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## Film Theory and Aesthetics: Notes on a Schism

The relationship between film theory and traditional aesthetics has been marked to a great extent either by mutual inattention or by open suspicion and disagreement. I suppose (sadly) that this is a common state for relations between many of the academic disciplines carved out of the arts and humanities. Film theory and aesthetics—both sub-fields within the disciplines of film studies and philosophy, respectively—share a number of concerns: canons and canonization, interpretation, spectatorship, narrative, style, feminism and feminist aesthetics, and photography, to name a few. In some academic Eden, film theorists and aestheticians ought to be learning from each other.

When I say that film theory and aesthetics have often ignored each other, I don't mean that philosophers have ignored film, or that film scholars disregard aesthetic issues. The latter could hardly be the case; film scholars consider problems such as interpretation and meaning, for example—both central issues in aesthetics. And as for aestheticians thinking about film, the list of philosophers who have written about the motion pictures is quite long, considering the youth of the medium.<sup>1</sup> One of the first was Harvard psychologist/philosopher Hugo Münsterberg, whose 1916 book, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, is still of great interest today. In recent years, philosophers have produced books about film with some regularity.<sup>2</sup> Judging from these recent publications, it appears that aestheticians' interest in film as an art will continue, if not intensify.

When I say that film theory and aesthetics mainly ignore each other, I'm writing about two academic disciplines, not about aesthetics or film in a broader sense. The issues of aesthetics are not wholly encompassed by the discipline of

aesthetics, just as film theory cannot hope to answer (or even to ask) all questions about film. Film theorists tend to ignore (or take exception to) what aestheticians say about film, and aestheticians ignore (or vehemently critique) what film theorists say about the philosophy of film. The discipline of film studies considers film, and the discipline of aesthetics considers aesthetics, from within the context of particular academic institutions or fields, each with a particular history and set of conventional practices. Thus film scholars approach film, and aestheticians aesthetics, within the context of institutional constraints which in part determine the relevancy and interest of issues, and the appropriateness of methodologies.

Each discipline has a history which sheds light on its contemporary concerns and approaches. We may think of traditional aesthetics as a field represented by the type of work seen in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and *The British Journal of Aesthetics*. Those practicing aesthetics (as I think of it here) are usually British or American and are affiliated with the American Society for Aesthetics or the British equivalent, and perhaps attend the professional conferences associated with those organizations. Film scholars, and especially theorists, are associated with journals such as *Cinema Journal*, *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Camera Obscura*, and *Screen*, and in this country are often affiliated with the Society for Cinema Studies.

The purpose of this essay is make some observations on the relationship between the two disciplines. I begin with a brief look at actual interaction between film theorists and aestheticians, and go on to trace the history of the turn of film theory away from Anglo-American aesthetics and toward French theory. Next I examine some

points of philosophical disagreement and differences in methodological approach. I continue with a reminder of the areas of mutual interest between film studies and aesthetics, and end with a plea for mutual cooperation. However, my prognosis for such a result is not good; the rift between the two disciplines is at present very wide, and stems from fundamental differences in the types of activities that count as scholarship in each field. Throughout I will assume that the reader knows more about aesthetics than film studies, and thus requires more information about the latter.

#### I. THE TURN AWAY FROM AESTHETICS (AND HUMANISTIC INQUIRY)

My educational background and interests have put me in a position to observe both film studies and aesthetics over the past several years. I graduated from college with a degree in philosophy, where my special interest was in aesthetics and the arts generally. I went on to earn higher degrees in film studies at two of the major graduate programs in the field, and meanwhile continued my studies in aesthetics. As a film studies graduate student who had been trained in what might be called "soft" analytic philosophy, I found that my approach was sometimes valued, at other times considered odd, and perhaps even thought to be retrograde by some. In looking back, I think that my training in philosophy made it more difficult for me to accept much of the film theory that was considered central to the field. I found it frustrating that film theorists, with some exceptions, did not seem interested in subjecting film theory to the rigorous interrogation I had been taught was central to the theoretical or philosophical enterprise. Close analysis was for films, not for film theories.

In writing this essay, I do not presume that my observations are complete or that they hold for all of film theory or aesthetics. The relationship between any two academic disciplines is complicated. Neither film studies nor aesthetics is homogeneous and monolithic. For example, as the recent issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* on "Feminism and Traditional Aesthetics" makes clear, some scholars within aesthetics call for, or at least wish to examine the possibility of, an alternative feminist aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Film theory, the relevant branch of film

studies for my purposes, can hardly be called monolithic either. For example, while the dominant conception of the film spectator is derived from psychoanalysis, an increasingly visible faction of scholars is developing a theory of spectatorship based on the more rationalist model of cognitive psychology.<sup>4</sup> In tracing the relationship between these fields, then, I can only point to broad tendencies and to specific interchanges between film scholars and aestheticians. The tendencies I describe are open to counterexample, and the specific interchanges will not be characteristic of everyone in the disciplines.

What is the current relationship between film theory and aesthetics, between film theorists and aestheticians? Explicit contact between the two disciplines has not been cordial, and is often marked by name-calling, suspicion, and total dismissal. In his survey of contemporary film theory, for example, film scholar J. Dudley Andrew notes that while *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* has "eagerly incorporated cinema as a subject," the journal has had little influence on film theory, and in fact, the word "aesthetics" has virtually disappeared from the film theory lexicon. For the most part, Andrew writes, film theory has avoided the "'timeless' speculations" of aesthetics and of "that refined organ of philosophers of art and beauty," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.<sup>5</sup>

For their part, aestheticians have pulled no punches in their critiques of film theory. The debate has by now become intemperate and emotionally charged. An amusing example comes from Ian Jarvie in his *Philosophy of the Film*:

Writers on film characteristically make free with references and allusions to films which they have not the slightest reason to suspect their readers know. Writers on film characteristically drop the names of, or even quote from, their own favourite gurus. ... Nearly all name-drop shamelessly. But worst of all is the general irrationality of their procedures.<sup>6</sup>

Philosopher Noël Carroll has presented a thorough critique of contemporary film theory of the psychoanalytic/semiotic/Marxist variety (what he calls "psychosemiotic," for short), beginning with an extended review of Stephen Heath's *Questions of Cinema* and later expanding to two books on classical and contemporary film theory, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Carroll concludes

that contemporary film theory “has been nothing short of an intellectual disaster and ... should be discarded.”<sup>8</sup> Carroll’s work is often persuasive, but also dismissive. To say that he has sown seeds of discord between certain elements of film theory and aesthetics would be an understatement; what he has done is to plant full-grown Discord Trees. Though many film theorists will grudgingly admit that some of Carroll’s criticisms are well-founded, the predominant ill-feelings are obvious in reviews of Carroll’s work which have appeared in film journals. A *Film Criticism* review of Carroll’s *The Philosophy of Horror*, for example, uses words like “die-hard empiricist,” “totalizing,” “bizarre,” and “insular sensibility.”<sup>9</sup>

Aside from such increasingly rancorous instances of contact, the usual practice of these fields is to ignore each other. Aestheticians have written several books on the subject of film, and *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* has published dozens of essays on the subject beginning with its very first volumes in the fifties. However, this is typically not work that grapples with the issues of film theory as it is practiced in the field of film studies. Carroll’s work is an exception here. His *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* has engaged the central tenets of film theory with such force that theorists have had no choice but to take notice.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from Noël Carroll’s critique, other significant references to contemporary film theory come from feminist aestheticians. The “Feminism and Traditional Aesthetics” issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* clearly shows that aestheticians intent on developing a peculiarly feminist aesthetics are turning to elements of feminist film theory. No fewer than seven of the thirteen essays in the issue discuss or mention feminist film theorists.

Traditional aesthetics, then, has shown a distaste for film studies, and film studies, in turn, pays little heed to aesthetics. Few film theorists stay current with scholarship in Anglo-American aesthetics. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy’s popular anthology, *Film Theory and Criticism*, does contain excerpts of work by Stanley Cavell and, in its latest edition, by Noël Carroll.<sup>11</sup> But at least until very recently, those concerned with the central developments of film theory would more likely turn to Phillip

Rosen’s *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*.<sup>12</sup> There one finds few (if any) references to Kant, Wittgenstein, Searle, Beardsley, Danto, or Wollheim. The authorities most cited in this anthology are predominantly French or influenced by French theory: Andre Bazin, Raymond Bellour, Theorry Kuntzel, Laura Mulvey, Stephen Heath, Jean Mitry, Christian Metz, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, etc. The impact of traditional aesthetics on film theory has so far been minimal at best.

The so-called classical film theorists—those writing before the advent of semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Althusserian Marxism—often worked within paradigms less alien to aesthetics than what we see today. Hugo Münsterberg was a philosopher himself, and names such as Rudolph Arnheim and Erwin Panofsky are well-known to aestheticians. Filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein discussed issues common also in traditional aesthetics, such as synaesthesia and the relationship between words, images, color, and sound. In his discussions of film, he also consistently appealed to the other arts, making diverse references, for example, to Charles Dickens, Johann Sebastian Bach, Leonardo Da Vinci, and the kabuki theater.

Film theory today may have advantages over classical film theory, but it also tends to be more insular and inward-looking. A set of theorists and texts are taken as authoritative and are cited over and over again. In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, the most common references—aside from nods to other film theorists—are to the mainly French anthropologists, philosophers, psychoanalysts, and cultural critics whose work occupies a central place in the field—for example, Levi-Strauss, Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Althusser, and Lacan. A few essays are more wide-ranging, mentioning Husserl, Stanley Cavell, Galileo, and Leon Battista Alberti. But it is clear that traditional aesthetics, and more broadly, Anglo-American philosophy, has had no impact on the type of theory represented by this book.

The study of film was initially undertaken in a spirit more compatible with aesthetics. In the early 1960s, film courses were scattered throughout the humanities curriculum, in departments of English, theater, comparative literature, and the foreign languages. Encouraged by the proliferation of “art” theaters in urban areas, Amer-

icans began to take film seriously, though it was mainly films by the great European "auteurs"—Bergman, Fellini, Godard, for example—that were thought to be worth studying. These film courses often approached film as a traditional art form, studying subjects such as adaptations of theater and literature into film, various sorts of inter-arts comparisons, and the careers and work of film auteurs. During this time essays on film by philosophers were quite common in film journals.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, film studies was becoming a discipline in its own right. The nature of film studies today is in great part a product of the politically-heated time of its emergence, and of French intellectual culture, which underwent its own radicalization in the late sixties. Film studies attracted young scholars who entered the field precisely because it offered an alternative to traditional academic disciplines. Many of these scholars studied theory—semiotics, structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Althusserian Marxism—in France in an atmosphere of political and intellectual rebellion fostered by the events of 1968. Film theory imported from France was politicized with a vengeance, and film was studied as part of a radical cultural critique. Film scholars often combined a sense of political mission with a new and unique "science," what has come to be known as "cinesemiotics." Radical or not, film theorists eventually began to publish, work the lecture circuit, and in general take advantage of the system just as aggressively as their more traditional counterparts. Eventually, though film theory considered itself to be subversive, it became as entrenched and academic as its more conservative counterparts.

In part, then, the turn of film studies away from traditional humanistic inquiry can be explained with reference to its political radicalization. But this, in turn, must be understood in the context of the heavy influence of French theory on the American film studies scene. The influence of the French on film studies cannot easily be overestimated. This partly stems from the early fascination of French intellectual culture with film. American philosophers took some interest in film during the 1950s and 1960s, publishing various essays in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *Film Quarterly*, and *Cinema Journal*, for example. But their work

was overshadowed by French critics and by Americans influenced by the French, all of whom were more immersed in film culture and more easily familiar with the language of film criticism.

French intellectuals had become interested in the cinema as early as the 1920s, with the rise of the French cine-clubs and the film culture surrounding them. After World War II there appeared active and popular film journals such as *La Revue du cinéma*, first published in 1946, and *Positif* in 1952. The more famous *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1951) featured the writing of well-known critics like Andre Bazin, as well as criticism by future New Wave filmmakers Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, and others. In addition, general French interest in film was so great that serious books of film criticism and/or theory could be underwritten by commercial publishers.

French thinking about film found its way to our shores long before the advent of cinesemiotics, often through Americans who spoke and/or read French. Andrew Sarris's influential *The American Cinema* (1968), for example, imports the auteur theory and argues that the theory fits the American cinema particularly well. Thus more Americans began to see Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, and John Ford, for example, as *auteurs*—film artists on a par with Bergman and Fellini. Most importantly, Andrew Sarris valued the popular cinema, and made no sharp qualitative distinction between film as art and film as entertainment, just as French thinkers in general were less likely to draw rigid distinctions between "high" and "low" art.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, French *aestheticians* began to take film seriously early on, while many of their counterparts in Great Britain and the United States arguably still downplay its importance. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* has published sporadic essays about film throughout its history, and *The British Journal of Aesthetics* in the 1970s and 1980s has published an average of one essay on film every two or three years. By contrast, *Revue d'esthétique*, by the mid-1960s, had begun to take the cinema as a major artistic and cultural phenomenon. It featured special issues on the cinema in 1967 (double issue), 1973 (triple issue, over 400 pages), and 1984 (experimental cinema). In addition, it devoted a 1982 issue to filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, and a 1986 issue to video art.

While the consideration of film had become a favorite pastime of French intellectuals, many American graduate students interested in film studies traveled to Paris to study with theorists such as Christian Metz and Raymond Bellour, and to attend the well-known seminars put on by these and other scholars. Most were familiar with the French language and were attracted to the country's mystique, and perhaps especially the *chicness* of post-1968 French intellectual culture. In the early 1970s, what was to become the most influential organ of contemporary film theory in Britain and the United States, the film journal *Screen*, published extensively about the new film theory and about French film study. The best-known of the frequent contributors to *Screen* was Stephen Heath, who not surprisingly studied with Roland Barthes in France during the 1970s. French thinking about film, then, has been the dominant influence for American and British film theorists.

## II. DIFFERENCES IN PHILOSOPHY AND METHODOLOGY

So far I have described the relationship between film studies and traditional aesthetics, and traced some of the historical and sociological factors in the turn of film studies away from traditional aesthetics (and from Anglo-American humanistic inquiry generally) toward the cinesemiotic Marxism derived mainly from French theory. Next I will examine some major philosophical and methodological differences between the two disciplines.

Important here is the tendency for film theorists to see aesthetics as apolitical and therefore politically conservative. In the 1970s and 1980s, film theorists expressed their political interests in explicitly Marxist terms, finding the clandestine workings of bourgeois ideology in phenomena such as pictorial perspective, classical editing (suture), and classical narrative structure. That sort of theory can be characterized as *political formalism*; it argued that various patterns of film form were *in themselves* either complicit with bourgeois ideology or emancipatory. This theory is still widely-practiced in varied guises, although the move toward multiculturalism, feminism, gender and race issues has put the discourse on a different plane. Political discourse within film studies is no longer

necessarily Marxist; much is now compatible with democratic humanism in its call for emancipation and the celebration of diversity.

Many film theorists would reject any separation of politics and aesthetics, and claim that the attempt to practice aesthetics as a politically neutral discipline is itself an act of political conservatism. The politics of film theory is decidedly left, and many scholars foreground political issues as centrally important. The 1991 conference of the Society for Cinema Studies, for example, took as its theme "multi-culturalism," and included such panels as "Towards a Multi-Cultural Film Theory/Critique," "Race and Class in American Documentary," and "Third World Women and Western Feminisms: Critical Conjunctions." The 1992 SCS conference featured as a sub-theme (constituting at least 40 per cent of the papers offered) "Discourses of the Oppressed." For many contemporary film theorists, issues of race, gender, culture, class, and sexuality *just are* the central issues in the study of film as cultural product. Unlike much film theory, the study of aesthetics is not undertaken to effect direct political change or to directly comment on political developments.

Mainstream film theory is often *explicitly political*, and *explicitly left*. Theorists or philosophers who write about issues not explicitly political are sometimes thought to be apolitical (and thus complicit with the status quo), or worse, reactionary. For example, Noël Carroll—who has forayed repeatedly into hostile theoretical territory—is regularly accused by film scholars of political conservatism. In an essay critiquing Carroll's institutional theory of film, Blaine Allan emphasizes that "the art work enters into relations of *property* and economic value" and that an institutional theory of art which places "the work within the context of its own social institution, the 'artworld,'" withdraws the work from society at large and closes down critical discourse.<sup>14</sup> Though Carroll explicitly acknowledges the need to relate the artworld to broader social structures, he doesn't do that himself, and Allan apparently thinks this to be sufficient evidence of "fundamentally conservative insularity."<sup>15</sup> To turn to another example, Stephen Heath writes that Carroll's work inclines to "complete political demobilization" and that Carroll "can give no acknowledgment of any social institution of 'belief' (which means in any Marxist

sense no account of ideology).”<sup>16</sup> Heath suggests that Carroll’s attack on his book, *Questions of Cinema*, is part of a larger conservative assault on Marxism in the academy, and that Carroll’s position is “reactionary.”<sup>17</sup> Warren Buckland, in his long review of Carroll’s *Mystifying Movies*, complains at several points that while Carroll’s attacks on the theories of Stephen Heath, Colin McCabe, and Raymond Bellour point out lack of evidence and faulty reasoning, they ignore a problem Buckland finds more central—the implicit sexism of their work.<sup>18</sup>

All of Carroll’s positions, I would argue, are compatible with cultural critique, though Carroll seems uninterested in extending his work in that direction. Heath implies that Carroll is a rationalist skeptic with no commitments except to Reason, Truth, etc. One wonders if Carroll’s work would be better accepted by film theorists if it exhibited explicit allegiance to ideological projects other than those of contemporary film theory—Christianity or environmentalism, for example. I’m inclined to think not. It sometimes appears that the call to practice film theory is essentially a call to participate in a specific political project, and to participate in that project in a specific way.

The place of “the political” in the doing of philosophy, then, is one of the most serious differences between film theory and traditional aesthetics. But there are more. The claim is sometimes made that aesthetics is, in J. Dudley Andrew’s words, “‘timeless’ speculation,” insufficiently attentive to historical context and social function.<sup>19</sup> Some of the charges bear consideration, as I shall argue below. However, others seem to be the result of a misunderstanding of the projects of aesthetics and Anglo-American philosophy generally.

What many film theorists look for in their investigations of filmic phenomena are explicit ways to link these to particular historical conditions and to ideology. In aesthetics they typically won’t find this. Thus we can see how the charge that aesthetics is apolitical is linked to the claim that it ignores history. Blaine Allan claims that Noël Carroll’s institutional theory of film “asserts a static essentialism” because it “removes any dynamism or process from its concept of history.”<sup>20</sup> But Allan seems to profoundly misunderstand the nature of the institutional theory of art (in any of its forms), since that theory

makes art not a static, natural kind but a product determined by social institutions. Art acquires its status not due to creative genius or artistic inspiration, but through institutional means. The only salient essential component of art, on most institutional theories, is that it is bound by the institutional mores and practices out of which it emerges. Far from giving us a static and essentialist conception of art, then, the institutional theory makes possible the historical study of the arts in relation to all of the various institutions of which they are a part. Again, Allan assumes that because Carroll doesn’t do history, his philosophy is ahistorical. In fact Carroll’s account of film here encourages and makes possible a more historical understanding of the medium. Film theorists should not mistake the doing of philosophy for ahistoricism. In the case of the institutional theory of art, and in many other cases, it seems clear that philosophical formulations can contribute to an understanding of history, even if the actual historical work must be accomplished by others (historians, for example).

In another respect, however, the charge of ahistoricism is more warranted, at least from the perspective of the film scholar. Traditional aesthetics seems particularly well-suited for the exploration of philosophical issues having to do with the fine arts as autonomous practices. Aesthetics can explore issues such as the definition of art, the nature and function of artistic intentions, whether and what music expresses, etc. These all are important topics. However, film studies takes a more contextual, functional approach to film. The advent of semiotics in film studies has encouraged film scholars to approach film much differently than would an aesthetician. In its investigation of conventions and codes of meaning, semiotics has encouraged a shift away from thinking of film as an art toward a conception of film as a signifying practice with important cultural connections.

As Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery write, this shift in critical focus determines the types of issues that are investigated. Allen and Gomery are historians, but the questions they ask of film history are in many cases identical to those asked by film theorists:

Rather than asking, Which films are art? we might instead ask: How and why have the elements of film form (lighting, editing, camera movement) been used

in particular films at particular points in film history? How and why have some styles become normative for long periods of film history (the Hollywood style, for example), while others have flourished for only brief periods (German Expressionism, French Impressionism) or have been idiosyncratic (the “personal” style of Méliès or Dreyer)? What have certain cinematic devices meant to audiences at various points in film history (high-contrast lighting or the jump cut, for example), and how was this meaning created?<sup>21</sup>

Film theorists and historians are less interested in art than in studying film as a cultural practice. Gomery and Allen imply that pure aesthetic interest, apart from historical considerations, is inadequate. They argue that a better investigation of a film topic will consider film not only as an art form, but as a technology, an industry, and/or a cultural force.

As I mentioned above, aesthetics can contribute to such an investigation, and I believe that in many cases it does. However, in ignoring or downplaying popular art, the social context and functions of art, and other similar issues, traditional aesthetics becomes not so much ahistorical—for it is concerned with art history, narrowly considered—as decontextualized. It prefers to explore art as an autonomous realm rather than as an integrated component of a complex society, though both approaches raise interesting aesthetic problems. To bolster art as an autonomous realm, aesthetics maintains distinctions (whether explicit or implicit) between fine art and popular art, and art and craft, and promotes notions of aesthetic disinterestedness. Traditional aesthetics tends to see the arts as a realm of connoisseurs and individual artists, and shows little interest in the popular arts or in the cultural functions of art.

Many film theorists are interested in discovering links between the production and consumption of films (and television) and political/historical issues of power and control. Others are more concerned with placing signifying practices and reception in an historical context, often in relation to political, economic, and social issues. The Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize in Film, TV and Video Studies, associated with *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, is given annually to a book and an essay in the field. In announcing the 1990 essay winner and two honorable mentions, the selection commit-

tee made a statement which functions as an implicit attempt to direct the field toward favored interests and methodologies. It also reveals the radical difference between the approaches of film studies toward film, and aesthetics toward the arts:

The selection committee wishes to acknowledge a general field of inquiry to which all three essays contribute, namely the historically-rooted analysis of the image as a commodity form. These essays extend current film and television studies in an important way through their attentiveness to economic and legal as well as cultural practices which have helped shape the consumption of the image in our time.<sup>22</sup>

Film theorists, for the most part, differ from traditional aestheticians in their emphasis on the political and historical nature of their enterprise, in their insistence on putting film in a cultural context, and in their seeming unwillingness to consider issues not directly related to broad cultural issues. We might call these differences in *emphasis*, in what is deemed important about the enterprise of studying film as one of the arts. But the institutional constraints of film theory and traditional aesthetics also create different methodologies and notions of what constitutes good scholarship.

Warren Buckland, in his review of *Mystifying Movies*, claims that Carroll practices a sort of “scientific imperialism” because he presents “Analytic philosophy” as “the only legitimate paradigm based on ‘true,’ ‘objective’ knowledge.” Buckland claims that the assertions of film theory are developed on pragmatic grounds and should be evaluated as such. The theoretical claims of a paradigm, he writes, should not be evaluated by “absolute standards,” “but rather in terms of their effectiveness in relation to the aims of the paradigm in which they were developed.”<sup>23</sup> Buckland implies that since film theory was developed “within a critique of science and objective truth,” universal standards of logic and evidence do not apply.

Few aestheticians (and few philosophers) would accept Buckland’s claims here, if taken at face value. First, Buckland assumes that Carroll’s concern with reason and evidence is coextensive with a search for “objective” truth, which in turn is coextensive with foundationalism. The philosopher’s appeal to logic and the need for

evidence, then, constitutes a type of epistemological arrogance by which he claims for himself the discovery of absolute, objective truth. Buckland's assumptions, however, are faulty; the appeal to reasoning and evidence is compatible with the belief that one's claims are fallible, proximate, and temporary, and may be shown to be so at any time. In addition, Buckland's pragmatism is irresponsibly utilitarian, implying that a paradigm's claims can be evaluated only by their effectiveness in achieving certain ends. He also assumes an incommensurability of disciplines, such that two disciplines need never appeal to overarching standards of evidence and reasoning.

My purpose here is not to give a full account and critique of Buckland's views. Rather, I want to draw attention to them as a symptom of the fact that film theorists and aestheticians value different skills and engage in different types of discourse. The aesthetician is typically concerned with the reasoning process and with investigating issues according to strict protocols. The process of arriving at a position is just as important as the position itself. Film theorists often seem more interested in conclusions and less in carefully analyzing the process of arriving at them. David Bordwell, a film scholar who is critical of some of his field's practices, argues that much of what passes for theory in film studies (and by extension, literary studies), is in fact a form of critical interpretation of texts. Bordwell shows that interpretation occupies a central place in film studies at the expense of theory in a philosophical sense, which "proposes, analyzes, and criticizes theoretical claims" and "consists of a systematic propositional explanation of the nature and functions of cinema."<sup>24</sup> Bordwell proposes that film studies make interpretation more peripheral, and that it engage in more "lively, skeptical debate" and undertake what he calls an historical poetics of the cinema.

The goal of practitioners in the institution of film criticism, he writes, is often to generate "a novel and persuasive interpretation of one or more appropriate films."<sup>25</sup> Theory is often accepted as doctrine and used to generate interpretations. Bordwell writes that the rhetorical aggressiveness of much of the theory often seems calculated to cut off, rather than encourage, self-criticism, questions, problems, debate, and the

careful weighing of alternatives: "A rhetoric of musts and onlys, of always alreadys, of dangers and complicities portrays the writer as one guided by certainties."<sup>26</sup> On this view, not only is much of what passes for theory actually interpretation, but much of this work is actually anti-theoretical (and anti-philosophical) in its rhetoric. One very healthy characteristic of traditional aesthetics (and of philosophy generally) is just what film theory often lacks—lively, skeptical, and (usually) friendly debate.

Bordwell finds two broad categories of interpretation in film studies—explicatory and symptomatic. Explicatory interpretation claims to find the explicit and implicit meanings of a text, while symptomatic criticism, widely considered to be cutting edge, looks for repressed meaning, and relates this to social and political concerns. Symptomatic criticism is a hallmark of psychoanalytic semiotics, and this may also partially explain the wide gap between film theory and aesthetics, for traditional aesthetics has shown little interest in psychoanalysis. Noël Carroll makes use of cognitive psychology and its investigation of the rational workings of the mind. Most aestheticians, I would venture, prefer to see the spectator/viewer/reader as a rational agent, or at least prefer to attend to what is rational about spectatorship/viewing/reading. With the exception of increasing numbers of cognitive theorists, film scholars turn to psychoanalysis as a model for spectatorship and for the psychological workings of films. Neither alternative is complete or wholly satisfactory. While cognitive psychology emphasizes rational agency, it has so far been less successful in accounting for emotion and desire. On the other hand, psychoanalysis, in the hands of symptomatic critics, conceives of the spectator as a simpleton and a dupe, one subject to illusion and unaware of the dangerous ideological effects ostensibly visited on her through various film processes. For obvious reasons, a film scholar devoted to psychoanalysis and to the symptomatic interpretation of texts may also be less interested in reason and reasoning than most philosophers. On their view, reason skims the surface, while they plumb the depths of ideology and desire.

It is clear that film theory and aesthetics differ markedly in their approaches to film and to the arts. But film theory and aesthetics can and should learn more from each other. The disci-



plines share many common interests. A look through the table of contents of Andrew's *Concepts in Film Theory* reveals chapter headings that might easily appear in a book about traditional aesthetics: perception, representation, signification, narrative structure, adaptation, valuation, identification, figuration, and interpretation.

Several developments could lead to more cooperation. Since it is a relatively new discipline, film theory should be eclectic and synthetic rather than system-building as was Theory (with a capital "T"). It must look to aesthetics, psychology and other disciplines in its attempts to answer the problems before it. For example, film theory can learn from the self-criticism of aesthetics.<sup>27</sup> A typical essay in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* traces previous thought on a subject, preserves what is good, and proposes a new approach to that which is found wanting. Film theory must be more critical of its presuppositions, and less prone to the wholesale acceptance of a Theory. In writing in the field of aesthetics one also sees a continual looking back to preceding thinkers. Film theory tends to forget, or ignore, the work of earlier theorists in unwarranted deference to the new. We currently see few references to important film theorists such as Hugo Münsterberg, Jean Mitry, or Victor Perkins, for example. Finally, film theory often seems too eager for a political payoff to investigate issues thoroughly. The typical claim is that every issue is a political issue. But every issue is political only in a broad sense, a sense that makes every issue also psychological, religious, sociological, physical, economic, biological, etc. No one is able to explore an issue from every perspective simultaneously. Theorists often quote Marx, who wrote that the point isn't to interpret the world, "but to change it." Since interpretation presumes understanding, this implies that one can change the world without understanding it, an assumption which is no doubt true but hardly comforting. To expect all work about the arts and media to be explicitly political is narrow and constricting. The question at hand may be more interesting in some aspect other than its political one, and political understanding depends on a knowledge of other aspects of a subject.

On the other hand, aesthetics has something to learn from film studies. Segments of the academy—film studies, literary studies, comparative

literature, and ethnomusicology, to name a few—are working to put the arts within a cultural and/or historical context. Meanwhile, traditional aesthetics prefers to see art as a realm separate from human action and social concerns. Every scholar has the right to explore issues not directly political; yet are there not significant philosophical issues revolving around art in relation to culture? While much of the academy is coming to grips with this century's radical changes in our audio/visual culture, aesthetics, with notable exceptions, seems determined to limit its interest to the traditional canon of the fine arts (painting, sculpture, music, literature, poetry, theater, dance), and tends to ignore popular arts such as film and video. How long can aesthetics afford to downplay these major changes in the system of the arts? Erwin Panofsky wrote in 1947 that narrative films, with the exception of architecture, cartooning, and commercial design, are "the only visual art entirely alive."<sup>28</sup> If a grain of truth exists in Panofsky's hyperbolic claim, perhaps aestheticians ought to think about the movies more often.<sup>29</sup>

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1. For a bibliography of philosophical writing about film, see Ian Jarvie, *Philosophy of the Film: Epistemology, Ontology, Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 364–375. Also see his "Philosophers at the Movies: Metaphysics, Aesthetics, and Popularization," *Persistence of Vision* 5 (1987), pp. 107–112.

2. Münsterberg's book has been more recently published as *The Film: A Psychological Study* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970). Münsterberg was a psychologist in the William James mold, at a time when psychology and philosophy were closer in methodology, and psychology had not become the strictly separate discipline it is today.

Recent books on film by philosophers include: Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton University Press, 1988), and *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* (Columbia University Press, 1988); George Wilson, *Narration in Light* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, 1981); and Jarvie's book (see note 1).

3. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48.4 (Fall 1990).

4. See, for example, David Bordwell, *Narration in the*

*Fiction Film* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), and *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Harvard University Press, 1989); Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton University Press, 1988).

5. J. Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 10.

6. Jarvie, *Philosophy of the Film*, p. 190.

7. Readers interested in what is now called the "Heath/Carroll Debate" should see Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (London: MacMillan, 1981), and Noël Carroll, "Address to the Heathen," *October* N. 23 (Winter 1982); see also Heath's reply, "Le Père Noël," *October* N. 26 (Fall 1983), and Carroll's "A Reply to Heath," *October* N. 27 (Winter 1983).

8. Carroll, *Mystifying Movies*, p. 226.

9. Review by James Morrison, *Film Criticism* 15 (1991), pp. 41-43. For a balanced review of Carroll's work, see Peter Lehman, "Noël Carroll and the Philosophy of Film Theory," *Persistence of Vision* 8 (1990), pp. 85-93.

10. Another book which engages the claims of film theory is George Wilson, *Narration in Light*. Cavell's and Jarvie's works pursue the philosophy of film mainly apart from the discourse of film theory.

11. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 1992).

12. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (Columbia University Press, 1986). The field of film studies is at present changing so rapidly that it is difficult to gauge the influence of the sort of Marxist and psychoanalytic semiotics represented in Rosen's book. It appears that such theory is losing its central place in the field.

13. For a more complete account of these developments, see Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, pp. 43-53.

14. Blaine Allan, "Up Against the Institutional Wall: A Dissenting View," *Film Reader* 4 (1979), p. 98. Carroll's essay on the institutional theory of film can be found in the same issue of *Film Reader*, immediately preceding Allan's critique. Carroll's more recent thought on this issue can be found in "Art, Practice, and Narrative," *Monist*, 71 (1988), pp. 140-156.

15. Allan, "Up Against the Institutional Wall," p. 99.

16. Stephen Heath, "Le Père Noël," pp. 98, 114.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 112, 114.

18. Warren Buckland, "Critique of Poor Reason," *Screen* (1990), p. 95, for example.

19. Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory*, p. 10.

20. Allan, "Up Against the Institutional Wall," p. 100.

21. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 79.

22. Announcement of the Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize in Film, TV and Video Studies: 1990 Book and Essay Awards.

23. Buckland, "Critique of Poor Reason," p. 81.

24. See Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, p. 250.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

27. I don't claim that this self-criticism extends to every possible assumption taken for granted in the field. Nonetheless, a strength of philosophy in general is its regular questioning of premises, arguments, and conclusions.

28. Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 3rd ed., eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 216.

29. Thanks to David Bordwell and Stephen Prince for information and helpful discussions of these issues. Any shortcomings of this essay are of course mine.