográficas y conceptuales en torno a nociones como modernidad, que exploraremos aquí.

### **Palabras clave**

Modernidad; reflexividad; modernismo vernacular; New Film History; vanguardia; clasicismo.

### **Autora**

Ana Rodríguez Granell (Tarragona, 1981) es doctora en Historia del arte por la Universidad de Barcelona (2012). Es profesora en los Estudios de Arte y Humanidades de la Univeritat Oberta de Catalunya en el área de Historia del arte e Historia del Cine y desde 2013 es directora ejecutiva de la revista indexada *Artnodes*. Desde 2008 ha participado en varios proyectos financiados y grupos de investigación sobre estudios fílmicos y cultura digital de los que se han derivado diversas publicaciones en revistas científicas y obras colectivas. En 2016 editó el libro *Identitats en conflicte en el cinema català* (Editorial UOC). Contacto: arodriguezgrane@uoc.edu.

### **Referencia de este artículo**

Rodríguez Granell, A. (2019). Modernismo vernacular y reflexividad ante Hollywood. Una revisión historiográfica sobre el cine de los años treinta. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 27, 215-228.

Edita / Published by



Licencia / License



ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB [www.revistaatalante.com](http://www.revistaatalante.com) MAIL [info@revistaatalante.com](mailto:info@revistaatalante.com)