Early Film Theory and Modernity
FILM 333 01 / HUMS 375 01 / LITR 351 01

T Th 10.30-11.20

Instructor: Francesco Casetti

While this course satisfies the “Film Theory” requirement for Film Studies Majors, it is meant for all humanities students as a way of looking at the development of the 20th century in light of its major media.

For a long time, early film theories have been overlooked and underestimated. Their recent rediscovery has, however, highlighted their crucial role in framing film as a “modern” invention. The main point of interest in early film theories is based on their capacity of highlight and focus some of the characteristic of modern life: speed, economy, contingency, excitation, etc. Prioritizing the filmic experience, they focalized attention on the spectator. But the idea of a “modern” art, as well as the research for a “modern” language, were also an important issue. On the background of this interest for modernity, early film theory was not uniform. Ideological differences and national identities played a major role in defining the perspective of theoretical research. In this respect, it is useful to compare the debate in the USA and in Europe and to acknowledge the very different traditions which they represented. The course will accordingly take into account theories in France (Delluc, Epstein), Germany (Arnheim, Kracauer), Middle-Europe (Bálazs, Lukács, Tille), Italy (Papini, Thovez), Soviet Union (Eisenstein, Vertov, Pudovkin) and USA (Lindsay, Freeburg, Münsterberg).

Week 1. Film and its time
Giovanni Papini, “Philosophical observations on the motion picture,” La Stampa, Turin, May 18th, 1907, pp. 1-2.
Enrico Thovez, “The Art of Celluloid,” La Stampa, Turin, July 29, 1908, p. 3

Week 2. Film and its time (a new art?)

Week 3. Reality on the screen
Francesco Casetti, Eye of the Century, Chapter 2, pp. 27-54

Week 4. Reality on the screen (the close up)

Week 5. Objective, Subjective
Francesco Casetti, Eye of the Century, Chapter 3
Jean Epstein, “The Senses I(b),” (1921) in Abel, vol. 1, pp. 241-246

Week 6. Objective, Subjective (real/possible; real/representation)
Georg Lukács, “Thoughts on an Aesthetics of Cinema,” (1913), in McCormick, Guenther-Pal, pp. 11-16
Rudolf Arnheim, “Fundamental Aesthetic Concepts” and “Summary of the Formative Media of Camera and Celluloid” in Film (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), pp. 41-46 ad 129-136

Week 7: A mechanical eye
Francesco Casetti, Eye, Chapter 4
Luigi Pirandello, The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cambridge, Dedalus, 1990, pp. 3-33; 77-116

Week 8: A mechanical eye (art and medium)

Week 9: Excited senses
Casetti, Eye of the Century, Ch. 5

Week 10: Excited senses (the splendour of the spectacle)

Week 11: Watching a film
Casetti, Eye of the Century, Chapter 6

Week 12: Watching a film (a new audience)
Jules Romains, “The crowd at the Cinematograph”, (1911) in Abel, vol.1: 53-54
Louis Delluc, “The Crowd,” (1918) in Abel, vol. 1, pp. 159-164

Bibliography
Essays available in V2 system

Course requirements:
The attendance is mandatory. No attendance, no grade.
First paper due by the 6th week; length 1,000-1,500 words; a commentary on some quotations from the mandatory readings
Second Paper due before the last week; length 1,500-2,000 words; topic assigned by the instructor.
Final exam: submitted electronically: a commentary on one or more topics discussed in class, length 1000-1,500 words
Active participation in discussion groups: 20%
First paper: 30%
Second paper: 30%
Final Exam: 20%