

## Film History / Film Theory: A Search for Common Ground

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### *Preface: A Myth of Origin*

The primal scene which serves as something of a myth of origin for this special supplement is one that will prove, I think, familiar to many scholars whether in theatre, film, literature, history, or, indeed, throughout the arts, humanities and social sciences. The scene involves two characters, Gregory Black and myself. We are friends and colleagues in the same university department of communication studies. Professor Black, trained as a traditional historian, specializes in film history, particularly in regard to the imbrication of public--governmental--industrial policy and Hollywood film production, distribution and reception. I teach, on the other hand, film and media theory, in all its entropic, jargon-laced structuralist and post-structuralist glory.

On one typical weekday afternoon, having fulfilled our classroom duties, Greg and I adjourned to Mike's Tavern (one of those working-class bar and grills so favored by frat boys, graduate students and now-getting-sort-of-older New-Leftish professors). Over burgers and brew we talk departmental politics, engage in campus gossip. Greg talks about last night's ball game. I try to sound like I know or care about last night's game. The conversation is free and breezy--we are, after all, friends and colleagues, both engaged in film and media studies.

What, of course, we do not talk about is our respective research, our writing; our teaching. Why bother? As an ever-so-fashionable theorist, I assume that traditional historians do little more than (re)-discover the obvious. And, if I read his mind correctly, Greg Black might well respond that at least "discovering the obvious" is preferable to obfuscating the ordinary.

For one reason or another, on this otherwise quite average afternoon, these usually repressed assumptions come to the surface. The two of us begin to discuss this apparent impasse. We wonder aloud about how, why and when

traditional (empirical) film historians and contemporary film theorists stopped talking to one another (or, we ask, did they ever?). Why do so few film theorists pay much heed to say, *Film History* (would more read it if it were printed in French?). Why do so many film historians shun *Cinema Journal* and find meetings of The Society for Cinema Studies little more than an aggravation they can very well live (and do their work) without. Even if I chose to write my own critical theory in a more (as we say today) "user-friendly" style, would Greg Black find it, in fact, one bit more useful? If I paid more attention to Greg's careful historical research, would I discover something "outside" the text that would in any way inform my "reading" of any given film as a site of free-floating signifiers within a Lacanian Imaginary? In truth, we did not know. We did know, however, that given the ever accelerating intervention of "cultural studies" into the work of both historical scholarship and film theory--we had better find out!

Thus was born the experiment that follows. For fun and just possibly intellectual profit, Greg Black and I decided to see what would happen if we each, using the basic tools of our respective disciplines, "worked-over" the same film texts. Since Greg had recently completed an in-depth study of the Production Code Administration's involvement in film censorship, and since, luckily enough, "censorship" has such resonance in both psychoanalytic and post-structuralist textual theory, we both found the subject of "censorship" to our liking. Censorship as practiced by the Production Code Administration might, then, be given a double reading as both a textual and social practice. We agreed to both write about the same heavily censored Hollywood films. We picked a sex farce, *Madame Du Barry*, a "serious" drama, *Dead End*, and an overtly political film, *Gabriel Over the White House*. We would, then, read each other's work just to see what we thought, if anything, the other offered. As it turned out, our little experiment evolved into a panel presentation at the Toronto 1990 Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association.

This gave us the opportunity to invite both a moderator and a respondent to join us. Film historian Garth Jowett agreed to introduce and moderate the presentation. Garth Jowett's *Film: The Democratic Art* did much to both initiate and guide the work of "social historians" of American film. We thus asked Garth to introduce our two quite different approaches to the three films by reflecting on the problems inherent in the split between film history and textual theory.

In choosing a respondent we sought a scholar adept at finding intersections between history and post-structuralist theory. Michael Ryan immediately came to mind. From the time of his influential book, *Marxism and Deconstruction*, to the present, Michael Ryan has more than most, engaged in a like search for a common ground between and within the various and conflicting articulations of historiography and critical theory. Moreover, in his recent book *Camera Politica*, Ryan and his co-author, Douglas Kellner, had turned their careful attention to the political content of American film. (In

fact, by the time of the Toronto conference, Ryan was in Italy and Doug Kellner graciously and expertly filled in.) The panel presentation provoked a lively and heated discussion, but for once the "heat" also seemed to be producing some light. So much so, we agreed that we could fruitfully continue and, indeed, expand our project.

Meanwhile, learning of our group's ongoing attempt to find a common ground between historical and textual analysis, the editor of *The Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, John Gronbeck-Tedesco, expressed the belief that the journal's readers might, likewise, find our experiment thought provoking and useful. Thus he asked us to re-group and refine our arguments and submit our results to print as a special supplement for the *JDTC*.

Accepting John's invitation, I, in turn, contacted film historian-theorist Janet Staiger who expressed a willingness to join in the fray. With her co-authors, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, Janet Staiger in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* set a new agenda in film studies by firmly establishing the (irreducible) historical-material "conditions of existence"--economic, technological and ideological--which *mutually* interact to overdetermine a set of widely held stylistic norms (narrative unity, realism and invisible narration) which in turn, determined the *specificity* of Hollywood films from 1917-60.

Thus this special supplement took on its current shape. Garth Jowett begins the supplement by offering a highly personal review (and re-view) of the split between empirical and textual approaches to film study. He goes on to argue that "facts" still matter and offers some "empirical" evidence in regard to censorship that textual analysts ignore at their peril. Greg Black's historical analysis of the three censored films is, then, followed by my own post-structuralist "readings." Michael Ryan responds by pointing out where Black and I might both, at one and the same time, be right and wrong (headed). Ryan thus suggests why the historian and "textualist" just might need each other. Janet Staiger responds by suggesting some elements of the censorship equation that both Black and I have perhaps left out (censored?) from our own texts, that is, the intersection of the film industry's self-regulatory practices via the Production Code Administration and the specific, local *self-regulation* engaged in by historically situated spectators.

Hopefully this supplement raises more questions than it answers, thus serving as an invitation for *JDTC* readers to join in our search for common ground between history and textuality. The contributors to this supplement can assure you of one thing, for each of us, the search has thus far been productive, exciting--and fun! We have certainly *not* "solved" the "problem" that divide empiricism and post-structuralism, but, then, perhaps that is not the point. Rather, as Andreas Huyssen suggests in his influential essay "Mapping the Postmodern":

The point is not to eliminate the productive tension between the political and the aesthetic, between history and the text, between

engagement and the mission of art. The point is to heighten that tension, even to rediscover it and to bring it back into focus in the arts as well as in criticism. No matter how troubling it may be. . . . It's our problem and our hope.<sup>1</sup>

*Kansas City, Kansas*

## Notes

1. Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," in *Culture and Society*, ed. Jeffery C. Alexander and Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 375.

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