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# To the Dreaming Observer: Response to Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell

PETER LEHMAN

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Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell's response to my criticism of their work on Japanese cinema obscures all the major points of my critique. I do, however, stand corrected on the absence of reference to Said's *Orientalism* in their work, though it remains useful to consider their claims with reference to that book.

It is important here to recall the argument and purpose of my essay. Contrary to Bordwell and Thompson's assertions, it was not written by someone who "wants to intervene in this controversy," nor was it written to "constitute the initial stage of a new research program." It was, rather, written to be presented at the beginning of a 1984 conference organized specifically around the idea of Western perceptions of Japanese film. The piece was intended as a polemic which would provoke response and discussion. In fact, I strongly recommended to the conference organizers that Bordwell, Thompson, Anderson, and Burch be guests of the conference. As I recall, Bordwell and Thompson were out of the country at the time. My contribution was in no way presented as that of a Japanese film scholar. It was indeed written from the point of view of a "disengaged" outsider. My only involvement had been as an editor, since several of the articles in the controversy were published in *Wide Angle*. My article is much more modest in its scope and intentions than Bordwell and Thompson imply. My attempt was to trace arguments, indicate areas that had been unsatisfactorily addressed, and reveal (in an admittedly polemical fashion) underlying assumptions. Several scholars currently engaged in Jap-

anese film research praised the presentation as a useful survey of pertinent issues in the field and several readers of the essay have responded similarly. As for Bordwell and Thompson's conclusion, I am happy to let others decide how "outdated" or "inaccurate" my article is.

Thompson and Bordwell claim that my method "simply juxtaposes other people's opinions with our conclusions" and that "Lehman's chief strategy should be apparent: citation of authority. Said, Anderson, Willemen, Oshima, Sato—all are simply juggled together to raise the possibilities of other readings." Both claims are wrong. My article traces key debates in the field, and when I cite scholars like Anderson and Willemen it is not their "opinions" to which I am referring. Nor are they being used as "authority" figures. They have offered specific arguments and challenges which have not been adequately addressed by Bordwell and/or Thompson.

Thompson and Bordwell also attribute positions to me that I do not hold and misrepresent my use of sources. For instance, "Lehman reproduces Joseph Anderson's claim (originally made in an interview with Lehman) that Ozu's style is not unique and that indeed other Shochiku directors, such as Shimazu, employ it." I manifestly do not "reproduce" that claim. It is clear that I am simply surveying Anderson's argument and Bordwell's response to it. This is prefatory to identifying the aspects of Bordwell's response which I feel are inadequate. I am, in fact, in full agreement with Bordwell and Thompson on this

point. The responsibility lies with Anderson (or anyone who defends that position) to cite specific examples which contradict Thompson and Bordwell's reading. As far as I know, Ozu's style is unique.<sup>1</sup>

Nowhere in the article do I argue that "Western cinema is not pertinent to Ozu." I am fully convinced by Thompson and Bordwell's argument that Ozu was well versed in Western cinema's stylistic devices and that he "deliberately swerved from them." It does not simply follow from that fact, however, that Willemen's challenge (which incorporates some of Anderson's points) is fully answered. It is true that Bordwell acknowledges problems with his formulation of modernism and classicism but specifically argues of Willemen's discussion of African tribal art and cubism that "The analogy reveals the weakness of Willemen's case. African sculptors never saw Cubist work, but Japanese filmmakers knew Western cinema very well" (54). My point was and remains that that difference does not invalidate important parts of Willemen's argument. The mere fact that Ozu knew Western film style and did not employ it does not significantly alter Willemen's point that Bordwell and Thompson are reading Ozu's films from their Western perspective. Ozu's knowledge of and departure from Western style does not mean that his films are in any way a critique of that style, nor does it tell us anything about how his style might be read within the Japanese context. The same is true of the much cherished point of individuality. To argue that no one in Japan or even the world made films like Ozu tells us nothing about how those films are shaped by and read within Japanese cultural traditions.

Thompson and Bordwell claim that I link them with Stephen Heath and Edward Branigan and "chide" them for disregarding Japanese culture. But the only reference to Branigan's work in my article is made in a discussion of Willemen's position. As with the earlier cited example of

Anderson's work, Thompson and Bordwell collapse a position I am surveying with one they attribute to me. They then say I am simply citing authorities. But, in fact, Willemen (the supposed authority) is the target of my criticism, not Branigan! The point (which was obscured by several dropped lines) was that Willemen accused Branigan of wrenching *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* out of context by comparing it with *8 1/2*. Yet Heath, whose previous work on Oshima is favorably invoked in that essay, does virtually the same thing when he discusses *In the Realm of the Senses* in comparison with *Letter From an Unknown Woman*.

The main point of my essay was that the work of all these Western scholars on Japanese film can only be understood within the ideological spaces into which they pull these films. It is for this reason that I stressed the way in which Thompson and Bordwell's work on Ozu fits in with their work on directors like Tati. Nor is it true that I am simply "chiding" anyone for ignoring Japanese culture. On the contrary, I conclude, "We should respect what we learn from our perspectives as witnessed in such excellent works as Bordwell and Thompson's, Branigan's, and Heath's." In fact, I call for a continuation of such work. It is only in regard to certain kinds of claims (such as those that Bordwell makes in his survey of the "dream cinema" or the conclusions that Thompson and Bordwell make in their Ozu article) that the Japanese cultural context is critical.

I even encourage further work on Ozu which incorporates Thompson's and Bordwell's work within the current Western work on space and eroticism in cinema. As for my work on Oshima, it is also clearly linked to other work of mine which reformulates certain current notions of the avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> In a forthcoming article, "*In the Realm of the Senses: Desire, Power, and the Representation of the Male Body*," I do, in fact, place that film within

the historical context in which it was made and relate it to Japanese erotic woodblock prints. I do not, however, think that all discussions of Japanese films must always employ the Japanese cultural context. But if one is going to claim, as Bordwell does, that other people are misreading Japanese film by virtue of how they think of Japan, then one had better do so.

*In Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*, Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott argue that “texts be conceived as having no existence prior to or independent of the varying ‘reading formations’ in which they have been constituted as objects-to-be-read . . . their reading is always-already cued in specific directions that are *not given* by those ‘texts themselves’ as entities separable from such relations” (64, emphasis added). They maintain that although texts have determinate properties “such properties cannot, in themselves, validate certain received meanings above others; they do not provide a point of ‘truth’ in relation to which readings may be normatively and hierarchically ranked or discounted” (65). It is precisely these points that I was striving at in my critique.

We can only understand Thompson and Bordwell’s analysis within the reading formation of what has been variously dubbed “neo-formalism” or “the University of Wisconsin project.” Their reading is based on a dazzlingly intricate analysis of determinate properties of the Ozu texts. When I referred to those as “easily observable,” I did not mean that in the derogatory sense that Thompson and Bordwell took it. They are correct that they were the first to make these observations; before their pioneering work seeing these things would hardly have been easy for anyone. I meant easily observable in the sense of verifiable. Nor did I mean that these patterns are “simple.” Of course I did not take the time to show a “detailed grasp” of all the elements of style they

analyze. I gave a few simple examples. In several seminars, I have analyzed these stylistic features in detail, using the same films and examples which Thompson and Bordwell employ. This did not seem to me the place to redo what they have already done, especially since I was not contesting their analysis of these determinate textual features. They have done a sophisticated job and their examples are well chosen and accurately described. The key point, however, is that these objectively analyzable textual features are not evidence for the conclusions that Thompson and Bordwell draw, nor is their reading a “true” reading which warrants the nearly contemptuous dismissal of other readings as being in error—the dreaded thematization. In “The Story Continues, or the Wisconsin Project Part II,” Barry King hits the nail on the head when he observes that Bordwell “counterposes an ‘expert’ reading to a lay reading in a manner which conceives of the latter commonsense or thematic reading as an error. . . . Is there not a certain positivist fervor in an account that offers a theoretical apparatus for a ‘correct’ reading and merely casts the reader in its own image?” (75)

The main aspects of my critique of Thompson and Bordwell’s work were that “they consider the systems they analyze to be solely properties of the films which they can uncover through detailed, minute analysis,” that they employ no cultural reference, and that although Bordwell condemns others for viewing Japanese cinema as a “dream-cinema,” he and Thompson are guilty of the same thing in their work on Ozu: they read Ozu as their formalist dream (12). I cannot, of course, assess how successfully Thompson and Bordwell will address these issues in their forthcoming books, nor how Bordwell will incorporate Sato’s criticism.<sup>3</sup> Considering Bordwell’s recent discussion of Ozu in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, however, I am not optimistic that these problems will be resolved.

Thompson and Bordwell emphasize that Ozu's films are "complex and daring because . . . they play with narrative and other formal patterns simultaneously." In this "expert" reading, one has to teach oneself (preferably with the help of a flatbed) to separate the formal patterns and then view them as "playing" with the narrative. This account, however, does not make sense to actual viewers who are deeply involved in the films through complex patterns of *identification* with characters as well as *evolving* plot events and themes. Although they are not thematically developed in the style of the classical cinema, Ozu's films are rich with meaning.

Clearly, Thompson and Bordwell's 1976 article on Ozu is part of the "always-already" of a neo-formalist reading. Not surprisingly, Ozu ends up with Tati and Bresson as a "parametric" filmmaker in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, a formal confirmation of my point that Thompson and Bordwell read Ozu within their Western ideological space. Even more remarkably, Bordwell characterizes parametric films as having "strikingly obvious themes."

Not much acumen is needed to identify *Play Time* as treating the impersonality of modern life, *Tokyo Story* as examining the decline of the "inherently" Japanese family, or *Vivre sa vie* as dealing with contemporary alienation and female desire. It is as if stylistic organization becomes prominent only if the themes are so banal as to leave criticism little to interpret (282).

The argument here is somewhat circular; since Bordwell declares the themes obvious and banal, he treats them that way.<sup>4</sup> But Ozu's films deal with such "banal" matters as the crisis young boys feel when they discover that their father is not what they had thought, the disappointment that aged parents feel in their children, and the intense loneliness that a widowed father

feels when his daughter has married and he is the only member of the family left in the house. The poignancy with which Ozu treats these situations should not be characterized as "banal." Nor is it clear how these banal, obvious themes differ from those of the classical cinema. One could accurately characterize *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* as dealing with the theme of the passing of the old West. Certainly there is no more obvious or banal theme in Westerns, but it does not necessarily follow that the theme is of limited importance to the film.

Although Bordwell's later work avoids claims of modernism about the parametric style, he notes that "possessed of a *horror vacui*, the interpretative critic clings to theme in order to avoid falling into the abyss of 'arbitrary' style and structure" (282). This virtually repeats Thompson and Bordwell's earlier conclusions that their reading of Ozu involves a "dangerous freedom; the old Ozu is far more comforting." "Falling into the abyss" simply becomes a dramatic metaphor for "dangerous freedom." But, I repeat, perceiving style and structure as arbitrary and separate from theme is not the grand, risky business that Thompson and Bordwell make it out to be. And it is, to say the least, condescendingly inadequate to characterize thematic critics as virtual cowards. Contrary to Thompson and Bordwell's claim that my critique is "outdated," I fear that three years after it was written, it is still pertinent. Far from resolving the problems in the 1976 Ozu article, the later work intensifies them. The neo-formalist Ozu is just as much of a dream as all the other dreams that Bordwell strongly criticizes in his 1979 article. It is a dream I do not share.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The reference to my interview with Anderson is also misleading. It is true that Anderson's article grew out of a taped discussion with

several *Wide Angle* editors, myself included. This was done at Anderson's request and in no way linked me or anyone else to his views. Precisely for this reason, I did not feel it appropriate to take any credit for the finished article. Loren Hoekzema, the Assistant Editor who not only participated in the interview but also saw the article through to its final form, was rightfully acknowledged.

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Lehman, "For Whom Does the Light Shine?: Thoughts on the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 7.1&2 (1985): 68-73; "The Avant-Garde: Power, Change, and the Power to Change," *Cinema Histories, Cinema Practices*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp and Philip Rosen (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984) 120-131; and "Style, Function, and Ideology: A Problem in Film History," *Film Reader* 4 (1979): 72-80.

<sup>3</sup> A translation of Sato's writings on Ozu appeared in the same 1977 issue of *Wide Angle* in which Anderson's article appeared, but Bordwell makes no mention of it in his 1979 article. At that time, he apparently felt no need to qualify the 1976 analysis of Ozu based upon Sato's observations.

<sup>4</sup> It is symptomatic of the general lack of attention to sexual ideology in Bordwell's work

that female desire is simply included in a list of obvious and banal themes.

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The British Film Institute and the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, announce an international conference to mark the opening of their major exhibition devoted to the life and career of Sergei Eisenstein. In this ninetieth anniversary year of Eisenstein's birth, the exhibition will include the largest selection of his drawings and designs so far publicly exhibited; and it is accompanied by BFI Publishing/Indiana University Press's important new edition of Eisenstein's writings.

It is the wealth of newly available material by and on Eisenstein that provides the impetus for a gathering of scholars and students from many countries, including the Soviet Union. The conference will include contributions from leading experts, screenings of rare film material and a private view of the Eisenstein exhibition at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art, as well as a round-table discussion of future directions in Eisenstein studies.

Since accommodation at Keble College is limited, early booking is recommended and all inquiries should be addressed to Ian Christie, Distribution Division, British Film Institute, 21 Stephen Street, London W1P 1PL (telephone 01-255 1444; telex 27624 BFILDNG; fax 01-436 7950).