# Pasts and Futures of 1970s Film Theory

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This article is about the emergence of 1970s film theory: its cultural and disciplinary conditions of possibility; the development of its core network of concepts and debates; its impasses; and, implicitly, the passion, or "passionate detachment" of its thought.  But, like Serge Daney's notion of the historical film as defined by the space between *what* it says and *when* it says it (Daney, 2000: 57-58), this article's return to 1970s film theory is only intelligible in the context of present film studies.  My analysis of political modernism is thus shaped by historiographical and theoretical currents defining the discipline now, specifically, institutional materialist histories of both film reception and film studies, and philosophical debates concerning the fate of the cinema's medium specificity in the digital age.  By moving beyond the theoretical limitations of 1970s film theory—for example, its ahistoricism and its narrow definition of the "cinematic situation"—these currents have opened new dialogues between film study and other disciplines in the humanities and reinvigorated the questions of classical film theory.  It is the vicissitudes of this latter accomplishment, however, that this article seeks to challenge.

Given the ostensibly dramatic changes to the cinema's technological base, a significant body of recent film theory has called for the reinstitution of classical theories of filmic ontology, but often at the expense of excluding 1970s film theory and its paranoiac search for the discursive legibility behind the image. My goal in this work is not to resuscitate the spirit of a vanquished political modernism, but to insist that investigations into the dialectic between medium specificity and the subject should not forget that era's commitment to understanding the experience of filmic ontology as an experience of culture's vaster psychosexual and socio-economic (over)determinations.  I also point to instances of continuity between the obsessions of classical film theory and 1970s film theory, even if this might mean reading the theory against itself.

### Conditions of Possibility

No linear set of circumstances can explain what led dominant film theory to assimilate an immanent critique of film textuality within broader considerations of the subject and social transformation.  Building on the work of Dudley Andrew, Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson have recently cautioned film historians to attend to what was foundational for film studies about the "Prague Spring of Academia," without representing the events of Spring '68 across the Western world as a primal scene in the history of film theory, or as a spontaneous "cultural" explosion that catalyzed a rapid unity between Leftist social movements, post-structuralist theory, and the institutionalization of film studies (Grieveson and Wasson, 2008: xv).  This myth obscures both the body of institutional and individual agents (film councils, educators, cinephiles) who

contributed in various ways to the academic study of the cinema throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and the historical continuities between 1970s film theory and earlier bodies of political and aesthetic film critique:

> [T]he political and intellectual context of the later 1960s marks a continuity with and not a break from earlier traditions of study. […] [W]e claim that the study of cinema was born in the early twentieth century as a political problem in conjunction with the social turbulence of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s.  (Grieveson and Wasson, 2008: xvii).

Moreover, as Kristin Ross has demonstrated in the French context, the myth of May '68 as a counter-cultural rather than properly political event is complicit with a broader ideological operation to transform the strike against Gaullism, American imperialism, and industrialized capitalism by over nine million people from all social classes into a precondition for individualist, neoliberal capitalism (Ross, 2002).  This "teleology of the present" eclipses May's long history, which dates back to the police massacres of the Algerian war, and the political (dis)identifications among workers, colonial militants, and intellectuals that took form throughout the decade.  May's history and the magnitude of the industrial militancy that that history precipitated are not coterminous with "anti-humanist" post-structural theory.   The theorists now retroactively labeled post-structuralists—Foucault, Derrida, Lacan—demonstrated an ambivalent relation to what was happening on the Berkeley campus and the streets of Paris and Prague.  So, the social and intellectual contexts surrounding May '68 did not found or cause the post-structuralist agenda of 1970s film theory in any straightforward sense.

During the 1960s, film theory in France, Britain, and North America worked through a long trajectory of changing paradigms that was animated by the social uprisings of the decade's end, as opposed to caused by them.  The case of *Cahiers du cinéma* is particularly instructive here given both the journal's radical shift from Catholic-idealist to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxies and its definitive influence on Anglophone film theory.  It is often overlooked that as late as the early 1960s, *Cahiers*, unlike its critical interlocutor *Positif*, demonstrated a rightist unwillingness to engage its own obsessions both with all things "new" and with Hollywood cinema in view of the French nation's rapid adoption of Americanized business models and ideologies under Charles de Gaulle.  Although the "*politique des auteurs*" was a revolution in film criticism—demonstrating that film meaning was not self-evident but had to be read according to critical methods—this revolution, as Jim Hillier notes, remained within a bourgeois worldview that failed to understand film style as a problem of social relations (Hillier, 1992: 7).  Hillier further demonstrates that even the journal's initial encounters with Bertold Brecht, mediated by Joseph Losey's writings, depoliticized Brechtian dramaturgy by subordinating its critique of realism and "the public entertainment machine" to (Bazinian) analyses of "the art of physical relationships between actors and settings" (Hillier, 1992: 10).

Throughout the first half of the decade, however, another vision of Brecht's criticism would hold sway, one less concerned with film as an art of perception and authorial expressiveness than as a system of signification (Faulkner, 2004: 180).  Turning to Roland Barthes' writings on Brecht throughout the 1950s and

early 1960s, *Cahiers* authors like Bernard Dort, Louis Marcorelles, and Fereydoun Hoveyda initiated a structuralist brand of new criticism. Like the period's "new novel" and "new cinema," *Cahiers* was working in its own register to find a conceptual language commensurate with the processes of depersonalization and bureaucratization characteristic of postwar European modernity. Its reframing of the relation between film and reality as a problem of the gap between the signifier and the signified thus belongs to a historical constellation that also includes Alain Robbe-Grillet's rejection of hermeneutic depth in favour of fiction that "knows no other reality than its own surface" and modernist cinema's (e.g., Rivette's and Antonioni's) de-psychologized landscapes and nonlinear temporalities (Robbe-Grillet, in Higgins, 1996: 84). This emergent, structuralist methodology—critiqued by *Positif* for its charlatanism—became increasingly embedded within a broader Marxist framing discourse corresponding to the social issues and events that dramatized the political sphere throughout the decade: American cultural imperialism and its dissemination of consumerist values, American military expansionism and its near genocidal violence against the Viet Cong, the educational divide between prestige institutions and dead-end degree programs, occupations in the major factories, and a heightened police repression of student and worker protests (Ross, 2002; Browne, 1990; Harvey, 1978; Williams, 1992).

It is not incidental that *Cahiers* turned to Althusser's critique of the ideological sphere in its attempts to find its theoretical bearings amidst this social turbulence. Althusser's investment in a scientific Marxism as the only avenue to escape ideology dovetailed with the journal's pre-existing Saussurian base. But the turn towards Althusser also marked a post-structuralist departure from a linguistic model of film analysis that cast issues of individual disruption as exterior to the system. *Cahiers'* early structuralist analysis proved inadequate to account for the *process* through which the spectator comes to desire particular forms of signification, and for how such forms mobilize and contain forces of excess and "negativity." Althusser's seminal work on the Ideological State Apparatuses proved crucial in this respect, since the theory of interpellation describes how instances of signification lead subjects to recognize themselves in the preordained role of "addressee." Moreover, Althusser's insistence on the relative autonomy of cultural spheres of production prompted a rethinking in the work of Jean-Pierre Oudart (1969), Jean-Louis Baudry (1976 [1975]) and, later, Metz (1977) of the ideological effects of the "material" conditions of film's concrete reception; for example, the obfuscation of the projector, the play of light and sound against a dark backdrop, etc. By analyzing film "texts" through the optic of ideology, *Cahiers* was resettling accounts in the history of film theory, marking a full break with (so-called) Bazinian notions of the transparency between filmic and pro-filmic realities. From an Althusserian perspective, film's self-evident nature is what enabled bourgeois cinema to naturalize historical power relations and to transfer the "obviousness" of these relations to other cultural discourses. If Bazinian criticism called for a phenomenological attentiveness to the "this was" once present to the camera, then *Cahiers* now argued that the meaning of any given subject matter could only be understood in *relation* to an absent or submerged elsewhere. Hence, in their influential essay on John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (*Cahiers*, 1986), the editors of *Cahiers* demonstrate that the film's coherence is based on how it incorporates elided scenes of history and sexuality into what it does show, on

"the unsaid included in the said and necessary to its constitution.  In short, to use Althusser's expression—'the internal shadows of exclusion'" (*Cahiers*, 1986: 447).

*Cahiers*'s investment in Hollywood and "new" cinemas and its appeal to (post)structuralist theory had transformative effects on Anglophone film studies. Reflecting on the emergence of 1970s *Screen* theory in Britain, for example, Laura Mulvey notes in a recent interview with Lee Grieveson and Peter Wollen that "there was an English eagerness to turn away from its own cultural roots and embrace French theory and American popular culture" (Mulvey and Wollen, 2008: 225).   French film theory enabled a break from British cultural isolationism and the Leavisite tradition of mass culture critique (Mulvey and Wollen, 2008: 219).   *Screen* gravitated towards the intellectual changes at *Cahiers* and *Cinéthique* throughout the 1960s, and aligned itself explicitly with the radical materialist agendas of these journals by translating some of their most influential essays in the 1970s (Comolli and Narboni, 1971; *Cahiers*, 1972; Oudart, 1978).   But whereas *Cahiers* pushed its materialism to one extreme in these years—by adopting Maoism wholesale and by working with Marxist-Leninist artists and activists (Reynaud*,* 2000: 47-55)—*Screen*'s trajectory was guided by the pedagogical imperatives of its supporting institutions.  Published by the Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT) and partially funded by the education department at the British Film Institute (BFI), *Screen* was increasingly designed for an academic audience, its essays disseminated in classrooms, conferences, and published anthologies (Rosen, 2008: 33).   As Judith Mayne notes, Anglophone film studies' appeal to continental theories of representation was thus as much an expression of its leftist commitments as a strategy to achieve legitimation within the university (Mayne, 1993: 35-36). The study of film could now be understood in dialogue with literary studies and other emergent disciplines like women's studies and cultural studies, which were also strongly affected by the social movements of the 1960s and attuned to the cultural importance of film and television.  As an object of study, film offered a means to engage an expanding demographic of young students with a "tidal wave" of interest in new wave cinemas (Grieveson and Wasson, 2008: xiii-xv).

The shifts in logic internal to film studies' trajectory from the 1960s to the 1970s were thus strongly inflected by a series of interrelated cultural, institutional, and aesthetic factors.  Later in the next section, I describe how this move toward an Althusserian theory of spectatorial misrecognition was re-routed in the 1970s through a Lacanian narrative of sexual identity formation defined in terms of overlapping specular "phases" and visual metaphors: mirror identification, fetishistic disavowal, etc.  Here, I only want to emphasize that as a general discursive regime, the Althusser-Lacan-Saussure triad dominated film-textual analysis though most of the 1970s and early 1980s.  The evidence of this dominance can be gauged by the series of polemical attacks against *Screen* theory that initiated the discipline's major currents in the 1980s and 1990s. Tom Gunning's (1989) investigation of the relationship between early film spectatorship and the thrilling entertainments of urban modernity, Vivian Sobchack's (1992) inquiry into the phenomenological homologies between camera consciousness and enworlded perception, and David Bordwell's (1985) study of the cognitive schemata that enable viewers to process narrational cues all justify the necessity of their respective approaches against the dogmatism of

the preceding psychoanalytic-Marxist framework. The criticisms of this framework are by now well known: inattentiveness toward historical context, contingency, and spectatorial agency; and a monolithic understanding of "classical" narrative cinema accompanied by a phobic rejection of the forms of pleasure it facilitates. Not only have these criticisms solidified into apparent givens for contemporary film study, but a dominant trend toward the re-interrogation of filmic ontology has mobilized the changes to film's technical base as an occasion to rewrite, if not reverse, the theoretical trajectory laid out above.

In the 1970s, film's realism was the key to its powers of seduction and interpellation. Now, however, with the "existential" bond between profilmic event, camera, and spectator challenged by a digital regime that makes manipulation the rule rather than the exception, celluloid cinema's indexicality is being celebrated as something more than an allure. [1] Theorists ranging from Jean-Louis Comolli (1999) to D.N. Rodowick (2007) have returned to Bazin in order to argue that the spectator's knowledge of photography's uninterrupted registration process was the historical condition of possibility for the experience of a "sensible continuum" between lived time and screen time. The photographic image, saturated by the contingency of "real time," resisted the imposition of any predetermined or finalized meaning, and invited a revelatory (non-anthropomorphic) attitude toward a filmed world that was felt to be *of* the same world in which we experience duration or Bergsonian *durée*. Given that the digital ideal of convergence threatens to interrupt this continuum at every level of the production process (see Manovich, 2002), *Screen* theory's staging of a binary opposition between a complicit and transparent "realist" cinema and an auto-critical modernist cinema is often evoked with a tone of dismissive contempt: "any reading attentive to the reality in front of the camera, to the materiality shared by actor and individual, by a specific place and a dramatic setting, was somehow compromised by the illusory pull of verisimilitude" (Margulies, 2003: 8). Although it is challenging not to identify with the sense of exasperation evident in Ivone Margulies' above account of *Screen* theory, this account is, at best, only half correct. As I demonstrate in the next section, *Screen* theory did tend to articulate its political commitments in terms of naïve symmetries between textual practice and spectatorial experience. But political modernism was not, as Margulies suggests, just about how textual operations unmask a given film's technological production conditions. It was also about how ideals of ontology are deployed toward the arbitration of social relations, and this question matters as much now as it did then. I am also not convinced that theorists like Stephen Heath "showed an obtuseness toward what was in front of the camera" (Margulies: 2003, 6). Rather than liquidating aspects of film feeling and reference, film theory in the 1970s was searching for a particular feeling of reference, what Laura Mulvey called "passionate detachment" (Mulvey, 1975: 18). While the concept of passionate detachment may be reduced to some Althusserian longing for ideological shelter, it may also be regarded as expressing a certain experience of our metaphysical isolation, and thus act as a nodal point of continuity between the pasts and futures of 1970s film theory.

**Epistemological Modernism, Suture, and Passionate Detachment**

Consistent with the critiques above, the most polemical film theory of the 1970s contrasted what Rodowick calls an "epistemological modernist" cinema against a dominant "classical realist" cinema (Rodowick, 1988: 52). Exemplary essays include Stephen Heath's "Narrative Space" (1976), Colin MacCabe's "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses" (1974) and Peter Wollen's "Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'Est*" (1972). Despite significant differences, all three essays celebrate the modernist text's "decentring" of linear, classical narrative; its stabilization of vision in a transcendental discourse that unifies what is shown with the act of showing.

Consider Wollen's essay, which polarizes an idealist Hollywood cinema against a materialist, revolutionary cinema and its "cardinal virtues," for example: estrangement of character identification through strategies of direct address; foregrounding of the medium's material substrate through visible marks and scratches on the grain of the image; the fracturing of the film's diegesis into a series of discrete worlds and epochs; and the play of quotation, parody and intertextuality against the reign of a singular, dominant discourse. The combination of such strategies destroys a representational regime of art that posits inert matter against the willful expression of consciousness by introducing a "genuine polyphony" of discourses and an "unending dialogue" in thought (Wollen, 1972: 127).

The terms of Wollen's argument, however, cast some doubt upon the genuineness of this polyphony as it concerns the spectator. Like Heath's "Narrative Space," Wollen's valorization of the modernist text, both in the counter-cinema essay and in "The Two Avant-Gardes" (1975), is subtended by a critique of another "counter-cinema," the ontological materialist films associated with the American underground and the British Co-op movement. Rooted in the lineage of filmmakers like Man Ray and Viking Eggeling, and embodied in the contemporaneous practice of Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice, Wollen allies this avant-garde with a Greenbergian modernism that seeks to exclude the work of art from the corrupting influence of mass culture through its interrogation of the medium's intrinsic properties. Like an "introverted" version of Bazin's ontology, Gidal and Le Grice substitute the purity of the pro-filmic event with the purity of "cinematic process, the cone of light or the grain of silver" (Wollen, 1975: 97). Gidal's and Le Grice's foregrounding of the optical substrate is thus very different from Godard's praxis, since its exclusion of history and, most importantly, language threatens the deterioration of meaning into "a purely private language" (Wollen, 1972: 124). When this critique is taken in tandem with Wollen's assertion that the image must be "commented and glossed upon" through a (tacitly) Marxist discourse, it must be questioned whether Godard's genuine polyphony is not in fact the staging of a more precise opposition between the codes of classicism and the language of socialism.

In the *Crisis of Political Modernism*, this is how Rodowick understands Wollen's claim that Godard's cinema internalizes the schism between the signifier and the signified. Wollen identifies ontological materialism with an idealism of the "signifier"—the play of images, light and movement—and Soviet Formalism with the idealism of the "signified"—a cinema of discourse short-circuited only by its

insistence upon representing the reality of the new social order (Rodowick, 1988: 46).  This image-signifier versus language-signified equation leads Rodowick to conclude that Wollen's understanding of the signifier-signified rupture can only manifest as an interrogation of the image-track by the sound-track or as an incorporation of Marxist discourse (*Ibid*.: 59).  Accordingly, if contradiction is no longer understood as the denaturalization of discourse *per se,* but as the collision of particular modes of discourse, then the political efficacy of this contradiction rests on its visibility to a spectator who can understand the terms of the contradiction *as such*.  Here it is worth quoting Rodowick at length:

> Rather than a difficulty in reading, which is supposed to encourage a productive and active semiosis in the spectator, is it not the case that what is asserted in place of a mimetic theory of representation is in fact a 'negative' identity theory where contradictions produced 'semiotically' within the modernist text are said to be reproduced as 'gaps and fissures' in the spectator's consciousness?  (*Ibid*.: 60)

Although Wollen's essays may call for more generous interpretation, [2] Rodowick is justified in criticizing the fundamental ambiguity at the heart of his (and MacCabe's) notion of the modernist text as based on a rupture of the relation between signifier and signified.  Wollen and MacCabe provide little account of *how* the cinema, as an economic, aesthetic, and ideological *dispositif*, lures spectators to misrecognize themselves in the images onscreen.  More recently, Rosen also maintains that there was "something abstractly general about many of the major accounts of spectatorial positioning and ideology […]. For MacCabe, the ideology of vision rests on a formal and epistemological hierarchy of discourses, no matter what a film depicts" (Rosen, 2008: 288).  The trajectory of "suture" theory, however, would eventually ground questions of spectatorial positioning on more concrete perceptions of how specific film spectacles organize depicted *objects and bodies* along oppressive axes of power, and, most importantly, gendered difference (Rosen, 2008: 288).

*Cahiers* film theorist Jean-Pierre Oudart imported the concept of suture to film studies from a dense essay on semiotics written by the Lacanian theorist Jacques-Alain Miller.  Oudart, and Daniel Dayan shortly thereafter, would mobilize the concept to describe how conventional Hollywood grammar enacts a moment of early psychological transition latent in the recesses of the spectator's unconscious.  The argument runs as follows: camera vision, when unmediated by character consciousness, evokes the spectator's unconscious memory of the acquisition of a pre-Oedipal narcissistic sense of self, characteristic of Lacan's mirror stage.  In the mirror stage, the infant has no sense of the distance between self and world, and misrecognizes himself (woman is cast out of this equation) in the gestalt image reflected by the mirror.  This misrecognition is an effacement not only of the infant's partial invisibility to himself, but of the fact that the image "There" is generated endogenously by the subject "Here" (Sobchack, 1992: 105). However, because this camera "perception" is outside and/or absent, it threatens to unmask the means of production and unravel the self-sufficiency of the film's diegesis, leading the spectator, in Dayan's terms, "to wonder why the frame is what it is.  This radically transforms his mode of participation—the unreal space between characters and/or objects is no longer perceived as pleasurable" (Dayan, 1974: 29).  To counter this conversion from

pleasure-plentitude to anxiety-lack, conventional film grammar cuts to a view which is then anchored to a perceiving consciousness within the diegesis. Because this perceiving consciousness is only a symbolic proxy, it initiates a spiral of desire, momentarily stopping the anxiety caused by the loss of initial plentitude, while at once pointing to that loss.

Clearly, this is an overtly literal and farfetched account of how the spectator registers shot-reverse-shot patterns, and how dominant narrative cinema mobilizes forces threatening the autonomy of the diegesis. Later accounts of suture, however, would use the term more as a metaphor or heuristic than as a process simply embodied in classical shot-patterns. Kaja Silverman, for instance, describes *Psycho*'s (1960) narrative alignment with Norman Bates following Marion Crane's murder as a "salvaging activity" that unveils the spectator's need to be anchored in meaning despite the perversity that this alignment entails (Silverman, 1984). In the case of *Cahiers* in the 1970s, the concept of suture would contribute to a broader theoretical discourse concerning the relationship between the alterity of the image and the cinematic frame. While Oudart cast the Other structurally beyond the frame as a source of spectatorial displeasure—the malevolent "absent one"—later essays by Daney and Pascal Bonitzer defined how exclusions from the image can point to political crises of representation, such as how to represent the colonized subjects heard but not seen in Marguerite Duras' 1975 film, *India Song* (Reynaud, 2000: 36).

Yet, as Bérénice Reynaud argues, for all of its concerns with lack and heterogeneity, *Cahiers* failed to engage sexual difference as one of the global discourses regulating the spectator's experience of pleasure (*Ibid*.: 8). And this was the chief theoretical innovation of Anglophone feminist film scholars like Claire Johnston and Mulvey to the concept of suture. Influenced by the apparatus theories of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) contends that the conditions of film exhibition (the fetishistic limits set by the frame, the non-reciprocal relation between isolated gaze and screen) and the properties of film image (the uncanny combination of presence and absence, Renaissance perspective) work to ignite the scopic drive—which is defined by the distance of its object. But Mulvey fleshes out Baudry's thin attention to the importance of secondary identification by outlining how the relay of glances that paper over "the cut" are organized around the subjugation of the female body. Dominant Hollywood cinema inscribes a gendered division of labor into its very grammar, working to appease the male spectator's contradictory needs for ego-identification and libidinal cathexis. These needs are balanced through a sadistic-voyeuristic alignment with the look of the male star, who enjoys the freedom of three-dimensional space, and a direct scopophilic look at the female form, arrested in spectacle. Mulvey argues that the image of woman as spectacle bears the potential to destroy the system that contains it, halting the linear flow of signification through its surface proximity and stasis.

Instead of rehearsing the rich history of criticism that Mulvey's essay has inspired (e.g., Mayne, 1993; Hansen, 1994), here I want to seize on one of the key phrases that concludes the essay: "passionate detachment." While theorists ranging from Vivian Sobchack to Steven Shaviro have represented 1970s film theory as a kind of puritanical discourse, fundamentally suspicious of feeling

(Sobchack, 1991; Shaviro, 1993), Mulvey's conclusion evokes the desire for an intensity of feeling, the feeling of being alien to or ex-cited from the symbolic law. Much of the textual analysis of the 1970s was in search for something like this feeling of detachment or ex-citement, and this search amounted to more than a scientific longing to escape ideology. Consider, for example, the conclusion of Stephen Heath's "Narrative Space" on Oshima's *Death by Hanging* (1968), in which Heath focuses on the series of eye-line matches between the film's protagonist "R"—ex-cited in his own right—and a cat in the corner of the frame sitting before a brick wall (Heath, 1976: 109-112). Heath brilliantly draws our attention to the conclusion of this exchange, in which we are suddenly thrust into the "impossible space" occupied by the wall and forced to look at the cat in the face—if an animal can be said to have a face (Derrida, 2008). I think it is clear from this example that Heath, for all of his claims about the discursive nature of the image, was highly attentive to what was before the camera, and even to the so-called indexical qualities of the image. This example also calls on the reader to engage some of the same questions that preoccupy contemporary film philosophy about our metaphysical isolation from the natural world, or, to use Stanley Cavell's terms, about "our skeptical terror about the independent existence of other minds"—a terror that is, in a certain sense, about our failure to be god, to be "No One in Particular with a View from Nowhere" (Cavell, in Wolfe, 2003: 45). Yet if the film provokes a spectatorial encounter with "skeptical terror," this terror is not reducible to the fact that it gives us an indexical image of the cat's past existence in time. It is through textual operations, and textual assistance, that the spectator is provoked to consider her place and the place of an Other who may know her in ways she cannot know herself. To feel one's knowledge come to an end is to experience a kind of detachment, but a detachment that may give rise to passion and compassion for the Other who cannot be known. It is towards such questions of detachment and the usefulness of 1970s film theory to the theory of the present that this article concludes.

**Conclusion: Pasts and Futures of 1970s Film Theory**

In this conclusion, I pose the institutional and theoretical histories of 1970s film theory as a problem for the present, because much contemporary film theory has called for the redefinition of the discipline's intellectual genealogy on these two broad fronts. Sticking to recent film studies' "manifest content," debates over disciplinary definition tend to revolve around the status of the film object: film's shift from celluloid to digital base and its ostensible status as "storage device," variable to its delivery format (Friedberg, 2006). Recent conferences devoted either in part or in full to the epistemology of film studies (SCMS, 2010; ARTHEMIS, 2010) reveal that film scholars have mobilized the apparent changes to film's production, distribution, and exhibition conditions towards diverse lines of historical and theoretical inquiry. If the corporate ideal of convergence has rendered the "mother image" of cinema in its theatrical incarnation as obsolete, then film study continues to demonstrate that this image is itself rooted in historical myth. Challenging such myths has enabled the discipline to rediscover the medium in unexplored social and inter-medial contexts—the classroom, the museum, the home (Acland, 2009; Wasson, 2005; Klinger, 2006)—opening itself up to interdisciplinary dialogues with communications studies, art history, and sociology in the process. The attenuation of film's analog base has also

reinvigorated ontological questions concerning film's medium-specificity and its relation to broader conceptions of the moving image.  What is surprising is that 1970s film theory has begun to re-emerge as a blind spot in the discipline's present auto-historiographies.   At the recent ARTHEMIS conference, for example, a series of papers challenged film scholars to consider whether or not the discipline can rest assured in having produced sufficient answers to that period's constitutive challenges and contradictions (Sconce, 2010).   Has the discipline's turn towards questions of affect and reception minimized the need to theorize preferred or dominant ideological readings of cinematic texts (Betz, 2010)?  Or can hypotheses regarding dominant readings be historicized within broader considerations of social context?   In what ways do institutional materialist histories of film exhibition outside the theater challenge *Screen* theory's assumptions about spectatorship?  Can such histories still learn from the kinds of questions posed by textual analysis (Caldwell, 2010)?

Sympathetic readings of 1970s film theory are surprising in this context because recent theoretical arguments for the altered technological identity of film usually support the resuscitation of classical film theory, specifically the realist writings of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer.  The return to Bazin in the writings of theorists like Mulvey, Doane, Rosen, and Rodowick must be seen as both a complex and loaded gesture: given Bazin's excommunication from the discourse of political modernism; and given that the version of Bazin presented in much of these writings is still heavily mediated by Peter Wollen's understanding of Bazin's realism via Charles Sanders Peirce's concept of the index.   For philosopher Jacques Rancière, film studies' recourse to the concept of indexicality is a means for reformed (post)structuralists to "expiate the sins" of a political modernist era that deprived the image of its status as visible evidence by "having transformed its spectacles and pleasures into a great web of symptoms and a seedy exchange of signs" (Rancière, 2007: 10).  According to this logic, the "index argument" flips 1970s film theory's stakes upside down, replacing an epistemophilia that called for the destruction of pleasure and the tireless search for the image's discursive legibility for a cinephilia drawn to the pleasure of the unassimilable indexical detail, "impervious to any narrativization, any intersection of meaning" (*Ibid*.: 11).

Yet recent scholarship on indexicality does not amount to a univocal discourse.  To its credit, this scholarship has demonstrated that the cinema's capacity to archive and structure instantaneity was crucial to the promulgation of discourses of chance in the midst of the rationalization of time in modernity (Doane, 2002).  It has also recuperated Bazin from the *de facto* deconstructionist critique of idealism by resituating his ontology in the gap between the objective, technological filmic record of reality and the spectator who invests this record with its reality in the absence of seeing the actual recording process (Rosen, 2001; Rodowick, 2007).  Nonetheless, Rancière is justified in his caution about how both celluloid's capacity to "mold" itself onto passing presence and the spectator's knowledge of this capacity have been transformed, contrary to 1970s film theory, into the *reduction ad absurdum* of cinematic specificity.  As if the photographic image's historicity is indifferent or anterior to the cultural, institutional, and aesthetic contexts that invest it with affect and meaning.  Rodowick, for example, argues that "before transforming them [photographs] as

signs, fictions, or works of art, we approach them as historical documents" (Rodowick, 2007: 78). [3]

The most philosophically rich articulation of the index argument, Rodowick's *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007), founds the spectator's distinct phenomenological attitudes toward photographic versus digital images on certain assumptions about his or her intuitive knowledge of how these images are produced. Deploying the deconstructionist methods of *The Crisis of Political Modernism*, the skeptic might argue that this definition of the spectator-image relation repeats one of the core tensions characteristic of 1970s film theory but in a different register. That is, for all of its claims about the polysemy of interpretation opened up by the textual operations of the epistemological modernist text, what the discourse of political modernism produced, to quote Rodowick again, was "in fact a 'negative' identity theory where contradictions produced 'semiotically' within the modernist text are said to be reproduced as 'gaps and fissures' in the spectator's consciousness" (Rodowick, 1988: 60). The discourse of indexicality seems to displace this intrinsic relation between reader and text onto a new relation between what Bernard Stiegler calls "the spectatorial synthesis" and "the technological synthesis" (Stiegler, 2002: 158). For Rodowick, the continuity characteristic of photographic "transcription"—light reflected onto photosensitive paper as an uninterrupted block of duration—and the discontinuity characteristic of digital "transcoding"—light reflected onto a magnetized strip that interprets code as a simulated analog image—are equated with two distinct modes of spectatorial intention: the will to believe in a past that is of the historical world but from which I am estranged, and the will to control in the present a geometric world that is of its own reality. Isn't this position in danger of producing a new kind of "negative identity theory," where the temporal and spatial discontinuity constitutive of digital calculation is reproduced, precisely, "as gaps and fissures in the spectator's consciousness," sundering his or her belief in the historicity of digital images? Or, to put things differently, "Can we conclude that the result is artificial because the means are artificial?" (Deleuze, 1986: 2).

In Rodowick's defense, however, *The Virtual Life of Film* addresses the ongoing *idea* of the photographic as articulated by the history of film theory. Rodowick's concerns about the digital image's temporal orientation toward "perpetually re-assertive presence" are also undergirded by a profound consideration of how the masses' desire to seize hold of the visible world is commensurate with increased exposure to bio-political measures of classification in the digital age. The transformation of images into numbers is concomitant with the emergence of new media environments that make new kinds of demands on the spectator-user. It is thus crucial to question the specificity of how both "new" and "old" media environment *operationalize* the digital image. Significantly, when Rodowick analyzes how contemporary Hollywood *cinema* imagines its own becoming-digital in the introduction to *The Virtual Life of Film*, he is attracted to questions dear to the days of political modernism: how, for example, do these films' narrative operations dissimulate as ontology, and toward what ends? He diagnoses the trans-generic tendency across films like *The Matrix* (1999) and *Dark City* (1998) to stage a conflict between the digital and the photographic that simultaneously exploits the technological spectacle of the former as it asserts the ontological primacy of the latter. "When this strategy occurs as a

narrative representation of technology, it is always a contest between competing versions of the 'real' dissembling the fact that each is equally imaginary" (Rodowick, 2007: 5).

Since the publication of *The Virtual Life of Film*, Hollywood has raised the stakes in its staging of the medium wars and modified its aesthetic operations accordingly.   James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), an impressively ideological combination of new-age spiritualism, Christian transubstantiation fantasies, and borrowed ideas about tribal peoples' sexuality—"hailed" itself (but hopefully not spectators) as an event that would transform the phenomenological experience of the cinema.   While critics were both fast and justified in their critique of the film's troubling colonial politics, the more important questions, I think, are: why this colonial narrative *now*, and how does the film displace its representation of an ostensibly racial conflict onto the technological conflict between photographic and digital audio-visual regimes?   How is "going native," in other words, made commensurate with "going digital?"   What work does this narrative perform in mediating some of the constitutive tensions of the digital image, its gravitation towards the inhuman and, as Vivian Sobchack has demonstrated, its paradoxical appearance as something both automated and animated (Sobchack, 2009)?

In the film, Jake Sully, the millennium's underwhelming answer to *Rear Window*'s (1954) L.B. Jeffries, leaves his immobile body in a state of electronic inertia from which he remotely automates a bio-engineered clone of the animistic Na'vi aliens.   With the Iraq War casting its "internal shadow of exclusion," Sully's mission is to gather the reconnaissance data that will give the military access to the Na'vi's precious natural resources.   His eventual conversion to native warlord is complicit with the film's attempt to lure the spectator's desire toward the digital world of Pandora.   But this allure is achieved through *cinematic* operations familiar to 1970s film theory: narrative alignments with the animated hero's mobility through time and "three-dimensional space" mediated by the "other" photographic scene of voyeurism and fetishistic disavowal, the portrayal of woman as the intermediary whose sexual demystification enables the hero to colonize the entire native group, and the equation of "nature" with maternal law (the "mother Tree of souls").   *Avatar*'s Pandora is nothing like nature, however, insofar as it is a place where the hero comes to learn how the animal world senses us, and thus a place where the limits of human knowledge and our metaphysical isolation are overcome.   It is an ecosphere simultaneously reproduced in the image of electronic networked culture and colonialist ideas about the spiritual lives of tribal peoples.   The film casts the Western world's present technological hyper-reality in the superstitious aura of "primitive" tropes of evolutionary regression, animism, and animal magnetism (see Leslie, 2002).   And so the digital archive is reified into Mother Nature's "intercellular memory," and electronic communication is literally rerouted into a libidinal exchange with the nonhuman world.   This magical digital ontology arbitrates the film's actual socio-economic determinations only in the form of structuring absences.   The film does not show the archaic power plants and electronic waste that bookend the production cycle of the "virtual" commodity sign.   Nor does it show the oil on the shores and the blood on the streets that come with the territory of plugging into nature and speaking for the other.   Yet the most gratuitous structuring absence is instated as a process at the narrative's conclusion when the flesh and blood Sully is used up and deleted

from the film.  The attentive labor expended into Sully's avatar—both his and our own—is divested of its source in the frail human body and imbued with its own autopoietic, free-floating existence.  If *Avatar*'s images appear to constitute *a* world, as opposed to being constituted *of* the world, then this impression is not reducible to how these images are made with numbers.

Investigations into *Avatar*'s reception contexts would, no doubt, describe how historical audiences engage the film in ways more complex and contradictory than my admittedly heavy-handed reading would suggest possible.  My objective, however, is to re-evoke 1970s film theory's attentiveness to how cinematic textual and aesthetic practices dissemble as ontology in order to distill broader socio-economic discourses.  I also want to evoke something of that period's militant "structure of feeling."  This article has suggested that among the various strains of contemporary film scholarship, it is the discourse of indexicality that maintains the most complex relationship with 1970s film theory. And the contrast between the militant versus nostalgic tones of these two periods contributes greatly to this complexity.  Rather than fighting, perhaps naïvely, for a Marxist-feminist cinema to come, the discourse of indexicality is deeply invested in questions of the cinema's past, if not its death.  This disparity is addressed openly in the preface to Laura Mulvey's excellent book, *Death 24x a Second* (2006), in which she contrasts her revolutionary, albeit binaristic, feminist film analysis "then" in the 1970s against her more meditative considerations of the altered identity of cinematic time "now."  This preface, however, provokes the question as to whether Mulvey's book is in fact diagnosing the death of a certain theatrical mode of cinema, or the death of 1970s film theory's belief in a certain *ideal* of the cinema: a cinema whose politics could be made legible and mobilized towards social transformation. Although film study does not tend to believe in this ideal any longer, the debates surrounding film's ontology have left a highly ambiguous presentation of the cinema's current political efficacy in its place.  On the one hand, there has been a tendency to mourn celluloid's purity of process as the lost means through which the medium enabled the world to exert its force on the image in excess of any semiotic over-coding.  On the other hand, the digital image is celebrated for the ways its capacities for appropriation and malleability have prompted the re-interrogation of cinematic history, but, otherwise, it is too readily associated with the promulgation of a utilitarian attitude towards time that inhibits contemplation.  Certainly, on screens both great and small, the digital image is being mobilized toward the accumulation and mastery over the past in an immersive present.  A film such as *Avatar*, however, may betray that this immersive present bears the inscription of its history; in this case, the history of imperialism and ecological domination that it completes in another virtual, but also material, register.  Combating such ideological immersion and rediscovering the cinema's political relation to life and to history will require more than a nostalgic lament for celluloid's lost continuity with the world.  It may even require that we engage both our new media environments and avatars with the ex-citement of distance, with passionate detachment.

**Notes**

[1] Challenging Metz's Saussurian model of film semiotics (Wollen, 1972a), Peter Wollen argues that Bazin, in claiming that the photographic image shares "the

being of the model of which it is the reproduction" unwittingly associates photographic cinema's principal semiotic power with Peirce's concept of the index: "Bazin repeatedly stresses the existential bond between sign and object which, for Peirce, was the characteristic of the indexical sign" (Wollen, 1972a: 125-126).  Wollen's injunction to film semiotics called for an attentive balance to the "aesthetic richness" of film's iconic, symbolic, and indexical properties, and maintained that "*there is no pure cinema*, *grounded on a single essence*" (153), whereas contemporary film study tends to found the medium's specificity on the latter.  Thus Mulvey writes, "While the photographic image, in semiotic terms, usually includes the iconic and often includes symbolic aspects of the sign, its aesthetic specificity is *grounded on the index*" (Mulvey, 2006: 56-57).

[2] It is not apparent that Wollen reduces the political efficacy of Godard's films to their employment of speech, as evidenced by his suspicion of Godard's "'logocentric antipathy to anybody who speaks someone's else own words" (Wollen, 1972: 128) and by his insistence that the ruptures introduced by a particular historical discourse always threaten to reverse their aspect: "The danger that threatens is that the introduction of words and stories—of signifieds—will simply bring back the illusionism of representationalism in flood" (Wollen, 1975: 103).

[3] Rodowick's account of indexicality can be differentiated from Mary Ann Doane's claim that "the index, sign and not-sign, is perched on the threshold of semiosis" (Doane, 2002: 101).

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