

Formalism/Realism Debates - Fantasy-Adventure Films in the Modern Age

Classical film theory birthed many debates regarding the distinction of formalism and realism within the art form. Over the years, these debates have both sparked changes in this very relationship itself and reflect variable manifestations of the two schools of thought on screen. The contrast between formalism and realism takes up a unique position with medium specificity arguments. Previous notions of medium specificity revolved around the idea that every artistic medium has its own unique characteristics and elements that determine how meaning and significance is revealed to the observer. While most new arguments for formalism/realism did remain consistent with the essentialist impulse, new ideas proposed by thinkers like Eisenstein, Bazin, Kracauer, and Vertov insisted on analyzing the conception of reality (or lack thereof) within films; and the certain properties that made this relationship crucial.

It was argued by Siegfried Kracauer that filmmaking is essentially torn between two tendencies—formative and realist. Both of these tendencies were looked at through two very different lenses. Bazin and Kracauer believed that what is required re:the two tendencies is a fair balance between the two, with a preference for one of them. On the other hand, Eisenstein and Vertov believed that the contrast between them allowed for the genesis of a new form; whether harmonious or incompatible. Eisenstein's key argument favored the formal aspects of the cinematic medium. He believed that editing and strategic structuring of images allowed film to transcend other art forms. His conception of "montage"—the assembly of shots that collide forms of meanings using two juxtaposed shots—was a dialectical one. He believed that the various forms of contrast between shots creates a conflict-based film syntax. Eisenstein's formalist perspectives highlight these kinds of unique elements, the manipulation of formal aspects, as key to the creation of a purely cinematic language. Vertov, in contrast, was a

proponent of realist arguments, and promoted the employment of the Kino-eye (*kino-glaz*) which essentially emphasized the importance of capturing human reality without any artistic manipulation of its elements—a ‘sensory’ exploration of reality.

Given these two schools of thought, we can analyze how they have manifested within the prevalent fantasy-adventure genre. Most visual spectacle and special effects within the genre are indicative of its formalist tendencies, as the emphasis that is laid on the visual elements imbue the film’s form. The manipulation of time in these films—use of unconventional editing and non-linear storytelling—allow for spectators to be fully immersed in the film’s formal conception.

Conceiving the genre through the realist tendency, many of these films do not stray from the very necessary element of characterization and development of human personalities throughout the stories. While fictional and sometimes inconceivable, the plots of such films are often given very honest and tactile *human* propensities that ground fantastical elements in order to reach the viewer effectively. Very often, such films also require a very consistent logic and internal meaning within their stories that do not alienate the receiver.

Conceiving them through this relatively new genre, the contrast within the formalism/realism debates are not as severe as they were in the days of classical film theory. As Kracauer exemplified, a balance between the two tendencies allow such films to contribute to medium specificity within cinema and make the art form a unique and captivating form of expression.