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Theory Response

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The Yin and Yang: Bazin and Kuleshov

Since the invention of cinema in the 19th century, there has been much debate about whether cinema can be classified as art. At the heart of the debate has been the question of whether or not the unique characteristics that distinguish film from other art forms exist. To be sure, with the gradual development of film technology, the popularization of a wide variety of film theories, and the enthusiasm of countless film lovers, film was gradually recognized as a new, independent art form in the early to mid-20th century. Nevertheless, today, a century later, there is still no standard answer to the question of the core characteristic of film that makes it different from other art forms. Whether one relies on the sheer uniqueness of video as a new medium or is a devotee of montage, there is nothing wrong with that. If we compare the development path of film theory to a vast galaxy, Andrew Bazin and Lev Kuleshov's theories are certainly among the most shining stars. Even though they have different colors of light, they do not need to be put on polar opposite sides. It is more like yin and yang in a Tai Chi diagram, distinct yet complementary.

Before the discussion, some brief introductory remarks are in order: Andrew Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," which holds that cinema should serve as a particular

kind of reproduction of real life, intended to reveal the real world, cites cinema's unique ability to preserve the continuity and integrity of time as an essential characteristic that distinguishes it from other art forms (Bazin 313). In his eyes, the camera should be neutral and objective, similar to the subjective perspective of a documentarian. Therefore, movies should be as close to reality as possible, with minimal human intervention to achieve the purpose of capturing life. The metaphor of "mummy" explains Bazin's journey and his vision of cinema in detail. His slightly religious text is a romantic link between the ancient and modern desire for authentic records.

Similarly, Lev Kuleshov's artistic theory of Montage in "The Principles of Montage" also has a hint of romance, as Kuleshov defines montage as a technical and artistic device that creates new meanings through the editing of different shots. He also argues that montage "is inextricably linked to the artist's worldview and his ideological purpose"(Kuleshov 137). Artists use a montage to stimulate the viewer's mental activity, autonomously constructing connections between fragments in their minds to derive unique insights. Kuleshov also describes a series of experiments using montage in narrative, the principles of which have profoundly impacted the development of film art and theory worldwide.

The pioneering ideas of both Bazin and Kuleshov have both advantages and disadvantages today in the 21st century. The greatest strength of Bazin's ideas lies in his emphasis on the unique theoretical characteristics of cinema as an art form, which effectively explains the ability of cinema, as a reproduction of reality, to reveal the essence of things and preserve the continuity and integrity of time. This viewpoint effectively enhanced the historical status of film as an emerging art form in the social context of the time. At the same time, although Bazin's theory emphasizes non-interventionism, it does not entirely oppose the artificiality of cinema. However, it pays more attention to the transparency of cinema as an art

with substantial documentary property. Bazin's so-called 'true realism' also emphasizes 'the need to give significant expression to the world both concretely and its essence' (Bazin 312). True realism is distinct from 'pseudorealism' which is likely to refer to earlier trick films that fooled the audience with 'illusory appearances'. Even though the popularity of those trick films was understandable given the constraints of the period, Bazin's spot-on critique was self-evident and advanced.

However, Bazin's limitations lie mainly in his obsession with the "mummy." What is meant here is an overemphasis on cinema's mechanical characteristic of preserving the continuity and integrity of time as the only feature that distinguishes it from other art forms. Undoubtedly, the preservation of temporal continuity and integrity is a giant leap forward for plastic arts. But what about theater arts, an art form that already has continuity and integrity? Is "preservation" the only quality left? To take an extreme example, if we were to record a theater performance in its entirety with a fixed camera and no editing whatsoever, would the product be closer to theater art or film art? We can certainly debate that it is a combination of the two. But is a movie without all the post-production (editing, special effects, sound, etc.) quite what we expect from the art of cinema? If we consider a videotape of a complete theater play as a movie, then who exactly should be considered the creator of this movie? The screenwriter of the play? Or is it the so-called "movie director" who sits behind the camera and does not intervene throughout? The lack of individualized expression and the suppression of experimental techniques will inevitably affect the upper limit of the development of cinematic art. To wit, the 'objectivity in time' cannot be the one and only characteristic of the cinema art form.

Similarly, Kuleshov's theory has both advantages and disadvantages. As a "Futurist" with the same strong personal style as Dziga Vertov, Kuleshov emphasized the central role of the art

of montage in filmmaking when he said, "Film montage, as the entire work of filmmaking" (Kuleshov 137). He encourages innovation and is impressive in his abundant spirit of exploration. However, from another perspective, the high degree of experimentation is like a double-edged sword. An Over-reliance on montage often makes it challenging to balance the complete narrative structure and delicate emotional expression of filmmaking. Moreover, if montage is taken as the core quality that distinguishes cinema from other arts, how do we distinguish between collage art and film artistry? As art forms that also emphasize deconstruction, selection, and combination, the marvelous chemical reaction between the various splices in a film and the blending of the different elements in a collage work both aim to create a higher dimension of meaning and aesthetics through the artistic integration of the relatively independent fragments. If there is only a difference between the two in terms of material and medium, it may seem unreasonable to consider montage a core characteristic of cinematic art. However, as Kuleshov mentions at the end of his article, instead of montage, the essence of a film is shaped by its content, which is influenced by the artist's ideological intent and the selected material of the film. Despite his claim that "In no case should one assume the entire matter of cinematography to be in montage." (Kuleshov 144) His sense of idealizing and idolizing montage and his writing give the reader a sense of logical detachment.

From the syllabus clip, the lecture *Cinematic Storytelling- The Heart vs. The Head: Paul Atkins at TEDx Maui* (Atkins, 2013) about influences of the emotional impact of moving images on our limbic system would be of interest to both Bazin and Kuleshov. From Bazin's point of view, Paul Atkins's talk on the subject of sharks, which are filmed by "non-professional actors" on location, is invaluable. Whether it is the shark's horrific mouth (3:04-3:20) or the shocking sight of a shark being brutally killed by humans (22:55-23:25), the camera retains its neutrality

while revealing the realities of the real world. On the other hand, from Kuleshov's point of view, the power of montage is evident in the emotional manipulation of the viewers by the patchwork and combination of different real-life clips as the topic of Atkins progresses. This can be seen in the different ways that the audience reacted to the footage. This lecture exemplifies how authentic images and montage, as two tools with different attributes, can be skillfully combined to implant a reproduction of reality from the author's perspective.

Another example of the equal weight of authentic images and montage is "*Venezia 70 Future Reloaded - Jia Zhang-Ke*." (Jia, 2013). The two-minute video has the power to transcend time by combining authentic images and montage techniques. Different levels of reality are repeated back and forth, especially in the last scene, which is naturally edited back to the modern timeline through the eyes of the actors in the black-and-white movie. The Kuleshov effect drives the audience's associations so that the lines in the black-and-white movie become the subtext between the hero and heroine at the end. (1:37-1:55) Jia Zhang ke's use of multiple real-life images not only leaves the audience with room for imagination but also sublimates the theme of artistic expression of the power of images. Such a combination of realistic movie footage and skillful montage should impress Bazin and Kuleshov at the same time.

In conclusion, Bazin's ontology of realism and Kuleshov's montage theory are innovative but incomplete. As the yin and yang, authentic images and montage should not be in a relationship where one side overrides the other, but rather should be balanced to combine the strengths of both to achieve the best results.

Works Cited

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