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Sociology and film

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The rise of sociology as an academic discipline is one of the more striking intellectual success stories of the twentieth century. From its roots in the attempt to comprehend properly the enormous changes that came with industrial capitalism, sociology has grown into a richly diverse assembly of theories, methods, and substantive studies which, however else they may differ, share a desire to examine the emergent patterns of social organization that characterize human activity. At first sight, then, it is both surprising and disappointing to discover how little the discipline has contributed to our understanding of film. After all, before the advent of television the cinema was perhaps *the* institution of large-scale cultural production, exemplifying much of what was distinctive about the twentieth century's new forms of communication. Surely such a remarkable social development should have been of vital sociological interest.

For a brief period, of course, it was, though now more than sixty years ago. Fuelled by public concern in the United States at the end of the 1920s, the Payne Fund financed a series of ambitious research projects, conducted between 1929 and 1932, exploring the impact of motion pictures upon youth: 'our movie made children' as the popularization of the Payne Fund Studies called them. The studies brought together sociologists and social psychologists to investigate a range of topics, the flavour of which may be inferred from some of the titles under which the research was published: *Movies, Delinquency and Crime* (Blumer and Hauser 1933); *The Content of Motion Pictures* (Dale 1933); *The Social Conduct and Attitude of Movie Fans* (May and Shuttleworth 1933); *Motion Pictures and the Social Attitudes of Children* (Peterson and Thurstone 1936). These volumes shared a forthright concern about the capacity of this new and powerful medium to have an impact on the attitudes, emotions, and behaviour of the young people who, then as now, formed the majority of its audience. They also shared a commitment to the newly emergent methodologies of the social sciences, using experimental studies, survey research techniques, extended interviews, and early forms of content analysis in their attempt to demonstrate that the movies were indeed having significant effects. Summarizing their findings, Charters (1935: 43) claimed that the motion picture 'has unusual power to impart information, to influence specific attitudes toward objects of social value, to affect emotions either in gross or microscopic proportions, to affect health in minor degree through sleep disturbance, and to affect profoundly the patterns of conduct of children'.

The Payne Fund Studies, then, set the tone for subsequent sociological approaches to film. First and foremost they were concerned with the *effects* of film, and, more specifically, with the possibility of deleterious effects on those (the young) presumed to be least able to fend for themselves. Having once focused on effects, they were inevitably much concerned with method and measurement. How to measure attitude before and after exposure to a film? How to analyse content scientifically, so as to assess a film's distinctive impact? They sought varously ingenious answers to these methodological questions, and in so doing they, and their academic descendants in the mass communications research of the 1930s and 1940s, made a remarkable contribution to the general development of social research methodology. So much so, indeed, that in retrospect it is possible to see in the Payne Fund Studies an outline of methodologies of precisely the kind that would much later attract critical charges of empiricism and scientism and that, as we shall see, were important in modern film theory's distrust of sociology. In fairness, however, it should be noted that not all the studies were equally open to the charge of restrictive empiricism. Herbert Blumer's contributions, for example (Blumer 1933; Blumer and Hauser 1935), are marked by the more ethnographic concerns of his Chicago School background, and in the 1950s he was himself to campaign against widespread scientistic use of the language of 'variables' in social research. But for the most part the Payne Fund Studies did begin a tradition in the sociology of film that was to focus primarily upon the measurable effects of film on particular social categories of audience. In so doing they not only limited the kinds of question that sociology might pose about film; they also ensured that the distinctive character of cinema itself was lost within the more general rubric of 'mass communications'.

Thus it was that the dominant framework within which sociologists came to consider the cinema—if they considered it at all—was that of mass communications research. Not exclusively, of course. There were one or two social portraits of the movie industry in its heyday (e.g. Rosten 1941; Powdermaker 1950) and there was always the industry-fostered enterprise of audience research, whether predominantly statistical (Handel 1950) or more concerned with qualitative accounts of the moviegoing experience as volunteered by audience members (Mayer 1946, 1948). But these were minor tributaries to the mainstream of communications research where, in the 1950s especially, widespread concern to measure media effects dovetailed neatly into the frequent claim that modern society was typically a 'mass society'.

This is not the place to examine the detail of the mass society thesis. Sufficient here to enumerate only the elements of the thesis which were to have a formative impact on the way sociology approached the study of film. We have already seen something of that in the emphasis on effects of mass communications research. To this mass society theory added a profoundly negative evaluation of so-called 'mass culture', employing the category as something of a conceptual dustbin into which cultural critics of otherwise quite diverse persuasions could cast all the distinctive cultural products of modern society (for a useful account of the origin and development of these mass culture arguments, see Swingewood 1977). The unreflective élitism of this view is well known, whether its proponents were conventionally of the left (the Frankfurt School) or of the right (Leavis, Eliot). What is perhaps less apparent is its impact on sociological approaches to the media, film included, which often took as given the characteristic evaluations espoused by mass society theorists and led researchers to conduct their work on the assumption that mass culture was inevitably crude and unsubtle, while its consumers were little more than undiscriminating dupes. The mass society thesis, then, served to legitimize a framework for sociological analysis which effectively denied both the variability of audiences and the richness of many popular cultural texts, thereby neglecting the complexity of the cinematic institution as well as the polysemic potential of its products. Much cinema, in this view, was no more than a commercially motivated means of pandering to the lowest common denominator, its inherent crudity ensuring that little or no theoretical or methodological sophistication was necessary for its proper sociological comprehension. Any intelligent observer, it was implied, could easily see popular film for the restricted form that it was.

Of course this view is unsustainable. Yet for many years something quite like it was sustained in the received wisdom of sociological approaches to the mass media. Only a tiny proportion of sociological work resisted the mass culture argument and examined film with any commitment to the idea that processes of meaning construction might be more complex than was suggested by the traditional 'hypodermic model' of mass communication. Some of that work simply bypassed the mass culture tradition by examining those rarer forms of cinema which were by then widely recognized as approximating to 'high art' and therefore could be seen to invite and merit more elaborate treatment. One such instance was Huaco's (1965) analysis of three 'film movements'—German Expressionism, Soviet Expressive Realism, and Italian

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Neo-Realism) employing a curious combination of Smelser's functionalist theory of collective behaviour and a somewhat unsophisticated base–superstructure metaphor. Revealingly, this volume claimed to deal with 'film art' rather than just film. However, as mass culture orthodoxy came under sustained attack during the course of the 1960s, sociological work developed on more than just 'film art', a process driven especially by the re-evaluation of Hollywood film by critics first in France and then in Britain, although also fed by growing dissent within sociology itself. When, later in the decade, the ideas of French structuralism began to have an impact in a range of subject areas (including both sociology and the nascent discipline of film studies) there was promise of a common framework of analysis through which a new, interdisciplinary understanding of film might be forged. By the late 1960s this had advanced to the point where the interests of the semiology and the sociology of film appeared to be converging, so much so that when the British Film Institute's Education Department published a collection of working papers emerging from its influential seminar series, four of the five contributors were academic sociologists (Wollen 1969).

Yet this positive concern with sociology was to prove short-lived, and as film theory became a central intellectual focus in English-language film studies its emergent orthodoxy systematically sidelined sociology's potential contribution. The charge most commonly made was that sociology suffered from precisely the kind of unreflective empiricism which film theory sought to combat in its own field of study. Ten years earlier that might have been true. By the late 1960s, however, such an allegation was, at best, questionable and, at worst, uninformed misrepresentation. The mass communications tradition was already under severe critical attack from within the discipline, and sociology more generally was in some ferment, shifting away from the apparent methodological and theoretical consensus that had characterized the post-war years. Whatever else it might have been, the sociology of this period was not empiricist in the traditional sense. Indeed, as a discipline it was arguably more theoretically reflexive and sophisticated than anything then envisaged in film theory.

In the event, the marginal role played by the sociology of film in the flowering of film theory in the 1970s had less to do with sociology's intrinsic empiricist failings than with the characteristic assumptions within which film theory itself developed. Here the position that came to be associated with the journal *Screen* was extremely influential, dictating terms within which debate was conducted and hence moulding the concerns of film theory even for those who did not subscribe to the *Screen* group's position. What was it about this perspective that had the effect of excluding sociology? The answer is not straightforward. After the first wave of enthusiasm for structuralist and semiotic approaches to film, it rapidly became apparent that the very formalism of such theories, in some ways a virtue, also extracted a price. Analysis tended to focus excessively on the film text (and film language) at the expense of any systematic understanding of the context within which texts were produced and understood. In consequence, neither individual spectators nor social structures featured satisfactorily in early semiotic analyses of cinema. On the face of it, this perceived failing opened up conceptual space for a distinctive sociological contribution. Unfortunately, however, film theory developed in a different direction, undeniably seeking to incorporate a social dimension into analysis, but not by application of sociological theories or methods. Instead, it was through the concept of ideology as that had been developed in Althusser's work that film theory sought to progress, borrowing particularly from his Lacan-influenced account of the ways in which subjects are constructed by systems of discourse. In this account the subject is constituted by and through the film text and is thereby caught within ideology.

Why this particular theoretical emphasis came to the fore is a complex question of intellectual and political history which cannot be dealt with here. The net effect, though, was to turn the film-theoretical enterprise towards analyses of the textual constitution of subjects and to a method based in structural psychoanalysis, rather than towards the kind of contextual concerns which would have necessitated a more directly sociological approach (see Creed, Part 1, Chapter 9). To make matters worse, the Althusserian framework offered an especially distinctive reading of the role of theory itself, a form of conventionalism within which theory was seen to constitute its object without reference to an independent 'reality'. Accordingly, any attempt to promote empirical work not cast in these terms—necessarily the case for a sociology of film—was condemned with the catch-all label 'empiricism', an allegation which was applied as indiscriminately as it was empty of intellectual force (see Lovell 1980 for

an excellent critique). Thus was sociology marginalized in subsequent film theory.

In claiming that the Althusserian and Lacanian turn in film theory effectively excluded sociological considerations I do not mean to suggest that this was a matter of wilful intellectual conspiracy. It was, rather, that the terms of film-theoretical discourse which became commonplace during the 1970s and 1980s relegated sociological considerations to the periphery. The irony is that this was precisely when sociology could have best played a positive role in contributing to an interdisciplinary understanding of film, and subsequent film theory has been less than adequate in this respect, largely persisting with a radically unsociological view of cinema. Even those later scholars dissatisfied with the prevailing dependence on psychoanalytically influenced film theory have resorted to alternative psychological approaches—for example, drawing upon cognitive psychology—rather than to sociological frameworks (e.g. Bordwell 1985; Branigan 1992). Such authors have done much to expand the concerns of modern film theory, but without making a great deal of progress in understanding the sociological workings of the cinematic apparatus.

Accordingly, sociological analyses of film have been sporadic rather than sustained over the past quarter of a century, moving from the naïve optimism of general framing texts (Jarvie 1970; Tudor 1974) to qualified applications of the sociological perspective, often in the context of other theoretical and substantive interests. In this respect the rise of cultural and media studies as legitimate academic 'disciplines' has been crucial, providing a framework within which sociologically informed researchers have contributed to further understanding of film. Although rarely explicitly labelled sociology, the work of Dyer (1979, 1986), Hill (1986), and Wright (1975), among others, will serve to suggest the variety of such indirect sociological influences. It is this kind of work that offers the constructive blurring of disciplinary boundaries that was once promised by the temporary alliance between the sociology and the semiotics of film. Today, however, the energy and promise of such interdisciplinary alliances is not to be found in film studies at all, but more generally in cultural studies, where television is understandably the single most prominent focus. And in spite of the recent efforts of, for example, Norman Denzin (1991, 1995), a sustained sociology of [illegible] still something of a pipe-dream.

But why should we need any such enterprise? [illegible] line of argument is to suggest that during the twentieth century sociology has accumulated a good deal of empirical knowledge about the workings of the social world, as well as establishing a not inconsiderable repertoire of research methods, and that both resources could contribute significantly to our stock of knowledge about film. In this respect we have no less need now than we have ever had for specific sociological studies of particular genres, of systems of film production, or of the social character of film spectatorship. Ironically, however, in the present circumstance of film studies it is perhaps in the area of general theory and method that sociology is most immediately relevant. This is especially apparent once we recognize that the future of film studies is inextricably bound up with the fate of cultural studies, which, deeply influenced by film theory in its formative days, has now outgrown its ailing film-theoretical parent. But contemporary cultural studies, it is widely believed, is faced with what various authors have called a 'paradigm crisis'. Formerly committed to a deterministic analysis which largely equated culture with ideology and which gave analytic primacy to texts and to systems of discourse, in recent years cultural studies has retreated from this 'strong programme', turning instead to much more localized, ethnographically inclined researches into processes of cultural consumption.

In many ways this has been a welcome development, especially where it has led to detailed empirical research into people's diverse and inventive 'reading practices'. But it has also bred dissatisfaction. For all the virtues apparent in recent work, there is a growing belief that cultural studies is losing its critical and analytic edge by retreating into forms of analysis which neglect the larger social context within which culture is utilized and reproduced, or by theorizing that context only in the grossest terms. Interestingly, sociology too has experienced just such conceptual polarization, at different times expressing itself in conflicting concerns with micro- versus macro-theorizing, with social determinism versus social phenomenology, and with society versus the individual. The difference is that sociology faced these divisions significantly earlier than cultural studies and has in the course of the 1980s generated a body of new theory oriented to concepts appropriate for understanding the crucial interaction between social structure and social agency.

It is here, surely, that sociology could play a positive pa[illegible] theory and method in cultural studies and, thereby, foster a more sophisticated understand-

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ing of the social institution of cinema. Film, after all, is more than mere celluloid. It is socially constructed within a three-cornered association between film-makers, film spectators, and the film texts themselves, and at every point in that nexus of relationships we encounter negotiation and interaction involving active social beings and institutionalized social practices. Sociology is the intellectual resource best suited to probing that particular complex of social activity. Note, however, that this is not to propose an academically imperialist project, a sociology of cinema in a strongly reductive sense. It is, rather, to suggest that in its recent theoretical and methodological concerns sociology has begun to forge an analytic position which could help to reconcile the potentially warring opposites of modern cultural studies. In so doing, it could still contribute centrally to a multidisciplinary understanding of twentieth-century culture, a culture within which film itself played a historically crucial formative role.

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21 Cultural studies and film

Graeme Turner

The development of film studies and its establishment within the academy precedes that of cultural studies, but over the last two decades there have been close parallels between the two intellectual and analytical projects. Both traditions are implicated in the turn towards the analysis of popular culture that commenced during the 1950s and 1960s in most Western countries. The spread of mass media culture, the installation of the teenager as an identifiable market category, and the various expressions of anxiety about the 'Americanization' of Western cultures as a consequence of the large-scale export of the products of the American mass entertainment industries, all assisted in raising the level of seriousness with which popular culture came to be regarded over the post-war decades. This change in the kind of attention directed towards popular culture in both the academic and the broader community resulted in significant modifications in the way popular cultural forms were examined and understood. Film studies and cultural studies have been among the participants in, and beneficiaries of, these shifts.

Film studies and cultural studies share a common interest in the textual analysis of popular forms and in the history of the cultural and industrial systems which produce these forms. However, there are limits to the commonality this might imply. Film studies is inte[illegible] interested in the individual text and retains a [illegible] mental acknowledgement of aesthetic value; cu[illegible] studies disavowed the notion of aesthetic value from the beginning and is only now returning to see just how it might come to grips with such a fundamental gap in its account of the operation of culture (Frow 1995). Film studies is an academic discipline, with all the institutional and political considerations that entails. Cultural studies likes to think of itself as an 'undiscipline' (Clarke 1991) and, despite its galloping institutionalization, operates in an interdisciplinary fashion as a mode of critique and interrogation. The project of film studies in the academy is still primarily an interpretive one—of textual analysis—while the history of cultural studies has seen it move from a focus on the text to the analysis of the audience, and from there to mapping the discursive, economic, and regulatory contexts within which the two come together. Notwithstanding these rather fundamental differences, one can still trace important historical links between the two traditions and suggest ways in which trade between them has been, and might continue to be, useful.

These links are not uniformly distributed across the various national academies and intellectual traditions, however. Departments of film are most numerous in the United States, and the discipline is perhaps the most established and secure there. Cultural studies is, alternatively, a relatively recent addition to the humanities in the United States and is still at the very [illegible] establishing its territory and its relation to cognate disciplines such as film, English, or commu-

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