

Revising Screen Studies

Toby Miller

Mainstream U.K. and U.S. academic screen studies is a blend of textual analysis, the psy-complexes, and a bourgeois business history that neglects a critical perspective on the division of labor. These tendencies have prevented screen studies from contributing significantly to public debate. Consider a recent content analysis published by the American Medical Association (AMA) that concerns feature-length animation films made in the United States between 1937 and 1997 and the way in which they associate legal but damaging drugs with heroic characters (Goldstein, Sobel, and Newman 1999). And another study, which noted that 1989 saw Hollywood and the tobacco industry enter a voluntary ban on product placement in live-action films—since that time, the incidence of stars smoking cigarettes in Hollywood film has increased eleven-fold, mostly to get around the problem of bans on TV commercials—a truly global marketing issue, unaddressed by screen studies (Laurance 2001). These studies received major media attention via a press conference, AMA endorsement, formal replies from studios, massive TV and newspaper coverage, and so on. How many screen studies professors or graduate students read them and contributed to media discussion?

The reason for this inability to contribute to public debate has to do with a longstanding tradition of viewing audiences as objects to be molded into citizen-subjects, civilized connoisseurs of either right or left, as the anecdote that follows will demonstrate. A how-to book called *Going to the Cinema* (Buchanan and Reed 1957) was part of a British series from the 1950s that instructs middle-class readers in how to enjoy culture. The book promises “increased powers of perception” that will develop spectators’ pleasure to make them more discriminating (Buchanan and Reed 1957, 13). A list of “films everyone should see” is included (Buchanan and Reed 1957, 155-57). This reiterates ongoing concerns of film theory, from the silent era’s



faith in what Vachel Lindsay (1970, 243) called "the moving picture man as a local social force . . . the mere formula of [whose] activities" keeps the public well tempered; through 1930s research into the impact of cinema on American youth audiences via the Payne Studies (Blumer 1933; Blumer and Hauser 1933); to post-World War II anxieties, evident in the anthropology of Hortense Powdermaker (1950, 12-15) and the sociology of J. P. Mayer (1946, 24), about Hollywood's entanglement of education and entertainment and the need for counterknowledge among the public. This history might have led to the formation of public intellectuals who made major policy and critical contributions to transforming Hollywood, but hegemonic U.S. and U.K. screen studies has produced none.

This is because the remarkable continuity of concerns about audiences is secreted in favor of a heroic, Whiggish narrative of teleological, textualist development that animates the *doxa* of the humanities screen academy. We are sometimes told today that, to quote one recent film-theory anthology, there has been "a general movement in approaches to film from a preoccupation with authorship (broadly defined), through a concentration upon the text and textuality, to an investigation of audiences" (Hollows and Jancovich 1995, 8); or, to paraphrase the fifth edition of a widely used anthology, that there has been, consecutively, a pursuit of knowledge about film form, then realism, followed by language, and, finally, cultural politics (Braudy and Cohen 1999, xv-xvi). Such accounts approximate the history of some humanities-based academic work but forget the hardy perennials of popular cinema criticism, social-science technique, and cultural policy as applied to the screen via formal analysis of films, identification of directors with movies, and studies of the audience through psychology and psychoanalysis. All of these have been around, quite doggedly, for almost a century (Worth 1981, 39).

But the rapid disciplinarization of screen studies over the past thirty years has ripped away old links to the social sciences. What is left out of today's dominant discourse of screen studies—the major journals, book series, conferences, and graduate programs? The AMA anecdotes point to (1) a lack of relevance in the output of screen studies to both popular *and* policy-driven discussion of screen texts, (2) a lack of engagement with the sense-making practices of criticism and research conducted outside the textualist and historical side to the humanities, and (3) a lack of engagement with social science.

Despite the continuity of textual and audience axes within film theory, latter-day lines have been drawn dividing media, communication, cultural, and screen studies for reasons of rent-seeking academic professionalism—on all sides. The theorization of production and spectatorship relations between film and television, for instance, continues to be dogged by the separation of mass communication's interest in economics, technology, and

policy from film theory's preoccupations with aesthetics and cultural address, although attempts are underway to transform both sides of the divide (Hill and McLoone n.d.). The division of labor encouraged by orthodox rent-seeking is imperiled by the fact that so many college jobs in film come not from the usual suspect—a literature department in search of a partial makeover—but also from communications and media studies. We can only hope for more forces breaking down these barriers. Otherwise, our contribution to public debate will be severely limited.

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