

Book Reviews

Subjectivity and *ostrannenie*

Key debates in European film studies

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Amsterdam University Press recently launched a book series titled *The Key Debates: Mutations and Appropriations in European Film Studies*. Directed by Ian Christie, Dominique Chateau, and Annie van den Oever, the series aims at focusing on the central issues animating the current theoretical debate within film studies (but with a special emphasis on its relation with digital media in general).

Ostrannenie: On 'Strangeness' and the Moving Image, the History, Reception, and Relevance of a Concept (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010) edited by Annie van den Oever, the first volume in the series, starts with a strong and intriguing thesis: 'Shklovsky's fundamental statements on *ostrannenie* (or "making strange") in art were first and foremost an urgently required and utterly relevant *theoretical* answer to the tremendous impact early cinema had on the early avant-garde movements in pre-revolutionary Russia' (p. 11). The emergence of optical technology and a new way of looking at the world made possible by moving images had an almost traumatic impact on the avant-garde arts. The concept of *ostrannenie*, born in the field of literature but quickly re-appropriated in a general theory of the arts, represents the theoretical correlate of a revolutionary time in the history of the 20th century. The aim of the volume, according to the editor, is to reactivate the subversive potential of this term, particularly regarding film and media studies, where it has been long underexposed; this may lead to detaching the history of the term from the re-reading of Russian Formalism that has characterised the century (for example, the circulation of the term in French structuralism through Jakobson). The first part of the volume (the first two sections) is thus devoted to a historical contextualisation of the term and the countless intellectual mediations involved in its history. Yuri Tsvian starts from the beginning in the first essay, where he retraces the 'gesture of revolution' in the defamiliarising act of rotation, of turning things upside down (revolution comes from the Latin *revolver*: to turn), as in the rotated street of Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Eye* (1924); this is a concept that also

characterised many other reflections of the time (Shklovsky, Levitan, Kandinsky, Rodchenko, and Eisenstein).

In van den Oever's chapter 'Ostranenie, "The Montage of Attractions" and Early Cinema's "Properly Irreducible Alien Quality"', which constitutes the theoretical core of Part I, she analyses the implications and context of Shklovsky's 'Art as Technique'. Her main argument is unequivocally clear and considers the structuralist recuperation of Shklovsky according to which 'Art as Technique' should be read as a treatise on art as *form*. In an avant-garde style of prose Shklovsky's opus should be read rather, according to van den Oever, as a revolutionary manifesto regarding the arts: 'art should be studied from the perspective of techniques and their perceptual impact, and not as a form to be interpreted' (p. 33). Even though van den Oever's reading sounds historically grounded we cannot help but note *en passant* that the term structuralism sometimes risks placing theoretical projects very different from each other on the same level, whose common denominator comes very close to a stereotype. In an endnote the author quotes Gerald L. Burns, who claims that

Russian Formalism is not Structuralism. Its method is historical research rather than the analytical construction of models. Structuralism raises itself on an opposition between system and history, structure and event; Russian Formalism defines itself not against history but against psychology. The difference between Formalism and Structuralism lies in the way the singular is preserved in the one but erased by the other. Structuralism is a method of subsuming thinking... (p. 207)¹

While such a portrait of the rhetorical opponent may at times look a bit crude if not utterly cruel (even though it may have a basis regarding Jakobson, it is hard to reduce Lacan's, Foucault's, or Althusser's structuralism to 'an analytical construction of models'), the main point of the argument is cogent and convincing. Shklovsky is interested in the possibilities opened up by a new artistic technique, its impact on perception, and the strong power it can have on audiences. Not dissimilar from preoccupations that would influence Eisenstein, looking at art from the point of view of technique will mean first and foremost to think about the conditions of perception beyond the moderation of the Kantian aesthetic. The anti-humanism of cinema is at this regard profoundly modern; the status of perception is not a given to which cinema has to adapt its own means, it is rather the potential of the optical technique to enhance visual perception and to set a new unit of measure for the perceiving body.

Consequential to such a sensibility is Part III which is dedicated to the cognitive and evolutionary-cognitive approaches within *ostrannenie*. Laurent Jullier

explores the dialectic between familiarisation and de-familiarisation at work in the perception psychology of visual images. The reason for this dialectic is obvious: in order to give a scientifically-grounded status to *ostrannenie* it is mandatory to have a solid grasp on what is perceived as familiar (which is practically the entire field of cognitive film studies). As it is stated by the author such a field would be better addressed in an interdisciplinary way given that it includes bodily, mental, cultural, and social dimensions. László Tarnay traces an ambitious lineage of the concept of *ostrannenie* in aesthetic and film theory from the Russian Formalists to the emergence of digital cinema. Barend van Heusden gives a fascinating commentary on Shklovsky's thought on *ostrannenie* and tests what aspects of his thinking are still relevant today in the current status of artistic cognitive studies. While Shklovsky's *ostrannenie* was caused by artistic techniques and their direct relation with the perceptual experience they generate in the public, structuralist *ostrannenie* was caused by a tension within the machine of the structure (which van Heusden, reducing structuralism to the work of Jakobson, understands as a mere production of meaning). Miklós Kiss concludes the section with an intervention on the relation between *ostrannenie* on a perceptive level and on the level of meaning-making.

The volume is completed with a series of four historical essays: Frank Kessler on the historical success of the term *ostrannenie* among every theoretical artistic discipline; Ian Christie, who gives an enlightening account of the specificity of the diffusion of Russian Formalism and Brechtianism in Britain; Dominique Chateau, who stresses the complications and misunderstandings of the interest in Russian Formalism by French Structuralism; and Emil Poppe, who engages in an interesting exercise of alternate history writing: why Christian Metz never discovered the richness of Russian Formalism (to which he would have probably felt very close). The final section is dedicated to dialogues with András Bálint Kovács on de-familiarising narratives and Laura Mulvey on the uncanny.

Subjectivity: Filmic Representation and the Spectator's Experience (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011) edited by Dominique Chateau tackles one of the most complex and theoretically-dense topics within the history of reflections on cinema; individual, subject, author, spectator, protagonist, and character could all be associated, more or less appropriately, with the semantic field of subjectivity. Generally, as different as they may be, all definitions of subjectivity agree on being at the opposing pole of the term 'objectivity' – a perspective that the editor of the volume calls 'oversimplified'. What then is the place of subjectivity in cinema, in its history, in the history of its ideas?

Chateau opens his penetrating introduction on the topic with a question that sets the theoretical tone of the book and that comes from Bazin's reflection regarding the presumed objectivity of cinema. According to Bazin cinema is based on

a mechanical reproduction of temporality that, from a purely technical point of view, is independent from the mediation of an artist. While traditional visual arts were directly crafted from the hands of an artist in the cinema we have a simple activation of a machine able to passively register the light stimuli passing through its lenses. Many film theorists based their thought on cinema on the possibility of such a passivity; other than Bazin himself these include Epstein, Deleuze, Rancière, et al. They all gave a specific importance to the ability of a mechanical means not to express the prerogative of subjectivity but rather to visualise what subjectivity would not have been able to see. In Deleuze this conviction is brought to a further level of awareness; his idea of cinema is precisely based on the possibility, given by the mechanical-passive camera, to extend vision beyond the boundaries of subjectivity (cinema is for him the collapse of subjectivity). Chateau seems to take a position against what he believes is an 'essentialist' definition of cinema of such a kind; cinema is rather 'a procession of production where man – that is, an identified subject, an author – is sometimes absent, sometimes present, and that the films where man is supposed to be present are no less cinematographic than others' (p. 11). It is a fact that subjectivity is part of the cinematographic art, which is enough to consider it a *legitimate* part without relying on prescriptive and essentialist definitions.

Even without stepping into the irresolvable philosophical quandaries regarding the term subjectivity (different philosophical traditions have completely different understandings of the term), the volume chooses to dwell deeply in the many nuances that define the network of relations between the representation of subjectivity within film, the representation of subjectivity *for* the spectator, the relation between the represented subjectivity and the spectator, the visibility of the subjectivity of the *author* in the filmic text, etc. In general, more than privileging the discussion on the cinematographic *dispositif* per se, the volume gives a specific emphasis on the study of film *as a text*; the underlying idea is that even the structural conditions of subjectivity always require mediation by film.

Is it true that 'film thinks' (p. 13)? Which kind of subjectivity can be ascribed to film itself? In Part I, From Mind to Film, from Film to Mind, the experiential nature of film is discussed at length from different point of views. In the first chapter José Moure discusses the work of Hugo Münsterberg, one of the first theorists of subjectivity in film. Münsterberg's argument is that there is an analogical relation between mental processes and cinematic processes. In the vein of early 20th century Bergsonian spiritualism the underlying alliance between the language of dreams, interiority, and the cinematographer is affirmed. This connection is far from being inconsequential; why is it that 'a medium which is apparently meant to reproduce concrete reality both externally and objective, has, from the start, been considered a privileged vehicle of subjectivity and interiority' (p. 24)? Moure

shows how Münsterberg developed a highly sophisticated spectator theory relying mainly on psychological resources; the specific devices of the cinematic medium recall at a profound level the mechanism of the mind. In an interesting reversal of empiricism it is not the spectator who looks at the film as an external object, it is rather the film which actualises and objectifies the processes of the mind. If it were not for the active participation of the mind conferring movement, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion to images, film would only be a dead series of empty shadows. In this account the pole of subjectivity – more than with the artistic choices of the filmmakers – lies in the act of perception of the spectator.

Gregory Currie's argument in the second chapter of the volume lies at the very opposite end of Münsterberg's conviction; according to Currie cinema is incapable of giving a satisfying account of a subjective experience of the world. His intervention seems to present the filmic variant of one of the most puzzling epistemological problems: the difference between the mediation in the representation of an object and the un-mediated object itself. The filmic redoubling of the problem would be as follows: it is possible to photographically present an object on screen, but what about the representation of the *experience* of that object? Contrary to Bergsonian spiritualism Currie's empiricism relies on a strong division between what happens on screen and what happens in the mind of the spectator. The representation of an experience on screen should never be confused with the direct experience of the spectator itself. What are depicted on the screen are nothing but objects (images) 'belonging to the world of things in space and time' (p. 42). The mediation of experience when it is represented through images and transposed to the screen ceases to be an experience and becomes an empirical object like any other. Currie's persuasive objectivism leaves room for subjectivity only when he mentions the different strategies that a film employs in order to co-opt the viewer in its own representational system; such a step is a fundamental ingredient for every artistic (and commercial) achievement.

Even though every film needs to contemplate the possible reaction from hypothetical spectators – and it thus has to include subjectivity in its own system of representation – it is true that from an epistemological point of view the implication of experiential subjectivity on screen is equal to zero. Currie is extremely convincing in his rigorous delimitation of the pertinence of artistic representations and epistemological implications; what risks to be left unquestioned is the epistemological status of the objectivity of the 'world of things in space and time', which delimits the threshold between objectivity and experience. How is it possible to be certain of the objective status of empirical images while excluding the possibility of subjective participation in them? Psychoanalysis or Hegelian-influenced epistemologies, for example, underline a primary and generative mediation implicated at the core of any objectivity. Psychoanalysis in

particular hypothesises that in the experience of vision the very consistency of the visual field depends on a primary repressed subjective element that cinema can possibly be able to resurface (like in the Lacanian theory of object *a*). It was out of the scope of Currie's contribution to deal with these issues but his elegant argument proves once again how a rigorous discussion on the epistemology implicated in the cinematic experience is all the more urgent.

Francesco Casetti addresses a methodological distinction between the traditional category of reception and the proper film *experience*. Contrary to semiotics and pragmatists, feminist film scholars, historical or ethnographic studies, which all in different ways link the act of perception to the linguistic dynamics of the film itself, Casetti takes a step back and focuses his interest in the process of constitution of vision as such. If within the theories of 20th century cinema was both an enhancement of the possibilities of vision (in a Deleuzian/Epsteinian fashion, beyond the boundaries of the human eye) and a subtraction from the world, in the 21st century cinema seems to have abandoned its own historical place. Through an overlapping between the crisis of its speculative status (i.e. the crisis of cinema as an idea, as a reflection on visibility) and the crisis of its apparatus (i.e. the declining centrality of the movie theater, the transition to digital media, etc.), Casetti re-proposes his famous discontinuous argument regarding the contemporary relocation of cinema into other media while focusing on the consequences that this process engenders on the nature of the film experience. Whether the subjective experience of the spectator will be integrated in the post-cinematic environment in a different qualitative way is a matter open to further analysis.

Part II of this book is devoted to the different ways subjectivity is represented within film. Through an enlightening commentary on Delmer Daves' *Dark Passage* (1947), Vivian Sobchack uses the Lacanian theory of object-gaze (though indirectly, through Slavoj Žižek's exemplification of the concept in the problem of the parallax) in order to circumscribe the element that marks the indiscernibility between the inside and outside of the picture, the subjective and the objective, the passive and the active, the self and the Other, first and third person. Céline Scemama, through an engaging analysis of Bresson's use of the voice, addresses the possibilities of a disconnection between sound and visual images; the text is detached from natural speech and receives a particular form of embodiment without being reduced to the function of a character. This use of the text 'permits the deepest and subtlest expression of an inner experience to take place without any identification on the spectator's part...[i]t is possible to be close to him, with him, but never in his place' (p. 117). In both of these chapters the term 'subjectivity' is understood in its more philosophically-appropriate sense, as irreducible to any human individuality. In both essays there is a symptomatic point within the filmic text that marks the crisis of the empirical ground that would supposedly organise

and mediate the relation between subject and object. This *third* indiscernible ground which jeopardises the dialectic between seer and seen gives the notion of subjectivity a more structural premise, closer to a crack within objectivity itself (i.e., what prevents objectivity to be fully objective) than to an experiential correlate of consciousness.

Part III dedicated to an epistemological discussion (in fact, largely present in the first section as well): Karl Sierek discusses a Bakhtin-influenced dialogical and polyphonic form of subjectivity; Jacinto Lageira analyses the role of the imaginary; and Chateau proposes a philosophical mediation in order to integrate a theory of subjectivity with a theory of film form. In Part VI, a final dialogue between Marina Gržinić, Maria Klonaris, and Katerina Thomadaki reflects on artistic practices where two or more subjectivities are at work and on the necessity to overcome an ontology of the double.

The final volume in this series is *Audiences: Defining and Researching Screen Entertainment Reception*, edited by Ian Christie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012). The Key Debates represents a welcome film studies publication, especially given the specific European connotation. The first two volumes covered in this review are a promising contribution to the current theoretical debate among film scholars in Europe and beyond.

Note

1. The endnote quoted by van den Oever comes from G.L. Burns' introduction in *Theory of Prose* by V. Shkolovsky, translated by B. Sher (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991 [orig. in 1925]).

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