

DECONSTRUCTION AS A METHOD OF FILM CRITICISM

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Abstract

Jacques Derrida coined the term 'Deconstruction' in his famous book 'Of Grammatology'. Barbara Johnson clarifies the term: "Deconstruction is not synonymous with "destruction", however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means "to undo" -- a virtual synonym for "to de-construct." If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself." Since its introduction it is widely used in literary criticism. Derrida in his writings does not talk about deconstruction of films but language of camera is actively linked with the written word. Written word in facts is 'signs' and 'symbols' which are the carriers of meaning. Camera also constructs the images and symbols with the help of cuts, angles and various other complex techniques. In the written signs the meaning is often obscured and split into various directions, rather than in a linear fashion. Likewise the visuals which viewers see on the screen cannot be limited to a linear and singular meaning. Hence, deconstruction theory is the quest of the hour as a method of film criticism. This research paper suggests a new arena in the field of film criticism through the kaleidoscope of deconstruction.

Key words: Deconstruction, Films, Meaning, Signs, Symbols, Images.

Introduction:

Jacques Derrida was born from Jewish parents in Algeria. He studied in France and joined military service. In the late 1980's he started teaching philosophy at Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris. He taught literature at the University of California. He had been a teacher of comparative literature at Yale University. He delivered a series of lectures in the summer of 1987 at the annual School of Criticism and Theory at Darmouth College.

Derrida's works came into light with two sets of major publication; first in 1967 with 'Writing and Differnce' and 'Of Grammatology'; then in 1972 with 'Dissemination, Margins of Philosophy and Positions'. In 1983 Derrida played an important role in the foundation of

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International College of Philosophy in Paris. The purpose of this institution was to provide priority to research topics not accepted in existing institutions in France or other Countries.

In 1966 Derrida presented his paper 'Structure, Sign, Play in Discourse of Human Sciences' at the John Hopkins University in Structuralism Conference. The paper includes his work 'Writing and Difference'. Structuralism argued that all meaning is produced on relationship and structure. Derrida rejected the theory and referred to 'deconstruction' as the main philosophical principal of the intellectual movement. Deconstruction had an enormous influence on this movement.

Derrida presented his basic views in his three books 'Of Grammatology', 'Writing and Difference' and 'Speech and Phenom'. For Derrida nothing remains absolute or eternal. All meanings, all values are historically constructed; they are logo centric illusions. Logo centism is derived from the Greek word 'Logos' identified with God, the ultimate source of truth. In deconstructing western metaphysics, he wants to prove that its theories are not truth rather they are constructions.

Postmodernism:

Postmodernism starts with rejection of artistic aura and discards the whole previous system of philosophical and linguistic speculations. The focus of postmodernism is on language and particularly signifying system, but its claims are basically ethical. It can be realized in the context of post second world war political and cultural disappointment of the developed countries of Western Europe and United States of America. The frustrated generation of the new consumer's society rebelled against traditional values and ideals, but could replace them only by despair or cynical hedonism wallowing in sex and alcohol. Postmodernism aims at freedom from all shackles of the past, both political and cultural¹, for postmodernists nothing remains absolute and eternal. All values, all meanings are historically conditioned. There is nothing necessarily essential for human being. Thus the construction on depicting universal experience in traditional literature is irrelevant and illusionary² and it has been deconstructed. Discrediting meaning as hopeless delusion postmodernists discards the whole previous system of philosophical and linguistic speculations. The focus of postmodernism is on language and signifying system, but its claims are basically epistemological.

Deconstruction:

The theory of deconstruction is a complex one and difficult to define in simple terms. Derrida himself clarifies, "There is not – one deconstruction, and deconstruction is not a single theory or a single method" (Vandenberg). Derrida says that in almost all of his essays, he attempted to define what deconstruction is, and that deconstruction is necessarily complicated and difficult to explain since it actively criticizes the very language needed to explain etc. One definition that Derrida did give in a summary of deconstruction is, "Deconstruction is a strategy of critical

questioning directed towards exposing unquestionable metaphysical assumptions and internal contradictions in philosophical and literary language (Vandenberg)³. Deconstruction is a form of textual practice derived from Derrida, which aims to demonstrate the inherent insatiability of both language and meaning. It rejects the word “analysis” or “interpretation” as well as it rejects any assumption of texts.

“Difference is an important idea with deconstruction, it is an observation that the meanings of words come from their synchrony with other words within the language and their diachronic between contemporary and historical definitions of a word” (Soskice)⁴.

Booth describes deconstructionism as a critique that does not preoccupy itself with sources and debates between competing interpretations, or with trying to avoid ideology and bias. Rather, they implicate historians directly in the evidence (Booth)⁵. This approach focuses on how we, as a whole, interpret historical events rather than the exact events that took place in a certain time period. Another way of defining deconstructionism is the theory of literary criticism that questions traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth.

Deconstruction and Films:

Derrida has never discussed film theory directly in his writings, neither he address, how the theory of deconstruction can be applicable to the study of films, but Brunette and Wills proposed the idea to have its applicability in film studies. They argue that theory of deconstruction is applicable in critiques of films as it is based on the logocentric foundations. Moreover they believe that application of deconstruction theory might even shift films from its traditional position within the visual arts to a new place in the media and information sciences.

In, 1986, Peter Brunette tried to explain how theory of deconstruction can be utilized as a medium of film criticism⁶. Although it's a fact that Derrida himself never discusses his theory of deconstruction with reference to films, but Brunette directly refers to Derrida several times in his article in which he explains how theory of deconstruction can be applied for film criticism. Brunette admits that till date when he is writing the article deconstruction theory hadn't been commonly used in film criticism. Basically the theory of deconstruction is more in the realm of literature and art like painting sculpture etc but never to films. However, this is a fact that theory of deconstruction can be applied in relatively the same way as in the deconstruction of printed text.

One important difference that film has in comparison with the written text is that film creates visual images. Films have characteristics to show something pictorial to the viewers with voice or speech. Whereas, written texts are signs and symbols which signifies the meaning and consecutively creates the images in the minds of the individuals. In both form, one thing is very

similar that they create image and the fact is that film is a text itself. Cinematography, after all, is also a form of writing (Brunette). It is found in the dialogue, background music, on clothing worn by the cast, on products and other materials such as signs that are used in a film.

Presence and Absence of Light:

Brunette explains, “A film is a matter of the presence and absence of light, and thus whatever we are able to see on the screen is constituted, finally, by a differential system of gaps and dark spaces that ‘create’ the presences of light and make them seem substantial. Moving from the spatial to the temporal (terms which of course are deeply implicated in one another), the familiar concept of persistence of vision might also be profitably reconsidered from the perspective of the relationship between presence and absence which deconstructive thinking can provide” (Brunette). Brunette says that the viewers has no choice but to only see what is being shown on the screen, and this gives the authority to the films in decision making. The director decides the shots, scenes, camera angle, camera movement and the sequence. For example, an introductory shot may contain just one character’s face or sometimes it may contain a beach with bird’s eye view angle. If a close-up shot of Gabbar’s facial expression is shown in film *Sholay*, he is referred to with a racial slur and the viewer gets a clear image of how Gabbar is feeling. This enables viewers to create the meaning of the character’s emotions and also pushes them to feel hatred, love, anger, compassion or empathy for different characters on the basis of pictorial representation they see. Another way the meaning is aimed to communicate in a film is the selection of color, location, related and unrelated objects in the frame.

“At another level, film, like all signs, necessarily represents what is *not there*. Thus, what is particularly interesting about the cinema is that the absence or endless chain of ungrounded signifiers which deconstruction considers being ‘inherent’ to representation is both more and less blatant here than it is in purely verbal signs” (Brunette). This is very similar with what Booth believes about semiotics. Each sign or symbol is carrier of some meaning; this meaning includes what has not been shown in the frame and is absent from scene. Symbolism plays a significant role in films.

Deconstruction rejects the concepts of film history as well and it challenges the dogmatic belief and proposes it to be treated like a kind of narrative. “Film history, like any other history, is also a narrative, and thus distorted as well as enabled by the constraints of narrative technique” (Brunette) ⁶. It asserts that the producers are authoritative in utilizing these narrative techniques to convey the desired meaning and they show what they want the viewers to see. A film producer applies these techniques deliberately to create a specific response, impact and interpretation from the viewers.

Semiotics of Cinema:

Semiotics is defined as the study of signs in the dynamic process of communication. Signs can be categorized into two components: the form that signifies (the signifier) and what it signifies (the signified). Semiotics plays an important role in Cinema. In cinema the meaning gets transferred with the help of visual image superimposed with voice. The image is like signs which are created by the filmmakers through various tools of lights, camera angle, shots, cuts and various other techniques. When viewers watch the film they extract the meaning depending upon their reference level. In this process certain meanings are lost, whereas certain meanings are reconstructed but the view which varies with their culture, education, references and others. Deconstruction tends to search out the missing points of meaning like a particular branch of psychoanalysis. Because of this dynamic process involved, literariness and critics believe that deconstruction has developed out of the theories of philosophers like Freud and Nietzsche. These philosophers emphasize on the science of signs that is semiotics to find out the hidden meanings in the dynamic process of communication. Although, the fact is that deconstruction is away from these theories as it does not tend to find the hidden meaning but to deconstruct the whole process and construct the meaning on the principles of differences and in one way or other it generates meaning.

Various theories of films have tried to search out a link between meaning generating role of cinema and meaning generated role of language. The language of film is both similar and dissimilar with the language of words or texts. It is similar as films also attempt to create image in the mind of viewers to create certain impact or effect and construct a meaning, likewise textual language tries to create image with the help of signs and symbols. It is dissimilar in the sense that it utilizes the visual image and voice as well, so the image creation or construction of the meaning in the mind of viewers becomes more complex and more emphatic. During 1960 and decades of 70's Christian Metz tried to assemble the **Grand Syntagmatique**. In this he proposes that a series of shots in films are equivalent to a sentence in the textual language. He argues that various juxtapositions can be constructed in the same manner as words in textual language.

Metz's introduction and application of semiotics in film theory has created a roadmap for later critical development, as **genre theory** and the structural analysis of films benefitted from a stronger relationship with a structural analysis of language than did the formal elements of montage. Rick Altman in essay "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to film Genre," (1984)⁷ explains how genre can be perpetrated in terms of variations, differences, conflicts, and tensions within the ambit of syntax and semantics. A genre's syntax can be explained as elements of films like narration, theme, icons –which identify the genre. Whereas, genres semantics are the ideological function of the genre as per its specific utilization of the syntactic elements present therein.

Deconstruction is not about the reliability and reality or truth. It rejects the nature of truth and accuracy. It tends to explain the authority and define social problems. These social problems vary from culture to culture and include abuse, race, discrimination and marginalization of women, gambling, violence and others. Deconstruction puts question mark on the treatment and

depiction of these social problems in films. It tends to reconstruct the particular reason in the way these social problems are depicted in the way. It also looks with skepticism at the selection of characters in the scene and the way particular characters behave.

Cinematography and Meaning:

The suffix –graphy in the word cinematography illustrates direct relation to the written word. This doesn't mean that in cinema visual images are constructed by written word, it means that cinematography is somewhat equivalent to the text in language. As in written words, the meaning is often obscured and split into multiple directions and the deconstruction of meaning does not follow strictly an uni-linear approach in the same way the visual image, which are shown in the screen does not have a single meaning. The meaning is obscured in the images which are present in the scene and which are absent in the scene and so the theory of deconstruction is required. The theoretical arguments suggest that the meanings that are constructed in the mind of viewers are by nature contradictory. Directors of the films neither can create a solid meaning nor a solid periphery within which the meaning may be constructed. Films are in fact flawed by the application of logic as it contains both a visual image and speech difference. By being of these two sections of Visual and Speech, films are byproduct of two different beasts and because of this the oneness and togetherness of films are unintentionally cracked and artificial. The image cannot be said to have linear meaning as films are split between image and audio, and these are incoherent in nature. Further, meaning of the film resides less in the content of the shots or sequences, but in the mutual and contextual relations between the images.

Conclusion:

Cinema is an art of the ghost.

Here, the ghost is me.

-Jacques Derrida

Mr. Derrida, who plays himself in a film with Miss Ogier, says, "I think cinema, when it's not boring, is the art of letting ghosts come back." Further he says that "memory is the past that has never had the form of the present." Cinema or films are the representation of the event which is absent at one sphere and present in another sphere. In Film studies the theory of deconstruction is slowly creeping in a calm and respectable fashion. Although, it has been an indirect seeping into the crevices of cinema, but it has seeped nonetheless. The paper proposes that the whole notion of film genre could be approached from a deconstructive point of view as deconstruction challenges the very fibers of interpretation itself, pointing out contextual and institutional

barriers that often accompany film in general. One problem with deconstructionism is that it doesn't have a definitive definition. This allows past, present and future research on deconstructionism to find different outcomes based on how he or she interprets the deconstructionism theory. Deconstructionism is a tough subject. It has many layers that need to be analyzed.

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