

Chapter 12

Modernism and Cinema

Thomas Alva Edison patented his invention of the Kinetoscope in 1891. Cinema as we know it today therefore traces back its origin to the 1890s, when penny arcade kinetoscopes were in vogue. Moving pictures have come a long way since then.

In his seminal work, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' Walter Benjamin observed that 'the camera was surgeon's scalpel which laid bare the optical unconscious.' Nowhere were the effects of modern technology and artistic movements more strongly felt, and disseminated, than in cinema. In this chapter, we will see how forces of modernism impacted the very young art form, such as cinema. You will also learn about some of the important names and movements related to this epoch.

The Pioneers of cinema

You will understand how cinema and forces of modernity go hand in hand when you go through the works of the following:

- The Lumiere Brothers
- Edison
- Melies
- D.W.Griffith

- Edwin S Porter
- Charlie Chaplin
- Buster Keaton
- Carl Theodore Dreyer

Great Filmmakers and Modernism

a. The Lumière Brothers

We owe the beginnings of cinema to Auguste Lumière (1862-1954) and Louis Lumière (1864-1968) . Louis worked on a machine to compete with Edison's Kinetoscope and invented the Cinematograph , which was a camera and projector in one. Their first film was *Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory* (1895), along with *The Arrival of a Train at a Station* (1895). The Lumieres are also noted for introducing the first ever special effects on screen in *The Demolition of a Wall* (1895) in which reverse motion was used to “rebuild” a wall.

b. George Melies

A conjurer, cartoonist, magician and inventor, George Melies was a multifaceted talent. He is said to be the first to use the trick photography and developed devices such as superimposition and stop motion. His adaptation of Jules Verne's *Le*

Voyage dans la Lune or *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and *The Melomaniac* (1903) were among the early landmarks in the history of motion pictures.

c. DW Griffith

DW Griffith is often termed as the father of cinema. He was a student of Edwin S Porter, whose *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) was the first film with a definite storyline. Griffith's most famous work is *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Set during the Civil War (1861-65), the film is noted for being outrageously racist, primarily because its representation: "The evil blacks versus the good white". It blatantly argues for Ku Klux Klan. A blockbuster, the film is also remembered for its realistic depiction of historical incidents, such as assassination of Lincoln and Sherman's march through Georgia. As if to atone for his 'sin' of racism, Griffith's next was *Intolerance*, a plea for racial integration.

Politically, this was an era where momentous events were taking place: The Treaty of Versailles was signed in June 1919 signalling the official end of WWI, The Wall Street collapsed in 1929, Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany in 1933, and in the same year, Roosevelt launched the 'New Deal' as a response to the economic Depression in America. New way of socio-political order resulted in novel artistic modes offering a radical perspective on the prevailing conditions.

Modernism and German Expressionistic Cinema

The impact of expressionism movement was soon realized in cinematic art. Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919), considered as one of the foremost expression of this aesthetics. It is a narrative of a mad doctor who uses a somnambulist (sleep-walker) to commit crimes for him. Wiene presents his actors in exaggerated make-up, and places them in distorted sets and angular architecture.

Dr Caligari embodies all the stylistic features of expressionism: chiaroscuro

(interplay of lights and shadows), oblique angles, spatial distortions, danger lurking in the corner, city as a threatening site, morally ambiguous characters.

It was also blamed for brainwashing the Germans, resulting in the rise of Nazism.

Other landmark expressionistic films of this period are *Nosferatu* (1922), *The Last Laugh* (1924) and *Metropolis* (1927). Directors such as Fritz Lang, Karl Freund and Billy Wilder, took expressionism to America; the result of this transcontinental exodus was a hybrid of German expressionism, French poetic realism, and American pulp— film noir.

FW Murnau (1888-1931) was yet another early exponent of expressionism.

Along with Fritz Lang and G.W. Pabst, his films are full of dread and suggest a world between reality and fantasy. The themes of repression and sexuality recur which echo something of Murnau's personal life since he was a closet homosexual during the period of Germany's homophobic laws. His films are known for creating a sense of an alternative universe. One of the best horror films, *Nosferatu, A Symphony of Terror* (1922), is a classic example of German expressionism, with Max Shreck playing Count Orlok, a Dracula-like character.

Recognized as the first science-fiction film, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) was one of the most expensive films of its times. The fairy tale plot focuses on Freder, the spoiled son of a rich father, the Master of Metropolis.

Freder learns the oppressive living conditions of the working class, and comes to understand them through a saintly young girl, Maria, who also mediates in cases of disputes between the industrialists and the workers. In order to break this alliance, the Master gets Maria kidnapped, collaborates with a mad scientist and creates a female robot. This evil double of Maria is unleashed on the city, where the femme fatale dances in a club and instigates a riot in the streets.

One lasting image is of the Tower of Babel as Maria addresses the workers.

Metropolis is credited for blending imageries of religion with that of a science-fiction, which have been referred in many later works: a futuristic robot, a steel-handed mad scientist, burning at stake, workers walking into the jaws of a machine

d. **Carl Theodore Dreyer** (1889-1968)

Born in Denmark, Dreyer's films are marked by austerity and stately pace. He took female suffering as a great theme, where women come in conflict with domineering, patriarchal forces. Dreyer started his career with *Leaves from Satan's Book* (1919), a work inspired by DW Griffith's epic, *Intolerance*. Dreyer's monumental work is *La Passion De Jeanne D'Arc* (The Passion of Joan of Arc; 1928), where Joan is played by Renee Falconetti, a stage actress, who played the part without makeup. For Dreyer, she embodied simplicity, starkness, and suffering. A perfectionist, he made Falconetti kneel down on stones for long hours to strip her face of emotions.

Let me repeat the outline of the story of Joan of Arc for you, though it is so well-known. A simple country girl from Orleans, dressed as a boy, led the French troops to defeat the English army. Joan was burned at the stake in 1431 on charges of heresy. An important feature of the shooting of Joan of Arc, is Dreyer's attention to details. The set was built in one piece with movable walls for the cameras. The sets are sparse and the emphasis is not on costumes or picturesque scenery.

Additionally, Dreyer used unusual editing and cinematography. The prison guards and the ecclesiastics on the court are seen from a low angle. Falconetti is shot in softer shades of grays, rather than in the sharp contrasts of black and white, shades Dreyer uses for her ruthless examiners.

Vampyr (*The Vampire*; 1932) is Dreyer's first sound film, where he pushes the subjective camera to a new depth of psychological horror. The film was inspired by a short story by Sheridan Le Fanu "Carmilla," that appeared in his collection *Through a Glass Darkly*. Dreyer takes the vampire-story template to evoke dread by forging German-Expressionist lighting to a French-Surrealist imagery of the unconscious. A crucial scene involves the hero looking into a coffin and finding his own body inside; and soon we are sealed inside the glass coffin as though a punishment for voyeurism. Through such innovative points of view shots, protracted dream sequences, and a haunting sound track, *Vampyr* has cemented its status as a perfectly chilling horror film. The film, however, was an all-round debacle, and Dreyer had a nervous breakdown after its completion.

QUIZ 1

1. Fill in the blanks:

- i. is Edison's contribution to cinema.
- ii. is a science fiction film by Fritz Lang.
- iii. Carl Dreyer's most well-known work is

2. State whether the following are true or false:

- i. *Vampyr* is Dreyer's first sound film.
- ii. *Dr Caligari* is a film by Fritz Lang.
- iii. *A Trip to the Moon* is the first film ever made.

Montage as an editing technique

Montage editing came out of the Soviet experimental cinema of the 1920s. Lev Kuleshov's significant contribution was the idea that each shot is like a building block and it derives its meaning from its context, that is, the shots placed around it.

During his workshop sessions at the state film school, VGIK, Kuleshov and his students would systematically dissect D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), viewing it several times, editing, reediting ; assembling and reassembling it. Kuleshov further felt that juxtaposition must be inherent in all film signs. Shots therefore acquire meaning when juxtaposed with what comes before and after them.

To put his principles into practice, Kuleshov juxtaposed several shots from different pieces of films which he then turned into a sequence. Experimenting with, what he called, the "Kuleshov effect", he took footage of the face of actor Ivan Mozhukin, and spliced in shots of a woman lying in a coffin, a little girl with a teddy bear, and a bowl of soup. The audience reacted positively believing that the actor had emoted well; however, in reality, the actor's face never changed expressions (only his still shot was used), and Kuleshov concluded that people react to a context, along with the content, to derive the meaning of a scene or a sequence.

Montage was used to perfection by Sergei Eisenstein who explained it as, " A montage is assembled from separate images that provide a partial representation which are in combination and juxtaposition." Suggestive of conflict and collision, Montage is particularly used when an editor/filmmaker want to convey a great deal into a brief segment.

The Comic Masters

a. Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977)

Charles Chaplin was born in England. Abandoned by an alcoholic father, his mother was a certified lunatic and put away in a mental asylum when the young Charles was nine. He started performing on the stage by the age of eight and joined a theatrical group. Chaplin came to Hollywood in 1913, and soon became an internationally successful star. In his autobiography, he recalls Los Angeles as “an ugly city, hot and oppressive” (Chaplin 1964:128). Soon, along with Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, D.W. Griffith, and W.S. Hart, he formed a production company, the United Artists Corporation. His slapstick style, coupled with sentimental themes of his films touched a universal chord. In his first film *The Kid* (1921), he endeared himself to the masses in his role as an underdog who adopts an orphan.

In *The Gold Rush* (1925), the Little Tramp becomes a gold prospector. Some of the noteworthy scenes are where a starving Chaplin boils and relishes his boot; the dance of the rolls; and the hut teetering on the edge of the precipice. *The Gold Rush* is the magnum opus of Chaplin’s career. *City Lights* (1931) is considered as one of Chaplin’s triumphs, with its blend of melodrama and physical comedy. Chaplin plays the Little Tramp who is moved by a blind flower girl’s plight. In a case of mistaken identity, she assumes that he is a rich man. The Tramp needs money for her eye operation to restore her vision and participates in a boxing match.

Though the first film with speech was used in *The Jazz Banker* (1927), Chaplin was convinced that speech would ruin the beauty of cinema, and defiantly presented the film as a “comedy romance in pantomime,” with little sound effects—with music by Chaplin himself. The film struck an emotional chord with the audience—including the Nobel prize winning scientist Alfred Einstein, who was seen wiping his tears after the show.

Since 1916, Chaplin had been thinking about a feeding machine, and also a radio-electric hat that that could register one's thoughts. He used the feeding machine in *Modern Times*.

In the film, *The Tramp* is constantly trying to get back into jail, where he feels safe and cared for. An indictment of crass capitalism and ruthless industrialization, the film satirizes assembly line production. Chaplin shows how in the modern times, a simple worker has become a part of the machines around him. One of the highlights of the film is the place where after hours of labor, the little man gets a lunch break, where he sits with a bowl of soup, twitching to the rhythm of the machine. Chaplin pantomimes his way through this film, full of warmth for the working millions.

b. **Buster Keaton** (1895- 1966)

Buster Keaton was born, Joseph Francis, in a vaudeville family. He started in films with comedian Fatty Arbuckle in 1917. Keaton was a genius as well as a masterful filmmaker whose technically innovative direction paid immaculate attention to details.

Rated by many as superior to Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton's films are interesting largely due to their stoic and surreal quality. He also had a penchant for performing his own stunts, which is evident from his preference for long, fluid takes. Another major factor for his lasting popularity is that he jettisoned slapstick, favoring a subtle comic style. Indefatigable in the face of troubles, Keaton's signature style was the stoically brave the odds and carry on. Among his many admirers are: Luis Bunuel, Chuck Jones, Woody Allen, Jackie Chan, and Steven Spielberg. Because of his ability to keep his composure in the middle of a chaos, he was called the Great Stone Face.

Three Ages (1923), an early film of Keaton's, is a spoof of Griffith's *Intolerance*. Keaton tells three stories set in the prehistoric era, the Roman age and the present day. Each time he is faced with a strong rival in love, who he tackles in his trademark style. In one of his shortest films, *Sherlock, Jr* (1924), Keaton plays a projectionist, who dreams of becoming a detective. He is falsely accused by his jealous rival of stealing from his girlfriend's father, and is banished from her house. In his state of dream, he becomes Sherlock, Jr., the world's second greatest detective.

The General (1927) is considered Keaton's greatest comedy, and is set during the Civil War. The action takes place during the Civil War (1861-65). The General is actually the name of his locomotive, and Keaton is an engineer, Johnny Gray, who loves his engine, and a girl, Annabelle Lee. The film clearly supports the South, as we find the Yankees stealing the locomotive. Much of the action centers on Keaton's search for The General, and winning over the girl. The film, as usual, is full of gags

The comedy arises in *The Cameraman* (1928) with Keaton sharing a dressing room at the swimming pool with a big bully. The two share a match-box of a space which Keaton tries to negotiate as the bully pushes him in a corner. An overhead shot describes the tussle between the two men. The scene ends with Keaton coming out in a bathing suit meant for a much bigger man.

QUIZ II

1. Fill in the blanks:

- i.was signed in June 1919 heralding the official end of WWI.
- ii. as a technique was introduced by Kuleshov and perfected by.....
- iii. Chaplin's is an indictment of ruthless forces of capitalism and industrialization.

2. Match the following:

- | | | | |
|---|-------------|----|-----------------|
| a | VGIK | i | Buster Keaton |
| b | The General | ii | DW Griffiths |
| c | Intolerance | ii | Charlie Chaplin |
| | | i | |
| d | City Lights | iv | Lev Kuleshov |

3. Assignment

Discuss the interplay between painting and cinema during the early period of films.

Suggested reading:

1. Chaplin, Charlie. *My Autobiography*. London: Penguin, 1966.
2. Trotter, David. *Cinema and Modernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

Selected websites

1. <http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue09/reviews/carldreyer/>
2. <http://chaplin.bfi.org.uk/>
3. <http://www.neatorama.com/2010/04/20/charlie-chaplin-celebrating-the-classic-comic/>
4. <http://lifewithoutbuildings.net/2009/09/subverting-the-spectacle-of-modern-times-charlie-chaplin-and-the-situationists.html>
5. <http://www.cineaste.com/articles/screening-modernism.htm>
6. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>

Answer key

Quiz I

1. i-Kinestoscope; ii- Metropolis; iii- The Passion of Joan of Arc
2. i-True; ii- False; iii-False

Quiz II

1. i- The Treaty of Versailles ; ii-Eisenstein ; iii- Modern Times
2. a-iv; b-i; c-ii; d-iii

Postmodernist film is a classification for works that articulate the themes and ideas of postmodernism through the medium of cinema. Postmodernist film attempts to subvert the mainstream conventions of narrative structure and characterization, and tests the audience's suspension of disbelief. Typically, such films also break down the cultural divide between high and low art and often upend typical portrayals of gender, race, class, genre, and time with the goal of creating something that does not