

EARLY FILM THEORY REVISITED: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Katharina Niemeyer and Tobias Hochscherf

With good reason, this journal has been careful not to feature articles based on the latest theoretical fad. Many approaches, indeed, have – rightly or wrongly – vanished or been neglected as quickly as they became fashionable, raising questions about their longevity and validity. Yet there are also those theories on motion pictures that have proven their usefulness and legitimacy again and again. Some of those theories that seem to stand the test of time have helped film studies to become an independent academic field and are still engrained in many of its foremost works. Such seminal critical approaches, from the auteur theory to gender and postcolonial studies, have impacted upon our understanding of film not so much because of their fixed meaning but rather their ability to change over time. This adaptability – owing to transformation processes of amending, criticising and modifying – has helped them to remain relevant.

Years before film studies have become an academic subject well after the Second World War, theoretical considerations had already emerged. The articles presented here, not least, demonstrate that from the early days of film, intellectuals, practitioners, journalists, actors and scholars have been discussing – explicitly or inexplicitly – the inimitable properties or communalities of different media. In so doing, they moved well beyond positivistic summaries of personal experience: they show a remarkable level of critical reflexivity and theoretical sophistication. Without making claims to be theorists, they habitually defended the medium as an art form in order to establish its legitimacy, focussing on a range of aspects, such as early writings on film including discussions of aesthetics, narrative possibilities, the relation of audio–visual images to specific sociocultural, economical and political contexts as well as their eventual effects.

Today, more than 120 years after the birth of film and a century after Münsterberg's seminal study *The Photoplay*,¹ it seems apt to reappraise some of the early ideas on film. Some of which have indeed been fashioning the way we think

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of audiovisual media and its effects now and then. This, in fact, might be a good working definition of what might be understood as film theory: the wish to understand, tell and promote film and cinema.

Looking at the era before the Second World War, indeed, offers interesting insights. It helps, first, to problematise the assumption that early film theory was concerned primarily with questions of aesthetics as many of the writings also address questions of media effects, audience reception and ideology long before the Althusserian 'turn' of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The demarcations of theoretical schools and different methodological approaches that can be identified for the past decades, second, are largely absent in early theoretical considerations. Commenting on the post-war development of film studies, media historian Robert C. Allen notes: 'Any hopes of dethroning the text in film studies and textual interpretation in film history were dashed in the mid-1970s as auteurism was succeeded by structuralism, semiotics, and Lacthusseranism. Film history was to take a very back seat indeed during the reign of high theory, which is not surprising given its resolutely ahistorical and thoroughly conventionalist underpinnings. All the cool graduate students were analyzing texts!'² Such fierce opposition was largely unknown in earlier decades. Inquiries into film theory, film analysis and film history are not necessarily dialectic, they should not be. On the contrary, they are inextricably linked and often dependent on one another. For us, it seems more than important to consider production and reception conditions, technical reflections and likewise the importance of narrative aspects in order to re-tackle the question of early film theory and within this early film also because of the fact the latter is, according to François Jost, more 'focused on the hand than on the eye'.³

Adhering to the multifaceted appearances of theoretical approaches and their possible transformations, our idea of 'Early Film Theory Revisited' takes into account that time – and thus historical progression – has played an important part on two levels: theory has been shaped over time and film as a time-based medium has been discussed by many a critic as a time-based medium. This in mind, the themed issue is based on a number of assumptions.

First, revisiting does not simply mean retelling but tackling the complex topic with distance and curiosity. New ways of conducting research are offered by the digitisation and constitution of (online) archives, ideally leading to discover the (deliberately) forgotten elements of the past and to ask new theoretical and historical questions. As the film scholar Francesco Casetti puts it by referring to post- and neo-theories of film and the apparent disappearing of cinema since the 1990s, today 'theory has not vanished: it is in disguise'.⁴ Film theory has become more eclectic. Instead of far-reaching new approaches, theoretical considerations are more often implicit in academic works on film. At the same time, there are still hidden and forgotten stories to tell, especially when it comes to the questions of gender and legitimacy, including inquiries on who and what was published and who and what was not. Filling this gap, the latest publication on reframing international women's role in practicing and theorising is one major example that shows the fruitful efforts done in this direction and that lead to new enthusiastic and indispensable mile stones in film history and theory.⁵

Second, revisiting does not mean redoing the same, it means to reconsider what theory was, is or could be by introducing a multidisciplinary approach. What

we can learn from film history and the history of film theory is that a thorough understanding or comprehension of a phenomenon needs various entries. Looking back at the responses towards and critical engagement with film, indeed, relativises the preference for or against certain approaches as well as the demarcation between practice and theory. French film theorist Laurent Jullier⁶ thus exemplifies the necessity for multiple entries into an advanced understanding of film by discussing its theoretical mimetic approaches. He argues that the eternal fight of those who defend theory and those who defend the common sense has to be less comical; both need each other in order to leave space for what should be the epicentre of reflection: film. Of course, that does not mean that film has absolutely to be understood via blurred patterns of a multitude of disciplines, approaches and methodologies. It is rather, as Casetti underpins, the idea of balancing very interesting and important but often lonely case studies (Bordwell, Carroll⁷) that cannot lead to a general statement and confronting them with the imaginative thinkers (Casetti quotes Deleuze here) who ‘generated more repetitions than questions’⁸ and who also neglected early cinema as not being part of the ‘intelligible and visible’⁹, excluding it without justification of a film that thinks.

The question as to where theory begins and where it ends is not an easy one. Regardless of how one defines theory, so it seems, its boundaries are far from being clear-cut. As in other scholarly fields, theory and theorists are being described as somewhat aloof. Rather than talking about actual phenomena, they are accused or celebrated of forming their own reality. Just to give one example, Christian Metz structural semiotic model that offers a way to divide films into different sequential segments (‘syntagmas’) works surprisingly well.¹⁰ Yet it raises questions about the usefulness of this approach to films and filmmaking. ‘We now have divided the film into its syntagmas, so what?’ might well be the response by film students if they try to apply Metz’ thoughts as an analytical tool. And indeed, the value for film practitioners and scholars of Metz’ heuristic model to make visible the spatio-temporal codes within film is debatable. Like other critical approaches, structural semiotic schemes can be far off from the way films are made and perceived, but this is of course and most of the time not their first aim. As such, most audiences and even scholars of film struggle to follow such self-contained rather than self-explanatory ideas.

The increased importance of employability as an educational objective across higher education policy has raised a number of questions about teaching and learning in the humanities and beyond. More often than not, curricula and learning outcomes are questioned as to their applicability. In addition to the sociocultural relevance of film studies, the subject has become a major economic factor in the multimedia digital age where audiovisual image can be made and consumed almost anytime and everywhere. This does not imply that vocational elements were introduced as part of all study programmes. Yet, for better or worse, theoretical knowledge can often not remain abstract. Whilst this puts pressure on study programmes, courses and modules to justify their thematic, methodological and didactic choices, it might as well prompt discussions that are long overdue – even if they have existed as long as the medium film itself.

Theory: historical approaches

Early film theory is the main focus of this special issue. Revisiting it means to rethink well-known mechanisms, patterns and key *personae*, but also to resituate them in relation to one another by taking into consideration the historical circumstances of their genesis, publication, reception, transformation and, if applicable, their legacy. Theories, in fact, appear in certain periods and places and they do not fall from the sky, and theoretical writing and consequently theoretical content cannot be separated from their specific conditions of production and reception. If films shape or represent cultural attitudes, the same can be said about theories. They emerge within concrete and complex technological, economic, social and cultural premises.

This following article reconsiders major early film theories and theorists up to the 1950s. Yet, some of them also provide scope for more or less unknown theoretical thinkers. The themed issue does so from historical perspectives that seek to contextualise the different approaches and concepts within their environment of production and reception. Instead of accepting theoretical ideas as universal, global and timeless concepts that can be applied at will, their thematic, geographical and historical contextualisation requires more scrutiny. Given that all theories, regardless of their aim or scope, are the product of specific historical, geographical and ideological circumstances, ahistorical approaches, which tend at discretion to apply theories without acknowledging their origin or evolution to any past or contemporary film, ought thus to be questioned. In fact, most film theories relate to particular schools of thought, expert networks, specific regional, national or intercultural discourses at a certain time. Besides the 'geographical provenance' as a primary cue to collocate different theoretical approaches, as Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener suggest,¹¹ the historical dimension must be taken into account, too, as critical thoughts on film can be located within place and time. Among other things, this can be ascertained by looking more closely at the respective forums in which such ideas and concepts were discussed. Very often, theoretical questions and debates were disseminated through film journals, such as *Bianco e nero*, *Close-Up*, *Der deutsche Film: Zeitschrift für Filmkunst und Filmwirtschaft*, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Filmkritik*, *Screen* and *Film Quarterly* that are central to an understanding of film theory and its historical contexts. Whilst film theories help to explain more general aspects beyond isolated case studies, and thereby offer assumptions towards a more comprehensive understanding of filmic images, they also play a role in the development of academic subjects, schools of thoughts and, last but not least, institutions with an interest in filmic heritage. Examples include the American Film Institute and the Academy of Motion Pictures, Arts and Sciences in the US, the British Film Institute in the UK, the Cinémathèque française in France, the Deutsches Filmmuseum and Deutsche Kinemathek in Germany or the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Italy as well as film institutes and museums in other countries. Societies and institutions devoted to the study and preservation of film, in fact, can also be found beyond these western institutions in Asia, Africa and South America, as, for example, the Cinémathèque Africaine de Ouagadougou, the National Film Archive of Iran, the Israel Film Archive, the National Film, Video and Sound Archives of South Africa, the China Film Archive or the National Film Archive of India.¹² In this sense, future developments of film history and theory are also guaranteed by the preservation and restoration of films, journals and other important archival documents.

There are plenty seminal publications devoted to film theory. Important milestones are, among others, by Guido Aristarco, *Storia delle teorie del film* (1951), Henri Agel, *Esthétique du cinéma* (1957); Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (1974) and J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (1976), Peter Wuss, *Kunstwert des Films und Massencharakter des Mediums. Konzepte zur Geschichte der Theorie des Spielfilms* (1990).¹³ It was mainly through these publications that the canon of film theorists has been established. Continental European authors – much more than Anglo-American writers – very much dominate the list of theory up to the 1950s, prominent names are Rudolf Arnheim, Béla Balázs, André Bazin, Walter Benjamin, Sergei Eisenstein, Lotte Eisner, Jean Epstein, Eugenio Giovanetti, Siegfried Kracauer, Hugo Münsterberg. Some have been part of this elite group very much from the time when they first published their ideas, others such as Münsterberg were rediscovered later.

This issue revisits early film theories from a contemporary position to signpost avenues for future engagement. Theory can only be developed and put into perspective if scholars look beyond ring-fenced disciplinary field of interest and national boundaries. What links more recent and older thinkers of moving images, wherever they may come from, is the common object that provokes discourses of rationality and passion: film. There is no universal film theory but there is a universal interest in film.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1916).
2. Robert C. Allen, 'From Exhibition to Reception: Reflections on the Audience in Film History', *Screen*, 31.4 (Winter 1990): 347–356 (347).
3. François Jost, 'Pourquoi le cinéma des débuts?' in Jost, F. Where next/Où continuer? *International Film Studies Journal*, no. 1 (2001): 15.
4. Francesco Casetti, 'Theory, Post-Theory, Neo-Theories: Changes in Discourses, Changes in Objects, Cinémas: revues d'études cinématographiques/Cinémas', *Journal of Film Studies* 17, no. 2–3 (2007): 44.
5. Christine Gledhill, Julia Knight, Jane Gaines and Dall'asta Monica, eds., (2015), *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press).
6. Laurent Jullier, 'Théories du cinéma et sens commun: la question mimétique', *Cinémas: revues d'études cinématographiques/Cinémas, Journal of Film Studies*, 17, no. 2–3 (2007): 97–115.
7. David Bordwell, Noël Carroll, *Post-Theory Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

8. Francesco Casetti, 'Theory, Post-Theory, Neo-Theories: Changes in Discourses, Changes in Objects, Cinémas: revues d'études cinématographiques/Cinémas', *Journal of Film Studies*, 17, no. 2–3 (2007): 41.
9. François Jost, 'Pourquoi le cinéma des débuts?' in Jost, F. Where next/Où continuer? *International Film Studies Journal*, 1 (2001): 14.
10. Christian Metz, *Language et cinéma* (Paris: Larousse, 1971), the English-language edition was published as: *Language and Cinema*, transl. by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).
11. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (New York and Abingdon, Routledge, 2010), 2.
12. An extensive list can be found here: <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/resources/public-research-centers-and-archives/>.
13. Guido Aristarco, *Storia delle teorie del film* (Torino: Einaudi, 1951); Henri Agel, *Esthétique du cinéma* (Paris: P.U.F., 1957); Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (London: Secker and Warburg in association with The British Film Institute, 1974); J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (London et al.: Oxford University Press, 1976); Peter Wuss, *Kunstwert des Films und Massencharakter des Mediums. Konzepte zur Geschichte der Theorie des Spielfilms* (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1990). Other influential books include J. Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1988); Nicolas Tredell, *Cinemas of the Mind* (Duxford, Cambridge: Icon Books, 2002); and Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010).

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