**Bela Balazs: Physiognomy as Language (In-Class Presentation)**

Today, I will be talking about the Hungarian film theorist, Bela Balazs, with a focus on his development of physiognomy as a concept for constituting the language of film. Balazs presents an argument for film language based in aesthetics, finding his most profound theoretical influences to be in the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Georg Simmel and Henri Bergson. Balazs presents an argument for cinema’s status as art based in medium specificity, which this group will recall from earlier in the term when we looked at the work of Hugo Munsterberg and Rudolf Arnheim. Balazs rejects literary adaptation in cinema in particular and he has a unique Marxist bent that allows him to conceive of cinema as having the capacity to provide an international language for humans through its visual expressiveness.

Bela Balazs was born, Herbert Bauer, in Szeged, Hungary, in 1884. His literary career began in 1900 when one of his poems was published in the local paper, *Szegedi Naplo*, and this is also when he took the pen name, Bela Balazs. Balazs was a film theorist, as well as, an accomplished novelist, fairy-tale author, playwright, opera librettist, poet, film director, screenwriter and critic. In the 2010, re-publication of Balazs’s books on film theory, *Visible Man* and *The Spirit of Film*, Erica Carter notes in the introduction that there has been a translation lag with Balazs’s written work. As a result, film studies has positioned him as a formalist concerned primarily with the abstract grammar of the film medium and as a cultural essentialist who proposes that the essential aspects of film as art constitute a “soul” for the film image. In this latter capacity, Balazs’s work has found renewed interest in contemporary film theory due to its post-structuralist sensibilities.

Balazs was theorizing a phenomenological epistemology for cinema based in aesthetics that was heavily dependent on hermeneutics, affect, performance, corporeality and audience reception. In some ways this is very surprising given that post-structuralism’s most prominent forefather figures (Marshall McLuhan, Raymond Williams, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and others) were not pushing at the frontier of these areas of discourse until several decades after Balazs. Balazs’s early work was produced during a period of accelerated technological development, where the mobile apparatus (or unhinged camera), stereoscopic film, colour film, widescreen format and synchronous sound emerged as more than just experiments in advancing the medium’s capacities to represent and present life, both realistically or abstractly. This may help in explaining Balazs’s many prognostications on film theory in the contemporary moment as well as revealing how Balazs accurately predicted the value of the medium as a popular cultural form.

Balazs went through a series of exiles from his native, Hungary, due to his strong ties to Communism, as well as, his Jewish ethnicity. His radical sensibilities were focused on remediating Hungarian folk vernacular with modernist urban consciousness – in effect, a fusion toward a new Hungarian folk vernacular. Carter contextualizes Balazs’s early cultural radicalism as expressing a Romantic commitment to a popular vernacular that drew on folk tradition, forming a mystical modernism rooted in avant-garde symbolism.

In 1915, Balazs joined with Gyorgy Lukacs to form the Sunday Circle – a loose association of writers, philosophers, scientists and other intellectuals who met on Sunday afternoon at Balazs’s home. The group was to be an artistic utopia within the broader cultural influence in Hungary of decadent aristocracy and conservative nationalism. In 1918, Balazs joined the Hungarian Socialist Party and cast aside his previous interest in hermetic utopianism, in exchange for revolutionary communism. Balazs had a prominent position as Director of Literature and Arts, in the short-lived Bela Kun-led Communist government in Hungary during 1919. Kun then fled to the Soviet Union and was an organizer and active participant in the Red Terror genocide in Crimea from, 1920-21. Balazs and Lukacs fled to Vienna, instead. Lukacs turned his attention to underground political agitation and organization, while Balazs focused on espousing Marxism’s capacity for transforming artistic practice toward a new mass culture based on revolutionary ideals. In his later years, upon reflection, Balazs scoffed at this idealism.

From 1922-25, Balazs would publish over 200 critical articles on film for the publication, *Der Tag*. These works became the basis for his first full-length book on the theory of film, *Visible Man*. I will briefly summarize the major ideological point of *Visible Man*: the printing press rendered the written word into the default carrier of meaning for human communication. Printing books usurped the cathedrals as the housing for the spirit of the people. But, the plurality of books fragmented that spirit. The visual spirit was transformed into a legible spirit and a visual culture was changed into a conceptual one. The “soul” migrated into the word where it was crystallized. The body was stripped of soul. The culture of words was over-intellectualized and made abstract, degrading the body to the status of mere biological organism. However, the new language of gestures communicating through the medium of film reclaims the body as sacred and vanquishes its status as a simple set of tools. Hence, the body is made visible. Cinema renders the body to unmediated spirit, spirit rendered visible, wordless. The main idea is that in experiencing visual media, we shift from an inner conscious language of words to that of images.

As an important side-note on this ideology, and as Carter also remarks on this – Balazs acknowledges psychoanalysis without accepting the bifurcation of the mind into the Freudian categories of conscious and unconscious structures, nor does he show an anticipation of Lacanian notions of a similar split between the symbolic and imaginary registers of the psyche. Furthermore, Balazs does not reason through his theories with a nuanced appreciation of neuroanatomy. American psychobiologist, Roger W. Sperry, pioneered studies that have shown that the human brain’s hemispheres operate very differently, where one structures visual language and the other structures verbal language. More recent studies reveal that a slight majority of humans favour thinking visually and that few people work at producing a balance between visual and verbal thinking (Laura Otis, *A New Look At Visual Thinking –* good citations, including some notes on Arnheim).

With respect to Balazs, it may be critical that the inner language of words not transform into an inner language of images in the way that he is suggesting because if mass culture did use cinema for such a feat and crafted an international language that was visually-based, there may be structures of oppression and discourses that oppress verbal thinkers in profound ways. Finally, schizophrenia has often been considered a language disorder – the language of thoughts. If those who were predisposed to thinking verbally found a culture that was aggressively geared toward visual thinking, this may expose them to psychological conditions that could trigger schizophrenia. Of course, the visual thinkers would likely be more insulated from such issues through a sophisticated visual culture and mass language of images. Balazs was much like Alice through the looking-glass, from Lewis Carroll’s famous tale – he was caught up in diagnosing the predicament of his historical moment and immediate cultural context. At the time, there was a fetishization of the written word and likely the intellectual community of his era would have scoffed at the notion that there are as many people who think visually as those who think verbally, and that this need not limit intellectual capabilities, overall. Balazs is reacting to that ignorance, yet it must be admitted that the verbal-oriented hemisphere is also the place for rational and analytic thinking, therefore it is rather ironic, and perhaps paradoxical, to write theory while also espousing a rejection of verbal language.

The notion of film becoming a new universal language was not unique to Balazs and other first-generation cinephiles, filmmakers and film theorists, from Ricciotto Canudo to Vachel Lindsay to Louis Delluc, promoted cinema’s capacity to express meaning universally. Phenomenologically, Balazs’s concept that the body of the filmic image becomes unmediated spirit, spirit rendered visible, borrowed from Immanuel Kant and William James’s understanding of apperception. Apperception, in my own words and understanding, is that the mind resonates with objects perceived because concepts of those objects already exist in the mind. Bodily perceptions have pre-coded meaning because the mind is imbued with a code *a priori* that can make sense of those perceptions. The mind also develops a code based on *a posteriori* knowledge that can then organize meaning for what is perceived later that is relatable to the mind. In effect, the object has a little bit of what the mind understands, and the mind has a little bit of what the object means – this is the basis for understanding bodies as having spirits. For Kant, the *a priori* code is transcendental apperception and this is where Balazs sees “spirit” emerging in film, whereas the *a posteriori* code is empirical apperception and relates more to the formation of basic personality.

Through an understanding of apperception, Balazs considers the body and mind as one – each having necessary information about the other, such that they cannot function separately. The written word is dangerous because as an abstraction it can sunder the mind and body into having separate understanding of meaning from the written word. The body is often lulled when the mind is engaged with the written word – the mind is focused or agitated. These concepts reveal the radicalism in Balazs’s film theory. The traditional Marxist notion is that the proletariat body is focused and agitated through machine labour such that the mind is lulled into a state of political apathy. In classical Marxism, this paralysis leads to the agitation of the unconscious political mind which requires focus in order to become revolutionary, however, Althusserian Marxism considers this unconscious to be inherently apathetic, such that focus is more-or-less impossible. For Althusser, revolution is either individualist-internal or collectivist-external – revolution doesn’t remove mental shackles, but it can remove the social shackles clamped-on by institutions. For Balazs, the revolution is in having visual image culture agitate and focus the mind-body spirit from the shackles of the written word that keep the mind and body separated.

Film, with its communication of bodies or gestures, overcomes the written word. The body and mind of the subject are unified when receiving the filmic image because it is visual language, but objects of the profilmic are also unified mind-body through apperception. The viewer understands the profilmic object *a priori* through its spirit – its unified nature of mind and body. The profilmic object has spirit and makes an impression on the viewer through its physiognomy. Physiognomy in Balazs’s theory describes the dynamic features of a body, spatiotemporally. For Balazs, all bodies express dynamically and physiognomy is a poetics of film reception. The referent for physiognomy is always the human face – every object has a “face” and that is how our mind comes to understand the object. In effect, for Balazs, the communication of spirits is through faces.

Balazs’s nuanced understanding of physiognomy derives its aesthetic roots from Goethe via Aristotle. The Aristotelian notion that is picked up by Goethe regards bodies necessarily determining their nature. The lion’s body determines that it will stalk prey stealthily, yet have the speed and power to overcome a fleeing target. The lion’s body reveals the mind of a predator, which in turn makes visible the spirit of the lion. For physiognomy, our senses transmit information through our face, therefore faces construct meaning and they also construct faces for other objects in order to mediate the meaning-production process between subject and object. Balazs is working in the tradition that endeavors to establish identity between inner substance and phenomenal appearance.

This “interfacing” in the physiognomical aspects of film spectatorship is an agitation and focusing of spirits – it is both a socially and psychologically-meaningful aspect of the medium, according to Balazs. The profilmic “faces” of objects stimulate recognition automatically (because we have the code *a priori* for understanding meaning through the production of faces) and therefore we are intellectually and spiritually-engaged with film. Film is a medium rife with revolutionary capacities for the transformation of minds because it marries the various vantages for understanding to a single focusing point. The external body/object presented or profilmic object (quantitative external), our recognition of its nature through its physiognomical features (qualitative external), our perceptions through the face (quantitative internal) and our mind’s code for organizing those perceptions (qualitative internal) all become part of a single process of meaning-production. This unification with its aspect of universality determines a new form of human consciousness that Balazs argues can be the foundation for a universal visual language learned, practiced and mediated through film as a mass cultural form.

This unification is a meaning-production process that also constitutes film as an art form, because the physiognomical-based mode of meaning-production in film spectatorship is unique among other art forms. Balazs argues, that unlike film, theatre’s characters are always understood with duality where the actor is recognized as necessarily separate from the character. In theatre, this duality causes a separation of mind and body for the object – it lacks spirit in its presentation. In literature, the written word separates mind and body of the subject, while the mind and body of objects are rendered abstract (they have no physiognomy). In painting, the mind and body of the object is consolidated through presentation, but not representation. The nature of the object of painting is represented, but not presented – the painting of a Rembrandt windmill or a Monet bridge is the presentation of a painting of a windmill or bridge and a representation of that mill or that bridge, as imagined by the painter. There is another layer of bodies (the presentation of the painting as object, the representation of an object) that film does not have, therefore painting does not have the unification of interfacing that film has. How can the viewer of a painting help but conflate the presentation with the representation and in so doing render the object represented abstract and imaginary – spiritless? Music has the unification of tones through chords and the unification of sound through symphony, but there is no physical object presented per se, thus no physiognomical interfacing. The musical score is the presentation of what is represented, much like a painting or sculpture. Balazs notes that still photography can have the same physignomical meaning-production process as moving images under strict conditions that he feels are rarely realized. The photograph must be crafted through technique, such as lighting, and the photograph must not create pseudo-unification through artificial motif. Photographs (and presumably film) can construct mise-en-scene and framing such that the photographer seeks to craft a motif for the scene and this in turn represses or occludes the photographed objects’ physiognomical character. As viewers we see the face of the scene through motif (the face of the presentation of the photograph) as opposed to seeing the face of objects in the photograph. The dynamic aspect of objects through moving images makes it more difficult for motif to dominate the quality of an image. As such, Balazs rails against literary and theatrical adaptations for film because it reduces medium specific technique and renders images with motifs that diminish or banish the physiognomy of objects.

Without the distractions of abstract representation of objects, film facilitates a direct engagement of spirits. Our visual gaze as spectators is intellectual scrutiny and physiognomy as unifier for processes of meaning-production crafts a new perceptual economy that has utopian implications. The close shot, or close-up, is the most basic unit in this new perceptual economy. The close-up has a quality of Barthesian *punctum*, in that the physiognomy of an object captured in close-up destroys artificial motif – the interfacing of spirits is unencumbered by unrelated bodies or abstractions that would distract the mind. This punctum has a temporal quality. The dynamic qualities of the profilmic object, of the viewing subject and the process of meaning-production between them is rendered static through the close-up – this produces a unique form of spatiotemporality that reveals the unification process and thus reveals the spirit of things.

I would suggest that it is valuable to open a discussion of Saussurean linguistics, in particular the concepts of synchrony and diachrony, forwarded by Ferdinand de Saussure in his posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). The synchronic can be understood as fixity in the spatiotemporal register where meaning is produced. Humans construct meaning synchronically because we articulate thoughts in a particular moment in time and place in space. In addition, our minds often construct meaning through gestalts, wholes or ideals as a heuristic device. The diachronic can be understood as dynamism in the spatiotemporal register where meaning is produced. Our minds appreciate the construction of diachronic meaning because we have a sense of history through memory and imagination. In addition, it may be the case that the unconscious mind constructs meaning diachronically.

The avant-garde French filmmaker, Jean Epstein, was theorizing film around the same time as Balazs and was also concerned with phenomenological epistemology for the new medium. Epstein, developed a theory of photogénie recognizing that profilmic objects articulate meaning diachronically, while the spectator’s conscious understanding of the cinematic object is part of a synchronic mode of meaning-production. Yet, that we can identify something as “photogenic” suggests that some part of our minds (I would claim, the unconscious) is processing meaning diachronically. Balazsian physiognomy runs counter to Epsteinian photogénie, in that the unification process for meaning-production denies the diachronic spatiotemporal register. Our spirit and that of the profilmic object rely on synchronic modes of meaning production through physiognomical recognition. The close-up is the fulcrum of this synchronicity - it is the moment that has the least tension with diachronic spatiotemporal registers for processes of meaning-production. It is the place of least oscillation between synchronic and diachronic understanding. The close-up is like being in the eye of a storm. The unification in interfacing through physiognomy is so pure in the close-up that Balazs recognizes an inability to properly articulate the meaning. He simply refers to it as a “symphony”. And I suppose that we can take from this – a symphony of meaning between subject and object.

Carter explains that for Balazs, the close-up is the lyrical essence of the entire drama – a technical device that locates the film image not within the linear time of narrative or epic, but in the temporality of affect and the dream. For Balazs it is the close shot, and not montage, that is the site of temporal simultaneity in an aesthetic space. With close shots, multiple expressions are conveyed simultaneously and the close-up brings to light the movements of subjective affect. Balazs writes, “the close shot becomes a simultaneous representation that nullifies all sense of time”. The moving image can reproduce dream figures, and Balazs explains, “their rhythm does not conform to the laws of motion in the physical world, but to the internal rhythms of the mental world”. This statement recalls Munsterberg’s film theory from earlier this term, as well as, paralleling with Siegfried Kracauer’s ideas about “inner dispositions” conveyed through expressionist film images. Physiognomy takes on Romantic notions through affect where Balazs conceives of physiognomy through the close-up as not merely a quality of objects, but an actual dimension that renders visible emotion in its purest state. Balazs writes, “the position of the eyes in the top half of the face, the mouth below; wrinkles now to the right, now to the left – none of this now retains its spatial significance. For what we see is merely a single expression. We see emotions and thoughts. We see something that does not exist in space”.

Balazs relies on Bergson’s work on durée (or duration) and time. Bergson suggests that time is conventionally understood spatially by reflective consciousness. The segmentation of time in past, present and future is achieved through our rational minds constructing a temporal framework, however, the affective mind articulates anticipatory thoughts over-top of that temporal framework, simultaneously. For example, as our rational mind comes to understand the present, our affective mind simultaneously sees an imaginary past and future for that present, and perhaps a myriad of alternate present moments in the realm of possibility that the imagination can conjure. Therefore a sense of time is felt as having more dimensions than time itself. This is an interventionalist reading of Bergson who like Balazs understands temporal synthesis as a real dimension of time through human experience.

I would suggest that the unconscious affective habit of layering imaginary temporal frameworks over-top of segments in the experienced temporal register does not constitute temporal simultaneity, but is instead *ensemble* within segmentation where there is overlap and interpenetration, facilitating a form of free will from the strict dictates of actual temporal experience. To observe that “time flies when we are having fun” is simply to note that the affective mind is unconsciously producing more overlap and interpenetration during “fun” times – this is likely connected to the inhibition of neurotransmitters, such as dopamine or serotonin. However, the neurochemical flows may be affected by will-power and the mind’s intent to have energetic flow in discursive formations within the mind. One may affect and stimulate the other, or vice-versa, or they may work in conjunction. However, I would suggest that these energetic moments of overlap and interpenetration between the affective mind and rational mind when constructing a temporal framework do relate to an impulse to exert free will. And it would make a lot of sense to conceive of a person’s freest moments in life as being fun times.

As I have shown, Balazs has ambivalence toward spatializing time and idealizes synchronicity in the process of producing meaning between subject and object. The denial of diachronicity is problematic and is revealed most clearly through Balazs’s open disagreement with Sergei Eisenstein on the essence of film. Balazs agrees with contemporary film studies that there are three fundamental components of the language of film – montage (editing), camera set-up (cinematography) and close-up (mise-en-scene). However, for Balazs, montage is referred to as *Bilderfuhrung* (meaning, leading the image along) and this connects-up rather neatly with Vsevolod Pudovkin’s concept of “linkage”. These conceptions were rejected and criticized by Eisenstein as being akin to simple brick building in the meaningful film editing process. For Eisenstein, the essence of cinema was in a montage of dynamic collisions dialectically constructing meaning within shots and between shots. Diachronicity is an essential concept for understanding Eisenstein’s film theory.

The affinity Balazs showed for linkage or Bilderfuhrung in understanding the meaning produced through film montage may relate to his being influenced by concepts from the world of music and dance. Balazs saw movements as connecting sequentially to produce rhythm that in turn produces meaning. For Eisenstein, the meaning produces rhythm. To illustrate the difference, sweep one arm up, holding it for a moment, poised in the air, and then let the arm descend. Through linkage, the arm held high might represent “power” and as it falls, “compromise”. Each movement articulates synchronic meaning where the single position of raised or fallen determines the meaning of the movement. Through dialectics, the raised arm represents the thesis of “power” and antithesis of “overthrow” or “revolt”. The raised arm has a relationship with the tension that exists in raising it and holding its position. The arm descending is a synthesis of the arm raising, perhaps representing “defeat”. The fallen arm’s thesis is “defeat” but its antithesis is “reaction” for the tension that exists in the arm laying limp but having the potential for other movement. This dynamism in meaning production constructs a spatiotemporal register or framework, diachronically. There is history within movements and between movements and no movement exists in a vacuum, meaningfully.

Balazs’s film theory is located within aesthetic theory through physiognomy which is influenced by Goethe. His phenomenology is guided by the work of Simmel and Bergson. For Balazs, the film material is spiritually dead technologically and industrially, but becomes animated by a bodily poetics whose aesthetic qualities are those of music, lyric poetry and dance. The neo-Kohlbergian tradition in moral psychology has shown through studies that literary competence has a strong positive correlation with moral competence. Therefore, there is something quite dangerous in Balazs’s impulse to supplant literary culture with a visual culture, and not just for the possible discrimination mentioned earlier. If we master written word language first to gain moral competence, but then subjugate it for a universal visual language, what are the consequences, both psychologically and socially for that disavowal of a structure that is productive and good? Like all good Communists, Balazs is an idealist, but if the practical implementation of a universal language was achieved, would human minds become the masters of affective order or would the moral incompetence lend to psychological atavism? (Brooklyn Nine-Nine clip)

I will finish by directing you to a page of important quotes from Balazs’s first book on film theory, *Visible Man.* This includes a final thought on how Balazs’s project fits into the contemporary intellectual and cultural landscape.

Romanticism:

“For film is the popular art of our century. Not, unfortunately, in the sense that it arises from the spirit of the people, but in the sense that it is our of film that the spirit of the people arises” (4)

“the imagination and the emotional life of the people are inspired and given shape in the cinema” (4)

Post-Structuralism:

“aesthetics is one of the most arrogant and aristocratic of sciences, for it is one of the most venerable and it hails from an age when every question involved ultimate questions about meaning and existence” (5)

“more than any other art, film is a social art, one that in a sense is created by the audience” (8)

Hermeneutics:

“Venus’s hips smile as expressively as her face” (and he goes on to write that we can know the face expression of a headless statue based on muscle contortions of the back and torso)

“the language of gestures is the true mother tongue of mankind”

Affect:

“atmosphere is to be sure the soul of every art. It is the air and the aroma that pervade every work of art, and that lend distinctiveness to a medium and a world. This atmosphere is like the nebulous primal matter that condenses into individual shapes. It is the substance common to the most disparate works, the ultimate reality of every art.” (22)

Medium Specificity:

“If film is to be an independent art with its own aesthetics, then it will have to distinguish itself from all other art forms. It is the specifics of a phenomenon that constitutes its essence and its justification, and the specific nature of a phenomenon is best defined by what makes it different.” (17)

“film is a surface art and in it whatever is inside is outside” (19)

Physiognomy:

Physiognomy isn’t about “typage” for Balazs. Typage is frozen characters in that the viewer has pre-conceived notions on the meaning expressed through gesture. This can only work to enhance grotesquerie or to lend to comic effect

“the physiognomy of a face can be varied at any moment by the play of expressions, which converts the general type into a particular character” (29)

Final Thought:

Balazs aims for film to become an international language because it is a visual medium. It is impractical and virtually impossible to learn all written languages. For Balazs, physiognomical expressions and gestures of “exotic” ethnicities are unique and through exposure in film, we may glean the meaning of those gestures and expressions over a period of time where it would be impossible to learn a new written language of that culture or people.

What about powerful tools like Google Translate? Currently, it misses nuance and polymorphism (slang, colloquialism, etc.), as well as being poor at discerning meaning from poor spelling or grammar, but it does produce a form of international language of words and we can anticipate great improvements in decades to come.