

*LUKÁCSIAN FILM THEORY AND CINEMA:
A STUDY OF GEORG LUKÁCS' WRITINGS ON FILM 1913-71*

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Lukácsian Film Theory and Cinema. A Study of Georg Lukács' Writings on Film, 1913-71 is the third part of Ian Aitken's trilogy on European realist film theory. Curiously, the name of Georg Lukács — who is usually not associated with film theory, but known for being one of the most influential Marxist-Leninist philosophers and literary critics of the 20th century — appears in all three books, the analysis of his thought taking more and more space the further we advance in the trilogy. One has the impression of following the author's growing curiosity and interest in the Lukácsian philosophy and ideas about film: While in the first volume, *European Film Theory and Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2002), Lukács' thoughts about film are briefly mentioned and presented alongside the theories of Grierson, Kracauer and Bazin in one of the nine chapters of the book, the second volume, *Realist Film Theory and Cinema: The Nineteenth-Century Lukácsian and Intuitionist Realist Traditions* (Manchester University Press, 2006), grants him almost half of the book, including Lukács' interpretation of Hegel and the theory he derives from it, an investigation into some of his central philosophical and aesthetic concepts such as totality, *Stimmungseinheit* (unity of atmosphere) and *Besonderheit* (particularity/specificity) as well as a model of Lukácsian interpretation illustrated through the analysis of two films (Wajda's *Danton*, 1990 and Visconti's *Senso*, 1954). The last of the three books, *Lukácsian Film Theory and Cinema. A Study of Georg Lukács' Writings on Film, 1913-71* is, as indicated by the title, wholly concerned with the Hungarian philosopher's aesthetic conception of film. However, what Aitken offers to his readers is at once more and less than what the title promises. Less because Lukács did not actually write a comprehensive film theory, as he admits himself in one of the interviews published in the book (264: "I have only dealt with film incidentally" in "Revolution and Psychology of Everyday Life," 261-267) Apart from an early essay on film (*Thoughts Towards an Aesthetics of the Cinema*, 1913), and one

chapter in his *The Specificity of the Aesthetics* published fifty years later in 1963, there are only a couple of interviews and published letters dealing partly with the question of film. One could say that Aitken somehow magnifies the impact of Lukács' thinking on film after having discovered its existence. However, Lukács' remarks on the filmic medium and its inherent potential are stimulating and challenging, even more so when embedded in his broader philosophy. This is where Aitken's book is exceeding what its title suggests: it not only provides an analysis of Lukács' texts on film; these are extensively put in relation with his political and personal situation as well as with his philosophical and aesthetical thought, giving thereby a more ample and profound understanding of the issues in question.

Aitken's book is divided into two parts, the first consisting of his own reading and analysis of Lukács' philosophy and comments on film in chronological order, the second containing translations of Lukács' writings dealing with film and cinema (some of which available for the first time in English).

The first part begins with a description of Lukács' early aesthetics, that is to say, with an inquiry into his major works *Soul and Form* (1910) and *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), and their conceptual framework and connection to his essay *Thoughts Towards an Aesthetic of the Cinema* (written in 1911, published in 1913 in German), which is included in English in Aitken's second part of the book. Aitken points out how Lukács employs and relates philosophical notions such as soul, form, experience, culture, unity and totality, then links them to his essay on film. He also contextualizes this text within the framework of the *Kino-Debatte* (1910-1931), in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung*, which included contributions, among others, from Béla Balázs, Siegfried Kracauer and Rudolf Arnheim.

In this early essay, Lukács depicts the specificities of the filmic medium by demarcating it from another art form: theatre. According to him, the fundamental difference between the two is the different temporalities they generate — the drama being characterized by its absolute presentness sustained through the actors' play on the stage, and expressing the depth of the soul, whereas this intensive, concentrated and portentous "present" cannot be reproduced in film. Instead, film images, showing gestures, events and "movement as perpetual flux," recalling, though without being, "real life", become, as Lukács puts it, "fantastic": "A life without present, a life without fate, without reasons, without motives; a life the innermost of our soul never wants to become nor can become identical with" (*Thoughts Towards an Aesthetic of the Cinema*, 182). However, as Aitken

stresses, this aspect of film is not depreciated by Lukács, but constitutes the force of the medium: as pure surface, pure externality, it is able to open up an access to empirical liveliness beyond the causalities of instrumental rationality at work in real life. This “maximum vivacity” [*Lebendigkeit*], which is related to the mutism of silent film, and thus to body expressions rather than to articulated reason, grants an unprecedented poetic aspect to ordinary life and awakens “the *child* that is alive in each human being” (184). According to Aitken, “[t]he kind of film which Lukács endorses in *Thoughts* would therefore be a combination of naturalism, melodramatic effect, popular culture and surreal symbolism; and would also be characterized by both the use of special effects techniques and the deployment of a lyrical, poetic quality” (29).

This description of Lukács, privileging an art characterized by its inherent naturalism, could astonish those who are familiar with his thought, since the philosopher would later categorically reject, especially in his accounts on the realist novel, every naturalistic attempt to depict reality, and condemn artists and writers for showing naturalistic tendencies. This is where Aitken’s account goes beyond the simple explanation of the Lukácsian text as he addresses explicitly this violent reversal of Lukács’ conception of art, philosophy, and politics. In a chapter entitled *Narrate or Describe* (picking up the name of one influent article written by Lukács), he aims to explain how these changes were motivated, and to mediate between the thoughts of the young philosopher before and after his conversion to Bolshevism. Nonetheless, Lukács’ attitude towards naturalism, especially in relation to film, remains to some extent ambiguous, as Aitken points out repeatedly throughout his book.

During the 40 years that Aitken calls Lukács’ middle period (1918-1957), Lukács wasn’t concerned with cinema in a theoretical way, but turned in his philosophy and writings on literature towards a rigorous Marxist-Leninist approach. Concepts such as alienation, reification and class struggle became central to his thinking about capitalist society, and in his aesthetic considerations he followed Lenin’s theory of reflection — art as part of the superstructure is supposed to reflect dialectically the politico-economic conditions of society — and Engels’ conception of realism, supposed to show the objective underlying power-structures of a society through the representation of typical characters able to mediate between the socio-political totality and the individual. Instead of focusing on the representation of empirical reality, its intuitive and lively aspects and individual perceptive experiences, Lukács is now concerned with a portrayal of the social and

political reality. This has also an impact on his understanding of the relationship between form and content: against what he calls formalist tendencies, Lukács defends the idea that form has to follow the (political, “objective”) content. Aitken explains that this is one of the reasons why he rejects both modernism (which he considers as unable to penetrate into objective reality because it only reproduces the fragmentarity and immediacy on the surface of life) and naturalism which, in his understanding, is based on supposedly “neutral”, positivist empirical descriptions, thus consolidating capitalism instead of proposing a deeper comprehension and critique.

The film thematic, which had been suspended in order to fill the conceptual and political gap between the pre-communist, and the communist philosophy of Lukács, appears again in Aitken’s examination of Lukács’ seminal work *The Specificity of the Aesthetic*, especially his close reading of the chapter on film. Aitken’s treatment of this chapter, just as the original text itself, is quite dense, as it introduces a number of new aesthetic concepts. Aitken explores therein, among others, the notion of specificity (*Besonderheit*), that which mediates between the singular/individual and the universal, the concepts of atmosphere (*Stimmung*) and unity of atmosphere (*Stimmungseinheit*), which relate to the general ambiance as well as the realistic, perceptual and conceptual framework, and constitute the main “effect-category” of film. He also analyses how the notion of reflection already mentioned above is further developed and becomes a key notion for aesthetical philosophy. According to Lukács, all art forms are reflections of the external socio-political conditions of a society through the mediation of the artist’s consciousness, thus producing a totality represented by the dialectical relation between objective conditions and the way they are experienced. One of the important aspects of film as elaborated in *The Specificity of the Aesthetics* consists of its ability to produce a double reflection. Film, based on a “deanthropomorphic reflection and its technological realization” (187) — which means, a technical, non-human process unable to capture the essence of human beings and their inherent perceptual experiences — has to employ anthropomorphizing features in order to acquire artistic qualities. Therefore, the filmmaker has to use technical tools such as montage, etc. in order to reproduce perceptual experience and human values, thus effecting a special kind of second mimesis. Because film is particularly close to life due to the photographic authenticity of its images and their connection to real-time movements, “artistic form, and perceptual experience set within the real course of temporal duration are brought into correspondence for the first

time" (89), as Aitken puts it. Through this particular relationship between empirical reality, perceptual experience and attributed meaning, film proves capable of representing the interactions between appearance and being, ordinary life and essence, the particular and the universal and thus to prefigure the process of mediation between subjective and objective modes of being. This ability is due to the film's elasticity, which is not limited to mere naturalistic depiction or pure subjective expression, but moves on from one to the other.

Aitken's last chapters are concerned with Lukács late writings and the political and intellectual context from which they arose: on the one hand, Lukács' very complex and difficult *Towards the Ontology of Social Being* which Aitken recapitulates in a comprehensive way for the sake of completeness even if it does not deal specifically with aesthetic issues, and on the other hand, Lukács' smaller contributions on film through film journals, letters, interviews and introductions to books written by other authors. While these articles, some of which written before the publication of the *The Specificity of the Aesthetics*, show a peculiar interest in specific films, as well as in the filmic medium in general, and its capacity of manipulation and ideological persuasion (recalling Adorno and Horkheimer's remarks on the "culture industry"), they do not confront the question of film as thoroughly as his earlier writings. In Aitken's reading, they constitute nevertheless a relevant contribution to Lukács' comprehensive theory of film. The dialectical stretching of Aitken's approach to Lukácsian theory becomes very visible in these two last chapters: they show his intention to reconstruct in depth the Lukácsian philosophical framework, in order to put it into relation with Lukács' smaller, more modest writings which are explicitly dealing with film, thus allowing to mediate one through the other. This way, he not only shows how Lukács' thinking is indeed concerned with film theory, but also how a reading that elaborates on its implicit potential by relating his explicitly aesthetic notions with his broader philosophy can be made fruitful for film scholars.

What makes Aitken's analysis peculiar is the seriousness and consistency with which he delves into Lukács' philosophical and political universe. He explicitly takes the time to unravel the philosophical framework through which the aesthetic notions are then analysed. The filmic medium is thus understood for itself, in its own terms, but also as embedded in a complex of conceptual relations exceeding it. Hence, his book not only gives a comprehensive insight into Lukács' original thinking and the way he correlates politics, philosophy, art and film, but also an illustration of the fruitfulness and the need

of trespassing (while respecting at the same time) the intellectual division of labour in the analysis of specific art forms, particularly the filmic medium.