

John Hill und Martin McCloone (Hg.): Big Picture – Small Screen. The Relations between Film and Television

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Big Picture, Small Screen examines the nature of the relationship between television and cinema. It approaches this task from five different perspectives: historical, aesthetic, economic, technological and cultural address. There are 18 essays written by academics and media-professionals, and in so far as it predominantly discusses British and American television, it is mostly successful in achieving its aims.

Its first accomplishment is to dispel the myth that film and television are antithetical to one another, that from the moment the two technologies were available simultaneously, the Hollywood studios and TV networks have been in direct competition with one another.

It is so easy to forget that the applications of film and television technology that we take for granted today have not always been mutually exclusive, and that the interaction between them has always been fluid, with perhaps the V.H.S cassette

being the intermediary today. Peter Kramer's detailed but interesting history of the relationship between film and television, starting from the inventions and licensing of the original technologies by the likes of Edison in the 1890's, makes it very clear that the idea of television being a domestic medium and film being a theatrical, public medium only came about after a long period of experimentation: unsuccessful attempts were made by Edison to sell 'motion picture' hardware for domestic consumption and in the late 1920's (and again later in the early 1950's) the public were invited to view televisual spectacle relayed instantaneously into theaters, with emphasis on the live aspect distinguishing it from projections of pre-recorded movies.

In the 1930's, Hollywood, the communications industry (RCA, AT&T) and the broadcasting sector (the radio-networks NBC and CBS) all co-existed symbiotically. Radio needed Hollywood product in the shape of its stars, Hollywood needed the promotional capacity of a nationwide radio network and the manufacturers wanted people to buy the receiving apparatus. Once TV technology had improved to the point where it too could be broadcast, Hollywood intended to extend its influence into television, to grab part of the lucrative advertising action, but was prevented from owning its own TV networks by the Federal Communications Commission. However, the TV stations still needed product in the form of old movies and as the demand increased and the emphasis on live broadcasts decreased, the remains of the once glorious studio system used its production over-capacity to give the networks what it needed, filmed drama: TV series and TV-movies, often indistinguishable from cinema B-movies.

Essays by such eminent critics as Charles Barr and John Ellis attempt to tease out the fundamental differences in the aesthetics between film and television. The general consensus is that the live potential, the immediacy of TV is unique, that a live broadcast can touch the nation simultaneously or a live 'play' can impart some of the danger of a theatrical performance but the language of pre-recorded television drama, whether it be shot on video or film, has converged with cinematic grammar.

Ellis says, „in television, speculation takes the place of the anticipatory narrative structure „ (p 111). Martin McCloone debates whether the audience experiences television as a continuous flow although individual programs/films endeavour to differentiate themselves from similar product. There isn't enough discussion about the fundamental nature of what is probably the most influential contemporary medium. How is television's reception by its audience (no pun intended) different from that of film? Do people construct their reality differently in the face of television's constant/repetitive/rhythmic nature. The editors see the different psychological/ideological effects of television and film to be beyond the remit of their book.

The rest of the book concentrates on the economic and artistic/technical inter-dependence of the film and television industries. Particular praise is given to the

work of Channel 4 (Film on Four) and the BBC in keeping the British Film Industry alive by developing, financing or co-financing various film projects. The people in charge of these vital activities, Mark Shivas, Head of Films at the BBC, David Aukin, Head of Drama at Channel 4 and Michael Grade, ex-Chief Executive of Channel 4 are given the opportunity to express their opinions on the TV/film dynamic, and the work of Steven Frears (*My Beautiful Launderette* 1985, *Dangerous Liaisons* 1988) and producer Verity Lambert (*Widows* 1983, *A Cry in the Dark* 1988) is discussed in detail. Most see the convergence of the film and television industries as inevitable, but positive, in the context of developing local markets of indigenous material, with a wider appeal, to fill the niches left by the Hollywood blockbusters. However, John Caughie, who worries that the convergence is „pragmatic rather than principled“ (p.222), that by concentrating on the internationally acclaimed British art house cinema commonly associated with Channel 4, our national cinema or television generates easily recognized representations of the nation, without being representative of the nation.

There are sections on the different regions in the UK and Eire. Most articulate the same complaint that they are neglected: starved of attention and cash by the main television companies, under-funded by state bodies like the Irish Film Board or the Scottish Film Production Fund (if similar bodies exist at all), discouraged by the lack of tax incentives which exist in other countries, and so unable to nurture new talent or develop an identifiable film culture. Any local community trying to carve out its own identity in the film markets can empathize with these frustrated cries for assistance.

Finally, there is a well-informed article by Dan Fleming on the developing new television technologies, High Definition Television, Digital Television, Digital VHS, Video CDs etc. , and their likely impact on us if we decide to accept them into our homes.

Although cinema audiences in general have been steadily declining for 50 years (the reverse has been true in the UK in the last 10 years) the demand for films has been growing. It is only the site of reception which has changed. The majority of people no longer go to the cinema but consume their films at home. Most of the new technology improves on the home delivery systems so giving greater choice. The television and film industries are growing ever closer, although as this book explains, the relationship between the two has always been close and complex.

Big Picture, Small Screen acknowledges and illuminates the economic interdependence of the two media and appraises the current status between them in a well-grounded and surprisingly unacademic way. It is useful to any media student or non-professional who wants to be informed of the current status of the two media in the UK/Eire. Unfortunately, there is limited exploration of the fundamental differences between them.

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