

The Development from Classicism to Modernism in the Cinemas of France and the United States – A Comparative Cultural and Philosophical Case Study

Philosophical Framework: This research project will take as its foundation a philosophical principle foreign to both French and American culture. The notion of *pativasamuppāda*—most often translated as “dependent origination”—contends that the whole of reality consists in a “mutual arising, with entities co-depending upon each other for existence.”¹ Dependent origination does not merely signify the causal or dialectical relationships to which western intellectuals typically cling. Instead, it supposes an essential but dynamic similitude to be found in phenomena marked by even the starkest contrasts.

Purpose: I will apply this principle to a comparative study of French and US cinema beginning in the late 1930s and culminating in the late 1960s. It will serve as a guiding light for a study that aims to challenge western film theory and criticism predicated upon philosophical traditions that are differential and, in turn, often divisive. Breaking from such a paradigm, this study engages with two major developments in French and US cinema, those of classicism (wherein the values are motivational clarity and narrative causality) and modernism (wherein those values are upended through experimentation). The passage from classicism to modernism can be found in national cinemas all over the world², but my project will focus on France and the United States for three primary reasons: these countries’ preeminence in the establishment of basic cinematic expression, their ongoing role in the advancement of that expression, and the fact that these developments happened concurrently in both countries. My analysis will be carried out with reference to the principle of dependent origination, but the objects of my analysis will be seemingly unrelated. My project seeks to ask and answer: why do similar solutions to multifarious problems occur in French and US cinema without the two always being in direct dialogue? When do these cinemas converge and in what ways? Where do they diverge and in what ways? How can their relationship help us to understand “the movies’ [innate] place as instruments of social transformation”?³ Regardless of whether divergence or convergence dominates a comparison of the two developments, what can such a comparison teach us about community in world cinema and the ubiquitous process of cinematic modernization?

Methodology: Research for this project will be both qualitative and quantitative. Research materials will be manifold, including but not limited to cultural and economic histories, formal analyses, interviews, popular criticisms, and diverse theoretical and philosophical texts both within and without the discipline of film studies. My principal source for a broad cultural history of US cinema will be Robert Sklar’s *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*. My first step during the course of this project will be to read histories of French cinema by Richard Abel and Alan Williams in an effort to find a counterpart to Sklar’s study.

Timeline: During the summer of 2017, I will begin screening classical and modernist films from France and the United States. These viewings will continue throughout the course of the project. The summer’s readings will focus primarily on cultural and economic histories of France and the United States during the first half of the 20th century. During the fall of 2017, I will begin travelling as a means of diversifying the resources available to me. I will visit the Harvard Film Archive and, if possible, the Cinematic Arts Library at USC. The fall’s readings will focus primarily on critical, theoretical, and philosophical texts dealing with specific films and filmmakers. During the spring of 2018, I will synthesize my findings in a 50-100 page essay which will serve as my honors thesis. I may also expand upon one or more of the paper’s subtopics in a shorter essay that can be submitted to an undergraduate journal like *Film Matters* or delivered as a presentation at the undergraduate conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies.

¹ Murray Hunter, “Dependent Origination as a Natural Governing Law,” *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice* 4, no. 2 (2012): 116-177.

² Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “Introduction to The Modern Cinema 1960-1965,” *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 463-465. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

³ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.