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Pasi Nyyssonen

Film Theory at the Turning Point of Modernity

Hugo Münsterberg

Das Lichtspiel: Eine Psychologische Studie [1916] Und andere schriften zum Kino

Introduction, translation and commentaries by Jorg Schweinitz

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152 pp.

In the course of the 'cognitive turn' of film studies the name of Hugo Munsterberg (1863-1916) has been given a new reputation as an early predecessor of cognitive and scientific approaches to film theory and spectators' psychological processes. Munsterberg has been hailed as a more sound basis for psychologically oriented film studies than psychoanalysis, which dominated theoretical discussion in the 1970s and 80s. The recent interest in spectators' emotions makes Munsterberg topical too, namely he was convinced that 'to picture emotions must be the central aim of the photoplay' (65). Munsterberg's The Photoplay: A Psychological Study was first published in April 1916, eight months before his unexpected death. The book was soon forgotten and rediscovery had to wait until the 1970s when it was republished otherwise unaltered except the modernised name The Film and Richard Griffith's foreword. Das Lichtspiel now makes Danzig-born Munsterberg familiar to a German reading public as well. [1]

Das Lichtspiel is the first German translation of The Photoplay and, to my knowledge, also the most comprehensive collection of Munsterberg's writings on cinema available in any

language. This is not as much as it may sound because to his early death Munsterberg's literary work on cinema is very scarce. Besides *The Photoplay* only two articles, 'Why We Go to the Movies' and 'Peril to the Childhood in the Movies'. *Das Lichtspiel* includes also a previously unpublished interview with Munsterberg and, as an example of contemporary reception, Vachel Lindsay's review of the book. These writings, and a detailed bibliography, reference section, and a thorough introduction by the editor make *Das Lichtspiel* a highly important publication. The writings of Munsterberg take up two thirds of the book, and a 14 page reference section tells something about the carefulness taken in editing the work.

Munsterberg's book is divided into three sections. The Introduction presents a short history of film's 'outer' (i.e. technical) and 'inner' (i.e. aesthetical) development. The following two parts concentrate on the psychological aspects related to film and its viewing, and film's aesthetic essence and its potential as an art form. In their introductions both Griffith and Schweinitz value the psychology part as the most important contribution to the study. In his doctoral thesis, *The Aesthetic of Isolation in Film Theory: Hugo Munsterberg*, Donald Fredericksen emphasises the theoretical utility of Munsterberg's aesthetics and notes that the psychological analysis functions as a basis for the main goal of the book, that of presenting film as an art form in its own right. Schweinitz also brings this matter out in his introduction. [2]

The psychological section explores the major psychological functions -- perception of depth and movement, attention, memory and imagination, and emotions -- which are involved in watching films. Munsterberg considers the spectator to be mentally active in all these areas. The spectator adds movement and depth to static and flat pictures, creates meaning with the help of attention and memory processes, and also responds to screen images according to his/her's affective life. However, there is also another side to the activity thesis. In order to maintain the aesthetic attitude the spectator *should not* always use the full potential of his mental faculties. For example, in the case of attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*) our active (voluntary, *willkürlich*) search for significant information is less important than involuntary ('*unwillkürliche*') attention, when the cues for shifting our points of interest 'come from without', i.e. from decisions made by the director of the film (51-3).

Munsterberg also draws an analogy between mental processes and cinematic functions, e.g. memory corresponds to the 'cut back' in the cinema, and a mental act of attention selects the important information from a chaos of sensory stimuli like close-up focuses on a detail in a film's visual field. Munsterberg's discussion of spectators' mental functions is especially noteworthy, considering the fact that he had a widely recognised scholarly background as an experimental psychologist and consequently applied the most recent psychological research to his discussion on film.

The aesthetic task of proving film to be art, and an art form which is different from the theatre, is more in the line with other silent film theorists. Medium specificity and essentialism, as landmarks of classical film theory as described by Noel Carroll, [3] apply also to Munsterberg's aesthetic views. To prove that film is art is to distinguish it from the theatre and assign it certain

essential features -- silence, colorlessness, flatness -- which will guarantee its status as an independent art form. The aesthetical analysis is guided by Munsterberg's conception of art as something which is 'isolated' from real life. An aesthetic object requires a total harmony of its elements and at least a certain degree of detachment ('isolation') from reality. The lack of words is one way of detaching film from the actual world and helps the spectator to create an aesthetic attitude which is devoid of any personal or practical interest.

Munsterberg's article 'Why We Go to the 'Movies"' was published in *The Cosmopolitan Magazine* in December 1915 and its obvious purpose was to promote his forthcoming book. Munsterberg had just finished writing *The Photoplay* and the *Cosmopolitan* article is basically a summary of his main arguments for film as a new art form. The other article published in *Das Lichtspiel*, 'Peril to Childhood in the Movies', has a different emphasis. Published posthumously in February 1917 in *Mother's Magazine*, it was targeted directly to the educationalists and it paid more attention to the dangers of film to young audiences. As usually in his popular writings, Munsterberg starts by painting a rather grim picture of the subject in hand: 'It would be reckless indeed to ignore the dangers that lurk in the gaudy cinematograph shows', he writes. By 'dangers' he means for instance 'an atmosphere of vulgarity and triviality' in the movies (117-118). However, the negative aspects are far outnumbered by the positive potential of film: 'the motion pictures are, first of all, great teachers of knowledge . . . it [film] impresses the young mind more strongly than any verbal description or any simply printed illustration could do' (119). Besides 'intellectual education', films have an important mission in introducing us to moral and aesthetic ideals. Munsterberg promotes educational films and calls for special children's programs and even film theatres for the young (120-121). Munsterberg even made a few educational films ('Pictographs') for adult audiences, and, according to his daughter's testimony, he had come up with a project for teaching history using film just before his death.

So it seems that there are two sides in Munsterberg's views on film which seem to contradict each other. The 'practical' use of film does not fit in to his aesthetical definition of film as an 'isolated' art form which demands aesthetical contemplation from its audience. Munsterberg's definition of film as art based on Kantian aesthetics excludes film from the practical sphere of life and this is undermined by his strong emphasis on the educational value of film (35, 115, 119-121). The additional articles in *Das Lichtspiel* bring out this contradiction more clearly and provides readers with a more complex view of Munsterberg's thoughts.

Munsterberg's intellectual background offers some clarification to this contradiction. Munsterberg had the formal education of an experimental psychologist in Germany, and later gained a reputation in America as a professor of psychology at Harvard and as one of the leading proponents of applied psychology. Besides psychological research Munsterberg had a serious interest in philosophy too. He was closely connected to the neo-Kantian movement in Germany, especially to its idealistic, value philosophy oriented branch, the so-called Baden school (aka Southwestern school), led by Heinrich Rickert and Wilhelm Windelband. Munsterberg's own value philosophy, laid out in *Philosophie der Werte* (1908), is based on Fichte's ideas of an active subject and will as central aspects of human experience.

In his introduction to *Das Lichtspiel* Schweinitz does valuable work in clarifying certain aspects of these influences. First of all, he wisely leaves open the question whether Munsterberg was a Gestalt psychologist, as Munsterberg's discussion of the phi-phenomena and the activity of mind might easily lead one to think. Indeed Richard Griffith, Dudley Andrew and Jacques Aumont, among others, have labelled Munsterberg a Gestalt psychologist. [4] The history of psychology presents Gestalt psychology as a strong counter movement to Wundt's atomistic experimental psychology. Although Munsterberg opposed certain aspects of Wundt's psychological thinking, especially his voluntarism which was most evident in his theory of apperception, he remained in the Wundtian legacy of atomistic psychology. For instance, he criticised the Wurtzburg school's attempts to get rid of the Wundtian research methods and its restrictions as harmful and unscientific 'Mischpsychologie'. Also, the association of ideas, an integral part of the atomistic psychology which Gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer called a simplistic 'bundle' or 'mosaic-hypothesis', maintained an important position in Munsterberg's psychological writings and is clearly the central meaning making mechanism in *Das Lichtspiel*, too. Instead of the Gestalt theory, Munsterberg's psychological views are mainly based on his own modification of association theory. This so-called action theory was originally presented in his major theoretical publication *Grundzuge der Psychologie* (1900). [5]

In *Das Lichtspiel* Munsterberg tries carefully to separate psychological and aesthetic-philosophical discussions from one another. However, his philosophical convictions, which are in many ways in contradiction with his scientific views, are already present in his psychological analysis of the spectator's mental faculties. At least some parts of Munsterberg's emphasis on the activity of the spectator can be traced back to his Fichtean-influenced value philosophy. In *Grundzuge* (the purpose of which is to 'synthesise Fichte's ethical philosophy with physiological psychology of our times') Munsterberg describes how 'the real subject (Ich) is an actuality which takes attitude (stellungnehmende) . . . [and] in free acts the subject creates its own reality'. [6] For Munsterberg the creative act of will makes the world and its representations possible. Likewise in the psychological part of *Das Lichtspiel* Munsterberg praises film as embodying the active nature of the human mind: '*the objective world [in film] is molded by the interests of the mind* . . . In the photoplay our imagination is projected on the screen . . . we see the course of the natural events remolded by the power of the mind' (59, 62).

In his idealistic philosophy Munsterberg joined a large group of German scientists and intellectuals who had mixed feelings about the modernisation process. Traditional structures in science, society and morals seemed threatened, and a philosophy of values, an idealistic interpretation of Kant, and in some cases, Fichte, offered protection from the dangers of materialism and relativism. Film was considered one factor which promoted negative tendencies of modernism, but for Munsterberg it also offered a partial solution. For him film was a new modern art form which could introduce 'complete harmony of thought and feeling and will' to modern people's hectic lives, if only fitted into the requirements of an idealistic conception of art. The most important of these requirements was the above mentioned isolation which could produce 'ultimate unity through the harmony of its parts' (77). The harmony of an aesthetic object, creating harmony in its spectator, was of major importance amid the fervent modernisation process which was under way in America at the time.

In his introduction Schweinitz connects Munsterberg's aesthetical ideas to his neo-Kantianism and contemporary German discussion of fantasy and illusion. For example Konrad Lange, professor of Aesthetics in Tübingen, stressed aesthetic experience as detached from practical interests and the creative activity of the viewer. However, Munsterberg's aesthetical views were not presented for the first time in his major philosophical work, *„Philosophie der Werte“* (1908) as Schweinitz seems to suggest (21). Munsterberg published several articles on art, starting already at the end of the 19th century. The most compact exposition of his aesthetics can be found in his 'The Principles of Art Education' which was published in 1905. [7] However, in general, Schweinitz's introduction is a superb piece of work.

As a non-native German reader I dare make only few remarks on the translation. Schweinitz uses 'Bewusstsein', 'Seele' and 'Geist' to translate Munsterberg's 'mind', correspondingly 'mental' can be 'psychische', 'seelische' or 'geistige'. At least on some occasions the latter two terms have overly metaphysical connotations, especially in the psychological part of the book. On the other hand one must keep in mind (or in soul) that in *„Das Lichtspiel“* Munsterberg wrote for the general public, therefore he used these concepts more freely than in his scientific publications. One obvious omission seems also to have slipped in the translation. Munsterberg used to italicize his major conclusions (which Vachel Lindsay in his later comment on Munsterberg regarded as the only thing worth while to remember in *„The Photoplay“*), and also in his summary on the close-up as the objectification of the attention process he used italics. In the translation the italics seem to have dropped out. [8]

Oulu University, Finland

Footnotes

1. On current film theory see, e.g., Joseph Anderson, *„The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory“* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), Chapter 1: Introduction, also available at <<http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/film-philosophy/files/paper.anderson.html>>; Joseph Anderson and Barbara Anderson, 'The Case for an Ecological Film Theory', in David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, eds., *„Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Theory“* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), p. 348. On emotions, e.g., Murray Smith, *„Engaging Characters. Fiction, Emotion and Cinema“* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Ed S. Tan, *„Emotion and Structure of Narrative Film“* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996). The two English publications of the book are: *„The Photoplay. A Psychological Study“* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1916); and *„The Film: A Psychological Study. The Silent Photoplay in 1916“* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1970).

2. Richard Griffith, 'Foreword', in Hugo Munsterberg, *The Film*, p. xi; Jorg Schweinitz, 'Psychotechnik, idealistische Asthetik und der Film als mental strukturierte Wahrnehmungsraum: Die Filmtheorie von Hugo Munsterberg', in Munsterberg, *Das Lichtspiel*, pp. 22, 25; Donald L. Fredericksen, *The Aesthetic of Isolation in Film Theory: Hugo Munsterberg* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), pp. 113, 316.

3. Noel Carroll, *Philosophical Problems in Classical Film Theory* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988).

4. Schweinitz (1996), p. 18; Griffith (1970), p. xiii; Andrew, *The Major Film Theories* (Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 16-17; Aumont, *The Image* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), p. 65.

5. Munsterberg, *Grundzuge der Psychologie* (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1900), pp. 525-555; Munsterberg, *Grundzuge der Psychotechnik* (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1920 [1914]), pp. 722-5; Munsterberg (1996), pp. 51, 59, 63; On Wertheimer see e.g. Mitchell G. Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture, 1890-1967* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 220.

6. Munsterberg (1900), pp. vii, 50-1.

7. Munsterberg, 'Psychology and Art', *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 82, November 1898, pp. 632-643; Munsterberg, *The Principles of Art Education: A Philosophical, Aesthetical and Psychological Discussion of Art Education* (New York: Prang Educational, 1905).

8. Vachel Lindsay, *The Progress and Poetry in the Movies* (Lanham, Maryland and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1995), p. 256; Munsterberg (1997), p. 56. I assume that the italics are in the first edition, which has been the source of translation. I was able to lay my hands only on the 1970 edition which should be an exact reprint of the *The Photoplay*. The italicized part reads as follows: **The close-up has objectified in our world of perception our mental act of attention and by it has furnished art with a means which far transcends the power of any theatre stage.**

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