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What might we mean by Media History?

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If I comprehend the question right, at issue is whether media history – however we might understand it now and define it later – can be at the core of a research project, by which is meant a distinct area of knowledge as well as an academic discipline. That the question can be asked at all is a tribute to the modest success which in the 1980s assured film and television studies something of a privileged place – a so-called 'growth area' – in the universities. That it has to be asked means that past success and present disenchantment has to be seen in context. I shall try and sketch one such context, as it affects my own work, located at cross-currents: teaching film history and film theory, publishing on national cinema and on international television, doing research on early cinema, and hoping to contribute to the preservation and understanding of this century's incredibly rich audiovisual heritage.

I will, therefore, be mainly talking about the cinema, rather than photography, the press, radio or even television. Concerning the cinema, one might begin by noting a certain asymmetry between the scholar's construction of the cinema as object, and the cinema's existence in the culture at large, shaped by a dynamic in which academic work plays no part. What is striking about the scholar's conception of the cinema as a series of 'texts' (masterpieces, authored works or rare individual finds in archival vaults waiting to be lovingly restored) is the degree to which the cinema, as a still public and popular practice, seems to have experienced a loss of autonomy over the past twenty years. As movie theatres have become showcases for stories and spectacles also exploited by other entertainment industries (above all, by television, by videogames, and the musk business), the films themselves, while still the prime experience, seem to have difficulty in retaining their status as texts, no longer commanding their own space and closure. Not only has the sequel, prequel or series become almost the norm of mainstream film production: other aggregate states of the cinematic product are much in evidence.

For good or ill, television, for instance, has given all kinds of films a sort of afterlife and ghostly presence that has transformed their textual integrity and thus their very historicity. With the ownership of the worlds' film libraries having passed to multinational media, food- and

soft-drinks conglomerates, a movie undergoes several metamorphoses: cropped and colorized, panned and scanned, edited for television or interrupted by commercial breaks, its commodity character has become ever more inescapable. At the same time, contemporary films exist not only on the screen, but may be purchased or rented as a video-cassette, consumed as a novelized paperback, emblazoned on a line of t-shirts and tea-mugs, or pop, in the form of plastic toys, out of breakfast cereal boxes. Given that the cost of the average American blockbuster stills buys a medium-sized office block in most European capitals, it is not surprising that such a film takes up in space (mediasaturation, publicity, billboards) what it no longer occupies in memorable time, as it percolates through our audio-visual and print environment in ever shorter intervals.

The cinema's theorization

Yet, during the same period the cinema also attained a new specificity as a theoretical object, precisely by scholars many of whom had in fact given up the search for a cinematic essence. Semiology, linguistics and formalism, psychoanalysis and feminist theory, cognitive theory and pragmatics have all been mobilized, partly in order to come to grips with the cinema's status as a distinct mode of signification, but also in order to point to the structures: of perception, experience, identification or cognitive mapping, which film shares with other cultural products or artefacts. Whether this intensity of the cinema's theorization already contains a keen knowledge of an irrevocable historical loss is not at issue. Nevertheless, the paradox of this asymmetry between the scholarly expert's interest in cinema, and that of the popular fan of movies, is still worth stating, because however far apart they are in the nature (or cultural credibility) of their discourses, they are both caught in the dilemma of having to bridge the gap between a devotion to the unique, the singular (itself a function of making something the object of attention, study, and thus of love), and the powerful (intellectual, economic) currents moving them in the opposite direction, towards the general, the universal, the totalizing and globalizing.

Scholarly work in film has, for some time, been hyper-conscious of the need to engage with arguments emerging from already constituted debates, generating from these discourses insights that either are not specific to film, or that help to transcend the horizon (historical, theoretical) set by the study of the cinema as traditionally understood. Insofar as it has been author- and text-oriented, film studies was determined by a literary hermeneutics. But in the wider context of the cinema becoming a theoretical object (as opposed to a cultural reference point or a shared pleasure), film theory became influential in the humanities mainly to the degree that it was able to construct a common framework out of the implications of two brilliant moves: that of Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean-Louis Baudry about film technology (analyzing the cinematic apparatus and its 'reality effect'), and that of Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour, Stephen Heath and others about the close interrelation between narrative, specular seduction and gendered subjectivity. Both these moves made 'the spectator' and film reception a central concern of film theory and film studies, in a radical turn away from film production, whether understood as individual authorship or as industrial authorship.

Insofar as one can speak of a moment of crisis and renewal in the area of film history, it is in some respects as a reaction to these theoretical moves, which at a certain point were no longer felt to be compelling. Not only did the concentration on the textually constructed spectator

depend on a form of viewing – in a cinema, where nothing disturbed the cinephile’s meditative spell before the screen – that had become the exception rather than the rule. The viewer thus constituted appeared a-historical, un-graspable, leaving no trace of his/her presence, either in society or in the films. If reception, then perhaps what was required was a more detailed investigation of spectatorship, in the context of the cinema’s place in consumer culture, or in its battles for cultural status and legitimation. Research in these fields has unearthed much fascinating material, opening up historical evidence hitherto rarely inspected, such as the links between early cinema and popular theatre, or the distribution and marketing strategies of cinema owners and exhibitors, the information contained in the cinematic trade press and in fan magazines. Still more needs to be done in public archives or private collections, searching through national and local newspapers, but one sometimes wonders whether all this historical activity has challenged the dominant paradigms and assumptions. All too often, one feels that this research is instead returning, willy-nilly, to older, less sophisticated notions of individual, class, or identity, while taking for granted notions of causality, agency, development and influence which no self-respecting political or economic historian would or could accept. Nor would such a historian’s enthusiasm over the discovery of new kinds of evidence leave the question of these sources’ reliability as unchallenged as do some of the younger film historians.

Academic discipline

What the turn to film history has challenged is nonetheless clear: both the concern with audiences or reception, and the new histories of production and cinematic institutions show a retreat from the text, an unwillingness or impossibility of holding in place the single film as a sole or even primary object of analysis. One of the consequences is that these reactions to film theory, each in its way, seems only to have aggravated the problem of film studies as an academic discipline, by depriving it of an agreed object, and robbing of its most recognizable pedagogic practice, at least within a humanities curriculum: that of close textual analysis.

There is, as I tried to indicate above, no mystery about how this demotion of the film as text has come about. What needs to be added here is that it is of course wrong to say that the cinema’s loss of autonomy is a recent phenomenon. An individual film has never been a discrete textual object, except in the hushed atmosphere of a *cinéma d’art et essai*, in the pages of serious film magazines, or in the University’s textual analysis seminars in front of a moviola or a video-recorder. In the second instance, the prominence of textual analysis is itself a recent historical phenomenon: so-called ‘serious’ film criticism especially after 1945 had worked hard to give films this status of the individually authored ‘work’, by polemically excluding those features which made film viewing and cinema entertainment since its beginnings a social or economic event, inscribed in a wider history of popular leisure, commodity consumption, star cult, fashion, advertising, life-styles: all the things that now seem to delight the film and media-historian.

Yet such archaeologies of all the discourses which made films both intelligible and pleasurable to historically specific viewers seems at times a return of the repressed with a vengeance. For this ‘materialist film history’ as it is also called, may be said to be itself a product of the success of film study in the ‘cultural’ or humanities context, standing as it does in merely binary opposition to what it tried to displace. While in semiological or psycho-analytic film theory the

focus was on the filmic text, and how it 'positioned' or 'constructed' the spectator (making him/her the victim of a technologico-linguistic unconscious), the new research into audiences and reception tends to turn this around, making the spectator the supreme and autonomous agent, while enumerating all the wonderful things s/he can 'do' with the film text or television programme. Similarly, reaction to the monolithic, theoretical formulations about the cinematic apparatus and narrative has unearthed new sources for reconstructing 'production', such as patent files and government directives, censorship cards and legal cases, business files and company records. But in its underlying paradigms it appears to have itself produced a number of monolithic master-discourses: those of economism, functionalism or institutional determinism.

For despite the evidence accumulated by the new film history that the cinema, or at any rate, the American cinema, has behaved like any other capitalist industry this century, such knowledge is insufficient for approaching the social and historical role of the cinema. Industrial and technological analysis, and even the history of spectatorship and consumption may take one a long way away from the films. But they also have eventually to bring one back to the films: all this economic and discursive activity would not exist without spectators hungry for stories and images, for sights and sounds arranged, combined and organized in particular ways.

There is thus a hermeneutic circle (or spiral) whereby film history, as it leads us away from the film text, moves us closer to it, but not to its material or commodity existence. Instead, it is the film text's existence in and evidence of an individual or cultural imaginary (its aesthetics, its forms, its coherences and breaks, its ideologies and utopian dimensions) that demands our attention.

Popular

This a-symmetry re-joins my earlier one, about the discrepancy between the cinema as a theoretical object and its historical transformations. One might even say that the move away from the text in academic film studies stands in stark, but not altogether critically reflected contrast to the way film and the cinema have survived and are surviving elsewhere in the culture. Never has the cinema been more popular: thanks to TV and the VCR, to the successes of the American cinema in the 1970s and 1980s, colonizing outer space, inner space and virtual space, and thus opening up all our spacetime coordinates to new narratives, blurring and criss-crossing the boundaries between inside and outside, the animate and inanimate, human and beast, human and machine, creating new images, new bodies in a kind of profusion not known since Greek mythology or the times of Hieronymus Bosch. Something is happening here which ought to engage the historian, and not only the 'cultural' historian.

One would therefore have to conclude that the crisis in film and media history, and the status of the cinema as an object of research stands in direct proportion to there being a crisis in the cinema itself, except that the latter is a crisis only by virtue of the rapidity, apparent anarchy and explosive force with which the so-called media and information 'revolutions' have swept the cinema and films along with them. Film studies necessarily needs to historicise its object, once one is aware of how new technologies of storage and delivery have reshaped cinemas and film culture (implying, among others, the economic – and one also suspects, cultural – disappearance of the traditional art cinema, as well as of the avant-garde – and counter-cinemas that were once

so important for legitimating the 'serious', i.e. institutionally secured, study of the cinema).

The sense of major contemporary shifts and upheavals is no doubt one of the many reasons why the study of very early cinema has made such an impact in (Anglo-American) film studies. In returning to the now nearly a century-old 'origins' of the cinema, one comes up against a pre-classical cinema which oddly resembles our own contemporary post-classical cinema: domestic viewing alongside public exhibition, battles over technological, industry-wide standards, a profusion of performative and narrative modes, a highly segmented flow and a proliferation of cultural and media intertexts, where marketing and the patterns of consumption determined the physical shape, and thus the reading of the texts. As a result, it may well be that classical cinema – our own standard and reference point for so many years – will appear the exception, a moment of relative stability in a much more driven and fluid 'media'-history.

Cultural studies

If this history is the object of research, the question arises where it might be centred, or what discipline best articulates it. Many of my colleagues have opted for making television their main concern, as the economically, institutionally and socially dominant medium, influencing both radio and the press, and especially in Europe, financing much domestic filmmaking and nationally specific drama. But before one takes television as paradigmatic for studying all media, including the cinema, and thus as the theoretical basis and methodological foundation for a 'unified field theory of media history', one needs to reflect on the fact that television itself may be on the point of transforming itself out of all recognition: if the combination of computerized television set, digital video signal, and telephone interactivity 'delivers' only a fraction of what it is promised to bring to our audio-visual environment, our main problem as media historians will be to first find a new definition of what we mean by a medium.

It is, perhaps, out of a certain fear of amassing more and more so-called 'facts' about the cinema, without having either the basis of an established and methodologically secured discipline ('film history', 'media history'), or a true sense of where a contemporary perspective might locate itself in view of constructing its object of historical inquiry, that film studies has, among some of its practitioners, turned to 'cultural studies'. Cultural studies, which in Britain emerged in the late 1960s (methodologically) in parallel to film studies, and (politically) in opposition to mass-communication studies, has devoted itself to a new definition of the popular arts and entertainment industries, trying to take aboard a certain 'democratic' understanding of the motives, desires and pleasures among those who 'use' the mass media for their own self-identification and self-definition.

Cultural studies is, in this sense, linked to reception and audience studies as referred to above, but can also be understood as a way of mapping the fields of film and media history which can take a synchronic and a diachronic view, can speak about specific texts but also about the manner in which these are embedded in the wider (social) histories of popular entertainment, life-styles and consumption, domestic leisure and the 'public sphere'. More specifically, cultural studies has also tried to define for the popular a specific form of aesthetic production (formula, the stereotype, pastiche, intertextuality, irony), exploring subcultures' relation to style, or returning to Levi-Strauss' 'bricolage' and Michel de Certeau's idea of 'tactical knowledge'.

Cultural studies thus seems to make good the demand to pay attention to the materiality and heterogeneity of media practices and media technologies. Aiming to rescue the popular-as-progressive from radical theory's disenchantment with both high culture and mass-entertainment, it has, for instance, tried to document the sophistication and discrimination (the traditional hallmarks of educated taste) of popular reading strategies, as well as their subversive, interventionist and deconstructive potential. It has made axiomatic what in film studies remained contested territory: that cultural production is 'post-production', the appropriation and transformation of already existing texts, discourses, of ready-mades. In other words, it abandoned the production-oriented model, along with its heroic modernist version of authorship and 'masterpiece'.

The Netherlands

The epistemological picture I have sketched so far may not reflect altogether accurately the situation in The Netherlands. For a start, regarding the cinema: film production (commercial and avant-garde, industrial, official and domestic), film exhibition (in cinemas, non-commercial venues, cine-clubs), popular and high-culture reception of the cinema, and indeed the biographical data of most of the leading players are still so sparsely researched that a massive empirical effort of securing the sources, never mind their interpretation and interconnection, needs to be undertaken. It is one of the most agreeable aspects of my job here in Amsterdam that I have encountered so many individuals and increasingly also institutions (Stichting Film en Wetenschap, the Nederlands Film Museum, GBG, CBMO) that are not only convinced of the urgency of the task, but are also taking active steps in the appropriate directions.

Secondly, film history cannot and must not work in isolation from the efforts made by archives in preserving and restoring films. Here, the historian has a special kind of duty to the film as material object, and to exploit to the full what above I have called the 'textual integrity and historicity' of an archival print, which is itself a precious and unique source of 'wining' and 'unwitting' evidence for the trained film historian. To reconstruct and thus render intelligible the 'life' of a film, from production to reception is one of the most rewarding and challenging tasks one can have the good fortune to be asked to do.

Thirdly, and finally, what such a task implies is, of course, a renewed reflection not so much about the historiographical premises (for which there are precedents in other areas of history, art history, archaeology and cultural anthropology), but a more fundamental reflection about the kind of knowledge the cinema represents. In one sense, 'film' and 'the cinema' viewed *sui generis* represent no knowledge at all of the kind we might legitimately study in the form of a discipline: hence the constant accusation of it being a merely 'fashionable' subject, a 'finishing school' for students either unable or unwilling to engage with a more 'serious' subject. (Without wishing to dwell on this unduly, the lack of credibility of our subject does sometimes give me cause for concern and may well need to be the object of a separate colloquium...).

In another sense, however, film and the cinema do represent forms of knowledge, which are not only valuable in themselves, but may turn out to be of utmost importance for the future of our societies. I am thinking of what has variously been called 'unofficial', or 'tacit' knowledge, and where the popular media stand in some sense at the cutting edge. Formulated by thinkers as different as Polyani, Foucault, de Certeau and Bourdieu, the concept of unofficial knowledge

has become increasingly important for historians (in the wake of the 'annalistes' or Pierre Nora's 'lieux de memoire' project), for cultural anthropologists, but also for students and scholars of the mass-media, where for too long the notions of 'mass-deception' (Horkheimer/Adorno) or 'the media make you stupid' (Postman) have reigned as the only 'critical' paradigms.

It is therefore one of the most urgent tasks of film studies and film history to address these different concepts of 'knowledge' and the critical agendas arising from them, to draw a distinction between different kinds of knowledge, where alongside 'scientificity', 'rational method' a discursive space and a methodological approach is opened up for conceptualizing the kinds of 'unofficial knowledge' or 'popular knowledge' with which the cinema, the popular press and television are engaged in. In the latter case, we are dealing with kinds of knowledge derived from experience, from belief, from desire, from local interests and interpersonal goals, such as sociability and mutual self-interest.

In this respect, the cinema is par excellence a body of knowledge that exists 'out side' the academy, before it constitutes itself as a discipline within. Its important embodiments are the movie fan, the film or stills collector: figures who not only have an often encyclopaedic knowledge of their passion, but whose memories of 'going to the movies', 'where' and 'with whom' constitutes the kind of ethnographic and historical data that allow us to understand more fully the meaning of the a-symmetry with which I started: that opening up between the popular conception of the cinema in society at large, and the film scholar's construction of his/her object of study. It is therefore important, it seems to me that as film historians we are prepared, in the forefront of clarifying the goals and priorities, as well as the methodologies and theoretical reflections, to participate fully in the discussions around the changing relation between high culture and popular culture, between high theory and low medium, for it is in these debates that the negotiation over different kinds of knowledge can be most effectively argued.

It is here that I see the various disciplines and their representatives who have followed the call to be present at this meeting, to share a most pressing and pertinent set of objectives and concerns. One that, furthermore, requires the kind of institutional, organizational and financial support which only a national body is able to provide and set aside for this purpose.