

Theoretical essays:
film, linguistics, literature

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Manchester University Press



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Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

MacCabe, Colin
Theoretical essays: film, linguistics, literature
I. Title
082 PR6063.A13/

ISBN 0 7190 1749 1 *cased*
0 7190 1795 5 *paper*

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

Provenance of the essays and acknowledgements

Class of '68: Elements of an intellectual autobiography 1967–1981' is here published for the first time.

'Realism and the cinema: Notes on some Brechtian theses' first appeared in *Screen* 15, 2, summer 1974.

'Theory and film: principles of realism and pleasure' was given in slightly different forms to a SEFT weekend school and to the Literature and Theory conference at Essex in 1976. First published in *Screen* 17, 3, autumn 1976.

'On discourse' was originally the opening seminar in a course on 'Discourse and Social Relations' organised by Paul Hirst and Sami Zubaida at Birkbeck College, London in October 1976. It was reworked for a seminar on psychoanalysis and language which I organised at King's College, Cambridge in 1978 and published in a collection which I edited from that seminar entitled *The Talking Cure: Essays in Psychoanalysis and Language*. It is here reprinted by permission of the Macmillan Press.

'Language, linguistics and the study of literature' was first presented to the Cambridge Linguistics Society in the summer of 1979 and a revised version was given as a lecture to the Oxford University English Faculty in the same term. It was first published in the *Oxford Literary Review*, 4, 3, summer 1981.

'Realism: Balzac and Barthes' was a contribution to Cambridge University French department's research seminar in February 1983. It was reworked for my own research seminar at Strathclyde University and reached final form in July 1983 in Urbana-Champaign at a conference organised by the University of Illinois entitled 'Marxism and the interpretation of culture'. It is also published in the proceedings of that conference.

Preface

Much of what might be said in a preface takes up the substance of the introductory essay.

I have been very fortunate in twice belonging to quite exceptional groupings where I found the energy and excitement which should always accompany intellectual work but so rarely does.

I should like to record my thanks to Sam Rohdie who asked me onto the *Screen* editorial board and to all the then members of that board from whom I learned so much, even in disagreement: Ben Brewster, Ed Buscombe, Elizabeth Cowie, Christine Gledhill, Kari Hanet, John Halliday, Stephen Heath, Jim Hillier, Alan Lovell, Paul Willemsen, Christopher Williams, Peter Wollen.

At King's my colleagues were friends but their friendship never prevented them from teaching me a thing or two, frequently. Thanks, and more, to John Barrell, Norman Bryson, Frank Kermode, Dadie Rylands, David Simpson and Tony Tanner.

In addition I must specially thank Stephen Heath, a friend in every adversity, Jocelyn Cornwell, who always provided a fresh intellectual perspective, but above all, in the context of these essays, Ben Brewster, who taught me all I know about film and most of what I know about linguistics.

The introductory essay runs the inevitable risk of any biography however tentative or partial: a coherence always more retrospective than willed, an importance for the protagonist more narrative than historical. But to these general reservations one must add more local ones. In focusing on the institutional settings of intellectual debates, those debates are inevitably overspecified. It is not simply that most of the crucial moments and

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presences in one's life are missing. The impact of contemporary presences in one's life are missing. The impact of contemporary novels and poetry, of our current sounds and images is unrelated because unresolved. And this is perhaps inevitable with the choice of subject and form. As a result what can be specified and understood is given precedence over that which is still at work, still partially unconscious. Thus, feminism which produced many of the concerns and emphases for the work collected here is curiously unimportant for an account which focuses on definable intellectual institutions. But the paradox is largely apparent because feminism cannot be located as such a definable institution: to specify it in terms of ideas *or* politics *or* its impact on everyday life is to reduce the importance of a movement across all these levels. To capture such a movement would require a different kind of writing.

Perhaps that is just another way of indicating the major problem of an introduction that in its very form and language presupposes an importance for theoretical reflection that is questioned at the level of content. But to find a way of writing which would stress both the importance and unimportance of theory is a dilemma that has repeated itself in western culture since Nietzsche. It is only at some vanishing point in the future where the division between mental and manual labour is less insistent that this dilemma may finally dissolve itself.

Strathclyde University 9 October 1984

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Class of '68: elements of an intellectual autobiography 1967–81

I can still remember with all the clarity that normally attaches to screen memories, the shock I received when I first read the introduction to Roland Barthes's *Essais Critiques*, a collection of his occasional criticism which had been published five years earlier in 1964. I think that I had hoped that the introduction, by tying together essays from a period of a decade, would explain to me the unworried inconsistency which seemed to mark Barthes's work, especially when he was pledged, in the late sixties, to a consistent reading of literature. I suppose also that I wished to get a firmer fix on this anonymous figure who wrote so personally about the impersonal. It was with some such expectations that I turned to the introduction. But Barthes refused to introduce his essays. To write was to give up all rights, the text was left for others as the writer became simply another reader, unable to guarantee the true meanings of his or her own texts, or providing such a guarantee only at the risk of a bad faith which tried to freeze meanings in memory. Barthes's refusal of a canonical meaning for his own texts and the consequent ethic of a fundamental discontinuity of meaning and self appeared as a threat – do I not even possess my own meanings, do I not even possess an 'I' – but also as a surmise – and what would it be like to live under that sign?

That introduction crystallised for me much of what at that period, both before that frozen moment in the library and after, was so seductive about the explosion of work that erupted out of Paris in the middle and late sixties. And this emphasis on discontinuity, on heterogeneity, on the falseness of identities both semantic and social seemed to figure at the intellectual

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level the more pressing truths that were offered by the experiences of the late sixties when the revolution and the counter-culture promised in evanescent moments to be one and the same. The standard articulation of those experiences was, however, in the heavy and normative tones of an existentialism or a Marxism which tried to produce a unity of consciousness, where, it is ever more clear in retrospect, what was being celebrated was the possibility of a diversity of experience which could only be collapsed together at the cost of madness or morality. The importance of the sixties is not to be located in some mythical moment in the past where a specious unity was possible, but in the investigation of methods of articulating the differences of late capitalist societies that might yet help us to realise the possibility of a genuine plurality way beyond what can be imagined within the ideology of pluralism of discrete interests which our western societies offer as models for both personal and political development.

Re-reading Barthes's essay today, what strikes me is the extent to which Barthes remains attached to a realm of the personal untouched by the differentiation of language and the social; how the investigation of the sociality of language is premised on an area of the private which is absolute. At the end of a discussion about the dialectic between 'originality' and 'banality' Barthes continues: 'Whoever wants to write with exactitude must therefore proceed to the frontiers of language, and it is in this that he actually writes *for others* (if he spoke only to himself, a kind of spontaneous nomenclature of his feelings would suffice, for feeling is immediately its own name)'.¹ Barthes here draws back from a more radical thought: even our most intimate feelings can only be named socially because, outside of the public form of a language, we would have no criteria whereby we could recognise the same emotion as the same. Barthes's spontaneous nomenclature is none other than the belief in a secret naming that Wittgenstein took such pains to show was self-contradictory – there are no private languages. And if Barthes retained at the heart of his project an area of the private which finally, in his last and most moving book, he turned to systematise, he also retains its inevitable analogue, a public world which is undifferentiated except for the fact of its 'publicity'. Barthes refuses to consider his essays in terms of a necessarily delusive personal coherence, but he also

refuses to consider them in terms of the various institutional battles and struggles in which they were produced.

In introducing these essays I have no desire to try and make them finally coherent, to avoid all possible mis-readings both past and future by producing a reading now which would cancel all previous readings (including my own) and petrify the results under my control. The egocentric task does not appeal, or rather, its appeal is undercut by the knowledge of its impossibility. There is, however, a different desire in this introduction – the possibility of situating these essays, of describing the specific struggles and institutions which constituted the context if not the meaning of these texts. To undertake such a situation seems of value to me today as a method, at least personal, of marking the end of a particular period. If the publication of a selection of essays inevitably relates to financial and career motives which should not be underestimated simply because they are so little discussed, such considerations could not alone justify the painful task of collecting and reconsidering material which seemed consigned to the past.

Such a reconsideration seems necessary as part of a re-evaluation of the confident appeal to the rigour of theory which was such a striking feature of the late sixties and their immediate aftermath. For those engaged in the analysis of texts (and if that word immediately suggested literary texts at the beginning of the seventies, it was as likely to refer to film and television at the end) there was a renewed interest in the formal analyses of language, in psychoanalysis and in the possibilities of Marxism. If it may be analytically clearer and pedagogically more useful to divide these strands up and attach convenient labels and names to them, it is important to remember that these three elements were seen as part of a single effort, a determination to produce an understanding of texts which would be adequate to their reality and specificity but which would relate them to wider political and cultural struggles. The aim was nothing less than an understanding of the functionings of language and culture. The unity of the theoretical project was underpinned by a political over-valuation of theory which was one of the products of the political movements of the late sixties. This over-valuation often depended on a confident running together of the domains of politics, education and culture in over-simplified ways, but that over-simplification and that confidence were not without their positive aspects.

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London: Screen

Throughout the seventies in Britain, the most important consistent attempts to discuss and analyse the relations between culture and signification took place in the pages of the film magazine, *Screen*. And it is hardly accidental that the *Screen* of the seventies was itself a product of the political movements of the late sixties. Originally both *Screen* and its parent body SEFT (Society for Education in Film and Television) were set up at the end of the fifties by teachers interested in bringing film into the classroom, and it was practical questions about the teaching of film which dominated the magazine for its first twelve years. Throughout this period both the society and the magazine were located within the offices of the British Film Institute, which was the society's funding body.

Screen's transformation into a theoretical magazine is a complicated and complex history. At the intellectual level, however, the problems of reconciling film with traditional conceptions of art made a theoretical magazine a pressing necessity for teachers. Unfortunately the easiest way for teachers to argue for film within the school was to stress film as a great new artistic medium. If its commercialisation in the States had not allowed the artistic potential to develop, the argument continued, in Europe there was a long tradition of particularly gifted individuals who had transferred their personal vision of the world onto celluloid. The problem with such an argument for many teachers was that it reproduced exactly the traditional romantic valuation of art as the product of a superior individual consciousness and denigrated film in so far as it was part of a popular culture. The teachers who were introducing film into the schools were often those most influenced by writers such as Hoggart, Williams and Hall who argued against traditional conceptions of art and in favour of a serious consideration of the forms and values of popular culture. And to give that ideological position a pedagogic edge, the films that many teachers most wanted to discuss with their pupils were the intellectually despised products of Hollywood. This particular contradiction gained a further dialectical twist throughout the sixties as the theses and theories of *Cahiers du Cinéma* gained ground in the English-speaking world. *Cahiers*, probably the most influential post-war cultural magazine in the west, had argued for a new valuation of Hollywood by concentrating on those

directors who it considered managed to mark their films with a personal style and thus deserved the culturally privileged status of an *auteur*. The paradox of the *Cahiers* position was that it offered a powerful intellectual defence of Hollywood, and that in its pages it provided a great deal of material for teachers, but that this defence and this material was dependent on a concept of the artist drawn from traditional aesthetics. The popular culture of Hollywood was transformed to reveal the high art of the *Cahiers*-selected *auteur*.

Many of the most vital and important debates about education and culture were thus a matter of daily reality for anybody interested in teaching film. It is thus not surprising that 1968 was to affect this group of teachers with considerable force. I use that particular date simply as a convenient shorthand for that movement in the late sixties which placed questions about education, culture and lifestyle at the centre of a political agenda drawn up in schools and universities throughout the world. Régis Debray intended to mock the pretensions of that time when he said of the French students that in 1968 they had set out on a voyage to China and ended up on the shores of California. The jibe can be read against its intentions to reveal some measure of the inter-continental complexity of a movement whose effects as felt within feminism and the ecological movement provide the most vital political forces in the developed world and whose potential is still the only hope for a revitalisation and redefinition of a socialist project for society.

Specifically, in the more parochial context of the BFI and SEFT, the political rupture came in 1971 with the resignation of Paddy Whannel, head of the BFI education department, together with five members of his staff. The fundamental dispute which underlay these resignations was the demand by Whannel and the Education Department that the BFI should adopt an active educational policy which would seek to influence subject matter and method in film education rather than simply responding to specific requests from teachers. In some senses the Education Department was asking the BFI to undertake a task which the universities were manifestly ill-equipped to contemplate, partly because of their ignorance of film and partly because of their commitment to traditional cultural values, these two factors being intimately related. Behind the education department's

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demand was a widespread feeling that the rebirth of Marxist theory and the new wave of interest in formalist studies, particularly in France, offered a genuine possibility of analysing film in ways which would avoid the traditional cultural assumptions of *auteur* theory. The aim was nothing less than to constitute film as a rigorous object of study and the implied consequence, conscious or not, was a redrawing of both object and method in the humanities. If the resignations were the signal of a lost battle within the BFI, the war continued as the BFI, in recognition of the importance of a new educational policy, made a hugely increased grant to SEFT which became a genuinely autonomous body. Symbolically SEFT moved out of the BFI's offices and started its new role by reconstituting *Screen* as a magazine which would provide a focus for theoretical debates about film. It is vital, when considering the history of *Screen* in the seventies, to remember this unparalleled material and educational base which sharply differentiates *Screen* from many other contemporary radical intellectual magazines. To dispose of sufficient funds to run a proper office with a staff of three or four meant that the magazine was liberated from the constant worry of where the money or time was going to come for the next issue. This strong material base was the product of a genuine series of needs within education and the particular struggle that had been waged with the BFI.

Screen was thus ideally placed to undertake fresh work in cultural analysis. For subject-matter it had the great popular art of the twentieth century, virtually untouched by academic analysis, and for method it could draw on a whole series of arguments about culture and politics that had flourished in the twenties and early thirties but which had received little further attention until they resurfaced with fresh inflections and new emphases in France in the sixties. For the lazy and the professionally ignorant, and they are legion, such work is, unbelievably, still characterised as structuralist. The particular features of structuralist analysis, however, play only a small part in a more general movement which sought to understand cultural processes as systems of signification. The use of linguistics as a model to study these systems led to enormous gains at the level of the specificity of the analyses, but more important was the attempt to link questions of signification to questions of subjectivity. It

was around signification and subjectivity that this new work connected to Marxism. Marxism's abiding problem has always been to explain the way in which capitalist relations reproduce themselves in non-coercive ways. Throughout the seventies there were many who felt that the key to such an understanding lay in an analysis of culture which would not simply read it off as an effect of the economic base but would understand its ability to reproduce subjectivities, a reproduction finally determined by the economic relations but the mechanisms of which had to be comprehended in their own right.

In the first years, from 1971–3, *Screen's* major effort was to present and produce material that was not widely available in Britain. Material from the twenties and thirties drawn from the Russian Formalists and Benjamin was juxtaposed with recent French work from *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique*. This work drew on Christian Metz's semiology of the cinema but criticised a simple descriptive semiology from a Marxist viewpoint much influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis. It was in the context of this conjunction of semiology with Marxism and psychoanalysis that Kari Hanet, Stephen Heath and myself joined the board of the magazine in the summer of 1973. Stephen Heath and I had already collaborated for some time. In 1971, in my final year as an undergraduate at Cambridge, we had, together with Christopher Prendergast, published a small volume of essays entitled *Signs of the Times: Introductory Readings in Textual Semiotics*. The book had its origin in an article by Julia Kristeva on semiotics which Stephen Heath and Chris Prendergast had translated and which subsequently had been refused publication. I had been editing *Granta*, a student magazine, throughout the year and, carried away by enthusiasm, we suddenly found ourselves producing and printing a small book which laid out much of the current thinking of Derrida, Barthes and the *Tel Quel* group. Since that time I had started work on a thesis on Joyce's language and spent a year in Paris studying at the Ecole Normale Supérieure where I attended Althusser's and Derrida's classes. The summer of 1973 saw me back in England and the possibility of working on the cinema was immensely exciting. On the one hand Cambridge seemed an intellectual desert and, on the other, the cinema offered a peculiarly appropriate field for confronting some of the problems of the ultra-modernist positions adopted by Barthes and

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the *Tel Quel* group. If their analyses of the classic texts of French modernism, Mallarmé, Bataille, Artaud, were intellectually compelling and enabled a reading of Joyce and Pound which broke with the sterility of Leavis's restriction of modernism to Lawrence and Eliot, the political weight given to writing which disrupted the stability of meaning and identity was deeply problematic. If questions of subjectivity were placed at the centre of political inquiry, the only politically valid form of art was one which broke with any fixity of meaning to inaugurate a new decentred form of being. Such a position ignored totally the vast popular forms of film and television, reducing them to mere agencies of the reproduction of a fixed and fixated subjectivity condemned to endlessly consume the meanings and identities produced for it. This position foreclosed any encounter with or differentiation of the vast reality of popular culture, seeking salvation in a generalisation of the explosive force that modernism represented to traditional high culture. It further denied any interest in the dominant left political traditions which had valued art in general, and film in particular, in relation to canons of realism. The first two articles in this collection, and indeed all of my work for *Screen* circulated around these problems. It was the juxtaposition of Brecht and psychoanalysis, a juxtaposition largely encouraged by work on *Screen*, which provided for me some possible resolutions of these problems, linking the advances of the French theorists to a more useful political account of culture, providing a new way of thinking through the relationship between the social and the individual.

The psychoanalysis appealed to was the reading of Freud elaborated by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Lacan's theory emphasised that the unconscious was the product of the body's entry into a signifying system which was always unstable, never finished. The ego was an imaginary production forged and re-forged by the attempt to stabilise both subject and meaning, while the unconscious was the product of the fact that meaning could not be so stabilised. The advantage of Lacan over other versions of psychoanalysis was that the text, whether literary or filmic, ceased to be the representation of the author's psychic conflict but became the enactment of a series of conflicts shared by author and reader. The text was thus granted a reality but at the risk that all texts became versions of the same basic psychic

conflict. If the Oedipus complex as a series of biographical struggles within the family was replaced by the Oedipus complex as a structure which revealed the impossibility of mastering one's own meaning, the majority of texts became inevitable failures to affirm an intelligibility that they couldn't possess. All attempts at meaning became so many unworthy lures which attempted to seal the subject into an imaginary position of closure. Lacanian psychoanalysis, thus used by the *Tel Quel* group, furnished a criterion of value – insofar as the text remained open so did the subject. And it was this subject in process, never arrested within a fixed identity, which functioned as a new political model of subjectivity, the final break with a bourgeois ideology understood largely as an ideology of closure and identity.

The specificity of film was to be located in the field of vision: insofar as a film fixed the subject in a position of imaginary dominance through the security of vision then it fell immediately within bourgeois ideology, insofar as it broke that security it offered fresh possibilities. It was by drawing on psychoanalytic accounts of vision in voyeurism and fetishism that *Screen* elaborated its account and critique of the cinema. The disruption of the imaginary security of the ego by a problematising of vision was linked to Brecht's emphasis on the breaking of the identificatory processes in the theatre as the precondition for the production of political knowledge. To characterise *Screen* in the period 1974–6 in terms of Brecht and psychoanalysis is to reduce the variety and fertility of the work carried out in that period. The whole effort to understand the mechanisms of identification and representation at work in film went well beyond any simple conjunction of Brecht and psychoanalysis, and from an abundance of genuinely original work one might single out Stephen Heath's attempt to develop adequate terms for the analysis of film and Laura Mulvey's theorisation of visual pleasure from a feminist perspective. Nevertheless, all that work, as well as the first two essays here, were part of a collective effort to link formal analyses of film to political perspectives, and psychoanalysis was a crucial term in that conjunction. I have no desire to comment in detail on my own, much less others', work but the strengths and weaknesses of the psychoanalytic connection are clearer to me now than they were then.

If one is concerned to analyse art in its social and political

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context then one of the absolute necessities is to give an account of the processes of identification and disidentification, the methods by which fictions bind us into representations of both world and self. Psychoanalysis is the most developed theory of identification in the west, providing a whole array of concepts and procedures for following the mechanisms of identification. It is doubtful whether any serious contemporary analysis of social and cultural forms could ignore psychoanalytic method or insights. However, psychoanalysis finally comprehends all our complex identifications in terms of the fundamental identification of ourselves as sexed – as little boys or little girls. It is not simply that the problem with this theory of a fundamental identification is that it represents the difference between the sexes as the *necessary* basis for the recognition of further difference. One might argue against the position that there was any *necessity* in such a foundation while still admitting that sexual difference occupies a crucial place in our culture. What is really problematic is that psychoanalysis produces a theory of identity which does not allow for a genuine heterogeneity and contradiction in our diverse identifications. It does not simply make the claim that one difference is more important than all the others but articulates all further identifications in terms of a primary sexual identification.

It is now absolutely clear to me that it is on the basis of diverse and contradictory identifications that we must begin our accounts of politics and culture. It could be noticed, in passing, that the problems of diverse identifications surface within psychoanalysis in the heterogeneity of the neurotic, perverse and psychotic structures of identification co-existing within the individual. A sceptic might remark at this point that it is not identification which is being diversified but identity which is bleeding away in an unstoppable haemorrhage of difference. But the banality of endlessly finding the Many in place of the One is avoided by the concrete analysis of the processes of identification in particular fields of activity and struggle. Identity does not vanish but appears in relation to fields of practices and discourses often contradictory in both their internal and external relations. If the inevitable identities of race, class, age and sex impose (and that imposition insists daily), it is not because of some necessary features of biology or the forces of production but because of the practices and discourses which mobilise those biologies and those forces.

It is doubtful, given this perspective, whether one could produce a final theory of identity or identification; instead it will always be a question of using a variety of theories and scholarly methods in the investigation of particular unities of representation and practices, unities partly chosen in relation to divisions instituted by the academy, but, more importantly, in those vital obsessions where repetition may lead to liberating truths. In books as disparate as John Barrell's *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, Denise Riley's *War in the Nursery*, Jonathon Rosenbaum's *Moving Places*, Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan* and Edward Said's *Orientalism*, I glimpse a community of methods which takes us past the endless confrontation between the One and the Many, where the Master, in whatever mask, simply tells the same old story of fixed identity while the Legion of Difference promises the absolutely new and the absolutely different, right up to the gates of the university campus.

The acceptance of the diversity and the worldliness to which I am appealing also avoids the crippling weight of normative criticism which affects any fundamental theory of identification (Marxist or psychoanalytic) when it divides works of art in relation to criteria of identity which are automatically evaluative. In *Screen* the adopting of Lacanian forms of psychoanalytic argument had effectively reintroduced criteria of value which denigrated forms of popular cinema in favour of a certain number of politically avant-garde texts: Godard, Straub, Oshima etc. For those teachers who had looked to film theory to break out of the high art enclave, it had led firmly back there, albeit in a highly politicised version. As avant-garde positions were valorised, Hollywood was produced negatively: classic narrative Hollywood cinema was evaluated in terms of the constant placing of the spectator in a position of imaginary knowledge. This cinema was held to deprive the spectator of any perspective for social or political action except for privileged moments when vision was fleetingly disturbed by a pressure the text could not contain.

In my opinion it was this pattern of evaluation of the cinema which provided the most important area of disagreement when, in 1976, four of the board members most closely associated with secondary education chose both to resign from the magazine and to fight a campaign to gain control of the society. Unfortunately, however, the chosen battleground was psychoanalysis and in