FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Jean Epstein

Corporeal cinema and film philosophy

CHRISTOPHE WALL-ROMANA

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French Film Directors

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Tous ces phares parlent une seule langue, celle des éclats de lumière que tous les navigateurs du monde comprennent.

[All these lighthouses speak but one language, that of light bursts, which all the navigators in the world understand.]

Jean Epstein, *Les Feux de la mer* (1948)

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Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent upon national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about auteurism. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessarily coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the auteur perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly

skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already well known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the formal and informal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES
ROBERT INGRAM

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Sarah Keller (Colby College) and Jason Paul kindly invited me to the symposium on Jean Epstein they had organized at the University of Chicago in 2007, and it was a rare joy to meet other dedicated fans of Epstein. At this event I also met Tom Gunning whose unwavering support of my work since then has been an incredible gift. At the close of the symposium, I drew a mental outline of this book, so Sarah, Jason, and Tom were its gentle inspirers: thank you!

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For her gift of time and love, and for just about everything else too, I thank my wife and best friend, Margaret.

Abbreviations

To save space, I have used the following standard abbreviations for shot analysis.

CU	close-up (a face filling the screen or a small object/area)
ECU	extreme close-up (a small detail, part of something, an eye)
ELS	extreme long shot (persons too small to identify, aerial establishing shot)
FS	full shot (a person from the feet or knee up or equivalent)
HA	high angle (camera pointed downwards)
LA	low angle (camera pointed upwards)
LS	long shot (several persons in a large indoor or outdoor space or equivalent)
MCU	medium close-up (chest and face or a larger object/area)
MS	medium shot (a person from the waist up or equivalent)
POV	point of view
VLS	very long shot (a crowd or a very large space or expanse)

Contents

Introduction: Epstein at the crossroads

> Il n'y a pas d'histoires. Il n'y a jamais eu d'histoires. Il n'y a que des situations, sans queue ni tête; sans commencement, sans milieu, et sans fin; sans endroit et sans envers; on peut les regarder dans tous les sens; la droite devient la gauche; sans limites de passé ou d'avenir, elles sont le présent.
>
> Jean Epstein (1974: 87 [1921a])[1]

Lumière vs. Méliès revisited

Jean Epstein opens his 1936 documentary *La Bourgogne* with a curious very long shot (VLS). A locomotive loudly speeds by a railroad crossing from left to right, while cars stack on both sides of the track. It's the kind of shot one expects from a realist drama, for instance in Renoir's 1938 adaptation of Zola's *La Bête humaine*, or the end of John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). A few minutes later, a continuous 360-degree pan – which is among the earliest use of this shot – shows us an unremarkable crossroad, La Rochefoucault near Montbard.[2] One branch runs to the north-east, linking Provence to Germany, the voice-over indicates, while the other goes to the north-west, linking

1 'There are no stories. There have never been stories. There are only situations, having neither head nor tail; without beginning, middle or end; no recto no verso; they can be looked at from all angles; right becomes left; without limitations in the past or future, they are the present' (Jean Epstein, 1988: 242 [translation modified]).

2 The first 360-degree pan is usually imputed to James Whale's *Frankenstein* (US, 1936), with a centripetal 360-degree pan around Paul Robeson in Whale's *Ol' Man River* (US, 1936). See Robertson (1991: 113).

Switzerland to Paris. It's a simple X in the middle of the non-descript countryside. The voice-over adds that it is a site of many car accidents, but oddly no cars can be seen. More shots of the deserted crossroad follow, with an ominous insistence.

We get the sense that Epstein is not so much documenting this place as reimagining it as an enigmatic symbol of his own life. After all, the north-east branch makes a straight line between Poland, where he was born, and Nice, where he discovered filmmaking, while the other road similarly links Switzerland, where he was raised, and Brittany, where he made some of his best films. Perhaps he has found something like the geographical fulcrum of his travels. In any case, this crossroad sequence illustrates a major question that runs through Epstein's filmmaking career: what separates the documentary, ostensibly beholden to reality – the cinema of the Lumière brothers – from a fiction film, a work of imagination – the cinema of illusion of Georges Méliès? It would be in keeping with Epstein's philosophy of cinema to present such a thorny problem in filigree, by filming a simple crossroad.

The epigraph above confirms that Epstein was explicitly rethinking fiction movie as a genre. According to him, dramatic movies ought not to be story driven, but built around a number of situations. What's the difference? In a typical Hollywood movie every action, line of dialogue, scene, or episode serves the narrative arc clearly and efficiently. So efficiently that we can talk of absolute narrative dominance reinforced by viewer expectation to form a closed commercial bond whereby buyers 'get' what they paid for. Though other avant-garde filmmakers were quick to peg him as a commercial director, Epstein refused this kind of closed aesthetics. His œuvre favours 'situations', that is, fragments or moments dislodged from the narrative, meant to be experienced and enjoyed for themselves, as direct presentations of the essence of cinema. We can think of situations as having a self-contained *poetic quality*, distinct from their *narrative value*. If fiction films correspond to novels in literature, Epstein's movies may be considered to embed wayward poems in their plot, in the very way Proust punctuates his narrative with sprawling descriptions and disquisitions that are almost stand-alone prose poems.

Epstein's quote certainly points us directly to Aristotle's theory of the three literary genres: the epic (or narrative), the lyric and the theatre. References to the 'head' and 'tail' and 'no beginning, middle, or end'

cite almost verbatim the way Aristotle defines the epic – *haplèdiegetikê* – as a kind of animal body with a head and a tail. Epstein does not feel the need to make this explicit, however, thus illustrating a non-élitist intellectual ethics that attempts to couch complex ideas in approachable form. Greek thought and sexual tolerance matter to him deeply, as we will see, but not erudition. And while he delves into theoretical reflection he never seeks to gainsay a strategic advantage – as avant-gardes tend to do – only to clarify what we experience. To return to the citation as a whole, Epstein polemically rejects plot-driven cinema because it distracts viewers from the force and beauty of the filmic moments it is made of. What is beautiful, he suggests, is not the story – most plots follow stock fables anyway – but something about what is viewed and how it is viewed. In other words, a movie is not the *representation* of a pre-existing story, but the *presentation* of dramatic situations considered chiefly in how they appeal to our imagination and perception here and now. This, in turn, can help us to understand why poetry is so central to Epstein, together with *photogénie*, his term for the presentational force of certain shots or sequences.

By now, we have thrown out the window any notion that film theory in the silent era remained cursory until the likes of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov produced sudden leaps. In *La Bourgogne*, Epstein overlays intimations of deadly crossings or accidents onto a bucolic evocation, grafting a potential drama on the sober documentary genre. In his 1927 fiction film *La Glace à trois faces*, a car accident puts an end to the story when a fateful bird hits the driver. The virtual accidents in the documentary and the actual accident in the fiction film illustrate the same idea: 'Without limits of past or future, [these situations] are the present.' Cinema, like history and life, takes place also in its accidents, that is, in the here and now, within the tensions that bind our present to past and future. It is significant, for instance, that *La Bourgogne* was shot in March 1936, at the very time the nearby Rhineland was being reoccupied by the Nazi regime with its expansionist agenda. The documentary, usually about present and past, can also refract the looming shadow of the future. Jean Epstein, famous yet misunderstood, original yet held to be idiosyncratic and poetic to a fault, consistently referred to by most critics as a key theoretician and yet substantially engaged with by very few of them, has been stuck at the crossroads of film history, in a past that has not yet been recovered.