Chapter 10
Para–Formalistic Discourse and Virtual Space in Film

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ABSTRACT

Cinema remains current and saleable by constantly revolutionising the mode of its distribution. Film Auteurs are affected by these changes, using the contemporary “tools of their trade” to their advantage. This chapter focuses on two Auteurs’ use of digital technologies. Jean Luc Godard, one of the most innovative filmmakers of the last fifty years is a recent convert to digital film, having denounced the medium previously. Mike Figgis has been an advocate of digital filmmaking until recently, when he has been more circumspect. These filmmakers employ techniques indebted to Sergei Eisenstein and Bertholt Brecht. The “active” variant of third text understandings applied represent a “para-formalistic discourse” where the audience is made aware of the film’s artifice, projecting the audience into an ontological virtual space where they are compelled to confront conditions around them. A tentative advocacy of the digital as an aid to enhancing this experience is here advanced.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses issues concerning the production and reception of digital films; the ability of the auteur to shape such films, and the impact of the films on their audience. A broad definition of new media exemplifies the spirit of such specific explorations into digital filmmaking, noting; ‘formal and technological experiments’ and ‘a complex set of interactions between new technologies and established media forms’ (Lister, et al., 2003, p. 10). Such a conceptualisation recognises the potential for innovation present in the digital medium but also continuity with the older analogue form. An effect of the proliferation of digital film technologies such as CGI and
state of the art 3D has been to create the illusion of virtual worlds. The virtual here is characterised as a simultaneous depiction of ‘real’ conditions (virtual as nearly), and a liminal bridging to alternate or meta-realities. This chapter argues that para-formalistic discourse, being aware of its own artifice, is a necessary corollary of the film industry; namely an antithetic, countercultural approach that must strive to superimpose itself over and above the existing status quo. In repeated usage, it conjures forth a multiplicity of possible ‘virtual worlds.’ Para-formalistic discourse is third text narrative that responds to ontological givens and attempts to subvert them; that summons commentary from non-film based mediums (e.g. theatre) in order to form a meta-critique; and is an expressly political manoeuvre, grounded in theory indebted to Marxism and existentialism.

BACKGROUND

The creation of virtual worlds in film has been a facet of cinema since its inception. As an enclosed virtual space, cinema necessarily removed the spectator-consumer from the external physical reality of the outside world. Filmmakers continue to exploit new technologies to maintain the mystique of this virtual space. Digital film is the latest of these innovations. This chapter focuses on two progressive directors who have had different initial responses to the digital, Jean Luc Godard (France, 1959-present) and Mike Figgis (UK, 1980-present). Their similarity in outlook and approach has eventually caused a convergence of sorts in their attitude to the digital via a circuitous route that takes in issues of cultural context, aesthetic preference, and political positioning. As exemplars, their work embodies continuity in film that has always grasped as presciently at the future as it has drawn selectively from the past.

A cursory analysis of Godard and Figgis’ approach to the digital suggests divergent paths. Godard expresses apparently negative comments about the digital in an interview of 2001, where he references a cautious approach to the potential manipulation of new technologies. Godard’s contention is this: “The so-called ‘digital’ medium is not a mere technical medium but a medium of thought. And when modern democracies turn technical thought into a separate domain, these modern democracies incline towards totalitarianism” (The Guardian, 10/10/2001). Nine years after this statement, Film Socialisme (2010) is Godard’s first fully digital work. As one of digital cinemas innovators, Figgis was one of its foremost advocates. Yet more recently he has stated, as evinced by icewaterpictures (2008): “Digital technology has just indicated the acceleration of the problem of cultural saturation…”

When Godard made Film Socialisme, it seemed to parallel the work of cultural theorist Lev Manovich (2003), whose book The Language of New Media was as a new advocate of the digital and appeared a few short years after Manovich’s (1998) own technophobic communique On Totalitarian Interactivity. As with Godard, the adjustment was not as stark as it first appears. Manovich’s realignment was based around the political and social potentiality of the new medium; this facet has become more apparent as innovations such as digital streaming have developed. Digital streaming can now be used not just to relay cultural events at geographic distance but also create the possibility of multiple political meetings from one, by streaming the speaker to other locations. It is difficult to chart Godard’s own change in judgement since there is scant evidence to suggest it was purely political. Perhaps more importantly to Godard the digital represented a total realisation of his own aesthetic.

The denial or delay of this realisation has its origin in allegiances in French Cinema dating back to the 1940s. Godard had belonged to a social set that had frequented the Cine’-Club du Quartier Latin (CQQL) founded in 1947 by one of Eric Rohmer’s students (Brody, 2008, p. 15). Amongst this social set was a disavowal of the orthodoxy in French film at the time, which favoured weighty literary adaptions. The response to such fare was
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