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Everything is Subjective, Especially Art

Film theories can, in some ways, compare themselves to philosophy regarding the contemplation of a particular branch of knowledge. The main difference is the vagueness of philosophy concerning the medium specificity of film theory. Just like philosophy has philosophers, film theory has film theorists and most of their contemplative thoughts can be a basis for another and thus contributes to an endless cycle of theories to study. Within this essay, the focus will be on the objectivity and subjectivity of specific film theories and outside the medium as well. Film theorists like Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov further prove the subjectivity of the medium that philosophers like Locke theorize, however other theorists like Hugo Munsterberg propose a philosophy that transcends medium specificity.

Film theories from Soviet film director and theorist Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein focus on the idea of montage and what role the audience plays in understanding montage. According to theorists like Eisenstein in his theory titled *The Dramaturgy of Film Form*, montage is "not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that *derives* from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another"(Corrigan 262). The difference between an idea composed and an idea derived is the difference between art and mathematics. We can associate two separate images that are abstract on their own to be one whole idea when put together. Eisenstein provides the example of combining the image of an eye and the image of water and claims the audience can naturally deduce that this means "crying". Similarly, the independent image of a mouth combined with the independent image of a dog can be deduced as "barking". There is a very mathematical mindset within these two examples and can be reworded as eye plus water equals crying.

Mathematically, philosophers like John Locke would agree that some things are intuition-based. In a theory based on mathematics but composed of philosophy, Locke explains, "sometimes the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of two ideas immediately by themselves, without the intervention of any other: and this I think we may call intuitive knowledge" (Encyclopedia). This idea that we can connect two objects, images, and ideas and have them derive a separate idea is in line with Eisenstein's theory of montage as it explains the mathematical ideas behind it. However, philosophically, this assumes that montage is an objective idea that can be universally understood. It assumes that, in the way that mathematics assumes, the derivation of two sums is universal. One plus one will always equal two so Eisenstein claims that an eye and water will always equate to crying. The reality, however, is that art such as film is much more subjective and theorists like Locke would argue that two independent images are abstract and together, they are also abstract because deductions such as these are subjective. As Locke points out, "The gradual succession continues in a process of comparing each new image with its common designation and unleashes a process that in terms of its form, is identical to a process of logical deduction" (Locke). To the average person, we may agree that seeing water and an eye insinuates crying, but we could also insinuate various other outcomes based on the individuals' logical deductions.

Subjectivity is a tricky concept because it is not universal. It can shift and change based on the individual or the medium. Consider the 1965 film, *Le Bonheur* directed by French film director Agnes Varda. In a scene in which our main character Francois looks for his wife Therese only to find her dead body being pulled out of the lake, we are shown very interesting cuts and a montage that has an ambiguous ending. With cuts that go back and forth of Francois holding his dead wife in different positions, we get a very small cut in the middle that can be easily missed.

The shot consists of Therese trying to hold onto a tree branch as she drowns. Without context, the scene seems to be telling the audience that she was fighting for her life and didn't want to die. However, many audiences also believe that it was possible she attempted to commit suicide, only fighting for her life after the fact. Various moments contribute and solidify both options however those specifics are not as important for this argument. What is important is the fact that there are two very plausible outcomes, and it is very difficult to know what idea should be derived from this scene. It is not as objective of an idea as Eisenstein claims but rather a subjective contemplation that the individual audience member must make.

The example of the scene from *Le Bonheur* is a small piece of evidence for understanding why Eisenstein's theory of montage is objective, not subjective, and why it does not work when relating it to the medium of film. Eisenstein once compared his theory of montage to that of Japanese hieroglyphics when he said, "The combination of two hieroglyphs of the simplest series is regarded not as their sum total but as their product, i.e., as a value of another dimension, another degree: each taken separately corresponds to an object, but their combination corresponds to a concept. The combination of two 'representable' objects achieves the representation of something that cannot be graphically represented" (Corrigan 262). Again, he compares it to mathematical equations and not an emotional or psychological response of the individual human. A possible reason for comparing montage to a mathematical equation could be because of the objectivity of mathematics. With this mathematical basis, it is difficult to disprove his idea unless we consider the emotional approach of montage that comes with human intervention.

One film theorist who doesn't follow this mathematical objectivity of film montage is German-American psychologist and film theorist Hugo Munsterberg. In his theory *Why We Go to*

The Movies, he admits that montage is not a mathematical equation from which an idea is derived but rather a human characteristic. He mentions, "the order of the pictures on screen is no longer the order of events in nature, but rather that of our own mental play"(Corrigan 9). In this way, connecting two images in order to create an idea can be argued to be an objective act of human nature, but subjective in its outcomes. Mentally connecting the images to create new meaning is an objectively innate human behavior and can be proven scientifically and philosophically. Acknowledging the difference between objectivity and subjectivity in the montage is acknowledging Locke's theory of the primary and secondary nature of objectivity.

In a famous example from his book *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* Locke explains the idea of primary and secondary characteristics through the object of an almond. He says, "Pound an almond and the clear white color will be altered to a dirty one and the sweet taste into an oily one. What real alteration can the beating of a pestle make in any body, but an alteration of the texture of it?" (Locke). What this means is that secondary qualities are not a part of the almond itself. The almond is made up of its primary qualities which are its size and shape, and the rearrangement of these primary qualities gives us secondary qualities. Therefore, when we alter the taste or color of an almond, we are only really altering its primary characteristics of it. Secondary qualities are subjective to the arrangement of the primary qualities which are permanently objective. If we are to relate this to Eisenstein's theory, then we can assume that the primary characteristics of the film are the images themselves. The single shots that we are to connect in a montage are objective in the way that an image of an eye is objectively an image of an eye. Its size and shape and various other characteristics that we can discern via our senses help us to understand that it is an image of an eye. The same goes for the image of water. However, the combination of these two primary objects is a secondary characteristic, therefore making it

subjective. It is also primary to assume a connection between the objects, the water, and the eye, and therefore Eisenstein wasn't completely incorrect. Locke's explanation just shows that this is not a mathematical formula and rather a concept that is logically deduced. As humans, we can logically deduce. It is something that humans do outside of the factuality of mathematics. However, what we deduce is subjective and to assume otherwise goes against Locke's philosophy of primary and secondary qualities. The secondary quality, or the subjective part, is what we deduce. However, the assumption that all audiences will infer the same connections is arguably incorrect philosophically which introduces a flaw to Eisenstein's theory.

Another theorist we can assume has the same flaw as Eisenstein is Soviet filmmaker and film theorist Lev Kuleshov and his theory called *The Principles of Montage.* In his theory, he claims that the montage makes the close-up of the actor and their expressions irrelevant because it is only when combining it with the next shot that makes it relevant or gives it any sort of meaning. He explains this theory with a short film titled *Kuleshov Effect* in which he uses the expressionless close-up video of a man to follow images of food, a dead child, and a woman. According to Kuleshov, we can assume the emotions of the man to be hunger, mourning, and lust based solely on the images that precede the expressionless man from our own emotions. He goes on to say that cinema is a complicated art form because "the method of organization of its material and the material itself are especially interdependent." (Corrigan 135) He believes that one does not exist without the other. They give meaning to each other in the way in which an expressionless man and a shot of a woman give meaning to the other image.

However, Kuleshov acknowledges Locke in ways that Eisenstein does not regarding the primary and secondary nature of montage. According to Kuleshov, "every art form has two

technological elements: the material itself and the methods of organizing that material (Corrigan 139). Therefore, Kuleshov would agree that there are two separate components in montage and that one is objective and the other subjective. However, we use our emotions in order to connect the two, and although he believes that this is somewhat objective because the artist must reflect "in his production an objective reality" (Corrigan 140), he would also agree that the outcome is subjective because this entire theory's basis is that it is reflective of American cinema only. Kuleshov has various other insights on European and Russian cinema that differ from this. He believes that this method of montage works best based on the evidence that "American films achieved the greatest audience reactions, because they contained the greatest number of shots, from the greatest number of separate scenes, and accordingly, that montage, as the source of expression, as the artistic organization of material, affected the viewer more strongly and vividly in American films" (Corrigan 140). Therefore, according to Kuleshov, objectively American cinema is better at montage, but subjectively due to the way in which they produce it. In this way, the primary quality is the opposite of Eisenstein in the way that American cinema, the secondary characteristic, reflects the objective characteristics, while the production of montage is the primary or subjective characteristic. Taking into account cultural differences is still one step closer to Locke's theory that at the end of the day, everything is subjective except the primary characteristics.

In a short documentary-style film titled "How to Fix the World" created by psychologist A.R. Luria's conversations with Central Asian farmers showcase the way in which cultures can disprove the idea that montage is objective. Within the film, we see three central Asian women farmers, and they are asked to pick the odd one out in a series of four objects. The objects are a hammer, a saw, wood, and a hack. When the women began debating and questioning everything

except the wood, the psychologist in the film is audibly stunned and questions their choice. Even after explaining why the wood is the obvious choice of being the odd one out considering that all the rest are tools, the farmers do not agree. They believe the wood is necessary and is not, in fact, odd. This film is a wonderful example of subjectivity because it goes to show that various other cultures have different perspectives, and they form different connections between images than our own cultures. When considering Eisenstein and Locke, both would agree that the images are objective in the way that they are, in actuality, a hammer, a saw, wood, and a hack. However, subjectively, this goes against Einstein's theories on mathematically connecting two ideas together to form one objective idea. The women in this film would most likely not derive the concept of crying from just an image of an eye and water, which further flaws Eisenstein's theory.

There is a film theorist who comes close to that of Locke's philosophy that everything outside of the primary is subjective is Munsterberg. He considers film or any medium within art from a subjective and emotional point of view that differs from the mathematical that Eisenstein is drawn to and the objectiveness that Kuleshov is drawn to. Munsterberg argues that "even the most realistic art always gives us something different from reality" (Corrigan 14). What this means is that no matter how close to objectivity you try to get, or how close to the primary characteristics you get, there is always an element that will remain subjective because art itself is always subjective. Even comparing his idea of the close-up to that of Kuleshov's idea which was that the close-up itself is irrelevant, whereas Munsterberg explains that the close-up is "a form of expression which is entirely foreign to the real stage" (Corrigan 14) there is more subjectivity. He claims the stage can only claim so much attention from its viewer whereas with a film we can draw our attention inward and neglect all else that is unimportant at the moment. In a very poetic

way, he explains that "…our own inner actions become effective. Our own attention is projected into the life around us" (Corrigan 14). He acknowledges that each person has their own attention and projection and the subjectivity or the secondary characteristics that it embodies. Not only is the close-up a subjective part of the film but one's emotions and memories.

Unlike Eisenstein and Kuleshov, Munsterberg considers the emotions and memory of humans and the ways in which it makes, not only film but, art in general a subjective matter. He explains that we must transcend medium specificity. There must be something beyond the medium that allows us to continue to access these emotions and memories that we feel. In *How the Film Expresses Emotions* he mentions "As long as the photoplay works only with the methods of the theater, we must regret that we are deprived of the words (Corrigan 15). Right here we can see that he acknowledges the need to transcend the medium in order to get our own subjective points of view. He follows this thought with one about perceptions in which he says, "But what a different perspective is opened if we think of the unlimited means with which the film may express feeling and sentiment through means of its own" (Corrigan 15). Film itself has an unlimited possibility of combinations in which each shot can invoke a different feeling or remind us of a different meaning. If we extend this idea to other mediums, we can have a limitless possibility of subjectivity. Everything becomes this notion of a secondary characteristic that Locke describes as soon as we introduce ideas of emotion and memory which are very human qualities and are subjective to the individual. With Munsterberg's idea, we can step away from the mathematical objectivity that he claims is relevant to the montage.

Munsterberg is one of the few film theorists whose ideas align more with Locke's theories on objectivity in terms of the primary and secondary qualities that are a part of it. The combination of the subjectivity of emotions and memories with the element of montage can

create unique experiences for each individual that Eisenstein and Kuleshov do not take into account. When looking at Locke's primary and secondary characteristic philosophy on objectivity and subjectivity, Munsterberg's film theory is more in line with those concepts which allow it to transcend beyond the medium of film. The concepts discussed are no longer chained to that specific art form but can be combined with any outside experience in order to further solidify Locke's philosophies. However, even within the film medium, it allows for a greater viewing experience once the audience understands the significance of their emotions and memories concerning the films, scenes, shots, or even still images that they encounter.

Eisenstein and Locke's views are inherently different and although Locke's philosophical theories are much older, they still hold very strong and true in comparison to the newer film theories of Eisenstein. Locke's philosophies are still relevant to many mediums that we use today and were relevant to mediums before films such as painting, sculpture, and theater. The same goes for Kuleshov's theories in which he seems to be approaching the transcendence of the medium more than Eisenstein. However, the theorist who transcends beyond the medium the most is Munsterberg due to his acknowledgment of subjectivity without a mathematical approach. Instead, he uses a more human approach that will enable a difficult counterargument due to how subjective humans can be. Once we allow ourselves to accept that as humans, film montage will not be the same for every single one of us, we can then move beyond that and incorporate these concepts into mediums outside of film and into the outside world. In that way, we can create new philosophies and those philosophies may create new film theories and so forth. Having these concepts overlap will cause much more thought-provoking concepts that can be used to create better films in the future and to understand those films in ways previously unimaginable.

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