

# Introduction to film studies

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Anything that exists can be studied, and in these last years of the twentieth century it may well seem that virtually everything is. Yet only some things become organized into disciplines and institutionalized into departments and conferences; if everything has its web site, only some things have their boards of examiners, refereed journals, and employed enthusiasts, or possess the (often insecure) cultural capital of being understood to be 'studies'. Nor is the form that studies take wholly determined by the object of study—the history of film studies, as of any other discipline, makes clear that there are many different ways of deciding what it is you attend to, and how you attend to it, when you 'study' something.

All manner of factors, including chance, determine why something gets taken up as worthy of 'study' and what form that takes, but cutting across them all is the conviction, one that must be or be made widespread, that the object of study is important, that it matters. It is the terms of such mattering that then characterize the changing forms of study.

In principle, there could be film studies based upon the science and techniques of film, its physics and chemistry, the practices and possibilities of the camera and the other apparatuses of filmmaking. Yet these have not constituted a discrete branch of film studies, nor even very often been seen as indispensable to the study of film. This is despite not only a handful of academic studies, but also the in fact rather wide-

spread discourse of film science and technique in the culture at large, from the journals of professional cinematography all the way through to the lively market in special effects (how they are done) fandom.

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An interest in the physics and chemistry of film has made some impact within film studies in work on what are seen as the three decisive innovations in the history of film: its very invention and the introductions of sound and colour. (To these we might add wide screen—though this is generally seen as less transformative of the medium—and television, video, and digitization, which sometimes seem to open out onto the vista of the end, or at any rate acute marginalization, of our object of study, film.) Here such matters as the phenomenon of persistence of vision, the chemistry of photographic stock and celluloid, or the subtractive

## CRITICAL APPROACHES

versus additive methods for colour production do form part of many curricula, reference books, and histories. Yet the study of such things, the very basic means and possibility of film, for their own sake, as central to the discipline, is not established. Similarly, although students of film do sometimes know something about technique—know, for instance, what a fresnel does, or the merits of one Eastman Kodak stock over another—such knowledge has remained at best an optional extra to the constitution of film studies.

This has in part to do with the scientific illiteracy of most of those who constructed the field. It has also to do with a divide in conceptions of science and technology, between what I shall call—and polarize as—objectivists and historicists. The former see the truths of science as facts discovered in the natural world and technical practices as things imposed upon practitioners by apparatuses; the latter, the historicists, see scientific knowledge constructed according to cultural paradigms and see practices as routinized uses of apparatuses, apparatuses that were themselves constructed according to cultural norms and could be used differently. Though many scientists and technicians are much more profoundly aware of the relative nature of their knowledge and practices than film scholars are ever likely to be, the wider scientific, technical culture remains wedded to objectivism. Film scholars are far more likely to be on the historicist side, sometimes to the point of refusing altogether to acknowledge—and therefore to know anything about—the stubborn resistance of matter, of apparatuses, of physical and chemical givens.

Yet the reason for the absence, or at any rate extreme marginalization, of scientific and technical discourses in film studies is not so much this epistemological mismatch as those discourses' perceived value in relation to what matters about film. On the one hand, to pure science, film is not important enough of itself to constitute a field of study, but is only an instance in a wider field, optics and acoustics, say, or even physics and chemistry *tout court*. Meanwhile, technical discourse has not yet established for itself the place in scholarship that would enable it to found a field (even though, probably, more people teach and want to learn technical discourse than film studies). On the other hand, scientific and technical discourses don't tell film scholars what they want to know about film or films, that is, why they are fascinating or valuable. Knowledge of the chemistry of Kodak stocks in given periods, or of how a fresnel affects the focus and fall of lighting, tells us how

a given image or characteristic filmic quality takes the form it does, and probably enables us to refine our description of it, but it still doesn't tell us why, or even if, it matters.

Mattering has tended to be affirmed in one of two ways: the formal-aesthetic and the social-ideological. The first argues for, or assumes, the importance of film in terms of its intrinsic worth, whereas the latter focuses on film's position as symptom or influence in social processes.

### The formal-aesthetic value of film study

For formal and aesthetic discourse, film matters for its artistic merits. In this, it shares a concern with newspaper and magazine film reviewing, even if this common cause is sometimes obscured by antagonism of both journalists and academics towards one another. Both groups are concerned with championing film in general and with debating the merits of particular films. Film journalism long anticipated and made possible academic film study, and it has continued rather more whole-heartedly to concern itself with the questions that won't go away (is this film any good? is film in general any good?). At its best, journalism's readiness to mix a well-expressed, honest response with a fine, accurate, and evocative description of a film is of great methodological importance. There is value in the freshness and immediacy of the reviewer's response, just as there is in the distance and mullied-over character of academic work. And if academics may be rightly wary of the implications of the pressure on journalists to entertain (not least by imposing their personality between the reader and the film), it is regrettable that more film academics do not seem to share the journalistic concern with communication.

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Both reviewing and film studies concern themselves with film as art. The notion of art is notoriously loaded—it carries an inextinguishable overtone of value, so that we may say that the term 'art' in practice

designates art that is approved of. For much of its brief life film studies has mobilized just this overtone in its defence, usually quite explicitly. The most famous instance of this—and in terms of widespread, long-term influence, probably film studies' greatest hit—is the auteur theory (see Crofts, Part 2, Chapter 7). This made the case for taking film seriously by seeking to show that a film could be just as profound, beautiful, or important as any other kind of art, provided, following a dominant model of value in art, it was demonstrably the work of a highly individual artist. Especially audacious in this argument was the move to identify such artistry in Hollywood, which figured as the last word in non-individualized creativity (in other words, non-art) in wider cultural discourses in the period. The power of auteurism resided in its ability to mobilize a familiar argument about artistic worth and, importantly, to show that this could be used to discriminate between films. Thus, at a stroke, it both proclaimed that film could be an art (with all the cultural capital that this implies) and that there could be a form of criticism—indeed, study—of it.

Auteurism is the particular form that the argument from art took in the 1960s, the crucial moment for the establishment of film as a discipline. But film scholarship long before this had concerned itself with film as art, including, but not only, in terms of individual creativity. The terms may differ, but the form of the argument remains the same: film is worth studying because art itself is worth studying and film is art. Why art itself should be deemed to have worth, leave alone to merit study, are not matters to be gone into here: suffice it to say that film as art discourse leans on this wider art-as-a-good discourse, or rather, its many variations (e.g. individual creativity, formal coherence, moral depth, sublime or dionysiac experience).

One particularly productive strand of such discourse can be linked back at least to the German philosopher Lessing and his insistence (in *Laokoon*, 1766) on the importance of establishing what is intrinsic and essential to each artistic medium: only by being true to this can real art emerge. Thus painting should not try to be like sculpture, and much less should either try to be like music or literature. It is some such conviction, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, that informs work that has sought to specify the particularity of film. What is it about the medium itself that makes it distinctive and that therefore properly forms the basis for an account of what is potentially best about it?

Many answers have been proposed. One is film's

particular relationship to reality, the fact that it is reality itself that makes an impression on film stock—a sunset is put on a canvas by means of a hand applying paint, but it gets onto film by the chemical reaction of film stock to a real sunset. Theorists and practitioners alike have not naïvely supposed that film unproblematically captures or reflects reality, but they have argued that the fundamental way in which the film image is produced is in some sense by means of reality itself, that this process is unique to the photographic arts and that it is in maximizing the formal implications of this (e.g. shooting on location with available light, using long takes) that the art of film is realized. A second tradition takes film's temporal combination of shots in the act of editing (or 'montage') as most characteristic of it and thus, again, the foundation of film art (see Kolker, Part 1, Chapter 2). Realism and/versus montage long held sway as paradigms in film studies, but more recently there has been a renewed interest in other, obscured conceptualizations: 'photogénie', for instance, the particular *transformation* of recorded reality effected by the camera and its auxiliaries (lighting, movement, editing), or 'Zerstreung', the delirious, dazzling, profoundly irrational quality of the film experience (bright light flickering on a huge surface in a darkened room, with vertiginous illusions of impossible realities).

The argument from essence remains an argument for film as (approvable) art, but there have developed formalist approaches more equivocal with regard to value. These have sought to establish the forms in practice of cinema—not what they must or should be, as in essentialist arguments, but what, as a matter of fact, they are. Most notoriously, these were developed under the sign of the 'language of cinema'. This is an often unhelpful term. Language is a sign system characterized by arbitrary signs (there is no reason for the word 'cow' to designate the animal 'cow'), discrete elements (the sounds are clearly distinguished from one another, the written elements even more so), and constraining grammar (with only some latitude, you have to follow the rules of grammar if you wish to be understood). Film's signs, on the other hand, are motivated (by the 'special relation' to reality or by virtue of resemblance—an image of a cow looks like a cow), cannot be neatly separated out (for instance, how long does a take have to be to be long?), and their combination knows only the rather particular rules of certain traditions (notably 'classical cinema'). Yet the ambition of linguistics, or more broadly semiotics, to be an objective description, a 'science', of the forms

and procedures of a medium of signing has continued to haunt film studies (see Easthope, Part 1, Chapter 6).

The strongest such work has sought to overcome the weaknesses of the language model by identifying formal elements of film which correspond to norms of human perception. Among such work we may note—despite the huge divergence in the paradigms at work—three tendencies. Phenomenological work, which has come and gone and re-emerged as a presence in the field, focuses on the experience of the film image, drawing explicitly upon philosophical understandings of the nature of perception and consciousness. Here the unfolding of the film, the succession of images, and the image repertoire itself are all understood to work, probably in an unusually immediate way, with the habitual processes of the human mind. Psychoanalytic work, developing in the 1970s, links formal elements to unconscious psychic processes, most influentially in the feminist treatment of the point-of-view shot, whose organization is seen to privilege the male look at women in ways which either sadistically punish or satisfyingly fetishize the always threatening image of women to the male psyche (see Creed, Part 1, Chapter 9). Thirdly, most recently, what we might call the Wisconsin School, building on its highly influential work on 'classical Hollywood cinema', has started working on correspondences between film form and norms of perception posited in cognitive psychology, notably those between the film forms and mental processes required in order that a film may be 'followed' (see Christie, Part 1, Chapter 7).

By this stage, though, the need for there to be a point to studying film is in danger of being lost. In part, the yearning for science includes the shibboleth that things are studied because they are there and that there should be no tendentious point. In part, the very success of film studies in establishing itself as a discipline may mean that the reasons for establishing it no longer need asserting or even addressing. This may be short-sighted—funding realities mean that disciplines still have to be defended in terms of why they should be pursued. (The popular-with-students argument is not enough: for one thing, film studies is only popular with students relative to classics or chemistry, not to media or business studies, and for another, those who fund study may be more interested in what government and business want than in what students want.) The scientific stance may also be self-deluding, since in practice a sense of what matters is always present in scholarship at the level of the choice of what instances

and aspects get studied and what don't. In any event, it should be stressed that there is a risk of loss of point, not that this has occurred. The study of filmic language or formal-perceptual correspondences consistently provides a ground for understanding how film and films work, even if leaving out of account why we should want to know about this.

### The social-ideological value of film

Film-as-art discourses argue, or assume, that film is intrinsically worth studying. If they lean on wider discourses of art, of aesthetics or sometimes erotics, then this is only because film itself is an art and therefore valuable in the terms of art. There is no appeal to something outside film art. Social-ideological arguments, on the other hand, do make such an appeal.

One kind of social argument sees film as the exemplary or symptomatic art form of the category 'modernity'. This itself is conceived of as a structure of feeling characterizing an epoch in Western (and subsequently world) society from, say, the late eighteenth century onwards, based in capitalism, industrialism, urban and large-scale, centralized, 'mass' societies. To what extent we are still in this epoch, or whether there has been a qualitative change so profound that a new epoch must be recognized, one that may be designated 'postmodern', is part of this debate (see Hill, Part 1, Chapter 11). One consequence of considering that we are in transition out of modernity, or perhaps are already in postmodernity, is that film may come to be seen as an archaic and marginal cultural form. Postmodernity may rob film's modernity of the sense of the new and the now.

Film's modernity may be located first in its industrial character. Cameras and projectors are machines. Films are endlessly reproducible, as in all mass commodity production. They are made, for the most part, in conditions akin to factory production, which involves large numbers of people, a highly differentiated division of labour, and a temporally linear organization (e.g., at its most rudimentary, scriptwriting followed by filming, then processing, then editing). The numerical and geographical scale of distribution and marketing are comparable with other major commodities in modern societies. Production and distribution are centralized, a relatively small number of people putting out products consumed by millions upon millions (and, in the case of Hollywood, throughout the world).



The director confronts the studio logo in Guru Dutt's *Kaagaz Ke Phool/Paper Flowers* (1959)

The modernity of film at the level of production and consumption has been seen as of a piece with film form. The camera's mechanical reproduction creates a new, perhaps rather strange relationship between image and reality, just as the experience of modernity is said to distance people from nature and an immediately graspable, localized social reality. Editing is founded in fragments, a characteristic which has produced a variety of analyses in terms of modernity. One is that an art of fragments is analogous to the common experience of fragmentation in modernity, as rapid mobility, mechanical and long-distance communications, the mixing of classes and other social groups in cities, as all these break up the fixed, holistic bonds of traditional communities. A second view of the modernity of editing sees combining fragments as akin to

the dynamic of Marxist dialectical thought, itself understood as the mode of thinking and feeling appropriate to modernity and to what modernity makes possible, the construction of a new, post-capitalist society. A third view sees continuity editing as an attempt to cover over the cracks between film fragments in just the same way that mass culture seeks to weld a unity out of the fragmentation of modern societies.

Other aspects of film form have also been seen as distinctly modern. Both editing and the flicker of film (to say nothing of the importance of action and suspense genres in popular cinema) may be of a piece with the restless, febrile quality of modern life, or may, in another version, provide the intensity and excitement lacking in lives essentially drab and anomic. Camera movement, elaborate lighting, and special effects al

## CRITICAL APPROACHES

display the advanced technology at film's disposal. Finally, the conditions under which film is viewed—vast assemblies of strangers gathered together in the dark to see flickering, rapidly changing, fabulous images that they know are being seen in identical form across the world—locate both film's industrial mode of production and its formal properties in the actual experience of being at the movies.

Accounts of film's modernity have in principle simply been attempts to characterize and understand what contemporary life is about, what it feels like; but they have also usually been fuelled by an anxiety about this (see Gripsrud, Part 1, Chapter 22). Is not fragmentation a bad thing for human kind, and does not film either exacerbate it or seek to disguise the reality of it (and thus put it beyond critique and change)? Is there not a danger in the hypnotic quality of the film image, an inherent danger because it is a lure to passivity? Is not passivity dangerous, partly because, *quel horreur*, it is feminine, partly because passivity at the movies is coterminous with political passivity in life (a wholly dubious assumption)? Hasn't film demonstrably been used to manipulate people to acquiesce in totalitarian regimes? In short, is not film inherently political?

It is a concern with the politics of film that has underpinned the emergence of what we may call a cultural studies perspective in recent years. Its central proposition is that culture of all kinds and brows produces, reproduces, and/or legitimizes forms of thought and feeling in society and that the well-being of people in society is crucially affected and shaped by this. Who we think we are, how we feel about this, who we believe others to be, how we think society works, all of this is seen to be shaped, decisively, perhaps exclusively, by culture and to have the most profound social, physical, and individual consequences. Importantly, cultural studies has a differentiated model of society. Rather than treating cultural products as part of a mass, uniform, and homogeneously modern society, it has focused on the particularities of cultures founded on social divisions of class, gender, race, nation, sexuality, and so on. Within this perspective, cultural studies stresses the importance of power, the different statuses of different kinds of social group and cultural product, the significance of control over the means of cultural production. Equally, cultural studies does not assume that cultural products are unified expressions of sections of society, but may often treat them as products of contestation within such sections or else of struggles of such sections against other social groups.

Film is something of a minor player in this. Cultural studies emerged with television and has gone on to privilege popular music and new technologies among the media it analyses. None the less, the cultural studies perspective is widespread in film studies. Its most familiar form is ideological textual analysis. At worst this can be a reductive seeking out of politically incorrect narrative structures and stereotypical characters or an impossibly elusive, wordplaying, obfuscatory 'deconstruction' (a word often used to mean little more than taking something to bits as brilliantly as possible). At best it seeks to show the way that the textual facts of a film itself, its narrative organization, its address to the viewer, its visual and aural rhetoric, construct, not necessarily coherently or without contradiction, a perception of social reality (even and especially in films not apparently about social reality at all).

The chief problem for ideological analysis is the methodological weakness of the claims it seems to want to make about the social significance of the ideological operations it uncovers. Wary of claims of the effects of the media, claims associated with right-wing moral panics and unimaginative social-scientific empirical investigation, ideological analysis still assumes that it matters what ideology a film carries. Yet it only matters if it can be shown that the ideology is believed, or acted upon as if believed—in other words, if it cannot be shown to be effective. This is a move cultural studies has often been reluctant to make. Awareness of the problem has, however, led to an opening out of interest in cultural studies into areas that had hitherto been largely left to the social scientists but are now beginning to be more centrally discussed within film studies: production and consumption.

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tion have been talked about in film studies in the past. There have been moments too of guilty conscience, when it has been felt that students of film 'ought to talk about the industry', often resulting in surprisingly unsophisticated empirical accounts—surprising both because being given house room beside the most arcane textual discussions and because there was no lack of theoretical sophistication about the study of industry and business available in social science. Recently, however, film studies has woken up to the unanticipated impact that cultural studies has had in management, business, and other 'hard' social sciences, where talk of the culture of an enterprise is widely accepted as a key explanatory concept. We are now seeing the beginnings of work on the culture of the production of film. At the other end of the process, and even more developed, we may note the influence in cultural studies of conceptualizations of consumption in terms of active, interpreting, differentiated audiences and an interest in what kinds of sense social groupings make of films, genres, stars, and so on.

At times, films may get rather lost in this process, dissolved into the cultures of producers or the multiplicity of audience readings. This seems a pity, since without a sense of film itself, producers and audiences alike become just one instance of production and consumption among thousands. If this is the case, there is no particular reason to study them any more than producers or users of wheat or cars—perfectly good and important subjects, but neither seems set to define a discrete discipline. Moreover, there remains the problem of how one understands the relation between the culture of producers and the culture they actually produce, or the relation between readings and the detail of what is being read. Why does a given set of personnel, organized like this, with this set of shared and contested understandings of what they are doing, why does all this produce this kind of film? What exactly is it that this given set of readers is latching onto in a film to make this interpretation, to have this feeling about it? And in either case, so what? Why does it matter what kind of film is produced, what kind of reading is made, unless the film itself matters? Cultural studies approaches to production and consumption may show us why films matter to producers and readers, which is good for them but not in itself reason to pursue and fund a discipline. We have to go back to considering the aesthetic or social reasons for thinking why film matters, reasons not themselves entirely vouchsafed by the cultures of production and consumption.

Film studies should include physics and chemistry, technology, aesthetics, psychology (of some sort), the sociology of organizations and consumption, empirical study of producers and audiences, textual study of films themselves, and no doubt much else that we cannot yet envisage. On the other hand, it is never possible to do everything. Most of the time one has to put on hold crucial aspects of a phenomenon that one has not time (or perhaps inclination) to address. This means that one has to operate with a 'closed system, open mind' mental orientation, focusing on a particular neck of the woods but being ready to take on board findings and perceptions from those labouring away in other parts. (The phrase is borrowed from the title of a collection of essays by Max Gluckman published in 1964.) I do not say this in a spirit of tolerating everything—there are substantial intellectual reasons for wishing to dispute particular paradigms at work within all the many modes of film study I have tried to characterize. Rather, I want to insist that in particular, the aesthetic and the cultural cannot stand in opposition. The aesthetic dimension of a film never exists apart from how it is conceptualized, how it is socially practised, how it is received; it never exists floating free of historical and cultural particularity. Equally, the cultural study of film must always understand that it is studying film, which has its own specificity, its own pleasures, its own way of doing things that cannot be reduced to ideological formulations or what people (producers,

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**CRITICAL APPROACHES**

audiences) think and feel about it. The first cultural fact about film is that it is film. Quite what 'film' then is we must go on debating, but that debate must always be at the heart of a cultural understanding, just as any conclusions we come to will always be cultural as well as aesthetic ones.

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