

Film Appreciation
Prof. Aysha Iqbal
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture - 15
Formalism in Cinema

(Refer Slide Time: 00:16)



Good morning, welcome back again to our course Film Appreciation. Now here is a link to a wonderful movie a short film that I would like you to watch; please watch the film and then we will continue the lecture.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:42)

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cs2RZewMuAg>

Errata: Two Men and a Wardrobe

So, here is the link, the film is Two Men and a Wardrobe a short film by Roman Polanski; please watch the film and then will continue with our talk. Welcome back, so I am sure that you have watched the film, and let me just give you brief quick over view or the description of the film what the film is all about now Roman Polanski is Two Men and a Wardrobe is a short film about two men who emerged from the sea carrying an enormous wardrobe. Now this is very surreal, you remember we have been talking about, surrealism existing in a dream like state the blurring of boundaries between the real and the dream like state the fictitious. Now, this is extremely surreal in the sense that logically, practically it is not possible for men to emerge from a sea and then return to the sea as they do in the end of the movie.

So, this is not logically rationally possible, but we will leave it, because the film exists in as a sort of a metaphor. So, this is surreal activity and we know and you have already by now I am sure that you have already observed that wherever these two men go that they are treated as unwelcome guest. So, they are chased away from a tramp, restroom and a hotel. You know that wherever they enter they see people who are quite alike you know the hotel people who are in the hotel or in a rest room; they are quite similar as far as class is concerned as far as races are concerned and also they are alike. These men are they also get in a fight with some local hooligans that beaten up very badly. By the end the men return to the sea with their wardrobe.

And this is almost 18 or 19 minutes long movie. And it is what is about what you thinks it is about, the film is about one interpretation could be about the otherness, you know

there are people like us and then there people out there, who are not like us, so that otherness could be anything, it could be by way of your race, your language, the color of your skin, your religion, your nationality. So, all these things make you the other. So, whenever you are among very homogeneous group, and if you are not like them then you are treated as the other.

So, here Roman Polanski who himself was a polish Jew, he was also a victim of the holocaust during the Nazi regime. So, this part of you knows this angle of being the other must have been ingrained his psyche from the beginning. Now the entire array of response is that arise from otherness, you know curiosity, antipathy, aggression about these people it comes from there that these people are just not accepted wherever they go. Polanski himself lived a life in exile and this fact is also fore grounded in a film of course, lot of other things also happened to Roman Polanski later on in his life and he is still sort of an exiled person, but at the time of this movie too he was some ones other. So otherness in Roman Polanski you know persist. So, this is a movie I showed you when is to understand the concept of otherness.

Also the fact that it emerges from the tradition of the theater of the absurd, you know the theater of the absurd people like Samuel Beckett who wrote the play waiting for Godot, then we also had Eugene Ionesco who wrote his absurd display the Rhinoceros, and also the Bald Soprano. Then Harold Pinter who comes after these two great plays writes and he has written String of Place which comes under which fall in the tradition of the absurdist including a play called the Dumbwaiter. So, again we are talking about a pair of men - two men in caught in a situation and is now they know situation as such we the film maker or the play writer, they do not tell us the situation, we have to understand. So, we have as you know as the students of film appreciation, as a cine enthusiast, we have to develop that kind of sensitivity to understand that what the film maker is trying to show.

So, the Two Men and a Wardrobe is not just a comedy; although it appears like a you know one of those Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton kind of you know very physical comedy, where things are happening, but it is a very dark film as the film progresses, you must have noted it becomes darker and darker in its stone and that is Polanski world that is the absurdist world with that violence, aggression, exclusion they cannot be justified and they just they are just there. So, you cannot escape them and whenever there is a clash between the majority and the minority, these things will happen, and we live in an

absurdist world, which is quite meaningless. So, there is no sense in providing too much of an explanation for things, this kind of violence and aggression. So, this is what I wanted you to be sensitive to.

We also have an aspect called formalism. And now I will talk about formalism, and how cinema you know there is a form, there is certain style of film making, formalism is a theory that arose in the nineteen twenties and thirties. So, I will be talking about how formalism, and how the cinema, how cinema is started and in the influence of formalism, the formalist theory that how important the form of a film is rather than the content. So, we are not looking at the supremacy of style over content, but how a film is rather structured we are looking at that. So, do not get confused between the two terms. The formalism which began as a literary theory in the nineteen twenties, and thirties flourished during the forties and the fifties and is still in evidence today it was initiated by a group of Russian critics, so this is important we have to remember that is a Russian theory initiated by Russians and then some of the earlier practitioners of formalism were people like Sergei Eisenstein and Pudovkin the Russian film makers.

So, these critics wanted to develop a formal way to produce an objective method of analyzing literature. Formalists have generally suggested that everyday language which serves simply to communicate information is still unimaginative. As with many theories formalism developed as a means of studying literary text. It was an early attempt to theories and draw attention to the way narratives are constructed. Russian formalism refers primarily to the work of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language founded in 1916 in Saint Petersburg. Key theorists are Vladimir Propp, Boris Eichenbaum, Viktor Cheklovsky and Yuri Tynyanov. And secondarily to the Moscow linguistic circle founded in nineteen fourteen by Roman Jakobson. Roman Jakobson described literature as organized violence committed on ordinary speech. The literature constitutes a deviation from average speech that intensifies invigorates and estranges the mundane patterns; language patterns because Roman Jakobson was basically a linguist.

So, by estrangement what do you mean by it? This device serves literature by forcing the reader to think about what might have been and ordinary piece of writing about a common life experience in a more thought full way. In the routines of everyday speech perceptions of and responses to reality becomes stale blunted and as the formalist would say automatized scientific approach focused on literariness which can be found on the level of form rather than content. So, it is that kind of theory formalism also understands

art as a device of defamiliarization where the idea is that text is a sum total of its devices form and content that is Fabula that is a story ensues, which is the style the content - the way a story is told. So, while Fabulize the raw material or the basic stories Syuzhe is the transformation of the Fabula into a narrative discourse of aesthetic form syuzhe is the information and organization of material presented on the screen.

For example, you think of usual suspects by Brian Singer it is a mystery, it is a highest film, but is the syuzhe the way it is told, the unpredictability of narrative which is important. So, formalism is concerned with the meaningfulness of the artistic devices. So, again let me draw your attention to the fact that we are not talking about supremacy of his style over content, we are still talking about the way narrative is told by employing certain artistic devices. The core of the text is not the theme, but its device is so believe the formalist. The emphasis on the actual processes of the presentation of a literary text is known as laying bare its own devices something that is used by film makers also; they lay bare the cinematic devices. In very experimental in Avaganth films, you must have watched that they start showing the certain kinds of technical devices on screen.

I can give you example for example, Godard breathless ((Refer Time: 13:26)). So, there the two protagonist - the lead characters they go around switching on lamps. Now those lamps are not your ordinary lamps that we employ in a room, those lamps are like almost like a studio lights and send there, by doing that what is Godard trying to do laying bare the devices. He is showing you on his screen; see a bout de souffle was a very brush in kind of a film. The director tried to break certain traditions of the fourth wall. So, that is what is important. So, a laying bare the devices according to Shklovsky the most essential literary thing that novel can achieve is to draw attention to itself and the literary devices it employs.

A concern with form and not the topic of the film such as editing or narrative etcetera and it is also used in science to explain aesthetics, where art is a system of science and conventions. Formalism is also concerned with recognizing differences and similarities across text in terms of aesthetics, narrative, cinematography, mine on scene etcetera. Some of the film that I would ask you to watch; one is the Player 1992 film by Robert Altman, and then also 2001. As a Space Odyssey which is must watch for all cinema enthusiast, which is the 1968 film directed by Stanley Kubrick and you were aware of course, of the famous jump cut, the cut between you know the when the van was a still a permit and then going on in a space shift. So, I jump of literarily unit two thousand or

perhaps even more years, so that is what we mean by drawing attention to the stylistic device, artistic devices.

So, continuing with our formalism and if theories one of the key theories of this movement is Vladimir Propp who wrote morphology of the folk tale in 1928 Propp categorizes characters the idea is that how these characters appear in folk tales and according to the word that the expression that Propp gives us is the seven sphere of action. For Propp you have the characters can be categorized into as villain, helper, donor the magician, female in distress, dispatcher hero and a false hero. Propp is also associated to something called functions where each function represents the different stage in the protagonist journey. Now you can apply this feature very well to Christopher Nolan's the Dark Knight you know you have the villain who is the villain, the Joker. You have the helper, you have the magician as played by the Morgan Freeman characters you know who creates certain things for Batman, which are just not possible for any other man to create. You have a damsel in distress that is Batman's lady love. Then you have the false hero as played by the District Attorney, who later on becomes almost villain, so the two faces. You have the sheriff who is the donor and then of course, you have Batman who is your hero. So, you can I am not this is a template that several films employ even in a popular film like the Lord of the Rings, if you apply these ideas I am very sure that such kind of a template would avoid.

Viktor Shklovsky is another great contribution is an essay called art as technique which was published in nineteen twenties, where nineteen seventeen where he argued that non poetic forms cause a perceptions of familiar objects to become dulled out of habit, but poetic forms make us see ordinary things in a different way to make the familiar strange or ostraneniye is the word he uses. According to Shklovsky literature has the ability to make you make you make us see the world new to make that which has become familiar because we have been over exposed to it. So, familiar world is becoming is strange. Now we were talking about some of the features of formalism and editing is one key feature of formalism, in fact, it is very important. So, what does an editor do editors work is to shape many hours of raw film into a few hours of finished film. It gives form to the movie and the final picture depends on how it is edited.

Some of the famous collaborations, director-editor collaboration have been between Francis Ford Coppola and Walter Murch especially Eclipse know then think Martin Scorsese and his frequent or constant collaborator Thelma Schoonmaker. Then you have

Steven Spielberg and his collaborator Michael Kahn Woody Allen has often worked with Suzanne Moss, and then you have Quentin Tarantino and Sally Mink. So, these directors and editors combination often comes together and they create magic. Now what are the types of editing, so some of the, you know where they highly recognize kinds of editing techniques include film splicing, linear editing which is an original early method for editing films. Then you have digital and non-linear style of editing films here editors often use software and then you have a live editing as in live television coverage.

Some of the features of continuity and discontinuity editing are like in continuity editing which is more like old classic Hollywood style of film or narrative style of film making. So, it is very analytic it is invisible it does not call attention to itself and shots are subordinated to unity of the narrative they imply passive spectator is spectator is expected to believe and observe whatever he or she is shown. Now discontinuity editing is a more modernist and avant garde experimental in nature. It foregrounds short transition, and calls attention to itself. It implies that the spectator is active and actively participates on what is happening and can create his or her own meaning into that. Editing also until something called establishing shot or re establishing shot where the opening shot is created to establish the local the location and distance between characters.

So, now just to recap that features of formalism as a theory, now the key idea the concerned with form over content at the expense of subject. The topic of a film per the early formalist was unimportant instead the focus was on how the film was physically put together. Again we are talking what editing and its narrative structure. They were also interested in finding a scientific way of understanding and writing about an artistic form, and also to undertake formal analysis across disparate text as a way of assessing quality by recognizing similarities and differences in aesthetic narratives cinematography etcetera.

Montage is another important editing technique and is a kind of editing technique that refers to a series of images and sounds that form a visual pattern these patterns may, may not be very clear logical or sequential. Now soviet montage is one of the earliest and one of the most respected editing techniques. So, this kind of editing technique came out of the soviet experimental cinema of the 1920s, well someone called Lev Kuleshov referring to him quite often in this course. He first thought of it, but it is primarily associated with the works of Sergei Eisenstein. Now Kuleshov the significant

contribution was the idea that each shot is like a building block, and it derives its meaning from its context that is the shorts placed around it. Kuleshov felt that just a position of shorts must be inherent in all film science, shorts therefore acquire by meaning when just a pose with what comes before and after.

So to put this principle into practice Kuleshov of just a pose several shots from different pieces of films which he went turned into a sequence. So, experimenting with the Kuleshov effect, he took the footage of the face of actor and implies shorts of a woman lying in a coffin a little girl with the teddy bear, and a bowl of soup. The audience reacted positively believing that the actor had acted or performed very well. However, in reality they actors face never changed expression only, he is still he is a still shot was used. So, same face, but giving, but just a pose with different situation. So, this is called the Kuleshov effect.

So, Kuleshov in other words pioneered what is known as creative geography by splicing together bits of action from various sources, various films, taken from different spaces countries and regions. Along the same time you also had a great called ((Refer Time: 25:27)) who made his film man with a movie camera in 1929 and Dziga Vertov combined radical politics with innovative at aesthetics. He is credited with what is today known as the city cinema and the man with the movie camera is all about Moscow film and what happens you know at a certain period in Moscow. And the camera just rolls on he captures the city mostly Moscow, but may be saint Petersburg also occasionally and its buses and trams and it is a sport and leisure facilities its working conditions, citizens, law order, industries everything is captured. So, in other words, Dziga Vertov man with the movie camera is a celebration of modern city film aesthetics and political ideals. So, this is something that you should be attentive too. And then we also another great Russian formalist was Sergei Eisenstein who directed film such as a Strike Battle Ship Potemkin and October, he too articulated the theories of montage and type is used which means using non professionals with clear physical trades in representative roles.

You should remember that we have been talking about Italian new realism cinema also, new Italian new realist cinema also where same idea was used that of type using non professionals with clear physical trades and order to enact a role. According to Sergei Eisenstein at montages is assembling from separate images that provide a partial representation, which are in combination and just a position montage at the ideological level suggests conflict and collision. It is particularly used when an editor or film maker

would want to convey a great deal into a brief segment. Eisenstein believed that collision and conflict must be inherent to all visual signs and film; just a posing shots and make them collide or conflict and create meaning and produce meaning through this act.

(Refer Slide Time: 28:16)



I like to draw your attention to this particular montage. Now it is scene from Battle Ship Potemkin and it is famously called Odessa steps massacre. So, please watch this sequence in order to understand montage. So, now that you have watched the scene while explaining this famous scene Eisenstein postulated that formulation and investigation of the phenomenon of cinema as forms of conflict heal the first possibility of devising homogeneous system of visual dramaturgy, and this kind of visual sequence is capable of you know drawing attention to general and particular cases of a film. Some of the classic montage sequences include of course, you have seen Battle Ship Potemkin, citizen kin, the dining table sequence, the god father, the baptism massacre sequence, rocky the training sequence, stallion rocky and then cinema parody. So, the kissing montage in cinema parody. So, formalist insists on a systematic approach to cinematography. Before the Russian formalist Hollywood favored continuity editing which is also preferred by our own film makers Indian film maker because it is not intrusive in nature.

And generally, we use eye line matching shots and 180 degree shots establishing and re establishing shots, but formalism and discontinuity editing, they encouraged viewers to think along a lines of close analysis of films, think about the form organization and a structure of films. And they also most importantly encouraged us to read multiple

meanings in a movie. Thereby leading to the postulation that the work in the work has to be understood in its isolation and not on the basis of the writer's or the film maker's intention, so more importantly how the work is done that is important. And we will talk about other theories in detail later in our next classes.

Thank you very much.