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Romanticism and Revolution: 19th Century Europe

Due Date

“I Don’t Care For Novels: *Jacques the Fatalist* as a Proto-Film”

How can we critique a piece of art that defies all preconceptions and conventions of the form it takes? There are some works that simply seem to exist somewhere beyond all assumed formal limitations. One such work is *Jacques the Fatalist* by Denis Diderot, an odd hybrid that is part novel, part play and referred to as a “chronicle” by its author. How, though, can we attempt to criticize this work as a whole and tell whether or not it is “successful” if we are uncertain of its most basic form? I feel that it is impossible to criticize *Jacques the Fatalist* as either a novel or a play, simply because it is neither of those things. However—and I accept that, as a film student, I may be biased—I notice that there are, in fact, numerous, striking similarities between Diderot’s so-called “chronicle” and the structure of *films*! Of course, the history of film did not begin until the 1890s, and *Jacques the Fatalist* was written and published in the late 1700s—but still, there are certain elements of Diderot’s work that clearly exemplify later film theory, and I find it entirely plausible that Diderot did indeed produce a sort of proto-film, as it were; a film that, due to lack of technology, was not projected onto a screen but was instead written down and published as a “chronicle”. Therefore I would like to posit that, were we to analyze *Jacques the Fatalist* as a film, we would have a more solid framework from which to criticize the work, and we would be able to determine whether or not Diderot’s work is successful. Diderot, then, becomes director instead of author; his paragraphs and segments of dialogue become shots and scenes that form montage; his narrative becomes the lens through which he shoots those scenes; the work itself then becomes the film that we watch unfold in our mind’s eye. Comparisons between Diderot and director Yasujirō Ozu, as well as a piece of film theory, *Beyond the Shot* by Sergei Eisenstein, will not only allow us to explore the ways in which certain elements of film are at work within *Jacques the Fatalist*, but will also allow us to determine whether or not Diderot has created a film that we consider to be successful.

Perhaps the most essential component to any film is the shot, and shot indeed plays a large role in *Jacques the Fatalist*. In terms of filmmaking, a shot is defined as “A single uninterrupted action of a camera as seen by a viewer” (“Film Terminology”). In Diderot’s work, sections of text do not necessarily correspond to uninterrupted shots; however, there are very clear moments when the point of view changes or when the narrative shifts gears to talk about something new, and I would argue that each time either of those things happens we can consider it to be a cut to a new shot. For example, whenever Diderot interrupts the story in order to directly address the reader, there is a cut to a new shot. At the very beginning of the work, Diderot interrupts the narrative to say:

You see, Reader, I’m into my stride and I have it entirely in my power to make you wait a year, two years, three years, to hear the story of Jacques’s love affairs, by separating him from his Master and making the both of them undergo all the perils I please...How easy it is to make up stories! But I’ll let them off lightly with an uncomfortable night, and you with this delay. (Diderot 4).

This reminds me of certain instances of cinema in which similar narrative breaks occur. Consider even a film such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, for example, with the character of the Criminologist who pops in every once in a while to offer background on what is occurring in the film’s actual narrative. There is a similar sense of breaking the fourth wall, a concept invented by Diderot himself (“The Fourth Wall And The Third Space”), as the Criminologist directly addresses the audience watching the film and comments on the actions of the characters.

On another level, though, in terms of shot, Diderot’s writing seems to anticipate the work of Japanese screenwriter and director Yasujirō Ozu, who was prominent in the mid-1900s. Ozu is

well known for his unique filmmaking style. One of his most famous filming techniques is what is now known as the “tatami shot”, where the camera was placed at about the eye level of a person kneeling on a tatami mat; indeed, Ozu often placed the camera even lower. Ozu would set up an entire scene and then film an entire scene—a tactic much more suited to theater than to film. Diderot, as a playwright himself, must certainly have been aware of the way that theater functions: events unfold onstage, and the audience can choose what part of the stage to focus on. Film, though, is typically different, in the sense that a director can—for lack of a better term—*direct* the audience’s attention to specific areas within scenes by using different kinds of shots or camera movements, or through editing in post-production. Ozu’s signature shot captures scenes in their entirety, allowing audiences to decide which section of the shot they want to focus on. Ozu uses these shots to present life as it is realistically, which is something Diderot strives for in his work. Diderot speaks to this point when he comments on the idea of *Jacques the Fatalist* as a novel. He writes:

I don’t care for novels, unless they’re by Richardson. I’m writing a chronicle here. This story will either be interesting or it won’t, though that’s neither here nor there. My intention was to be true and in this I have succeeded. (Diderot 199)

It is this same effect that Ozu, so many years later, conveyed through film and became famous for. Diderot and Ozu both create fictional worlds, but they present them realistically and allow the audience to decide for themselves what to focus on. Within the framework of *Jacques the Fatalist*, many different stories are told that the audience can either celebrate or reject. Diderot himself tells readers not to pass judgment too harshly upon certain characters, which is especially notable in the case of Madame de La Pommeraye. After her story is over Diderot speaks in her

defense, pointing out that she was certainly justified in feeling the way that she did, and that her actions were not really so despicable in light of the emotional turmoil she must have been going through. So Diderot, like Ozu, presents scenes in their entirety, so that the audience can see everything, allowing the audience to pass their own judgments and choose what aspects of them to focus on. Diderot does not focus our attention on specific details within stories; instead, he presents them wholly and gives us all the sides of the argument so that we may form our own opinions. From all this we can definitively say that Diderot is using shot to his great advantage within the work.

Shot, however, is only one component of film; another important component is montage, and though at first glance it may not seem apparent, montage is hard at work within *Jacques the Fatalist*. Sergei Eisenstein asserts at the beginning of his piece *Beyond the Shot* that “Cinema is, first and foremost, montage” (Eisenstein 14). Eisenstein goes on to state that, in films:

The shot is by no means a montage *element*. The shot is a montage cell...What then characterizes montage and, consequently, its embryo, the shot? Collision. Conflict between two neighboring fragments...the collision of two factors gives rise to an idea. (Eisenstein 19)

Basically, what it boils down to is that when it comes to montage, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Two or more shots collide and, in a sense, explode, allowing the viewer to experience something more than what those shots are literally showing. Montage is not shots arranged to follow each other, but rather shots layered on top of each other, with each new shot adding something to the overall meaning of the sequence. In *Jacques the Fatalist*, one of the main ideas is the idea of fatalism itself; the concept that all of one’s actions and everything that

happens to oneself is somehow predetermined or “written on high”. Both this idea and the structure of the piece itself uphold Eisenstein’s montage theory. In terms of structure, if we consider each section of uninterrupted point of view to be a shot, and therefore each short story within the general framework of the piece to be a scene, comprised of multiple shots, it would follow then that we can consider the succession of stories within the larger work to be montage. Thus we can see that each shorter story builds upon the greater idea of the work in its entirety, and by reading every section—by viewing each scene, as it were—we can draw conclusions about the work as a whole. The story is not told in chronological order; it is instead a series of what are almost vignettes, cemented in a greater narrative. We judge each story individually—such as when we discuss the implications of Madame de La Pommeraye’s story—and ultimately, based on our judgments of the stories, we end up with a greater idea about the work as a whole and the themes that Diderot was attempting to convey. In terms of said theme, Diderot’s ideas about fatalism are upheld by montage theory: a series of events happens to oneself in one’s life for the sole reason that they are supposed to happen. In montage, a series of scenes are presented that conflict with each other in much the same way that events within one’s life conflict with each other—not just in a negative sense, but simply in the sense that in Diderot’s eyes, a person’s life events determine the way that person is; their actions are not undertaken due to free will but due instead to fate. Thus Diderot’s theme of fatalism is almost like a montage theory for human life: life is a sequence of events layered on top of and conflicting with one another that ultimately culminates in something greater, that being one’s entire life, personality, and general existence. Therefore, we can say that the principles of Sergei Eisenstein’s montage theory are exemplified to great effect within *Jacques the Fatalist*.

So, now that we have established the ways in which *Jacques the Fatalist* functions as a

film, we come to the question of whether or not it is *successful* as a film. There are certain qualities we look for, not only in film but also in all art forms, which allow us to determine whether or not a work is “good” or “bad”, and there are certain standards that we accept across the board as being signifiers of “good” art. Notable film theorist and historian David Bordwell says of films specifically:

Most people recognize some general criteria of excellence, such as originality, or thematic significance, or subtlety, or technical skill, or formal complexity, or intensity of emotional effect. There are also moral and social criteria...All of these criteria and others can help us pick out films worthy of admiration (“In Critical Condition”).

I think it is obvious that Diderot demonstrates great “technical skill” and “formal complexity” in *Jacques the Fatalist*. Indeed, by writing this work, Diderot achieved something that no one before him had achieved, and something that no one would recreate until the history of film officially began one hundred years later. I believe that *Jacques the Fatalist* is highly successful. Its main goal is to present the idea of fatalism, the idea that everything is predetermined or, as Diderot puts it, “written up there, on high” (Diderot 3). The things that happen, says Diderot, are the things that are meant to happen. He lets the story unfold and, though he often distracts the reader by saying that certain things *could* happen, he maintains that he would not make up farcical events for the sake of excitement and that he is telling the events of story in the way they realistically occurred (and of course this is also a wonderful example of metafiction, since the events portrayed are not really *true*). Thus I believe Diderot to have been ultimately successful.

While *Jacques the Fatalist* resists criticism as a novel—since it is so emphatically not a novel—it becomes surprisingly clear that if we consider it as a film or proto-film, and think

about it retroactively in terms of Eisenstein's film theory and Ozu's directing style, we can give a more accurate critique of Diderot's work. Through use of shot and montage, Denis Diderot has accomplished something amazing, and created a work that marries theatrical and fictional written form in order to create what I believe can be considered the first film.

Works Cited

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