

A Modernist Cinema
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Scott Klein
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OVERVIEW

The rise of cinema coincides both temporally and geographically with the emergence from the 1890s to the late 1930s of modernism in the other arts. Nevertheless, scholars working in the field of film studies have tended to reserve the term “modernist cinema” to describe films and movements from the three decades following World War II. Neo-Realism in Italy, the *nouvelle vague* in France, the post-war Swedish cinema revival, and the “New Wave” cinemas of Germany and Japan have been designated as “modernist” in order to distinguish the work of “auteur” directors such as Bergman, Rossellini, Antonioni, Fellini, Godard, Truffaut, Herzog, Fassbinder, Wenders, Oshima, and Teshigahara, all of whom came to international prominence from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s. Nonetheless, a strong and consequential case can be made that American, European, and also Asian cinema from the early 20th century to the end of World War II was deeply marked by, consonant with, and even productive of, the distinctively modernist aesthetics that emerged in the same period in culture, philosophy, and the allied arts.

A Modernist Cinema brings sustained critical attention to this subject with a chronological collection of seventeen chapters, each treating an important film of the leading directors from America, Europe, and Asia of the period 1916-1941: D.W. Griffith, Giovanni Pastrone, Sergei Eisenstein, Fritz Lang, Alfred Hitchcock, F. W. Murnau, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Dziga Vertov, Luis Buñuel, Jean Cocteau, Yasujiro Ozu, Leni Riefenstahl, John Ford, Jean Renoir, Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, and Maya Deren. It is true that many of these directors continued to make important films in the second half of the twentieth century and a few, such as Ozu, Ford, Buñuel, and Hitchcock, achieved some of their greatest popular and commercial successes following World War II. However, each individual chapter in the collection will focus on a major cinematic achievement by each director in the silent and early sound periods to illustrate the “modernist” character of pre-war cinema. Each will suggest how these works of art engaged with the most important themes and formal innovations of modernity writ large, implicitly providing a basis for understanding how these cultural and formal interactions were seminal to the creation of later post-war cinema.

A Modernist Cinema assembles chapters written by leading and internationally prominent figures within the burgeoning field of modernist studies each of whom examines silent and early sound films within a broad comparative perspective that analyzes the complex interrelations between cinema and other artistic manifestations of modernism. Individual chapters by Enda Duffy, Maurizia Boscagli, Laura Frost, Andrzej Gasiorek, Douglas Mao, Hesse Matz, Susan McCabe, Tyrus Miller, Elizabeth Otto, Carrie Preston, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Michael Wood, Lisa Siraganian, Scott Klein, and Michael Valdez Moses give sustained attention to the formal and generic characteristics of “modernist cinema” and suggest how a rigorous critique of the various styles, techniques, and formal characteristics of the films under consideration deepens our understanding of the problems and promises of modernity. The volume as a whole offers a reinterpretation of the role played by cinema as an aesthetic and cultural form that both reflected and helped constitute modernism in relation to literature, philosophy, politics, and the visual arts.

LECTURE TOPIC:

Chapter 12:

“‘Saved from the Blessings of Civilization’: *Stagecoach*, the West, and American Vernacular Modernism”

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While John Ford's status as one of the founders of modern cinema has long been secure, his contribution to a “modernist” cinema remains very much in doubt. While film historians have noted the influence of Murnau's expressionist films, especially *Sunrise* (1927), on the cinema of Ford (both directors were working for Fox Studios in the mid-1920s), and many of the most distinguished directors of the European and international “new wave” (including François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Wim Wenders, Akira Kurosawa, and Satyajit Ray) acknowledged Ford's influence on their art, a widespread critical perception remains that Ford's most famous and popular movies, and most especially his Westerns, embody a socially conservative and relatively traditional Hollywood aesthetic. This characterization of his work fails to recognize that Ford was a key contributor to an innovative form of vernacular American modernism that emerged in the late 1920s and 1930s, and that offered an alternative to the cosmopolitan and European varieties of high modernism associated with expatriate American artists such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Gertrude Stein. Though the “grammar,” “lexicon,” and “idiom” of American vernacular modernism varied according to the particular medium or art in which it was developed, an overlapping set of subjects, motifs, and representational techniques cut across arts as diverse as American cinematography, painting, music, architecture, and dance. Moreover, Ford's vernacular modernism of the late 1930s was self-consciously populist, critical, and allied with the politically progressive elements of the New Deal.

Focusing on *Stagecoach* (1939), with some attention to his later Westerns, I shall argue that Ford, along with such artists as Georgia O'Keefe, Marsden Harley, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Willa Cather, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mary Colter, Maria Montoya Martinez, Aaron Copland, and Martha Graham helped to ground a new and distinctively vernacular form of modernism provocatively located in the landscape, ecology, peoples, and regional culture of the American West. The literary modernism of Joyce, Woolf, Biely, Proust, John Dos Passos, Döblin, and Musil, like the cinematic modernism of Vertov, Eisenstein, Ruttmann, Lang, Pabst, Murnau, and Chaplin, have long been understood as inseparable from their modern urban settings. By contrast, the vernacular American modernism that arose in the 1920s and 1930s was often set in a stark, wild, sparsely inhabited, and often harsh or inhospitable western landscape that appeared to be the very antithesis of the modern urban centers of New York, Paris, St. Petersburg, Berlin, Vienna, and London (to say nothing of Dublin). However, a closer look at *Stagecoach*, which helped reestablish the Western as one of the leading Hollywood film genres for the next thirty years, reveals that Ford's American West is no less characterized by the problems of modernity and modernization, most especially those that beset modern urban life. Like the paintings of O'Keefe, the novels of Willa Cather, the photographs of Adams, Strand, and Weston, the southwestern architectural designs of Wright and Colter, and even the Pueblo revivalist pottery of Maria Montoya Martinez, Ford's Westerns are always haunted by images of urban life and the shadows of modern cosmopolitan existence. In *Stagecoach* (the first of seven Westerns filmed in Monument Valley), Ford captures the wildness of a monumental and hostile Western landscape in a famous series of strikingly original panoramic master-shots. But the characters who travel by stage through this primitive landscape – a prostitute, a drunken doctor, a corrupt banker, a Southern gambler, a whiskey salesman, the pregnant wife of a high ranking military officer, and an escaped convict – nonetheless exemplify the problems, temptations, failings, and needed reform of modern urban existence. Significantly, their epic journey through the American “wild west” is punctuated by

stops in small roadside inns, taverns, and towns that Ford characterizes by a dramatic shift in formal technique. These way stations amidst a “savage” landscape populated by hostile Indians are lighted in (German) expressionist fashion, and Ford’s mise-en-scène (especially the set designs) and distinctive camera work (close-ups, tracking shots, high and low camera angles) emphasize that urban modernity and its attendant problems have penetrated even into the farthest reaches of the “unspoiled” American West.

The world-wide commercial success and aesthetic influence of *Stagecoach*, Ford’s first major (sound era) Western, suggests how both the formal characteristics and the substantive concerns of a distinctively vernacular (and American) modernist cinema could be mainstreamed, popularized, and ultimately internationalized. But far from functioning simply as an “escapist” form of entertainment that nostalgically evoked an idealized pre-modern existence and thereby desensitized its audience to the ill effects of modern life, Ford’s Western offers a critical representation of modernity and the prospect that a regional iteration of “middle-brow” modernism might be put to socially critical and politically “progressive” ends.