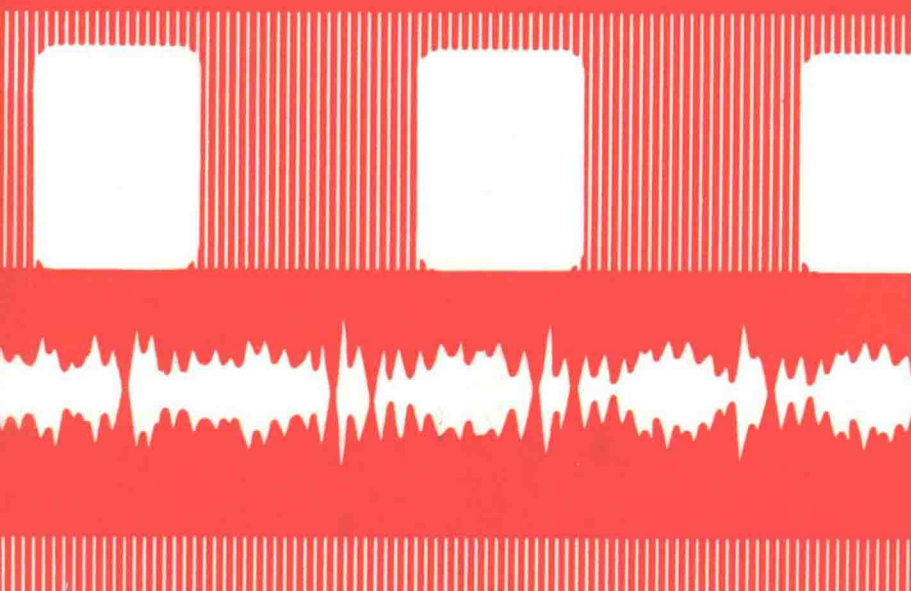


Dudley Andrew

concepts in
**FILM
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Concepts in Film Theory

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To
Brigid, Ellen, and James

Preface

Certainly in some sense this volume is a sequel to *The Major Film Theories*, for it begins in 1965, virtually where that earlier book left off. Just as Jean Mitry was seen there as the culminating figure of the classic era, so here he is situated at the outset of the modern era. Because film theory has grown so institutionalized, taken up as it has been in universities, promulgated in professional societies and at academic conferences, advanced in dissertations and in specialized journals, it seems proper to approach it through topics rather than through careers of individuals. Of course this limits my discussion to those issues that obsess our journals, conferences, and seminars. Maverick thinkers, some perhaps of lasting importance, are perforce left unheard in such a survey of recent trends. But I do not apologize for this, since more than mere convenience has urged this strategy. It is my belief, argued throughout this text in its method as well as in its propositions, that film theory exists as a discourse among theorists and with films. Hence I have gone straight to the noisiest corners of that discourse and have sought to make sense of the yelling and the whispers overheard there.

Are the topic headings sufficient to circumscribe this babble of modern theory? They are meant to be, and the reader is challenged to locate significant omissions along the way. Within the discussion of each topic, however, no pretense to completeness can be claimed. I present the arguments that most disturb or inspire me, and whenever useful, adduce enough background to situate a given film problem within its proper intellectual tradition.

All this is properly antecedent to the book's barely submerged and chief concern: to express, through a dialogue with the theories of the day, my own views on each particular concept and, more ambitious still, my own sense of the interdependence of these concepts. No doubt my predilections are readily discernable to the critical reader of *The Major Film Theories*, but there I struggled to let the figures I selected betray their insights and conundrums on their own. The present volume, for several reasons, is different. First, no names in today's theory are printed quite so luminously as to compel deference to their ideas, for this is genuinely an age of schools of thought more than of lone geniuses. Second, history has yet to sanctify or excuse the discourse of our era and everyone can feel freer with it than with the canonized systems of the past, no matter how far we may think to have outstripped them. Third, my own thoughts about film have matured exactly during the era this book chronicles. This is the theory generated in the institutions which have supported me, and I am happy as well as obligated to take a forthright stance within it. Nor is it treacherous to conclude, as I will, that the era of pure theory is over and that the task before us consists in confronting film concepts not with logic or with paradigms derived from other fields, but with exemplary films and sequences of films. To claim, as I also will, that theory must be led in some respects by criticism, history, and analysis, is an important *theoretical* claim. In a current volume I try to make good on that claim (*Film in the Aura of Art*, Princeton University Press, 1984).

Obviously the honesty as well as utility of this book is imperiled by a number of factors: an admittedly incomplete survey of the available positions, the tendentious way this survey conforms to my view, and the absence in this text of the kind of film analysis called for by the argument. Enter the Classified Bibliography. Great care has been taken to select enough citations relevant to each chapter to permit the responsible enthusiast to pursue the arguments initiated in this text far beyond the limited and parochial attention they receive in a book of this size.

While many items in the Bibliography may challenge my position, I look upon the Bibliography *in toto* as an ally. For I will be satisfied when any reader, stimulated by the arguments presented here, or by my personal assessment of those arguments, or even by the enticing titles in the Bibliography, recognizes that the concepts isolated in this book are anything but isolated, and can begin to see them as part of

the history of ideas, as part of contemporary intellectual life, as part of an overarching view I am indirectly tracing, or, most important, as part of the questioning of the medium that goes on within the work of films themselves. I will be satisfied, I say, because the discourse initiated in such recognitions is one with the discourse of this book. It is in fact the very discourse we label "Film Theory."

Iowa City
May 1983

D. A.

Acknowledgments

Film theory, I begin by saying, is now an institutional endeavor. Let me then thank the University of Iowa for the time it has given me through its Faculty Scholar program and the National Endowment for the Humanities for its summer support. In fact, this series of essays took shape during the NEH Summer Seminar I offered in 1977. To its dozen clever and enthusiastic participants as well as to my assistant in that seminar Mary Ann Doane I owe the impulse to have my say in matters of contemporary film theory. Mary Ann contributed further with comments on particular chapters, as did Dennis Giles and Jacques Aumont. Ana Lopez with the aid of Dana Benelli, Andréa Staskowski, Robert Arnold, and Daryl Iogha, organized the Bibliography. To all these I am indebted but to none more than Pamela Falkenberg, the closest and most generous reader I have had. While subscribing to few of my ideas, she brought me to test and then to express them as forcefully as possible. In a way her sympathetic intelligence exemplifies the premise of my methodology, that film theory fulfills its mission not when transcendental logic or external system steps in to make sense of the flux of film life, but when the encounters we have with films and ideas urge us to adjust ourselves so that we can fully hear them, truly understand what they might have to say, and in understanding them, understand ourselves and what we might be.

In this spirit I am brimming to acknowledge the deepest debt Stephanie and I have to our children who must be bewildered to see themselves

mentioned in the context of a book which interests them, if at all, only as a subject to ridicule at the dinner table. But insofar as I have learned the give and take of the hermeneutic enterprise I advocate in these pages, it is from them, or rather with them in their growing, in our growing together, that I have learned it.

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Concepts in Film Theory

The State of Film Theory

FILM THEORY AND THE ACADEMY

In *The Major Film Theories* I gave attention to several powerful individual thinkers who constructed complete views of the cinema. In writing now about contemporary theory, I find it far more useful and honest to treat key concepts rather than key personalities and to build an overall view of film based on positions taken in relation to those concepts, specifically to perception, representation, signification, narrative structure, adaptation, evaluation, identification, figuration, and interpretation. Why have these issues come to dominate our era in film theory? More important, why has a method based on such reflective concepts dominated other, more direct approaches to film?

In this introduction I want to argue for the propriety of these concepts and, more generally, for the propriety of a kind of enterprise that ceaselessly discusses, modifies, and rewrites theory in relation to such concepts. Modern theory approaches nothing directly, neither the audience through questionnaires and neuro-physiological experiments, nor the films through minute formal analyses and experiments. Such audience studies and formal experiments which do go on in mainstream film theory are invariably guided by the current general discourse, that is, by reflective concepts. For this is the state of film theory as it has come to be, an accumulation of concepts, or, rather, of ideas and attitudes clustered around concepts. Film theory is, in short, a verbal representation of the film complex.

How have we gotten into this state of affairs where direct approaches to the field are unfeasible, where theory aims at explanation or "picturing" rather than at "prediction" and "verification" as it does in the sciences and social sciences? How is it that even within the current paradigm of theory as reflective explanation, we can no longer expect a single thinker to take full command of the field by reorienting our view of it as Aristotle did in drama centuries ago or Kenneth Burke did in rhetoric decades ago?

To clarify the state of film theory we ought first to interrogate the terms we use to describe the study of anything. Too much of our vocabulary relating to research derives from the "allegory of the quest." We say that we engage in the "pursuit" of learning, that we "conquer" a field or hope for the "domination" of the known by the knower. I would like to substitute for these heroic and aggressive terms others of my own: "discourse," "representation," "adequation," in which a theory sets us reasonably before a picture of our field so that we see it in a comprehensive and fruitful way.

Perhaps even the term "field" has duped our expectations. Fields of research do not lie open for parceling out, homesteading, or development in the way the metaphor wants to suggest. They are social constructions, the first act of research, not eternal caches of riches passively awaiting the scholar's pick and axe. We may think that the heavens comprise a clearly delineated field, marked off by the earth's horizons and the power of our telescopes; nevertheless, there exist at least two subjects, astrology and astronomy, which have been established by societies in relation to this "same" field of stars.

What kind of social construction is the field of film? What is the potential workplace film theorists have hoped to inhabit? This essentially sociological question can be addressed by a sociological index: What has academia done with film? When and where has film been admitted as a subject of serious and progressive study?

No doubt a detailed history of the field would trace a complicated root system for film; still I think we can posit with justness that film attained some respectability in the early 1960's in American universities and this was primarily due to the enthusiasm of members of humanities departments. Alternative locations for film study, options which were occasionally exercised, would include the social sciences (especially communication research and sociology) and the fine arts.

It was no doubt inevitable for film to land in the humanities during

this epoch. The social sciences were growing so rapidly that they had little time or energy to do anything exceptional with regard to cinema. Certainly some data were collected and hypotheses advanced, but such study was normally carried out alongside the analysis of other expressions of mass culture. No systematic or consistently thorough examination of film could be initiated in a discipline which had much bigger game to stalk.

For their part, the fine arts in our era have been dominated by interests in the production of art. Consequently, those film departments lodged within the fine arts have emphasized production. Not only has this been at the expense of theory (though theory is almost always represented in such departments) but the literal expense of film production has stunted the potential spread of this conception of the field. Not many schools have been able to afford to place film within the fine arts.

The humanities, on the other hand, were primed to profit from the rising interest in the study of film. As the largest academic division within American universities, not only were there excesses of students eternally seeking new (and "relevant") courses, but excesses of faculty eager to teach them. Since the humanities were not experiencing anything like the growth pattern of the social sciences, their faculty were trying to achieve distinction in a crowded arena. The development of film as an extension of this arena gave many English, philosophy, theater, and language professors opportunities to find a new audience to teach, new journals to publish in, and renewed enthusiasm for their professions. When academic requirements in the humanities began to loosen up and even disappear in the late 1960's, film studies became a way to uphold enrollment for many departments, primarily language departments.

Of course the development of a field does not depend exclusively on the economics of higher education. It is also closely tied to the current movements of culture that interest the intelligentsia. Here again humanities professors were in a privileged position for they were connected to a native tradition of semi-academic writing on film and to a flow of ideas from Europe which began with ever greater frequency to take the cinema seriously. Actually these two lines of inheritance may serve to divide the types of humanities scholars who sought to involve themselves in film study. One group, a dominant and conservative one, readily formalized the prolific but haphazard cultural consideration of cinema which had always gone on outside academia (in the film re-

views of reputable journals and newspapers, in essays by cultural critics, at film festivals, and in the then few existing film magazines like *Sight and Sound* and *Film Quarterly*). The English teachers who took their cues from this tradition generally developed courses in adaptation, in film as drama, or in the analysis of serious auteurs like Bergman and Fellini. Such courses undoubtedly added to the prestige of film study and gave it a large undergraduate base, but they were not otherwise terribly useful to the progress of film theory.

Humanities divisions, moreover, are also notorious hiding places for radical cultural critics, some of whom saw in film study an opportunity to help shift the ground of the whole realm of humanities. These were the scholars who received their strength in part from European models made available to them at conferences and in scholarly journals. Because of their training, humanities professors are equipped to learn from foreign language texts. Popular essays by Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Eco and the extension of their insights by continental cultural critics had the effect of giving shape to a rebellious American sub-profession and of turning that rebellion onto new objects of culture. Film was a major recipient of this attention throughout Europe, a logical focus for the energetic disciplines of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and ideological analysis. Many American radical scholars eagerly turned to film as an open set of texts where new theories appeared even newer, and where there were as yet no traditional ways of dealing with the subject. Film study became a regular offering in many comparative literature departments, for instance, and was an integral part of radical journals such as *Diacritics* and *New Literary History* born at the end of the 1960's and of *Enclitic* and *Sub-stance* coming out of the 1970's. This subversive induction of film into academia aroused great hostility among traditional humanities scholars and drew fire as well from both film buffs and critics. All felt that cinema was being "used" for questionable purposes by people who knew little about it. The jargon associated with continental criticism was deemed most inappropriate for a fresh art like the cinema. While such complaints were to a varying degree justified, the discipline of film theory made great strides in this atmosphere.

Such advances would have been unthinkable were film a part of the social sciences, for in this country professionals in communication study, sociology, and so forth have exhibited comparatively little interest in the scholarship coming from other countries. Nor have historians and critics of the fine arts been particularly cordial to radical continental