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Thomas: Film/Culture: Explorations of Cinema in Its Social Context

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The essays and research reports collected in Film/Culture attest to the growing influence of communications research on film studies. It is a useful collection for several reasons. As Thomas explains in her introduction, the contributors are linked by their concern with cinema as social and cultural product. This concern leads them to treat film as mass communication rather than art, applying the perspectives of sociology, anthropology, and economics rather than those of aesthetics, art history, or literary analysis. Careful examination of the social contexts of media production, patterns of media influence, and social functions of media use has been largely missing from film studies in the post-World War II era. This undoubtedly has something to do with what Ian Jarvie describes in the final chapter of the book as the movement of cinema away from a position of "social centrality." 

When movies were a more "central" cultural phenomenon in American society—a period Jarvie estimates to have run from 1915 to 1950—a series of important film studies focused on the place of movies and moviemaking in social life. Garth Jowett’s contribution, "They Taught It at the Movies," reviews some of this literature, from Héaly’s early writings on motion pictures and juvenile delinquency (1915, 1926), Perry’s The Attitude of High School Students Toward Motion Pictures (1923), and Alice Mitchell’s Children and Movies (1929) to the Lynds’ analyses of media behavior in their Middletown studies (1929, 1937), studies by Thurstone (1930, 1931) and Williams (1933), and the series of Payne Fund Studies published after 1933. Those film studies helped to establish mass media research as a legitimate subfield of the social sciences. Mayer’s Sociology of Film (1946) and British Cinemas and Their Audiences (1948) contributed in the same way in Britain. By the end of this era Leo Handel was engaged in research on the Hollywood audience and on the social influences associated with movieling, Carl Hovland had completed several studies in the social psychology of film viewing, and Wolfinstein and Leites had written their famous book Movies: A Psychological Study.

As Jowett has noted elsewhere (Jowett 1976), by 1949 methods of empirical research developed for motion picture studies helped provide a base for the development of mass communications research more generally. Lazarsfeld’s arguments at this time in support of communications research as a field of social science rest heavily on previous studies concerned with movies and socialization, education and attitude change (Lazarsfeld and Stanton 1949).

The first chapter in Film/Culture, "Writing Film History: The Struggle for Synthesis," by Daniel Mann Lyuid, and the last, "The Social Experience of Movies," by Jarvie, discuss the decline of the Hollywood industry in the 1950s. Antitrust litigation, the Cold War division of foreign markets, blacklisting, and the rise of television combined to move film from its "central" position to a more peripheral role in the growing media complex. At the same time that Hollywood movies were losing their centrality and film audiences were becoming more segmented and specialized, scholarly attention to film movies away from a predominant concern with production codes and audiences. As television assumed many of the popular functions once performed by movies and "films" increasingly catered to particular subcultures and/or elites, the focus of scholarly writing came to be dominated more and more by text-centered analyses. A concern with film as an artistic text encouraged a literary perspective. The French film journal Cahiers du Cinéma had a great effect in this regard, promoting auteur theory, focusing on texts and oeuvres, and contributing a generation of critics-turned-filmmakers. Structuralist movements in literary theory were soon paralleled by the application of the structuralist perspective to film analysis. The concern for context became a concern for ideological implication, for film-text as sociocultural analogue. For two decades a semiological explosion of specific film-text analysis followed, along with an emphasis on broad structural theory and model building.

Film/Culture reflects a growing community of scholars whose work contrasts with the structuralist trend of previous decades. In some cases the contrast represents a conscious movement beyond structuralism, an attempt to build upon the structuralist tradition, recognizing the need to situate formal analysis within an exploration of cultural convention, the socio-economics of production, and the sociology and psychology of audience reception and behavior. Worth, whose article "Pictures Can’t Say Ain’t" is included here, articulated a field of study in which the tools of semiotics are applied to the study of the way actual social groups, rather than an analyst, create, interpret, and make use of visual images and events. He called this poststructuralist approach "ethnographic semiotics" (Worth 1981). Many of the articles in Film/Culture can be related to this movement, Carey’s
Chalfen's, Cucuteni's, and Meszaros's most explicitly. Others, like those of Linton, Jowett, Austin, and Kindem and Teddle, seem to spring from the dominant functionalist paradigm of American mass communications research. Still others appear to be atheoretical in their explication of film production practices, or impressionistic in their description of film form.

This suggests what I see as a weakness in the collection, namely, a lack of theoretical cohesion (or theoretical contentment). At times when I was reading through the book it had the feel of a sampler, exposing the range of film study topics addressed by sociological concerns but failing to give a sense of the theoretical paradigms and methodologies that should inform film study. At other times, after encountering three or four kindred articles in succession, this objection would fade.

Clearly, too many of the contributions present us with descriptions of film organizations, film audiences, and film metacinema which remain, consciously or unconsciously, "unencumbered" with traditional film theories—structuralist, Marxist, or functionalist. Too often the ideological implications of particular patterns of film production (or film study) are ignored. There is no reason why any one approach to "sociological" film study may have different implications from another. There is little recognition given to the theoretical stances from which descriptions of data (or collections of data) arise. Instead, theoretically "unattached" descriptions are offered as samples of what can be taken into account in explorations of social context. A grasp of traditional theory would seem to be a prerequisite for understanding the ways in which film form and content can be related to social relations of production and use. But those articles which seem uninformed by theories of the past provoke little thought about theory building for the future.

Yet, on balance it is refreshing to sample these explorations of cinema and culture. After wading through numerous semiological attempts to formulate comprehensive theories of cinematic perception and signification one welcomes the less ambitious and more empirically based work of those who would rather explore one piece of the social context of cinematic meaning. The scholars in Film/Culture remind one of Merton's advice to pursue sociology "of the middle ground." By biting off less they are able to examine and describe the social organization of filmmaking more closely. Semioticists like Metz and Heath and ambitious film theses with a call for a new method grounded in the analysis of social production and relations, largely because such analysis is never realized in their own approaches. More modest attempts to carve out segments of the film/culture complex, on the other hand, lay a substantial foundation for precisely this kind of research.

Jarvio concludes his chapter, and the book, by holding up these sociological approaches as "a standing challenge to the scholar who thinks that only semiological analysis of movies as texts is fruitful." This growing movement away from studying film as artistic text is reinstating cinema research as a branch of communications study. At the same time, it reflects a new kind of emphasis in mass media research, an emphasis on the examination of cultural process. It is to be hoped that this shift in focus will result in a new era of theory building as well.

References