

Film Studies: An Introduction

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Abstract

This paper is based on the seminar on film studies which took place in University of Indonesia, Jakarta early this year. The seminar responded to the growing interests in the academic setting on what film studies is. The paper shows that film studies deal with the film's form and context. To analyse its form, it is very important to understand the aspects of cinematography, such as visual image, sound and narrative. On the other hand, since film is closely related to social and cultural context where it is produced, it is only fair to employ cultural studies, using structuralism and poststructuralism for instance, to critically analyse the film's context. In consequence, understanding a film depends on the aspect of its analysis, the form or the context.

Background

Film, or cinema, basically means moving images –images of time, space, sound and story, has enjoyed tremendous popularity ever since its first appearance in Europe and America in the last part of nineteenth century. The film industry has grown rapidly due to people's interest in making and especially, watching films. With annual Bollywood's production reaches more than eight hundred films in average and Hollywood's is close to half the number of it, people can have so many choices to watch. Although most people watch films for entertainment, many become more interested in discussing what makes a film good or bad. Some film goers will probably not be satisfied by watching how the story goes, but they might be disturbed by what ideas underlying the story and why the story goes in certain way. It is for the purpose of analyzing films critically –both its forms and context- that film studies emerged.

In its form, film, is not just a means of entertainment. It is an art –the seventh art, as UNESCO has declared it. And just like any other arts, film is shaped "... not only by political, philosophical, economic factors, but also by its technology."(Monaco, 1981). Novel experienced rapid growth due to the invention of printing technology, while drama stage developed from outdoor Greek amphitheater to contemporary soundproof prescinium stage. In case of film, it has been through the development of photography to

computer technology. Nevertheless, unlike other arts, film is a teamwork; there is no individual to take the credits. There are director, script writer, actors and actresses sound engineer, and gaffer to name a few. These people work in accordance with their responsibility. Their work is an art in its sense; and their artistic work –cinematographic aspects- determines the quality of a film.

Contextually, film is not only telling stories but also showing ideas –politically and philosophically. Visual images presented in a film are not always as what they are *per se*. They may have different meanings and understandings. Furthermore, whether we like it or not, films have shaped ideas and values held by many people nowadays. These aspects of non-cinematography – contextually and receptively- which are represented by sound and visual images are also the concern of film studies.

Following is the introduction to film studies which discusses technical terms of cinematography to analysis of ideology and spectatorship.

The aspects of cinematography

As a form of art, film has its controversy. Although it is still arguable, many people think that film does not leave room for imagination as poetry or even paintings do. For instance, many fans of *Harry Potter* were disappointed with its film adaptation due to its different portrayal of some characters or settings. Moreover, this form of art does not seem to require any intelligence to understand it –cats and children seem to understand it easily. On the other hand, many argue that film can materialize characters and settings beyond imagination because of the advancement of technology in sound and visual effects. Films like *Star Wars* (first) trilogy (1978-1985), *Jaws* (1976), and *the Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2002-2004) offer ‘realistic’ yet imaginative settings. As for intelligence, people should watch Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941) or Alfred Hitchcock’s films to see how a story develops through the manipulation of images.

The aspects of cinematography, therefore, play important roles in making films successfully –and well. There are two parts of this section, namely:

1. Forms, in which the primary visual, aural, narrative, and mise-en-scene are introduced;
2. Approach and instruments, in which analysis on cinematography can be conducted.

1. Forms

1.1. Visual

This aspect of cinematography deals with lighting and camera angles. Lighting influences the images the film wants to show. For instance, back lighting gives effect of mysterious or romantic, while front lighting gives the effect of happiness.

Camera angles, on the other hand, present relationship between the filmmaker and the viewers. If the camera follows the subject as the subject moves or change, it is called pan (from right to left, and vice versa) or tilt (from bottom to top). If the camera rolls, it means the subject doesn't change but its orientation within the frame is altered. The other terms are tracks (or 'dollies') and crane shots which mean the camera moves along a vertical and horizontal line and the subject may be either stationary or mobile (Monaco, 1981:78). Each shot and its combination is the filmmakers' effort to ask viewers see things from their point of view.

1.2. Auditory (aural/sound/sonore)

Sound has a function to attract attention as well as to develop atmosphere or conflict of the film. Sound in a film can be divided into four category:

- Parole/vocal/human's voice:

Vocal imparts characterization and information in form of dialogue, monolog and voix off/voice over. Dialogue is presented when images are not able to show story anymore. In contrast, voix off/voice over is presented without the presence of the speaker. It has the function to narrate the story while images are visible.

- Sound effect

Sound effect can be synchronized or asynchronized. The first refers to the sound of a certain image. For example, the sound of a piano when the piano is played. The latter refers to the sound which is not related with the image being presented. For instance, the sound of barking dog without the dog in the sight.

- Music

Music is categorized into diegesis and nondiegesis. Diegesis means the music comes within the film and functions as characterizing a scene. For example,

the music in a saloon in western film. Alternately, non-diegesis means the source of the sound cannot be traced within the film. It serves as a background to a scene.

- **Silence**

Silence is important in film. It serves as dramatic effects to make the meaning of the film more pronounced.

There are three relationship between sound and visual in a film:

- **Sound in** : the source of the sound (vocal, sound effect, music) is visible in the screen.
- **Sound horschamp** : the source of the sound is not visible in the screen.
- **Sound off** : the source of the sound is in different room/place and time.

1.3. Narrative

Basically, cinematographic narrative is similar to literary narrative. In many ways, the director has the same role as the author; yet, cinematographic narrative uses movements instead of words as its material. There are three aspects of narrative:

1. **action**

It refers to what a character does, how he interacts with other characters and objects in a film

2. **character**

It determines whether a film is interesting or not. An interesting character looks real and emerges characterization. This characterization is presented through its appearance, dialogs, internal and external actions, reactions from other characters, the choice of character's name, and its contrast to other characters.

3. **background of place and time**

It is presented through décor so that viewers are aware of where and when the story takes place.

The stages of cinematographic narrative are:

- Synopsis (an initial plan of the story, consisting story concept and interpretation)
- Scenario (a more detail writing of the story with exact cinematographic language from shots, lighting, camera angles, description and location)
- Découpage/storyboard (how scenario is materialized visually for every shot)
- Editing (the cutting and continuation of a film)

Other aspects which closely related to narrative are themes and symbolism. Similar to other literary work, theme is the idea underlying the story. It can be about relationship between man with himself, man with other people, man with his destiny, man with nature, and man with arts. The themes can be hierarchical. For instance, a theme of a man's relationship to other people leads to a smaller theme of disappointment, which leads to another smaller theme of violence, and so forth.

Symbolism almost always appear in a film since film present ideas through images. Symbol can be universal or created. A relationship between one symbol with another describes its value and meaning in the plot of a film. Symbolism in a film can be recognized through repetition of certain object; context, in which an image refer to relationship between object with a character; and visual, sonor or musical stress on certain character/object.

1.4. Acting and Mise-en-scène

According to Slamet Raharjo, the language of film is a development of visualization techniques derived from the language of theater which is known as 'dramaturgi' (dramatic convention). It is technical convention of performing arts to create dramatic structures.

Down left stage	Down center stage	Down right stage
Left center stage	Center stage	Right center stage
Up left stage	Up center stage	Up right stage

Dramatic Convention: Stage convention

It is necessary that all crew of film makers understand the concept of dramatic convention since film, as well as drama, creates ‘truth’ on performing the art. The created ‘truth’ should convince the audience through suggestive approach. However, unlike drama on stage, in film there is no direct communication between stage creator and the audience. The created ‘truth’ is presented through the result of visual and sound editing. The camera, then, takes over the stage director. Camera should record what we think about place, time and event; it should not record the place, time and event which can be seen in plain view. Hence, continuity of mise en scene is very important in determining a good film.

The acting and shooting should be able to answer who you are and which perspective you want to take. Consequently, any object, any dialog and any scene should be meaningful in the presentation of a film because they must represent what we are thinking. It is a reason why a good film is not telling a story; instead, it is *showing* a story.

2. Approach and Instruments

Criticizing a film is not always parallel with judgement. In fact, criticism also functions as understanding, appreciation, and even promotion of that film. In criticizing a film, therefore, a comprehensive tools must be applied appropriately. In consequence, a critic should recognize approaches and instruments to analyze a film.

Cinematographic approach is textual; it is loyal to the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of a film. Intrinsically, every claim should be based, among others, on the visual, sonore, and narrative of the film. Extrinsically, criticism will pay attention to the work of film crew, such as producer, director, actors/actresses, etc.

To be able to analyze a film intrinsically, three instruments can be used:

1. Descriptive Instrument

In descriptive instrument, a film is analyzed by paying close attention to all visual and aural shot. They are broken down into:

- segmentation
- decoupage
- description of visual tracks
- description of sound tracks

2. Quotation Instrument

This instrument makes use of:

- summary of the story (synopsis, scenario)
- photography of shots
- sketches from storyboard

3. Documentary Instrument

It deals with data before and after exhibition stage.

The Aspects of Non-cinematography

Film cannot stand alone without the relationship to social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which it is produced and received. In line with this concept, film is part of cultural studies whose interest is in how (popular) culture defines societies. From cultural studies' point of view, film is an arena of negotiation in three levels: audience, text, and institution (Gramsci, in Junaidi, 2007). Each of them has actively created meaning of a film.

Dealing with the film texts, cultural studies offer film analysis from the viewpoint of structuralism and poststructuralism. Structuralism takes after Saussure's ideas, one of which is cultural text and its practice can be analyzed like language. Consequently, understanding cultural context of a film is a must and at the same time

claims must be drawn from the structure of the texts. For example, a study by Wright (1975) on *Six Guns and Society* investigated how American Dream presented in western films is articulated differently in accordance with the history of America. Wright employed narrative structure of western films in relation to the concept of mythology. In his findings, the narrative structure of western films have evolved into three stages since their first productions in early twentieth century to the second half of the century (see Junaidi, 2007)

In spite of this, poststructuralism, whose proponent is Jacques Lacan, refuses the idea that there is structure underlying the meaning of cultural texts and practices. Instead, poststructuralism believes that meaning is always in the process, brings to a halt temporarily in the flowing of possibilities (Junaidi, 2007). In consequence, meaning in the text is not static, it is dynamic and contextual. Moreover, poststructuralism concerns with the issues of subjectivity and self. A study by Mulvey (1975) on feminism deconstructed meanings of images presented in popular American films. In her findings, Mulvey argued that popular cinema has exploited female for the benefits of 'male gaze'; therefore, popular cinema should be destroyed and more films should be produced without male illusions (see Junaidi, 2007).

Film studies in cultural studies considers viewers as active audience. The underlying idea behind it is that "media consumption is assumed as a complicated social and cultural experience where the audience construct meanings out of media texts based on their distinct background" (Dawis, 2007). Audience reception studies assume that audience go through the meaning-making process, in which audience reacts to the media presentation according to their beliefs and values as well as social and political background. A case of *Menace II Society* copycat murder case revealed that "...media have the potential to be a principal socializing institution, particularly when family, religion, church, school, positive role models, and normalized values around law and order are all absent." (Coleman, 2000). Other studies also found that media have created interpretative communities, in which the members, if not identify themselves, shared the same view presented in the media.

Closing

Film studies attempt to make critical analysis possible. We should bear in mind, however, that film studies are complex. In its form, it's a collective art of visual, sound, and narrative. On the other hand, it is the product of social and culture where the film is made. Therefore, taking all the aspects of one film into one analysis is quite impossible – it takes a book to do that! One aspect of analysis, for instance the analysis of visual image, would be sufficient.

Another point to ponder is that in academic setting, it is necessary that we impart the knowledge of film studies to our students since it is beneficial not only for their academic purposes but also for their professional life. Academically, it can enhance students' understanding about the language of film. Professionally, it facilitates them to get career in media industry as film journalist or even work as scriptwriter, for instance.

Reference

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