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Even today there are people who think these harmless little books are dangerous: An interview with David Bordwell

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Following the conversation with Richard Dyer featured in the Spring 2016 issue of NECSUS, we continue our series of interviews with key figures in the field of media studies. This time we turn to David Bordwell, one of the most prolific scholars in film studies, but also a controversial figure who was involved in a number of debates about the methods and directions of film and media studies, most notably in the anthology *Post-Theory* (co-edited with Noël Carroll, 1996). These debates remain relevant for our current situation in which different approaches often co-exist in mutual ignorance rather than any sort of resolved relation.

After a distinguished career at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Bordwell remains active as a scholar, as a public speaker, and as a visitor at film festivals. With his partner Kristin Thompson he has not only written three important books – *Film Art: An Introduction* (1979; 10th edition 2010), probably the most widely used introductory film studies book; *Film History: An Introduction*; and *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production until 1960* (with Janet Staiger, 1985) – but he also maintains the blog Observations on Film Art (<http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/>), which includes reports from his ongoing research, discoveries at film festivals, and discussions of current issues in film culture. I engaged him in an email dia-

logue about his career, the ‘paradigm wars’, and the current situation in which film culture is being reconfigured.

Part I: Getting started

Hagener: What films, books, and events led you towards film (studies)? Was there any decisive experience that you can now connect in biographical retrospection as an early vocation?

Bordwell: I became interested in cinema by reading books about it, when I was 14-15 years old. At that point, around 1961-1962, there were very few books on the subject, and most of them were histories. I read Arthur Knight’s *The Liveliest Art*, Paul Rotha’s *The Film Till Now*, Raymond Spottiswoode’s *Grammar of the Film*, Rudolf Arnheim’s *Film as Art*, and a few others. I began reading film criticism, chiefly James Agee’s *Agee on Film*, Dwight Macdonald’s columns in *Esquire*, and Parker Tyler’s *Classics of the Foreign Film*. A little later I began reading *Film Quarterly*, *Movie*, and *Film Culture*, when I could find issues. I also tried making my own 8mm films. I didn’t see that many films because I grew up on a farm. Most of the films I saw I watched on television, and I tried to see the things that were featured in the books. I also watched a lot of old Hollywood movies broadcast on local TV. By the time I was 16 and could drive a car, I started seeing foreign films that played nearby cities. So I saw *8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963), *That Man From Rio* (Philippe de Broca, 1964), and a few others. The films that I was most interested in were those by Orson Welles.

Hagener: You started studying at university at a time when film as a subject did not yet exist. You were an English major at SUNY Albany with the aim of becoming a high school teacher. Was film always your main interest or did it just gradually shift into that?

Bordwell: I did not expect to make film a career. I was chiefly interested in literature and teaching it in high school. But film was my other main interest, and when I went to college I re-started the campus film club. We programmed films we wanted to see. That was the main way I caught up with classic and contemporary cinema. We showed silent films from the Museum of Modern Art circulating collection, and on weekends we showed Hollywood classics and recent foreign films. So I got to see films by Akira Kurosawa, François Truffaut, Robert Bresson, Jean-Luc Godard, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, and others in 16mm. After trying high

school teaching I decided to refocus on film. I was still reading about it a lot. If there was one event that convinced me that I should go into film it was seeing Kenji Mizoguchi's *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954) at the Bleecker Street Cinema in the autumn of 1965. I came out of it deeply moved and thought that I would like to know more about this film and about film in general. So I applied to graduate school at the University of Iowa and at New York University. Iowa accepted me, so I went there. I was lucky because Iowa was emerging as an excellent program.

Hagener: Were you under the influence of the European new waves of the 1960s which made their way onto US campuses in the course of the 1960s, or was it rather the New American Cinema (your generation) that influenced you most?

Bordwell: I was more influenced by the foreign imports – Truffaut, Godard, Resnais, Fellini, Antonioni, Bergman, Kurosawa, Wajda, Leone – and classic Hollywood, particularly Hitchcock, Welles, and Ford. My first article published in a national journal was on *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946), when I was still an undergrad. I didn't care much for most US cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, except for Richard Lester and Robert Altman. I still don't think much of the Movie Brat cinema. During the 1970s I was mostly focused on discovering the riches of American and Japanese cinema. Carl Theodor Dreyer was very important for me because he had such a long career and he led me to study silent films of Scandinavia, France, and Germany, as well as European cinema of the sound era.

Hagener: You did your Master's and your PhD in Iowa with Dudley Andrew, in the early and mid-1970s, arguably the origin of film studies in the United States. Many of the founding figures of the study of film were around at that time (Mary-Ann Doane, Jane Feuer, Patrice Petro, Phil Rosen). Did it feel like a pioneering era living through it?

Bordwell: Yes, Dudley was my advisor and taught me a great deal. Although I had read the first volume of *What Is Cinema?*, Dudley showed me how to analyze Bazin's theoretical arguments. He also used slides to illustrate his lectures, a tactic I thought was essential for studying the things I cared about. The people you mention were a bit younger than me, and they came to Iowa after I left – except for Phil Rosen, who was there for a year or two when I was. I learned an enormous amount from Phil, who remains a good friend. I got to know the others you mention after I came to Wisconsin in the summer of 1973. Kristin [Thompson] was there at the same time I was, doing her MA while I did my PhD. Of my other Iowa contemporaries

there was Don Fredericksen, Tim Lyons, and Linda Provenzano. Don and Tim got academic jobs, but concentrated more on teaching and administration than on research. Linda became a film bibliographer. Another compadre was Mike Budd, a wonderful guy who wrote on the Western and did a book on *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919). Yet another friend, with whom Kristin and I stay in touch, was Mark Johnson, who went to Hollywood and became a top producer who made films such as *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson, 1988), *A Little Princess* (Alfonso Cuarón, 1995), *Galaxy Quest* (Dean Parisot, 1999), and, more recently, *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013). I don't think I felt like a pioneer. I was just trying to figure out some questions that interested me about film, and to see as much as I could! But it was an exciting time, because there was so little film research that almost anything you tried to do was original. And we graduate students taught each other a lot.

Part II: Interests and developments

Hagener: You wrote your PhD on French Impressionist film of the 1920s. It appears an unlikely choice because it seems to be a step away from your key concerns. How did you come to the topic, or how did the topic come to you? Was that partly due to Dudley's influence?

Bordwell: I was at that point thinking of writing a book on Carl-Theodor Dreyer, and I did a little book on *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). You may not know about (it was part of a series on individual films called Filmguides). I thought I wanted to know more about the context of the film for my Dreyer book, and since I read French (but not Danish) doing something on French Impressionism would allow me to understand what Dreyer was up to. I don't see it as too apart from my concerns, because it was focused partly on stylistic conventions among a group of filmmakers. The problems, though, were many: I hadn't yet developed a comparative methodology (based on the historical centrality of Hollywood style); I didn't have a robust theory of style, or of narrative; and I couldn't go back and re-see the films in the process of writing (they were very hard to see in those days, and of course many still are). The resulting dissertation was useful for me, and some people have claimed to like it, but by today's standards it's pretty minor.

Hagener: When both *Narration in the Fiction Film* and *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (co-written with Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson) came out in 1985 was it obvious to you that both would be epoch-making works? Or does something like that only become obvious in retrospect?

Bordwell: No, I really didn't think that the books would be well-received or influential. I expected that they would be widely disliked because: (a) they weren't about ideology; (b) they weren't psychoanalytical (in fact, *Narration in the Fiction Film* was anti-psychoanalysis to some extent); and (c) they were very fussily academic, making distinctions that most people at the time didn't care about. You have to remember the climate of the 1980s, where psychoanalysis, feminism, and neo-Marxism were the dominant ways of thinking about film. Even today there are people who think these harmless little books are dangerous.

Hagener: In *Narration in the Fiction Film* you state that your approach does 'not have much to say about affect' (p. 39), which has always struck me as a bit strange. *Narration* can be understood without feelings – was that meant as a provocation? Would you still hold to that view, also in light of advances in the neurosciences?

Bordwell: Yes, it was something of a provocation. I tried to separate, we might say, the expressive dimension of narrative from its representational dimension. I think that this is partly right – you can comprehend something as a flashback whether or not you feel suspense or empathy or whatever – but the formulation is too strong, as you suggest. I would now say that a good deal of *Narration in the Fiction Film* is tracking 'cognitive emotions' like curiosity, suspense, surprise, and that global and diffuse affect Ed Tan labels 'interest'. As for the neurosciences, I can't say since that literature is very technical.

Hagener: Change and continuity, schemata, cues and hypotheses are key terms you have employed. Would you say that your project (the Wisconsin project, as it has sometimes been called) has been historical at heart, with cognitivism (theory) and neoformalism (aesthetics) as afterthoughts? How would you describe the relationship between the three elements?

Bordwell: Your question is interesting, because I'd say I'm primarily a film analyst who tries to explain the way films are made through historical and psychological frames of reference. I try to give functional and causal explanations of narrative and stylistic features. I think some notion of aesthetics is at the heart of it, but I always try to make it a historical aesthetics.

Hagener: You said in an interview that you have one foot in the old and one foot in the new. What do you mean by that?

Bordwell: I don't remember the context, but I think it applies to the fact that my sense of cinema as an art is part of the 'great tradition': silent film aesthetics, Eisenstein, Bazin, etc. A poetics of cinema seems to me to have a lot in common with traditional film-as-art concerns, and certainly the tools I'd use to analyze films owe a lot to that tradition. On the other side, I think that drawing on cognitive science to some extent, along with poetics like the Formalists (still very misunderstood, I think) and Gombrich, gives me some purchase on more advanced intellectual work.

Hagener: As a follow-up: what role do categories such as national cinema, auteur, and genre still hold for you? It seems to be that at least auteur (Eisenstein, Ozu, Dreyer) and national cinema (Hongkong) are still valid categories to work with for you.

Bordwell: Yes, I really employ these categories at many levels. Aesthete as I am, I'm attracted to artists who are strikingly individual, so my auteurs tend to be very original. But since I think that every artist works with or against supra-individual norms, I've always tried to locate the individual in relation to other creators. That sometimes involves considering schools, generations, and national cinemas. So, for instance, it's fascinating to consider Eisenstein in relation to other montage directors, or Ozu in relation to Japanese filmmakers of his time. When I focus on an individual filmmaker I tend to bring in those categories to get a stronger sense of what the individual is doing. But as you say, sometimes I think that a national cinema has created an interesting set of collective norms, as with Hong Kong film. I try to balance a fascination with the norms and conventions with a sense of the contribution of individuals (King Hu, Wong Kar-wai, Johnnie To). My most recent book, a manuscript I'm just finishing, is a study of narrative innovation in 1940s Hollywood. In this project individual directors are seen as contributing to trends. Some – like Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Preston Sturges, etc. – are very distinctive, but they draw their strength partly from what their peers were doing at the time. One thing that I now notice is that all the things I do demand bulk viewing – a need to see many films, even if we're looking initially at only one creator. This tendency does go back to my dissertation, which can be considered a crude version of what a 'school' or 'movement' stylistics might be. Good thing I like to watch films – and that since I started, it's a lot easier to see films and study them!

Part III: The dominance of the classical and the ‘paradigm wars’

Hagener: The classical mode, as described in your work, means different things in a number of fields – it is a way of telling a story, it is an aesthetic style (*‘découpage classique’*), it is also a historical period and an organisational mode of production. But in a way, the term classical also describes your style of research and writing. What weight does the classical carry for you? Are you happy when you are described as a ‘classicist’?

Bordwell: Several of your questions can most economically be answered if I explain how I conceive of research. I think of it as an effort to ask specific questions – not to apply a doctrine or to consider a ‘topic’. Once we have well-formulated questions we can develop conceptual tools for answering them, and we can argue for the best candidate answers. Also, having well-formulated questions allows us to be clear about what we *aren’t* trying to do. A great many alternative questions can be posed about the same phenomena, and they don’t necessarily have to be in rivalry. So, for instance, when we worked on ‘classical cinema’, I think we were starting from an intuition that a certain way of making (and distributing and marketing) films had achieved historical saliency. The question is, whatever we call it: how may we describe this tradition and explain this tradition causally and functionally?

The term ‘classical’ was inherited from French observers and a few English writers (chiefly around *Screen*). Nothing much hung on the term itself, except that it conveniently captured qualities of efficiency and stability that could be assigned to that tradition. It’s just shorthand, in a way. What’s important is that tradition has a set of more or less stable features, such as styles of editing that can also, as shorthand, be called classical. And that tradition rests upon a mode of film production as well. Again, as a *façon de parler*, it can be called classical.

The term means almost nothing, but the way it’s ‘cashed in’ – the way we specify the narrative conventions, the stylistic habits, the typical mode of production – is what’s important. We ought not to reify research findings into something called ‘classicism’ (or whatever). The interesting stuff is the actual arguments about form, style, and mode of production. It could be called X. The important thing is what questions we pose and try to answer about it. I really don’t think of myself as a classicist, but then I don’t know what that would mean in film studies. That I’m not a postmodernist? I just

don't understand. But then there are a lot of things said in film studies that I don't understand.

Hagener: In *Narration in the Fiction Film* you argue for the existence of four different narrational modes: classical, art cinema, historical-materialist, and parametric. You have repeatedly (in 'Intensified Continuity' and other essays) argued for a continuing predominance of the classical and against the need for a new term, be it postmodern, postclassical, or something else. Would you still stick to those four paradigms as the most important modes? And what is at stake in this debate?

Bordwell: Yes, I would still find these as useful ways to think about narrational options. But they shouldn't be reified. Asking other questions would yield other categories. Often, I find, I'm doing something akin to art historians who try to come up with terms for trends, schools, movements, and the like. The main point I would change is the assumption that somehow the four are conceptually and historically independent. I think that the historical influence of classical narration has made it a kind of 'basic' narrational mode which the others selectively revise/reject.

Hagener: From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s you participated in a number of (polemical) controversies, partly sparked by others, partly initiated by your own attacks, possibly peaking in the discussions surrounding the anthology *Post-Theory*. Looking back at this period, would you see these events as necessary moments of clarification?

Bordwell: I don't know if my critiques of other positions have led to clarification for others, but they have for me. Apart from forcing me to clarify and explain my views, these polemics showed me surprising things about the positions I criticized and their advocates. For one thing, I was surprised at how unwilling those advocates were to examine their basic conceptual commitments and the philosophical history behind them. They seemed not to know, for instance, that there's a long debate about 'the subject' in the history of philosophy; many seemed to think that 'subjects' were individuals or people. Many seemed to have read too selectively in Freud and Lacan. I tried to read as much as possible, and in doing so I found that many things ascribed to these thinkers by people in film studies were mistaken or insufficiently nuanced (see, for instance, my arguments in *Post-Theory*). I was also surprised at people's reliance on equivocation, misleading rhetoric, free association in place of argument, and a blanket appeal to authority. And I was surprised at how quickly people discarded positions that they'd once held passionately, such as the shift from semiotics to psychoa-

nalysis to cultural studies. And so many of these researchers simply switched without explaining the evolution of their thinking. In all, I guess what got clarified for me was the fact that film studies wasn't yet a mature discipline.

Hagener: Asked the other way around, is the peaceful coexistence of analytical philosophy, Marxist-influenced cultural studies, Deleuzian neuro-aesthetics, psychoanalytical theory, actor-network theory today (and the list of the promiscuous offerings goes on) a good thing or are we missing a sense of the categorical differences and ontological distinctions? What can we learn today when looking back at the intense debates of the 1970s and 1980s?

Bordwell: I would just reiterate that doctrines matter less than the questions we ask, and that any of these doctrines are useful insofar as they help answer precisely-formed questions. Usually those questions aren't posed explicitly, or precisely, and very seldom are alternative answers considered. I think that what we can learn from the debates (maybe not so intense) of the 1970s and 1980s is that research depends on questions.

Hagener: When discussing approaches close to the Frankfurt School and critical theory, I remember that you once said to me, jokingly, 'I never had a dialectical thought in my life.' Would that maybe sum up your approach, that film studies should rather tackle manageable and definable tasks of history and analysis (what you have termed 'mid-level research') instead of approaching big questions such as the general role of media in the modern world?

Bordwell: When I said that, I think I was saying that dialectical thinking in the Hegelian sense doesn't come naturally to me. In matters of art, I'm a methodological individualist. I think that the questions that interest me ask me to start with the concreteness of the artwork, the circumstances of its making, and the institutional and medium-particular norms, constraints, and opportunities pertinent to it. I think that if we do tackle middle-level questions and offer robust candidates for functional and causal explanations of phenomena we pick out, we have a chance at generalising out from them to bigger statements. We build the ground we climb on.

Part IV: Future developments

Hagener: You have made one video essay on constructive editing which was well received and has been viewed more than 35,000 times (<https://vimeo.com/52312154>), as well as some shorter pieces only accessible to readers of *Film Art: An Introduction*. Which were the main challenges in this production process?

Bordwell: The production of the video essay was pretty easy. I worked with our technical expert at the UW Department of Communication Arts, Erik Gunneson, and he did all the cutting, sound work, titles, etc. The only real task was getting Criterion's permission to use the *Pickpocket* (Robert Bresson, 1959) extract. Fortunately, it was so short that they didn't object to putting it online. The *Film Art* pieces were conceived as extensions of the book. Criterion would permit them only if US users of the book could access them. This is because they don't hold international rights for the titles, only North American ones, so rights-holders in other countries would object if the clips were available globally.

Hagener: Why have you not made any video essays since then (in 2012)?

Bordwell: I really conceive my 'video lectures' – the voiced PowerPoints available on my Vimeo channel – as my efforts to enter this world. I'm not sure that even the constructive editing piece is really a video essay; it seems more like an illustrated lecture. The main obstacle to doing more of any video presentation is time! But for a new project for 2017, I'm considering doing three short video lectures, maybe without the PowerPoint format. Those would be on the period 1908-1920.

Hagener: You are a regular blogger. How do you consider the role of blogging in relation to your other commitments and activities?

Bordwell: The blog was born as another supplement to *Film Art*, but it soon outgrew that and became more of a free-standing web thing. It has now been continuing for ten years, with over 720 entries! In retrospect, I think it was a substitute for my classroom lecturing. After I retired, the blog has been a good outlet for my ideas, and it permits a lot of freedom. I can write about recent films, old films, and other things (e.g., recently, *Archie* comics). We can also draw upon the expertise of colleagues and give them a forum for their work. Our guest blogs have been popular for the most part. In general, I'm a compulsive writer and enjoy the problems of planning and composing a text. The ability to embed stills and clips is very attractive to me. In a way, writing the blog is more fun than writing an

article or book chapter. And now I find that for a book I can sort of ‘offload’ bits that don’t fit into a blog, for example my recent entries on *The Chase* (Arthur Ripley, 1946).[1] They would be disproportionate in my current 1940s book, but in that manuscript I can mention the film briefly and then footnote the blog if the reader wants more. Over the last couple of years, there has been some talk of ‘the death of blogging’. Clearly Twitter, Instagram, and other applications have replaced what blogs did early on, but we’re committed to keeping the blog going. It still gets a reasonable audience – between 900,000 and 1.2 million hits per year – and we think that we have a core audience of 30,000-40,000 readers who follow us regularly. It has been hard to keep blogging while writing a long book, but I hope that shorter projects in the future will allow us to keep going for some years.

It might be worth adding that the blog has led to another activity very recently. The American cable channel TCM is launching a streaming service in conjunction with Criterion called FilmStruck. It went live yesterday.[2]

<http://www.filmstruck.com>

It’s available only in the US, for obvious rights reasons. At first, only certain devices can tap into it: computers, laptops, iPads, Kindle Fires, and Apple TV. Soon, Chromecast and Roku (maybe the most popular set-top box for streaming) will be added to the gadgets that can pick it up.

<http://www.filmstruck.com/devices>

The Criterion side will offer a library of hundreds of titles, along with all manner of extras: bonuses from the DVDs, out-of-print extras from the laserdisc days, voiceover commentary, and new material of many types – e.g. interviews with filmmakers, creative work by young directors, critics’ commentary, etc. The cost is very reasonable. For the Criterion side Kristin, Jeff Smith, and I have recorded a ‘series’ of once-a-month presentations (7-12 minutes) focused on appreciating style and form in a single film. It will be called ‘Observations on Film Art’ and will be sort of a live version of the blog, with indicia for *Film Art*. They’ve already shot 6 episodes: an introduction; Jeff Smith on music in *Foreign Correspondent* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940) and on camera movement in *Three Colors: Red* (Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1994); me on editing in *Sanshiro Sugata* (Akira Kurosawa, 1943) and on staging and

performance in *L'Avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960); and Kristin on Kiarostami's narrative strategies. This is, we think, an interesting experiment in getting our ideas about film artistry to a broader audience. It fits into our general rationale for going on the web back in 2006: trying to present our thinking to a wider audience than academics, and in a way that's pleasant and user-friendly. And without the publishing delays of books and journals!

Hagener: What are your current and future projects?

Bordwell: I have just finished a longish book on narrative innovation in Hollywood film of the 1940s. That should be published next fall. Kristin and I will go on to revise our book *Film History: An Introduction*. I have ideas for other books, a short one on Late Godard and a couple of others. Kristin and I are also planning to continue our blog.

Hagener: If you had to pick five films to take with you on a lonely island, which films would they be?

Bordwell: *Early Summer* (Yasushiro Ozu, 1951), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944), *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (Jacques Demy, 1967), *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), and *Playtime* (Jacques Tati, 1967). These aren't necessarily the best or most important in my view, but given the circumstances you indicate I'd need cheering up.

Notes

[1] <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2016/08/28/in-pursuit-of-the-chase/> and <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2016/11/01/back-on-the-trail-of-the-chase/> (3 November 2016)

[2] 1 November 2016.