One of the driving concerns of early film theory revolved around the question what is the relationship of film to reality? For some theorists film seemed to depart from every other art form because of the way it was inherently concerned with photographic documentation of reality. The German critic zigfried krakauer talked about how film ruptured abstractions aesthetic abstractions scientific abstractions social abstractions that we used to navigate and make sense of the world. While a Beethoven symphony might be seen in the best-case as a celebration of the universality of human freedom or as a deep evocation of joy or sadness there is always something very general about expression in music .... It id not about this or that person's Joy or sorrow but just seems to express Joy or sorrow generally.

In the case of a painting for instance in The Portrait by Caravaggio we looked at last time, even though we have a specific individual that's being depicted, there's something idealized about the depiction. While the painting springs from the imagination of the painter, and emphasizes only the most important elements of the artist's vision, a photograph records all the chaotic and seemingly insignificant details of reality.

According to another influential film critic in the realist camp, Andre bazin, whose vision of cinematic realism we'll spend more time with in the second half of this course, according to bazin, film illuminates the particularity of the world it reveals the beauty and sacredness of reality as it is not as it might be depicted in some artists idealization of it.

From this point of view the defining feature of film is the way that it injects reality into the artwork.

But one of the other facets about film that we looked at was the fact that it emerges from processes of mechanical production and reproduction.

Last time i talked about the way that artists in the nineteenth and into the 20th century became interested in foregrounding the apparatus of techniques used to create the illusion of reality. Whereas in the Caravaggio painting, in order for the image to seem realistic, the real techniques used to create the painting have to remain hidden. What is most present in our perception of the painting is the content that is the image of the man holding the loot, but not tadarius brush strokes or other formal techniques that Caravaggio used to create the image.

For many artists and film theorists such ad sergej eisenstein, the defining feature of cinema was precisely the way that the machinery and formal techniques of Film production was able to shape reality in surprising and defamiliarizing ways.

For them it was the formal aspect of production, assembly, and if you remember that's precisely what Montage means, these formal aspects we're what set film apart from previous art forms.

And so you have two competing notions at what constitutes the essence of film an early film theory

Formalism and realism

DISCUSS CHART

essentially what we're looking at in the distinction between formalism and realism amounts to a recognition of the distinction between form and content

I think generally content is pretty familiar concept in the case of a movie we might ask what is the movie about or in a painting what is this a depiction of . In the case of an abstract painting like the Kandinsky images we saw last time the content might include the colors and the shapes on the canvas but because it's an abstract image form and content seem to be much closer to each other, the same might be said about a piece of music The melodies and harmonies rhythms etcetera are all the content in a piece of music but him some sense they are also formal devices in themselves.

The formal elements of a movie would include visually the way images are presented, but also the way the story is told. and here we see an important distinction between plot and story this is a distinction that goes back at least as far as Aristotle ... But what does it refer to?

Very briefly you can imagine it this way

You know if you ask me how my day was I might say something like oh you know I went for a run in the park and I came home and did some work then I made dinner and I went to bed what I've done is selected what I consider to be the most important elements from everything that happened in my day ... now certainly lots and lots of other stuff happened but I've only chosen to tell you about the things that I think are most important for you to get a sense of how I feel about my day. Essentially, in order to give you the most ideal sense of things, I filtered out all the nearly infinite events that actually took place ....

This is the essence of the difference between plot and story

And as you might notice there's a similarity in the in the way plot filters out the less important events... To the way an artists imaginary depiction of a scene filters out all the komplex noisy chaotic details that are captured by a photographic image

So, Story can be thought of of all the events that actually happened

Where is plot is the particular arrangement of those events to make a narrative about them.

Now quite often plot and Story are in alignment ... For instance a plot and a story are often in the same temporal order, but I'm sure you can all imagine movies that you've seen where for instance the events are actually out of order.... for instance perhaps the main character is shown first in old age on their deathbed like in Citizen Kane or saving Private Ryan for that matter
....So you can see that plot and story are quite often out of alignment. The idea of Plot In traditional narrative is that it is meant to clarify the story to draw attention to the most important events from the story. So in the case of a movie that opens with the main character on their deathbed the point is to show that the most ideal arrangement of events May not be the chronological order events from the life of the character, rather the moment of the character's death seems to encapsulate something important something absolutely essential about the meaning of the character's life, it illuminates their story in a way that some random or insignificant event that just happens to be earlier in time may not.

But in some avant-garde films you could have a situation in which the story is completely cut up and jumbled so that it's no longer very easy or even possible to make sense of it in a typical chronological cause and effect relationship. In this case it's not the story that is important but rather the formal arrangement of elements from the story. For a beautiful and dreamlike example of something like this from the 1940s you might look at meshes of the afternoon which I put a link to on the final project website.

The distinction between medium and message is one will spend more time on in a moment but you can think of the medium as the way a message is communicated so on one level you have the message the content of a communicative act, but the medium can communicate things separately from the message.

ONE way to think about this is the difference between what someone says and how they say it ... what they say is the message how they say it is the medium. This is sort of interesting to think about in relation to topics and leitmotifs, for instance when Darth Vader is dying we have his theme which we might consider to be the content or the message, but the way it is presented, in high strings calling forth associations of frailty ghostliness and death communicates something beyond the mere presence the character Darth Vader.

Now as you might have already noticed the artists that are most interested in formal techniques quite often are those working in an avant-garde style. There are two reasons for this for one thing avant-garde artists are usually extremely interested in technical innovation, and so technique is often for grounded in their work. But the other thing about the avant-garde is that it is associated with a radical awareness and a desire to question the status quo in art in politics in society. The whole idea of defamiliarizing reality in eisenstein's theories of montage, is based on the use of shockingly new techniques in order to recontextualize reality as we usually experience it. And as you might remember this is combined with an interest in Awakening the viewer or the listener to an awareness of those elements of their social circumstances that they simply take for granted and those things that might be otherwise. A bit later we'll discuss the way these ideas develop and change under the changing circumstances in the Soviet Union, and why it is for instance that eisenstein doesn't follow his own advice as regards the non-synchronous combination of sound and image in his statement on sound.

In the other column across from avant-garde I've listed a few subtypes of realism and in particular narrative realismit's important to distinguish idealized narrative realism like that found in the number of socialist films but also in films from the Hollywood studio system of the first half of the 20th century, it's important to distinguish these from other types of realism for instance films that make use of documentary-style footage or films novels paintings that depict a nun idealized and in many cases oppressive social reality. Later on in the course will talk about realism in the theories of Andre bazin which is quite distinct from idealized narrative realism.

Just to say a few words about narrative realism, you remember how when we looked at the painting by Caravaggio of the man holding the loot I said that in order for the image to seem realistic the formal or technical devices used to create the image have to remain concealed. This is the main idea behind idealized narrative realism in Hollywood or socialist realism, the ladder of which Alexander nevsky is a very clear example. In a typical Hollywood movie especially from the first half of the 20th century you can think of Classic Hollywood.... If the techniques of filmmaking get in the way of the story and especially to the point that the viewers can understand the story then you have a problem. And so what you see in a lot of classical narrative Cinema are very careful and usually very formulaic or even cliche techniques to draw the viewer's attention to the most important characters events plot points etc. So for instance in Alexander nevsky we very often have Alexander framed squarely in the center of a shot usually from a moderately low angle which helps to make him look almost stereotypically Virile, heroic, stable, sturdy and so on. The story unfolds in chronological order and is really a series of set pieces in the most important locations to convey the story everything builds up to the battle on the ice the big climax of the story after which there is a short resolution it's interesting that the battle on the ice happens right around the golden mean so about two-thirds of the way through the movie so that even the temporal proportions of the events help to make that scene stand out as the central defining moment of the story.

One of the things that film theorists had been interested in since the beginning, is the way that images put into a succession function sort of like a language...in other words, when you see a succession of images it seems to be communicating something sort of like the way a sentence in language communicates a meaning. When we for instance see the proletariat being gunned down and in the next moment we see a bull being slaughtered we can't help but make a connection between these images. The film seems to be saying look their lives are expendable as this bulls Life or something along those lines.

And so many theorists became interested in applying insights gained from linguistics to the study of film... in The attempt to develop a grammar or syntax of Cinema.

In the second half of the 20th century the number of theorists in France started looking at semiotic as a way to make sense of the way that film's seem to communicate things to us. Now semiotics is just the study of how signs, like words, or images, convey meaning.

What a number of theorists working in this tradition argue is that the array or apparatus of techniques, camera placement, cutting, continuity editing, narrative devices, all the conventions used to tell a story in a movie, that they function like a language.

Now the thing about language is that its based on words, and words don't have any necessary or natural connection to the things they stand in for. So for instance, the word horse as a sound or as a written word is only arbitrarily connected to the concept horse. But a language system... because it's based in discrete units like words, necessarily organizes the world into distinct categories. According to several people working in this tradition those categories could have been otherwise. So for instance some of those categories might be something like a particular nationality or culture, particular political divisions like liberal or conservative, masculine or feminine behavior, or that sort of thing. So for instance when we say that person is a liberal French political theorist, or a benevolent and masculine Russian Warrior, in the case of Alexander nevsky, the categories we use to describe these things are also a matter of convention they are cultural not natural, in other words they could have been otherwise. now it could be that certain underlined distinctions are natural for instance the physical distinction between masculine and feminine bodies ... But on this account many if not most or all of the social meanings associated with a distinction like masculine feminine are arbitrary or a matter of cultural convention, and so are the things people do to communicate them... so for instance short hair or a red Maserati being used to make someone think aha that guy is a big strapping masculine warrior, hunk or whatever.

In a similar way to how arising Melody on the trumpet snipe communicate to us haha that guy is heroic, the the social meanings and associations communicated by the melody are a matter of cultural convention.

Now this brings us to 3 axiom's in this theoretical tradition.

1 that ideology is communicated through systems of expression

2 that what we call personal identity choosing from a finite and pre-arranged assortment of available cultural codes for self-expression

3 That cultural products like artworks films pieces of music perpetuate ideology by concealing the apparatus of techniques used in their production.

So one of the things that I've been saying throughout this lecture is that it's not just the message that conveys a viewpoint or an ideology but that's the way a message is structured also conveys a viewpoint or ideology.

One simple way to understand this is the platitude that history is written by the winners. now we were just talking about the difference between plot and story and the way that plot is a selection of events from a story that emphasizes a particular sub set of everything that happened every event that transpired, in order to get a certain point across. So when you think for instance of the way history is told who are the important historical figures that we venerate you know should we celebrate Christopher Columbus for instance, what were the important events in history, and so on. The fact that we know the name Christopher Columbus and not the names have all the people he came into contact with and possibly murdered is an example of the way ideology is already embedded in the way we talk about the past.

Similarly, the way we think about personal identity involves categorizing every possible thing a human being could do into a set of social categories that are understandable and expressive.

We often think of our personal identities is somehow being proof that we are the Masters of our own private autonomous domaind of experience. But on this account the most important things that we take to be a mark of our identity, for instance the language we speak the culture we come from the movies or music we like, how we express ourselves, etc all part of a pre-arranged set of possibilities that our communally constituted. Sure identity really just amounts to choosing between a limited number of possibilities. this is sometimes referred to as the tyranny of the false choice, That the only choices that are available to us are the ones made available by the status quo.

But how are these choices made available to us? On this account works of art movies books pieces of music emerge from a set of beliefs or ideologies about the world and then turn work to persuade us of these beliefs in a variety of ways.

One of the ways they do this is by presenting certain cultural conventions as though they are natural, self-evident, just the way things are, or have to be.

So what is the apparatus or the ensemble of techniques that carry this out

Well in the case of the cinema, the apparatus involves the the fact that the screen fills our field of vision, and the fact that the room is completely dark except for the screen helps to Replace our eyesight with that of the camera, the camera eye the fact that the camera chooses the objects we see, and how are we see them.
The framing of shots the miseenscene so for instance the fact that Alexander nevsky is usually in the center of the frame often takes up the entire frame helps to indicate his importance his manliness or whatever. Music certainly plays a role in this ... the way that music encourages us to sympathize with certain viewpoints through the use of empathetic or an empathetic music.

Now earlier in this lecture and in the last lecture we were talking about naturalism in art the way that for instance that Caravaggio painting needs to hide the Marc's of its actual material production in order to maintain the illusion reality. And on this account, when the techniques of production are concealed so are the ideologies that inform those techniques, and that they help to reinforce. To the extent this remains hidden our own subjective experience is suspended that is an immersive artwork makes us forget that we are watching and evaluating it. Another way to look at this is that ideology is enabled by the concealment of technique it... makes the staged appear self-evident, natural, real, as though the viewpoints of the narrating system were basic and unmediated, or just the way things are.
we're going to talk about the way that music manufacturers of sense of desire next week when we look more in-depth Ed Wagner and schopenhauer, brighten the manufacturing of desire is also an important element in movies TV and other narrative media. The way that narratives pull you in help you sort of get lost in the narrative.... For instance with cliffhangers, the defining feature of binge-worthy TV shows. I mean sometimes it's really ridiculous I think I was watching top Chef or something and I really couldn't care less about who won or even what anybody was cooking but the way that it was edited with action-packed music and quit cutting meeting up to the moment that they were about to raise the lid on the tray to show what the chef could just cooked and of course right at the moment that they lift the tray before you can see what's on it it cuts to Black... Commercial break.... Now that my desires piqued I guess I should probably buy whatever their advertising.... But anyway the point is that narrative is one more device that acts to immerse you in whatever you're watching

Basically any of the techniques of a work of art that cause us to get lost in the immersive experience create a situation in which the medium becomes invisible, and our critical faculties are suspended. We stopped asking what are the implicit assumptions about the world that this artwork is emerging from and trying to persuade us of.

It was particularly interesting to look at eisenstein and his shift from a basically formalist or avant-garde sensibility to the Soviet socialist realist Style we see in Alexander nevsky. in the early days of the Russian Revolution avant-garde formalism tended to be regarded as revolutionary we talked about that a little bit last time the idea being that through d familiarizing familiar images put in strange configurations The Hope was that the viewer would be awoken to a new critical awareness of the social circumstances they find themselves in and might start asking what are the assumptions about my social political economic life do I take for granted withings could be otherwise.

Slide
But as you might imagine avant-garde Cinema did not play very well in front of audience is made up mostly of rural farmers and peasants. There are accounts of nearly empty theaters screening some of eisenstein's early films and also films have other avant-garde Soviet directors like. And as the Communist authorities began to solidify power they didn't want a revolutionary mindset to be maintained. That is they wanted to hold onto power so they couldn't very well have the population engaging in Revolution after revolution after revolution. But also because avant-garde Cinema was not very popular with the proletariat and the population at Large, it gradually came to be labeled as decadent... And since it's defining feature was the way it used formal techniques in a shocking surprising and innovative way ... But the main thing was that it for grounded formalist techniques, it was open to the same criticism that was leveled against can notion of autonomous art... Namely that it didn't adequately address social conditions it was just sort of to play thing of the wealthy educated class...Leon Trotsky in literature and Revolution attacked formalism alleging that it turns its back on history and class struggle and is concerned only with the play of forms in an abstract context

Socialist realism became distinction aesthetic paradigm until after Stalin's death in fact was inscribed in law under what was known as fish Dino of doctrine

Interesting to compare socialist realism with American realism the Hollywood film

In other words, the medium within which a story is told function like a language.

And we've already seen an example of something like this in music, when we were talking about musical topics we describe how the particular use of an instrument or a melodic figure say of a Fanfare or horn call have a rhythm for instance a March rhythm might act as a sign to make us think aha heroism or aha royalty or in the case of Darth Vader, evil or frailty or death.

In the case of those Kandinsky paintings from last time if you remember the first one the message involved a rider and a horse perhaps traveling through the forest by a lake at least that's sort of what it looks like. But the code, the Assembly of techniques to produce that message adds meaning to the image the particular use of color the strange sort of dreaming us in the use of light in the painting are formal devices that shape the message. In the case of the third image that we looked at the abstract image it's much harder to tell what the message is what we notice are all the formal elements so the code is the most salient feature.