

Reviewing bipartisan systems in the context of classical film theory: formalism and realism, identification and essentialism

Reverendo bipartidarismos no contexto da teoria clássica do cinema: formalismo e realismo, identificação e essencialismo

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to investigate the classical film theory, with special attention to the beginnings of film thinking, aiming to clarify some controversies and deepen certain debates, which, even today, do not seem to be fully resolved. Therefore, two aspects will be investigated: the oscillation between approach and retraction of the cinema in relation to other art forms and the bipartisan approach to the history of film theory, arranged around two main axes, formalism and realism.

Keywords: Film theory, film history, Ricciotto Canudo, formalism, realism

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é investigar aspectos da teoria clássica do cinema, com especial atenção aos primórdios do pensamento cinematográfico, visando o esclarecimento de algumas controvérsias e o aprofundamento de determinados debates, os quais, ainda hoje, não parecem totalmente superados. Portanto, dois aspectos serão investigados: a oscilação entre aproximação e afastamento do cinema com relação às demais manifestações artísticas e a abordagem bipartidária da história da teoria do cinema, organizada em torno de dois eixos fundamentais, o formalista e o realista.

Palavras-chave: Teoria do cinema, história do cinema, Ricciotto Canudo, formalismo, realismo

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I INTEND TO ADDRESS two problems or controversies that emerged in the early development of film theory in the first two decades of the twentieth century, which lasted until about half of that century – and possibly still exist. The first controversy regards an oscillation in the center of the discussions and defense of cinema as a legitimate art expression. I will call the two poles of this oscillation *identification* and *essentialism*. By *identification* I refer to the strategy of claiming the art status for cinema through the approximation of the latter with already established art expressions: painting, literature, music and theater. *Identification* here is not connected at all with the concept established in the cinema studies of psychoanalytic approach, which concerns the (primary or secondary) identification processes of the viewer with either the fictional characters or with the device itself (Baudry, 1986: 286- 298). By *essentialism* I mean the attempt to isolate the cinema uniqueness, what differentiates this type of art from other art expressions. This oscillation is not banal and, sometimes, raises contradictions in a single text or speech. In the absence of more precise terms, *identification* and *essentialism* pay tribute, in this study, to the long tradition of *paragone* (Italian for comparison), a method that confronts different art expressions, usually led by a celebrated artist, in order to determine some supremacy. Examples of *paragone* can be found in Ludovico Dolce's *Aretino* (1557), in Leonardo da Vinci's *Trattato della Pittura* (c. 1500), or in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocconte* (1998). As noticeable in the following pages, the *paragone* reappears at the reflections of some of the earliest and most influential critics and theorists of cinema in the twentieth century, as Riciotto Canudo or Rudolf Arnheim.

The second issue, which is related to the first one, concerns the possible division of cinema thinking between two trends: formalism and realism. It is common for the historical understanding of cinema thinking to identify formalism and realism as two vectors around which several critics, theorists and/or filmmakers are grouped. I intend to explain here how this division or bivectorial approach may be sketchy. To split film history and theory between the formalist and the realistic vectors implies burying the subjective aspect of both trends and considering that a formalist filmmaker or theorist, strictly speaking, would be refractory to realism – and vice versa. It should be emphasized that this bivectorial approach is often (maybe always) the product of new approaches in retrospect. Although I will try to avoid the vicissitudes of this process, throughout this work certain authors will be addressed from a theoretical division reported by other authors – as in Victor Perkins's review of the thoughts of Rudolf Arnheim, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Sigfried Kracauer

and André Bazin, among others, reinforcing this bivectorial approach. Before I delve into these issues, it is worthwhile to approach film theory from a historical perspective.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF FILM THEORY

Susan Hayward divides the history of the film theory into three phases that alternate between theory-*pluralism* and theory-*monism*. Thus, between the 1910s and the 1930s, the period corresponding to the rise of film theory, pluralism would have prevailed. From the 1940s to the 1960s, monism emerges from totalizing theories. And from the 1970s to the 2000s, a return to pluralism is noticed (Hayward, 2006: 410). Between the 1910s and the 1930s, the most prominent works in film thinking are Louis Feuillade's manifesto "Le film esthétique" (1910), Ricciotto Canudo's essay "Naissance d'un sixième art" [The Birth of a Sixth Art] (1911), Vachel Lindsay's book *The Art of the Moving Picture* (first published in 1915 and reviewed in 1922) and Hugo Münsterberg's book *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (originally published in 1916, with its 1970 edition used in the present article). Feuillade suggested that cinema should be both a popular and economic art, based on a synergy between technology and esthetics and on an artistic economy that organically included art and capital. In "Naissance d'un sixième art", Canudo announces the promise of a sixth emerging art, cinema, "plastic art in motion". It would arise from an evolution of the cinematograph, a technique extremely attached to its objective reproduction potential (as well as photography) and, therefore, which could not be classified as art yet. In *The Art of the Moving Picture*, Lindsay offers, also in an essayistic tone, different impressions around the young art of cinema (some of them actually inspiring), always comparing it with the other art expressions and based on critical models derived from literature or visual arts.

Lindsay cites three "genres": action, intimacy and splendor. Lindsay appeals to the example of other arts to define the cinema, seeing it as once "sculpture in motion", "painting in motion" and "architecture in motion", with motion forming the common substratum of definition (Lindsay's visual orientation is not surprising, given his painterly training at the Art Institute of Chicago). (Stam, 2003: 44).

In a pioneer effort for a more powerful film theory, Hugo Münsterberg argues, in *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, that cinema (which he calls "pho-

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toplay”) is not filmed reality, but a psychological and esthetic process that reveals our mental experiences:

The photoplay tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world, namely, space, time, and causality, and by adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world, namely, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion. (Münsterberg, 1970: 74, emphasis in the original)

Münsterberg’s arguments do not omit the association of cinema with a technique of mechanical and objective reproduction of nature (starting with the term “photoplay” itself), but focus on the relationships. This interface space, a process or transition space occupied by cinema and marked by human subjectivity operations, is the preferred research field of Münsterberg, as indicated by passages such as the following:

The photoplay shows us a significant conflict of human actions in moving pictures which, freed from the physical forms of space, time, and causality, are adjusted to the free play of our mental experiences and which reach complete isolation from the practical world through the perfect unity of plot and pictorial appearance. (Ibid.: 82, emphasis in the original)

Münsterberg concludes his work with an auspicious affirmation:

For the first time the psychologist can observe the starting of an entirely new esthetic development, a new form of true beauty in the turmoil of a technical age, created by its very technique and yet more than any other art destined to overcome outer nature by the free and joyful play of the mind. (Ibid.: 100)

It is worth noting the prevalence (or rather, greater visibility) of the cinema thought developed in both the Anglophone and the Francophone media. The historiographical perspective of film theory remains essentially Eurocentric, and perhaps nowadays we need a bigger research effort about the upsurge of more systematic (theoretical) cinema thought in other parts of the world. This article will not delve deeper into this debate about cultural imperialism, but the prevalence of the Anglophone and Francophone film theory is easily noticeable in the bibliography of this study, representative of a place of speech that is also responsible for the recurrence of the *paragone* and for the preference for a dichotomous approach (formalism vs. realism).

The end of World War I broadened the discussions involving topics such as high and low culture, realism vs. naturalism, reception, montage (editing), simultaneity, subjectivity, psychoanalysis and unconscious, authorship vs. script-led cinema, pace, sign and meaning, among other aspects. With the advent of sound film, between the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, issues such as the death of experimentalism, the end of the cinematic art and the search for a complete cinema emerge.

Between the 1940s and the 1960s, but particularly after 1946, the efforts converge in the search for a complete theory of cinema. In the period, proposals such as Alexandre Astruc's concept of the *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen) stand out, and two main schools of thought take shape: the author's theory (auteurism or auteur theory, a derivation of the *auteur policy*), in the 1950s, and film semiotics, in the 1960s. Auteur-structuralism replaces the author's theory in the 1960s.

Between the 1970s and the 2000s, with the crisis of the totalizing theories and the advent of post-structuralism, several vectors of thought start to emerge. For example, in the wake of Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction, discussions involving the importance of intertextuality and of ideological effects, of the subject's position or role and of the enunciation effects on the viewer (performance) get enhanced. In the Anglo-Saxon environment, feminism arises in cinema studies, recrudescing the debate about subjectivity and agency, forgotten since the 1920s (Hayward, 2006: 413). Such changes give rise to the cognitive program, semio-pragmatism and cognitive semiotics, among other vectors of thought.

The *cognitive turn* in the 1980s benefits from the contribution of cognitive science to cinema studies, and emerges to some extent in response to the *grand theories* – as psychoanalysis and semiotics. The cognitive program proposes that neither theory should be inserted in the movie, nor the movie should illustrate theory. In this sense, analyzing the *problems* of the movie would prompt the formulation of a microtheory constellation (*problem-driven theories*).

In *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, Warren Buckland (2000: 3) proposes a historical approach model for film theory in which there is, initially, the emergence and consolidation of (1) *classical film theory*, organized around two main axes: (a) montagists (with authors such as Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein etc.) and (b) realists (especially represented by Sigfried Kracauer and André Bazin). After the classical theory (2), comes *modern film theory* (also known as *contemporary film theory*), subdivided in (a) cinema semiotics (Christian Metz of *Film Language and Language and Cinema*) and (b) post-s-

structural film theory (*second semiotics* or *psychosemiotics*, including Marxist and psychoanalytic film theories, as those of Stephen Heath, Colin MacCabe, the Christian Metz of *The Imaginary Significant*, Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean-Louis Baudry and Raymond Bellour, among other authors). Buckland notes that the transition from 2a to 2b would have been made by theories of enunciation based on Benveniste's linguistics. On a third moment the (3) *cognitive film theory* emerges, expressed by the work of authors as David Bordwell, Noel Carroll, Edward Branigan, Joseph Anderson, Torben Grodal, Ed Tan, Murray Smith and others. Finally, Buckland proposes a fourth stage in the history of film theory, in which the (4) *cognitive film semiotics* (a development from 2a) arises. This cognitive film semiotics would be represented by (a) new theories of enunciation (Francesco Casetti, Metz of *The Impersonal Enunciation*), (b) semio-pragmatics of film (Roger Odin) and (c) the transformational generative grammar and cognitive semantics of cinema (Michel Colin, Dominique Chateau).

In this study, I am particularly interested in describing the classical film theory and its background. I intend to investigate here issues in the model that organizes early film theory and the theoretical classicism around the two supposedly antagonistic trends, formalism and realism. This model is common in several historical approaches of film theory (see Perkins, 1976; Buckland, 2000: 3).

Specifically regarding classical film theory, with emphasis on the early days of film theory, it is worth recurring to the text of V.F. Perkins, "A critical history of early film theory" (1976). In this essay, Perkins conducts a careful review of the main vectors of thought at a stage in which the main purpose of critics, theorists and filmmakers was to legitimize cinema as an art expression. Among the authors mentioned by Perkins, there is Vachel Lindsay, Rudolph Arnheim, Paul Rotha, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Béla Balász – interestingly, Ricciotto Canudo does not get enough attention from Perkins –, in addition to filmmakers as Abel Gance, Walter Ruttmann and Germaine Dulac. Perkins presents a negative opinion about this first film theory, a phase in which "the theorist's concern with prestige severely limited his freedom to investigate and speculate on the nature of the movies" (1976: 403). He points out exaggerations, daydreams and vicissitudes in the arguments of the first theorists, some persistent in the overview of the subsequent film theory. For example, according to Perkins (1976: 403), the effort of Arnheim of applying to the cinema the same rules and principles of all other art expressions would result in more harm than good.

According to Perkins, the first film theory was victim of its own obsessive search for the establishment of cinema as an art expression, succumbing to the radicalism of certain propositions and blindness to the other proposals. Also according to Perkins, what pioneer theorists such as Rotha and Arnheim claimed was too far from what the filmmakers had been experiencing at the time, in a way that the first film theory fell into dogmatic normativism and ignorance about the actual developments of the seventh art. The formalism of Arnheim, Rotha, Balász and Pudovkin, crystallized in the conception of art as “difference-from-reality” and montage as filmic specificity (the great advantage of the movie over other arts) is Perkins’s favorite target: “seen as the creative essence of cinema, difference-from-reality is elevated to the status of criterion. Because ‘art only begins where mechanical reproduction leaves off’” (Perkins, 1976, 404). Perkins refers to Pudovkin, for whom

the shooting process is not the simple setting of what happens in front of the camera, but a peculiar manner of representing this fact. Between the natural event and its appearance on the screen there is a highlighted difference. It is precisely this difference that makes cinema an art. (1983: 68)

This conception, averse to the capability of objective reproduction of nature, would have been disastrous for the first film theory, according to Perkins, who also criticizes the efforts of theorists to isolate the specific component of cinema, what supposedly distinguishes it from all the other art expressions: “The claim here is that the essence of a form can be found by isolating one of its components” (Perkins, 1976: 405). This component, on many occasions, was found in the montage – as for Pudovkin, for whom the “constructive montage” would be “a specific and particularly cinematographic method” (1983: 65), also stating that “[s]imilar to the notion of time, the filmic space is also connected to *the main cinema process, montage*” (Ibid.: 69, emphasis added). However, according to Perkins, “the component described as essence cannot in practice be observed in a pure state” (Perkins, 1976: 405). It is worth noting that André Bazin had already spoken about the problem of oscillation between identification and essentialism, actually employing other terms that, in a way, refer to the same concepts: impurity and autonomy. Advocate for an *impure cinema* at a given time, Bazin (2014) sees the search for the essence/specificity/autonomy of cinema from a historical perspective:

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It is true that the history of art goes on developing in the direction of autonomy and specificity. The concept of pure art – pure poetry, pure painting, and so on – is not entirely without meaning; but it refers to an aesthetic reality as difficult to define as it is to combat. In any case, even if a certain mixing of the arts remains possible, like the mixing of genres, it does not necessarily follow that they are all fortunate mixtures. (Ibid.: 60-61)

Perkins calls the group of the first formalist theories of cinema, which made room for the acknowledgment of cinema as an art, the “established theory” or “orthodox film theory”. The orthodoxy in cinema thought would have privileged the form at the expense of the content, and enhanced what the author defines as “dogma image”. Perkins notes that the “the idea that editing ‘resembles a creation’ dominated the development of the orthodoxy. Editing became identified with the creative *language* of the cinema” (Perkins, 1976: 409, emphasis in the original). Yet according to Perkins, “the ultimate and least valid extension of the mystique is the belief that montage provides not just the language of film, but a definition of the movie’s artistic nature: in Roth’s words ‘the intrinsic essence of film creation’” (Ibid.: 409). Perkins is absolutely against this formalist position and montage as a filmic specificity. According to him,

If we isolate cutting from the complex which includes the movements of the actors, the shape of the setting, the movement of the camera, and variations of light and shade – which change within the separate shots as well as between them – we shall understand none of the elements (and certainly not the editing) because each of them derives its value from its relationship with the others. (Ibid.: 410)

In general lines, Perkins is excessively harsh towards the filmmakers/theorists related with formalism, as when he affirms that the “the champions of montage and the image have never known what to do about sound” (Ibid.: 420). This is an exaggerated observation, if not completely mistaken, since Eisenstein, for example, worked on a reasonable number of film lines and experiments about sound in cinema, as we can see in his proposal of “vertical montage” (in which the idea of conflict is transported from the clash between two shots to the confront between the sound and image bands) and in several of his writings in the volumes *Film Form* (2002a) and *The Film Sense* (2002b). Eisenstein speculated theoretically even about stereoscopic 3D (S3D) cinema, in an essay originally published in 1947 (see 2013: 20-59).

For Perkins, only the emergence of realistic cinema thought (from the work of authors such as Bazin and Kracauer) can redeem the orthodoxy excesses and vicissitudes, bringing some justice to the aesthetic achievements of filmmakers as Erich Von Stroheim, Max Ophüls or Jean Renoir, among others. Perkins reminds that Bazin accused the orthodox theorists of having modified the true vocation of the cinema, which is the primacy of the object, for the supposed primacy of the image (1976: 419). However, although he tends to the realism most of the time, Perkins does not excuse Bazin and Kracauer's exaggerations and distortions. About Bazin, Perkins admits that “[h]is vision tends to create a dogma so limiting as the created by orthodoxy” (Perkins, 1976: 420). The reaction to the theoretical orthodoxy of cinema and its “dogma image”, manifested in the realistic thinking, would have been exaggerated at several moments, creating its own “dogma object”. The author concludes by noting that:

Bazin mistook his own critical vocation to the defence of realism for the ‘true vocation of the cinema’. His theoretical statements threaten a purism of the *object* as narrow as that of the image. Despite Bazin's careful qualifications and disclaimers, realist theory becomes coherent only if we identify the cinema's ‘essence’ with a single aspect of the film – photographic reproduction. In defining the film by reference to one of its features it resembles the orthodoxy, as it does in making a criterion out of a preference for particular aspects of film technique. Both theories discriminate in favour of certain kinds of cinematic effect, in other words certain kinds of attitude given cinematic form. The image dogma would assess quality in terms of the artist's imposition of order on the chaotic and meaningless surface of reality. Object dogma would derive its verdict from his discovery of significance and order *in* reality. Each of these positions presupposes a philosophy, a temperament, a vision – terrain which the theorist should leave open for the film-maker to explore and present. (Ibid.: 421, emphasis in the original)

Here I intend to demonstrate that, beyond a critical assessment of formalist and realist positions in the overview of classical film theory and its background, it may be useful to question this division into *ideological trenches*, which can be an essentially retrospective and simplifying operational perspective of the real complexities that characterized cinema thought in the first half of the twentieth century.

In this sense, I propose we take this further, from the usual reading of authors by others ones to the investigation of two basic texts by Ricciotto Canudo, author to which are attributed key notions for the development of the

first film theory, as the idea of *seventh art* and the very controversy between formalism and realism. Until this point, much of the arguments developed and the divisions of the theoretical fields were made from authors speaking about other authors (as in the case of Victor Perkins). Let us proceed now to an important, but sometimes forgotten source.

RICCIOTTO CANUDO

Ricciotto Canudo, Italian critic based in France, is the author of two especially useful essays for this investigation: “Naissance d’un sixième art” (originally published in *Les Entretiens Idéalistes* of October 25, 1911) and “Réflexions sur le septième art” (text originally published in 1923 and reprinted in *L’Usine aux Images*, 1926).

In “Naissance...” Canudo refers to cinema as a not yet established art, but as an emerging expression, full of potential. Thus, cinema would be the synthesis of five ancient arts: architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry (literature), “the superb reconciliation of Space Rhythms (Plastic Arts) and Time Rhythms (Music and Poetry)” (Canudo, 1988: 59). Later, the author adds a third rhythmic art, dance, to music and poetry, raising cinema to the status of *Seventh Art*. In his enthusiasm to greet the artistic potential of the cinema, Canudo compares it with the established arts (*paragone*), as in the following text:

The new manifestation of Art should really be more precisely *a Painting and a Sculpture developing in Time*, as in music and poetry, which realize themselves by transforming air into rhythm for the duration of their execution. (Ibid.: 59, emphasis in the original)

The cinematograph promotes, according to Canudo, the advent of a “Plastic Art in Motion” (Ibid.: 59). The author also highlights two fundamental aspects of the cinematograph: the *symbolic* and the *real* (Ibid.: 59-60). The *symbolic* aspect is velocity: of the film reel turning in the projector, of moving objects represented in the bright screen. The *real* aspect concerns the elements that arouse the interest and wonder of the modern audience: the photographic recording (plus the value of the movement) of reality, of actuality. Furthermore, according to Canudo, the cinematograph “represents the completion of life in action” (Ibid.: 61), being the product of Western culture, an “action culture” as opposed to the oriental culture of contemplation. The European Canudo falls into the typical Eurocentrism of his time and

a conception of the *other* that would only be demystified many years later, with the publication of works such as *Orientalism* (originally published in 1978), by Edward Said. The influence of Italian Futurism in Canudo's essay can be seen in the exaltation that the author makes of speed, as in the excerpt in which he wonders:

Who is still able to enjoy a pipe by the fire in peace these days, without listening to the jarring noise of cars, animating outside, day and night, in every way, an irresistible desire for spaces to conquer? (Ibid.: 60)

However, although cinema has potential and promises all the graces of a new art expression, very present and magnanimous, the cinema of his time, according to Canudo,

is not yet an art, because it lacks the freedom of choice peculiar to plastic *interpretation*, conditioned as it is to being the *copy* of a subject, the condition that prevents photography from becoming an art. (Canudo, 1988: 61, emphasis in the original).

It should be noted that Canudo uses the terms *cinematograph* and *cinema* with caution, associating the first to a popular technique, a product of industry and science, and the second to a nascent art. Also according to the author,

Arts are the greater the less they *imitate* and the more they *evoke* by means of a synthesis. A photographer, on the other hand, does not have the faculty of choice and elaboration fundamental to Aesthetics; he can only put together the forms he wishes to reproduce, which he really is not reproducing, limiting himself to cutting out images with the aid of the luminous mechanism of a lens and a chemical composition. The cinematograph, therefore, cannot today be an art. But for several reasons, the cinematographic theater is the first abode of the new art – an art which we can just barely conceive. Can this abode become a “temple” for aesthetics? (Ibid.: 62, emphasis in the original)

This is the clear emergence of the fundamental formalistic thesis, that an art is not based on the mechanical and objective reproduction of the world, but rather on its expressive capacity to create a *new* world reflecting the will and feelings of the artist. This notion, very popular in the wake of Post-Impressionism, relegated the majority of the actualities and travelogues to the status of mere curiosity or uneducated leisure. Therefore, Canudo's

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arguments base the theses of Rudolph Arnheim and Paul Rotha, and will be invariably revisited by the so-called Soviet *montage theorists* (Pudovkin, Vertov, Eisenstein).

Although Canudo denies the cinema of his time the status of art, based on the lack of artistic expression of the cinematograph, the critic is generous in the compliments to the representational capacity of this art-in-potentiality, “this new mimetic representation of ‘total life’” (Canudo, 1988: 62), also exalting its educational potential – it is tempting, here, to identify a seed of the myth of a complete cinema.

The cinematograph brings, in the midst of the smallest human settlement, the spectacle of distant, enjoyable, moving or instructive things: it spreads culture and stimulates everywhere the eternal desire for the representation of life in its totality. (Canudo, 1988: 65)

The quoted excerpt indicates arguments that will be substantially developed by two authors who are posterior to Canudo, Sigfried Kracauer and Andre Bazin, strong advocates of cinematic realism. The issue here is that the idea of a photographic objectivity inherent to the cinema, of the art that benefits from an *automatic report of the world*, can already be clearly perceived in the following excerpt of Canudo:

Suddenly, the cinematograph has become popular, summing up at once all the values of a still eminently scientific age, entrusted to Calculus rather than to the operations of Fantasy (*Fantasia*), and has imposed itself in a peculiar way as a new kind of theater, a scientific theater built with precise calculations, a mechanical mode of expression. (Ibid.: 60)

Although not exactly finding in these arguments the legitimacy of cinema as an art expression, Canudo does not exclude them from the discussion – he accepts them as intercurrent features of the cinematic phenomenon, and outlines them similarly to how the apologists of cinematic realism will do later on.

In “Naissance ...” we may also find a possible origin for the idea that cinema would actually be an ancestral creative impulse that remits to prehistoric times, which can be proved by the finding of cave paintings. This analogy is useful to Canudo in his search (*paragone*) for the distinction of the cinema (here understood as essentialism) compared with the visual arts, established by the advantage of capturing the elements of the objective world under the creative (and subjective) point of view of the artist. The first and most obvious feature of this distinction would be movement. According to Canudo,

The ancient painters and engravers of prehistoric caves who reproduced on reindeer bones the contracted movements of a galloping horse, of the artists who sculpted cavalcades on the Parthenon friezes, also developed the device of stylizing certain aspects of life in clear, incisive moments. But the cinematograph does not merely reproduce one aspect; it represents the whole of life in action. (Ibid.: 61)

Twelve years later, in “Réflexions sur le septième art”, Canudo proceeds with his defense of cinema as an art expression. Again, it is possible to see the oscillation between identification and essentialism – with focus on the second one. Canudo begins his essay arguing that cinema (and here the author employs more freely the term *cinema*) arises from of industrial and scientific research, and that in France, more than anywhere else, people ignore that cinema is the art that “must not resemble any other” (Canudo, 1988: 291).

A small seed of Bazinian realism can be seen when Canudo states, “[a]nd yet, *nature as character* is another absolute domain of the cinema” (Ibid.: 292, emphasis in the original). Nevertheless, keeping in mind Canudo’s connection with the formal theories of art, it should not be a surprise that, soon after that, the author enthusiastically acclaims the German expressionist cinema, particularly the expressive power of the *décor* in movies such as Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1919) and Karl Heinz Martin’s *From Morn to Midnight* (*Von Morgens bis Mitternacht*, 1922), besides the occasional French Impressionism by Abel Gance’s *The Wheel* (*La Roue*, 1923) (Ibid.: 292; 294). Radicalizing formalism, and in accordance with his agreement with expressionists, Canudo states that the real can only be truly found in poetry:

Between the mood of unreality synthesized by the German film’s designers, and the mood of equally synthetic unreality “engineered” in Gance’s French film, there is absolute reality: the artist’s dream, Poetry. As Novalis says, Poetry is the absolute Real. (Ibid.: 294).

Therefore, the idea of a “cinematic language” soon appears in “Réflexions ...”, the concept of cinema as a universal language, whose domain would guarantee the status of art to what once was mere mechanical reproduction of reality.

1. Let us remember that the essay “An unexpected junction” (*Nezhdannii styk*), SM Eisenstein, was written in 1928 and published in *Life of Arts* magazine (*Zhinz Iskusstva*) n. 34, and “Out of Box” (*Za Kadrom*), written in February 1929, was published in 1930 in the French magazine *Transitions* with the title “The Cinematographic Principle and Japanese Culture”. In 1949, the same essay was published in *Film Form* titled “The Cinematographic Beginning and the Ideogram”. Analogies between the cinematographic language and ideographic writing, as well as expectations of the dispute between identification and essentialism, reappear in a variety of Eisenstein’s texts, such as “Through Theatre to Cinema” (original title *Srednaia iz trekh*, 1924/29), written in 1934 and published in *Sovietskoie Kino* magazine, n. 11/12, December of the same year (see Eisenstein, 2002a).

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Thus, the cinematic language, even outside the story that it animates, is feverishly seeking its speech, articulating its syllables, striving toward an optical pronunciation. So far it has generally lacked elegance, or pleasing spontaneity. (Ibid.: 295)

The linguistic paradigm that is presented in Pudovkin and particularly in Eisenstein, then revisited and reviewed by cine-structuralism, has already manifested itself at that point. In the subsequent lines, Canudo provides more *ammunition for the dogma image*, and then refers to the alphabets and ideograms, an important analogy for Eisenstein¹.

Ideographic languages like Chinese, or hieroglyphic systems like the Egyptian, still visibly manifest their origins in images. The newer alphabetical languages, although based more on sound than image, might also hark back to these origins in images. Cinema, for its part, draws upon and multiplies the possibilities of expression in images which heretofore was the province of painting and sculpture. It shall build a truly universal language with characteristics entirely yet undreamed of. (Canudo, 1988: 291)

Nevertheless, in the same paragraph Canudo highlights aspects of the cinema that are in the center of the realistic thinking that has been constituted in a supposed opposition to the formalism and the linguistic paradigm.

The arrival of cinema heralds the renovation of all modes of artistic creation, of all means of “arresting the fleeting”, conquering the ephemeral. What it can already show us – for example, in slow-motion studies on plant growth – is an affirmation of its stupendous capacity to renew the representation of life itself, fixing the instant-by-instant movement of beings and things. Cinema gives us a visual analysis of such precise evidence that it cannot but vastly enrich the poetic and painterly imagination. In addition, through its “horizontal” dimension – its capacity to show events occurring simultaneously – it will increase the total sum of our sensations. (Ibid.: 296)

The same paragraph ends with an image that could refer to ideas of *tracing the real* and *cobbled of the real*, which were so important to Bazin (2014): “The screen, this single-page book so unique and infinite as life itself, permits the world – both internally and externally – to be printed on its surface” (Canudo 1988: 296).

Canudo dedicates his following lines to a critique of the French cinema and the commercial interests involved in it – a critic that sounds familiar even

when transposed to the 1950s, in the context of the emerging “Authors’ Policy” (1988: 297) – to afterwards resume his critique of the “filmed theater” (1988: 297). The oscillation between *identification* and *essentialism* reappears in this context:

If cinema is more than just photographed theater, or an illustrated realist novel, all the actors must be articulated in the play of light, just as painters expressed the phantoms of their dreams via the play of color. The film, the work, will then appear in its own right, independent of the other arts, not needing overexplicit intertitles or mimed speeches, free from the conventional fetters of the theater. (Canudo, 1988: 298)

Then, Canudo reinforces his appreciation for the suggestion power of cinema, his bet on the cinematic representation of emotions and on the cinematographic potential to move the audience – a concept near to the cinema defended by D. W. Griffith, revised and developed by Eisenstein (2002a). Applying the term *écraniste* to refer to the filmmaker, Canudo debates here his concept of “cinematic truth” (part IV of “Réflexions...”), and again criticizes the mere objective reproduction of reality.

But if the *écraniste* has succeeded in situating his action in the greater psychological context, if he has successfully prepared me for the emotions he feels, then I will respond in the manner he desires.

In cinema, as well as in the searches of the mind, the art consists in suggesting emotions, and not in retelling facts.

Only a few *écranistes* have understood that cinematographic truth must correspond to literary truth, to pictorial truth, even to the truth of love. None of this is objective “reality”. (Ibid.: 299)

In Canudo’s texts there are seeds of arguments both in favor of the *image dogma* (formalism) and the *object dogma* (realism). Both *essentialism* and *identification*, both the condemnation of representational naturalism and the measured praise of realism. In this sense, Canudo’s prose may unintentionally assist on clarifying a fundamental problem. The issue is consisted of the following theoretical parities: *identification vs. essentialism*; *formalism vs. realism*. If *essentialism* and *identification* may be considered parity categories, commensurable or relatable (moving towards or away from the other arts), formalism and realism cannot. In other words, I might argue that cinema comprises or resembles other arts, or that the cinema actually is distinguished

from other arts expressions by such and such reasons. I might further clarify that cinema is similar to the other arts at such and such aspects, and it gets distant, or distinguished (in relation to other arts), by these and these other aspects. However, is not possible to definitely state that the interest (or *faith*, in Bazinian terms) in the form (image) invalidates the interest (or *faith*) in real or in reality – ultimately, in the empirical world, the objects of the world being apprehended by our senses.

CLASHES IN REVIEW

Such controversy is extensive and involves a variety of authors, including aspects of philosophy and philosophy of cinema that I do not intend to approach now. However, for now, I would emphasize that the division of the cinematic thinking between two *ideological trenches*, namely the formalist and the realistic one, reduces the complexity of the theoretical agendas of cinema at different times in history. It is worth remembering that the same division reflects, to some extent, another separation, which has also been identified as overly reductive. It is that one which elected, as in Georges Sadoul (1983), the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès as respective *parents* or *founders* of two cinematographic sides: the documentary and/or the cinema of naturalist orientation, and the fantasy movie and/or the cinema of formalist trend. It is not necessary now to scrutinize the weaknesses of this false cinematographic genealogy.

It is not common ground to avant-gardes (inside or outside cinema) – except for the most extreme moments of Expressionism and Surrealism, for example, and movements such as the *pure cinema* or *abstract cinema* – the disregard to the empirical world or objectivity representation issues. It may seem obvious, but it is worth remembering that *the Soviet Montage School*, considered an avant-garde movement in the context of cinema history, never defined itself in opposition to *reality*, to the empirical and historical world, and perhaps in opposition to *realism*. It would be at least unreasonable to associate the unrealistic label to filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein – although both had very particular conceptions about dealing with reality. The fact is that the *cine-eye* (*kino-glaz*) of Vertov (1983), or the *cine-cuff* of Eisenstein – and his “montage of attractions” (1983) – were never built as opposed to the reality of the empirical world, perhaps, quite the opposite. It is not unprecise at all, from a careful reading of manifestos and essays signed by Vertov and partners (the *kinoks*), but especially by Eisenstein, to locate a very certain realistic orientation behind the speculation about the artistic form. A

particular kind of modernist realism or avant-garde, in the spirit of Brecht, according to which

A photo of the Krupp factory or the A.E.G. indicates almost nothing about these institutions. The authentic reality slips and falls on functional. We might say that the fabric is unable to portrait the concretization human relations. It is therefore, in reality, “something to build”, something “artificial”, something “addressed”. (1984: 113)

For Brecht, realism and shape become amalgamated to such extent that it is no longer possible to classify this artist with an old opposition of binary terms. We may see, for example, “The Birth of the Cine-Eye”, Vertov’s text originally published in 1924, an appeal regarding the “truth”, to “everything that could be useful to discover and show the *truth*” (1983: 262, emphasis in the original). For more controversial and diffuse that this term might be, particularly in this context, it seems unreasonable to divorce it from a realistic intention:

Not the “Cine-Eye” by the “Cine-Eye”, but the truth, thanks to the means and possibilities of “Cine-Eye”, that is, the Cine-Truth.

Not the improvisation taking “by the improvisation taking”, but to show unmasked people, without makeup, fixing them at the time they are not representing, reading their thoughts revealed by the camera. (Vertov, 1983: 262)

It could be objected that the search for such *truth* and the realistic intention graspable in cinema and in the theses of the Soviet montagists were wrong, or were wrongly formulated. But this questioning is not enough to divorce them from a broad realistic aesthetic program – a divorce that frequently appears in many retrospective approaches and even in the teaching of film theory history.

Ultimately, we can assume that an intention, and even a realistic guidance, goes through the majority of the aesthetic programs, schools, and movements that compose the film history.

Strictly speaking, the formalist film thinking does not exclude (except in some moments of more extremism) the objective dimension of the techniques of the approximate reproduction of reality, or the aspects regarding the content of the moving image (its external referent), or yet the photographic support of the cinematographic art. Maybe that submission of the content in favor of the form, as noted by Perkins (1976), might

be less prevalent than what this author assumes about the theory and practice of filmmakers/theorists commonly associated with formalism. For example, in his essay “Eh! On the Purity of Film Language”, originally published in May 1934 in the journal *Sovietskoie Kino* no. 5, Eisenstein notes that, “for many directors, montage and leftist excesses of formalism – are synonyms. However, the montage is not that at all” (2002a: 110). The filmmaker adds:

I am not in favor of the “hegemony” of the montage. The time when, with educational and training aims, it was necessary to conduct tactical and controversial movements for the wide release of the montage as an expressive medium of cinema has gone. (Eisenstein, 2002a, 111)

On the other hand, the realistic thinking does not exclude the concern with form, much less condemn it. On the contrary, the most sophisticated realistic thinking (as in Bazin) sustains a fine formal rigor, and suffers from an aesthetic normativism as limiting as that one found within the more radical formalist thinking. If the realistic thinking in film theory is constituted and is defined in opposition to the formalist thinking, the fact is that both emphasize almost the same agenda of issues, and one particular question: what is cinema. Hence, it is difficult to analyze one to the detriment of the other, the disposal or disregard of aspects of an agenda for the benefit of axioms of another one. In other words, being *realistic* does not mean subduing the form as well as being *formalist* is not characterized by despising the content of the moving image. Let us look at the following excerpt:

Well, the situation now is that once again our culture is being given a radically new direction – this time by film. Every evening many millions of people sit and experience human destinies, characters, feelings and moods of every kind with their eyes, and without the need for words. For the intertitles that films still have are insignificant; they are partly the ephemeral rudiments of as yet undeveloped forms and partly they bear a special meaning that does not set out to assist the visual expression! The whole of mankind is now busy relearning the long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions. This language is not the substitute for words characteristic of the sign language of the deaf and dumb, but the visual corollary of human souls immediately made flesh. *Man will become visible once again.* (Eisenstein, 2002a: 111)

Who is the author of this text? A sympathizer of the cinematic realism or some critic of *cine-language*? No, it is Béla Balász (2010: 10), in the essay “Visible Man” (*Der Mensch Sichtbare*), from 1923 – a contemporaneous text of “Réflexions sur la Septième Art”, by Canudo. Also according to Balász, the “camera found the parent cell of vital substances in which all major events are ultimately designed: since the largest piece of land is nothing but an aggregate moving particle” (Ibid.: 90) – to whom this observation serves, to formalistic or realistic ones?

Eventually, Christine Hetherington-Wright and Ruth Doughty note that the cut in continuity, the montage, and the sequence-shot feature three different ways of telling a story (2011: 48). However, “[a]lthough Soviet montage is most famously associated with Formalism, all three ways of composing a narrative involve selecting a form and applying it to a text” (loc. cit.). About Bazin, whose defense of cinematic realism would be virtually opposed to formalism, Robert Stam explains:

In fact, Bazin is in some ways a formalist in the sense of being less interested in any specific “content” than in a style of *mise-en-scène*. He neither can be reduced to a purely realism theoretical; his ideas about gender, authorship and “classic cinema” also have had a huge impact. (2003: 96)

It is worth remembering that, as Eisenstein (2002a: 110-111) later recognized the emphasis on form and montage as a political necessity restricted to a certain time, Bazin also relativized the indexical function of cinema, a paradigm to which his name has always been associated:

What do we actually mean by “cinema” in our present context? If we mean a mode of expression by means of realistic representation, by a simple registering of images, simply an outer seeing as opposed to the use of the resources of introspection or of analysis in the style of the classical novel, then it must be pointed out that the English novelists had already discovered in behaviorism the psychological justifications of such a technique. But here the literary critic is guilty of imprudently prejudging the true nature of cinema, based on a very superficial definition of what is here meant by reality. *Because its basic material is photography it does not follow that the seventh art is of its nature dedicated to the dialectic of appearances and the psychology of behavior.* While it is true that it relies entirely on the outside world for its objects it has a thousand ways of acting on the appearance of an object so as to eliminate any equivocation and to make of this outward sign of one and only one inner reality. (2005: 62, emphasis added)

We should not forget that even at the last line of “Ontology of the photographic image” (text considered by many as a kind of *manifesto* of the indexical paradigm), Bazin has relativized the role of the cinema’s photographic base, opening up to the complexity: “On the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language” (Ibid.: 16).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Therefore, in the case of Ricciotto Canudo, whose writings largely enriched this bipartisan approach (formalism *vs.* realism), it is possible to verify the organic nature of the relationship between thoughts about form and content, or the nature of the cinematic image. Although Canudo does not disguise his enthusiasm for the formalist paradigm, his two essays here directly investigated provide useful arguments for both aesthetic programs, *posteriori* developed both by theoretical formalists and by realism thinkers. I tend to believe that the bipartisan approach of film theory might obfuscate more than clarify aspects of the evolution of the cinematic thought as a whole, with implications regarding the contemporary understanding of the cinematic and audiovisual phenomenon. Instead of two parallel or diverging lines in the context of film history and theory, a more productive way of approaching the cinematic formalism and realism might be grading them in a *continuum* or vector – a line whose more distant extremities do not actually account for the most of the produced thought.

Finally, in the context of digital cinema and post-photochemical images, the precariousness of the formalism *vs.* realism opposition seems even more evident. As noted by Stephen Prince, “Digital imaging exposes the enduring dichotomy [Formalism *vs.* Realism] in film theory as a false boundary. It is not as if cinema either indexically records the world or stylistically transfigures it. Cinema does both” (1996: 35). The author notes that

Whereas classical film theory was organized by a dichotomy between realism and formalism, contemporary theory has preserved the dichotomy even while recasting one set of its terms. Today, indexically based notions of cinema realism exist in tension with a semiotic view of the cinema as discourse and of realism as one discourse among others. (Prince, 1996: 31)

Prince asks himself: towards the digital cinema, should we entirely dismiss the concepts of realism in cinema? His answer points out to a model based on correspondence, in an effort for a reconciliation between formalism

and realism in the context of contemporary cinema studies (post-photographic) (Ibid.: 31). Furthermore, according to Prince,

The tensions within film theory can be surmounted by avoiding an essentializing conception of the cinema stressing unique, fundamental properties and by employing, in place of indexically based notions of film realism, a correspondence-based model of cinematic representation. Such a model will enable us to talk and think about both photographic images and computer generated images and about the ways that cinema can create images that seem alternately real and unreal. (Prince, 1996: 31).

In this scenario, the current reconfiguration of the indexical paradigm, driven by deep changes in the cinema praxis (digital/post-photochemical), suggests new models of analysis and new approaches to a virtual history of film theories. Among these models are the concepts of perceptual realism, proposed by Gregorie Currie (1995) and developed by Stephen Prince (1996), and the correspondence-based model (Ibid.: 31), replacing the indexically based model. Regardless of the validity of the correspondence-based proposed by Prince (1996), the fact is that in the context of digital or post-photochemical images, more flexible and comprehensive models seem to be necessary – as well as new perspectives of retrospective approach on film theory. **M**

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