media/rep/

Repositorium für die Medienwissenschaft

D.N. Rodowick

# A Compass in a Moving World (on genres and genealogies of film theory)

2013

https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13202

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**
Rodowick, D.N.: A Compass in a Moving World (on genres and genealogies of film theory). In: Liv Hausken (Hg.): *Thinking Media Aesthetics. Media Studies, Film Studies and the Arts.* Berlin: Peter Lang 2013, S. 239–259. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13202.

**Nutzungsbedingungen:**
Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0

**Terms of use:**
This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0 License. For more information see:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität Marburg

# A Compass in a Moving World (on genres and genealogies of film theory)[1]

*D. N. Rodowick*

All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles; and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations and dance before our eyes

Ralph Waldo Emerson

## 1. A compass in a moving world

Ein philosophisches Problem hat die Form: "Ich kenne mich nicht aus."

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §123

In the final pages of *The Virtual Life of Film*, I recounted my puzzlement at being asked if the study of film would remain relevant in an era dominated by electronic and digital images. No doubt cinephiles of a certain generation regard the disappearance of the photographic image with intense nostalgia, perhaps even mourning. Indeed the millennial form of cinephilia has become historical in a way that swings between mourning and melancholia. A desire in pursuit of a lost object: Has not the experience of film always been such, that is, the longing to recover the past in the present and to overcome lost time? The difference now is that the phenomenological force of photography has been almost completely replaced by new series of computational automatisms and experiences. From the perspective of melancholia, film is historical in an archaeological sense: an object lost to history that cannot be recovered; an experience that can be imagined or reconstructed perhaps but never again felt anew. Consequently, one seeks in digital images an experience that cannot be fully replaced, like widowers who have not yet learned to admire a worthy and seductive lover.

The melancholic cinephile will never let go of his desire for a lost object. (And he may even have forgotten or lost any sense of this experience as perceived or lived.) But mourning can be overcome and new loves reborn. That moving images have a virtual life means that new ways to love them can always be found – they will continue to be meaningful and to give meaning to our present experience. Explaining and evaluating this virtual life requires concepts, or rather, an ongoing process of conceptualization, of refashioning or inventing

1 This essay is adapted from my book *An Elegy for Theory*, forthcoming from Harvard University Press in fall 2013.

ways of understanding commensurate with the image's virtual life. The desire to explain this experience by inventing or developing concepts adequate to thinking with or through it – call this, for the moment, theory – is inescapably caught up in, indeed engendered by, our confrontations with the ontological perplexities that screened images raise regarding our locatedness in time and in space, both in relation to the world and to each other through the medium of moving images.

But am I not caught in paradox here? In a project devoted to exploring the prospects for studying moving image culture in the twenty-first century, why extol a love that can always be rekindled in the moving image while writing an elegy for theory?

In some respects, theory is more present than ever to our thoughts about moving images. One consequence of the rapid displacement of photographic by digital processes has been to fuel a new and welcome fascination with the history of film theory, as if desiring to recover or to re-experience the intense aesthetic pleasure and ontological curiosity of the artists and writers who lived and witnessed the first thirty years of film's virtual life. These philosophical pioneers puzzled over the new qualities of space and time enfolding spectators and defining their modernity, while challenging tenaciously held concepts of aesthetic experience inherited from the nineteenth century. (Writing in 1939, Walter Benjamin expressed this attitude in observing that the question was not whether photography or film could be art, but whether instead they had transformed the entire character of art (Benjamin 2002, p. 258).) In short, faced with a new medium, they felt compelled to define and explain it, even as its forms shifted before their eyes. Classical film theory has renewed significance for film studies today because the computational arts and communication, which often take on a photographic or cinematographic appearance, confront us with an analogous shock and compel us to reassess our experience of modernity through moving images. Like Vachel Lindsay, Hugo Münsterberg, or Ricciotto Canudo, not to mention Jean Epstein, Sergei Eisenstein, Siegfried Kracauer, or Walter Benjamin, we strive mentally for concepts to give logical form to the unruly thoughts inspired by images that disorient us in time, and which are no longer content to occupy space in ways familiar to us.

An elegy for film fuels the virtual life of theory; one turns on the other like two strands of a Moebius strip. The displacement of the photographic by the digital inspires new forms and conditions of ontological puzzlement concerning our experience of modernity through moving images. And these images now move, and occupy space and time, in ways that are as novel to us as to spectators in the first nickelodeons. Twenty years hence, will readers completely attuned to a computational ontology puzzle over how we could have felt such wonder and anxiety? Classical film theory was a lively period of conceptual innovation and

experimentation. Contemporary cinema studies seeks inspiration there, perhaps because the shock of modernity is as intense for us now as it was for those thinkers who first confronted the powers of photography and cinema. The desire to explain this experience, indeed the unending task of mastering it through concepts that could settle this moving world and help us find peace within it, was given a name very early in the twentieth century: "theory." Already in 1924, in his wonderful and prescient book *Der sichtbare Mensch*, Béla Balázs called for theory as a conceptual compass in the stormy seas of aesthetic creativity and experience. What film studies has forgotten in the intervening decades is the *strangeness* of this word, as well as the variable range and complexity of the questions and conceptual activities that have surrounded it over time like clouds reflecting light and shadow in ever-changing shapes. The word "theory" has weight, gravity, and solidity in the humanities today. But, as Wittgenstein might have put it, like every overly familiar word on closer examination it begins to dissolve into "a 'corona' of lightly indicated uses. Just as if each figure in a painting were surrounded by delicate shadowy drawings of scenes, as it were in another dimension, and in them we saw the figures in different contexts" (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 155).

The idea of theory in art or film has a long and complex history, and this history invariably and recurrently coincides with and departs from the history of philosophy. Indeed the range of activities covered by concepts of theory comprises a genealogy much longer and more complex than the virtual life of film. As a form of explanation, theory is ever more important to our comprehension of contemporary moving image culture, which is ever more powerfully a digital culture. Yet in film studies, as in the humanities in general, attitudes toward theory remain vexed. The decades since the 1970s have witnessed many critiques of theory, mostly unkind. These attempts to dislodge, displace, overturn, or otherwise ignore it have taken many forms – against theory, post-theory, after theory – as if to contain or reduce the wild fecundity of its conceptual activity or to condemn it to exile. In most cases, these critics have a no clearer view of what theory is than the thinkers who are supposed to practice it. The lack of clarity in our picture of theory haunts the humanities, and this is equally as true for its defenders as its assailants.

The impulse that drives my project goes deeper than debates for and against theory, for there is a hole at the center of this discussion (what once might have been called a structuring absence) that is not so easily filled in or accounted for. My first thoughts on this problem date back to my inaugural lecture at King's College London in 2002, when it occurred to me that the two fundamental problems confronting the revitalization of film studies in the twenty-first century were, first, how to assess the displacement of the photographic by the electronic and

digital, and second, how to renew the place of theory in this debate.[2] In the days following my lecture, a colleague and good friend, Simon Gaunt, an accomplished scholar of medieval French and no stranger to contemporary theory, asked a question which, despite its simple and straightforward form, continues to haunt and derail me: “What is film theory?” He might well have asked, what is literary theory or art theory? But being a good philosophical friend, Gaunt was provoking me, I continue to think, to confront a deeper and more fundamental problem. Despite thirty years of teaching and writing about the history of theory, I could not give a simple answer to his enquiry, for the question “What is theory?” is as variable and complex as the desire to explain “What is cinema?”

Gaunt’s question, and my incapacity to respond to it, utterly defamiliarized a mode of existence I had happily occupied for several decades – that of a self-described film theorist. My confidence was shaken, and the word “theory” became unfamiliar to me, melting into its corona of lightly indicated uses. Indeed, to paraphrase Christian Metz, I discovered that I have loved theory, I no longer love it, I love it still.

What is theory that it should arouse such emotion and debate both within the humanities, and between the humanities and the sciences? For those of us in the arts and humanities who characterize our work as theoretical, by what conceptual means do we recognize and identify the how, why, and what of our doing? What does it mean to belong to a community of thinkers in the arts and humanities who characterize their work as theoretical, and how does this make us different from (or similar to) a historian, a critic, or even a philosopher? Do we have now (have we ever had?) a clear and perspicuous view of theoretical activities, practices, and concepts? Would anyone who knows what “theory” is, please raise your hand?

## 2. Many lines of descent

> When the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle: only if you are an architect of the future and know the present will you understand it.
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the uses and disadvantages of history for life*

In the contemporary context, the concept of theory is like a coin too long in circulation. Passed from hand to hand its surface is flat and unburnished, its value illegible. If our conceptual picture of theory is clouded, perhaps this is because

2 Published as “Dr. Strange Media, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Film Theory” in Grieveson and Wasson, 2008. An expanded version of this essay comprises Part I of *The Virtual Life of Film*, 2007, pp. 1-24.

we have forgotten that it is a *moving* picture. Theory, as we live and challenge it today, and as it challenges us, has a history. It is not *a* language-game but many, comprising various overlapping yet often contradictory and contested forms of life. Little wonder that now as in the 1920s it has seemed more a battleground – a test of competing conceptual wills with feints, sallies, and parries – than the rational unfolding of a communal research program. From a scientific point of view, it may seem odd to suggest that theory has a history, or further, to say that our picture of theory is cloudy or unfocussed because we have forgotten its history or become blinded to it. However, a genealogical reflection on theory in general, and in the philosophy of art and of film studies in particular, may help to restore some conceptual precision to its range of connotations and semantic values. Theory may again become a satisfying word if, as Emerson would recommend, it can be reclaimed from its counterfeit currency.

Genealogy is not history. One must take seriously that Nietzsche's critique of history, of its uses and disadvantages, was one of his untimely meditations. A genealogical approach offers an historical perspective that breaks open the linear conception of time as progress or progression, revealing many variable and discontinuous lines of descent. We may set out on straight and well-paved highways, but there will also be cul-de-sacs, detours long and short, secret passages, steep turns, and sudden and surprising vistas. Theory has no stable or invariable sense in the present, nor can its meanings for us now be anchored in a unique origin in the near or distant past. If the currency of theory is to be revalued conceptually for the present, we need a history that attends critically to the competing sites and contexts of its provenance in the past, and which can evaluate the forces that shape its diverse and often contradictory conditions of emergence and its distributions as genres of discourse. To sketch out a genealogy of theory is to return to it a historical sense of its discontinuities as a concept and as an activity – not retracing a line, completing a circle, or constructing a frame, but rather, to follow theory's complex web of derivations and to evaluate the concept in the space of its proper dissemination.

## 3. On the history of film theory

> What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.
>
> Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*

Perhaps our picture of theory is not so much a cloud or corona as it is a palimpsest, whose many historical layers compete for our attention in such a way that we are unable to focus on any one of them. Theory is not only a vista composed

of many layers; our view of it is also oriented by many competing frames. Obtaining a clearer picture of theory means neither choosing a different frame nor drawing a more refined sketch or taking a different perspective, but rather remaining open to the complexity of its past and present movements.

In *The Virtual Life of Film*, I argued that one powerful consequence of the rapid emergence of electronic and digital media is that we can no longer take for granted what "film" is – its ontological anchors have come ungrounded – and thus we are compelled to revisit continually the question, What is cinema? This ungroundedness is echoed in the conceptual history of contemporary film studies by what I call the metatheoretical attitude recapitulated in cinema studies' current interest both in excavating its own history and in reflexively examining what film theory is or has been. The reflexive attitude toward theory began, perhaps, with my own *Crisis of Political Modernism* (1988; rpt. 1994) and throughout the 1980s and 1990s manifested itself in a variety of conflicting approaches, principally Noël Carroll's *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* and *Mystifying Movies* (both 1988), David Bordwell's *Making Meaning* (1989), Bordwell and Carroll's *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996), Richard Allen and Murray Smith's *Film Theory and Philosophy* (1997), Francesco Casetti's *Theories of Cinema, 1945-1995* (1993/1999), Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey's *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts* (2001) and so on.[3]

One thing characteristic of all these works is the isolation and detachment of "theory" as an object available for historical and theoretical examination, but in doing so, these books take three different approaches. Natural scientific models inspire one approach, both philosophical and analytic, which posit that the epistemological value of a well-constructed theory derives from a precise and generalizable conceptual framework defined in a limited range of postulates. This approach assumes there is an ideal model from which all theories derive their epistemological value. In turn, the value of film theory is measured by its historical progress toward commensurability with this ideal model. Alternatively, Francesco Casetti's approach is both historical and sociological. Agnostic with respect to debates on epistemological value, it groups together statements made by self-described practitioners of theory, describing both the internal features of those statements and their external contexts as a form of social knowledge. In *The Crisis of Political Modernism*, my own approach, inspired by Michel Foucault's) *Archaeology of Knowledge,* assumes that the conditioning of knowledge itself is historically variable. Discourse *produces* knowledge. Every theory is subtended by enunciative modalities that regulate the order and dispersion of statements by engender-

3 I present another and more expansive version of these arguments in my essay, "An Elegy for Theory," 2007.

ing or making visible groups of objects, inventing concepts, defining positions of address, and organizing rhetorical strategies. This approach analyses how knowledge is produced in delimited and variable discursive contexts that are investigated as discontinuous, if sometimes overlapping, genres, practices, or modes of discourse.

In a first move, it might seem strange to associate theory with history. Introducing a series of lectures at the Institute for Historical Research at the University of Vienna in 1998, I astonished a group of students by asserting that film theory *has* a history, indeed multiple histories with various yet intertwining genealogical lines of descent. Here the analytic approach to theory, on one hand, and sociological and archaeological approaches on the other, part ways. The fact of having a history already distinguishes film theory, and indeed all aesthetic theories, from natural scientific enquiry, for natural and cultural phenomena do not have the same temporality. Examination of the natural world may presume a teleology where new data are accumulated and new hypotheses refined in modeling processes for which, unlike human culture, we have no prior knowledge. Aesthetic inquiry, however, must be sensitive to the variability and volatility of human culture and innovation; their epistemologies derive from (uneven) consensus and self-examination of what we already know and do in the execution of daily life, or in adhering to and departing from the cultural protocols of our institutional contexts. And there is yet another model of theory offered by Hegel in the introduction to his *Lectures on Aesthetic*, or the young Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel*, which stands somewhere between art and philosophy as the expression and refinement of concepts offered to us in aesthetic experience, but in a pre-conceptual or proto-conceptual modality. For Hegel, art is the perfection of a place where philosophy will arrive and find itself in reason through theory; for Lukács, theory is a lifeline thrown to us in the storms of modernity, where art expresses the disjunction of reason from reality as well as the utopian possibility of their reconciliation.

Here, our picture of theory becomes unfocused again, but now lacks clarity for other reasons. Many different conceptual images are superimposed one on top of the other, and each image resembles the others in ways significant enough that they appear to share the same design. But this image is chimerical and leads us astray if we are unable to recognize that even the short history of aesthetic writing on film reveals distinct and disjunct strata. Here the discontinuities between different approaches to investigating and evaluating the arts are as important as continuities.

A historical perspective on film theory is wanted here, but what kind of history? One irony in asking this question suggests that our contemporary picture of film theory is ineluctably tied to a certain image of *history*. To my knowledge, the first synoptic account of aesthetic writing on film was Guido Aristarco's *Storia*

*delle teoriche del film*, published in 1951.[4] Owing to the overlapping senses of the word "storia" in Italian, the title of Aristarco's pioneering book could be translated as either the "story" or "history" of film theory. But the appearance of "theory" in the title is equally significant. Our contemporary sense of what theory means may not derive precisely from Aristarco's work, but his particular usage was certainly representative of a broad shift taking place in the immediate post-war period that involved a new set of criteria for identifying theory as a concept allied to a distinct set of institutional practices.

The notion that there is a "story of film theory," a coherent and perhaps teleological historical narrative that could be retroactively superimposed on the unruly critical writing on film emerging in cinema's first fifty years, is coincident with similar shifts in the study of art and literature, especially the emergence in comparative literature of a new domain of inquiry – the survey of critical theory in a synoptic perspective whose inaugural gesture is René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949). To this general historical perspective we owe the practice of conceptualizing courses in film, art, or literary theory as occupying a single term of study, or perhaps two successive semesters. In a course on aesthetics, which might begin with Plato and conclude with Derrida, this kind of decontextualized, ahistorical, and often chronological, approach implicitly assumes that there is a continuous, linear, and more or less unified narrative that can be told about aesthetic expression and judgments of value. Or, similarly, that the concept of the aesthetic itself has a philosophical continuity reaching back to Periclean Athens or before. Hegel's philosophy of history is not too far in the background, even if its outlines are fading. That Aristarco was influenced by Lukács and encouraged him to return to writing about film, and that Lukács and Balázs were close friends throughout the teens establishes an oblique yet distinct network of filiations and family resemblances here.

Retrospectively, it is equally curious that early in the 20th century film would become associated with theory. This association is not natural or self-evident. One of the earliest occurrences of the term appears in the aforementioned *Der sichtbare Mensch* (1924), where Béla Balázs argues that "Theory is, if not the helm, then at least the compass of artistic development. And only when a concept sends you in the right direction can you speak of erring. This concept – film theory – you must make for yourself" (Balázs 2001, p. 12).

The idea of theory presented here is both wonderfully contemporary yet also expressive of a very specific moment in the philosophy of art. On one hand, Balázs is suggesting that in order to develop or unfold its expressive possibilities, the new art of film needs critical reflection. Criticism guides film (away from

4 I thank Francesco Casetti for leading me to this reference.

literature or theater perhaps) towards something like a heightened self-understanding, not only of its internal formal possibilities, but also its external cultural presentation of "visible humanity." In many ways, Balázs' book can be read as a founding text of visual cultural studies, one that gives pride of place to film not simply as the art most characteristic of modernity, but also as a new scriptural form through which humanity comprehends itself in a post-alphabetic culture, and where literacy now means close attention to the physiognomy of things as well as people, social as well as natural space. At the same time, "die Theorie des Films" is not something discovered "from" or "in" cinema as if there were facts there to be uncovered or brought to light. Rather it is a practice of the construction of concepts that is already curiously close to Gilles Deleuze's observation sixty years later in the conclusion to *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* that theory is made or crafted no less than artistic expression itself.

On the other hand, Balázs' text may appear contemporary to us only as the retrojection of a picture that is far too familiar, and this image may not align precisely with the one he intends. Theory seems always to have accompanied film study on its long march toward academic acceptance, which still seems hardly or only newly achieved in the twenty-first century. It is a word, concept, and practice that we have taken for granted since at least the 1950s. Just as the notion of the *auteur* appeared as one strategy for legitimating the study of film by trying, and only with some difficulty, to locate filmic expression in a singular creative voice or signature thus defining it as art, perhaps theory also emerged as a way of applying a scientific patina to the discussion of an art form that was barely considered as such in 1924.

But step back further from this picture or try to see it in a different light. What is called theory now might not be legible as such to someone of Balázs' historical place and culture. In 1924, a writer with Balázs' education and experience might well have defended film in the context and vocabulary of the philosophy of art or aesthetics. Here we need a frame or context where theory seems alien or strange to us as a usage that is not obvious or self-evident. Indeed Balázs' particular appeal to theory in 1924 was probably exceptional and the word itself surprising in this context. This was certainly not the way writing on film or art was usually characterized in the teens (Georg Lukács' *Theory of the Novel* being an exception, to which I will return). For example, in 1912 Lukács, one of Balázs' closest friends of the teens, published a short text entitled, "Gedanken zu einer Ästhetik des 'Kinos'," that is, thoughts toward a cinema aesthetics. Reviewing Balázs' book in 1926, Andor Kraszna-Krausz describes it as a contribution to "aesthetic philosophy," and the title of his review characterizes

the book as "eine Filmdramaturgie" (Balázs 1926). [5] This terminology resonates in compelling ways with other fundamental texts of the period such as Sergei Eisenstein's 1929 statement, "A Dramaturgy of Film Form." In his first preface to *Der sichtbare Mensch*, Balázs portrays his arguments as a "philosophy of the art of film" that explores questions of meaning by way of a critical account of the medium's distinctive aesthetic features. And finally, Balázs' most well-known book in English, *Theory of the Film*, a collection and synthesis of texts spanning his entire career as a writer, seems never to have born that title except in English translation. Published first in Russian in 1945 as *Iskusstvo Kino* (*The Art of Film*), in 1948 the book appeared in German as *Der Film. Werden und Wesen einer neuen Kunst* (*Film: Growth and Character of a New Art*). Yet more significantly, the Hungarian title given this work was *Filmkultúra: A film müvészetfilozófiájá* (*Film Culture: A Film Philosophy of Art*). To complicate this picture, or alternatively, to show that a new usage of a concept of theory was setting in by 1950, it is interesting to note that the first chapter of the German version of Balázs' book argues in its title for "Eine Filmästhetik ("a film aesthetic"), while the Hungarian version begins "Az elmélet dicsérete" or "In Praise of Theory."

My point here is that what we call theory today was characterized very differently throughout the long and complex history of writing on film before the end of WW II – as dramaturgy, aesthetic philosophy, and the philosophy of art, if the writers bothered to characterize their work at all. Indeed the adoption of the English title *Theory of the Film* in 1952 is already indicative of a reflex to superimpose retroactively a picture of theory on a complex range of conceptual activities that may not have characterized themselves as such. This picture clouds our image of what those activities meant and were supposed to accomplish historically.

No doubt, many of the best known writers on film in the teens and twenties did not think of themselves as theorists at all, at least in the contemporary sense. Like Balázs or Lukács, students of the great nineteenth century German tradition of aesthetics, they placed themselves, and were trying to place film, in a conceptual domain occupied by the philosophy of art. The appearance of the word theory in 1924, then, must evoke a special case, and one that is already in tension with philosophy or the philosophy of art.

At the same time, we still don't know what "theory" means in 1924 or why it should be evoked as a special case. In calling for theory as the compass guiding

5 Reprinted in the Reclam edition of *Der sichtbare Mensch*. This rapprochement of theory to dramaturgy also suggests a slippage with one of the German senses of *Lehre*. Often translated as "theory" (Goëthe's *Farblehre* as color theory or Schlegel's *Kunstlehre* as theory of art), in an aesthetic context the term is closer to doctrine, or better, a systematic poetic guiding or clarifying expression.

the aesthetic direction of a new art form, what language-game was Balázs playing? To grapple with the genealogy of this concept does not mean erasing differences and restoring continuities, but rather making the word "theory" alien again, to make it unfamiliar by peeling back the palimpsestic layers of meaning covering it over.

## 4. Genres of theory

> The modern is never simple; it is always, so to speak, on the top of something else; always charged with contradiction, with a reminiscence, in one word, with a history.
>
> Bernard Bosanquet, *A History of Aesthetic*

To make these layers distinct again, it may be useful to picture the emergence of film aesthetics in the twentieth century from the perspective of three more or less discontinuous and open genres. It is tempting to think of the history of film aesthetics as a sequence of thirty year periods – 1915 to 1947 for classical, 1947 to 1968 for modern, and 1968 to 1996 for contemporary film theory. But this approach disregards the important overlaps, retentions and returns, irregular continuities, all the dotted lines, straight and curving that thread through these three discursive series. For reasons that should soon be apparent, I will recast this formulation as the emergence and persistence of aesthetic, structural, and cultural modes of aesthetic writing on film. These are less chronological periods than distinct though sometimes interpenetrating enunciative modalities whose internal regularities are defined by commonalities of concept formation, institutional contexts, and rhetorical strategies.

Blossoming from the soil of Hegel's organic and typological categories, the aesthetic discourse is concerned with questions of artistic value and the delimitation of aesthetic a prioris through which film's singularity as an art form could be identified and assessed as well as compared with the other arts of space and of time. The structural or semiological discourse is dominated by problems of meaning or signification in relation to the image. Beginning with the filmology movement in postwar France, it is marked by the introduction of film studies to the university in the contexts of the human sciences and is dominated by the influence of formalism and structuralism in the 1960s. Finally, the cultural discourse is defined by the psychoanalytic challenge to structuralism, the predominance of theories of the subject, and the problem of ideology.

Periodizing the aesthetic investigation of film as classical, modern, and contemporary is doubtless familiar to most students of cinema and, at first glance, may seem commonsensical. However, it is precisely the sources of this common-

sense that interest me here, for there are good reasons to challenge them. To maintain productively our disorientation with respect to theory, the discontinuities of these genres of discourse must be understood from the standpoint of their institutional contexts and rhetorical strategies but also, and more specifically, as distinct conceptual shifts in which the practice and activities of explanation and evaluation – ways of asking questions and anticipating answers, adapting and transforming terminology, rewriting precedent debates or repressing them – subtly but decisively shift meaning.

The earliest emblematic works of the aesthetic discourse are Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915) and Hugo Münsterberg's *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916). Undoubtedly the richest and most complex period of writing on film, this discursive territory ranges from North America across France, Germany, and the former Soviet Union, before returning to the United States in the last works, written in English, of Siegfried Kracauer. It includes all the dominant figures of the first fifty years of thought about film: not only Lindsay and Münsterberg, but also Ricciotto Canudo, Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Germaine Dulac, the French Impressionist and Surrealist writings on film, the Soviet montage schools with Lev Kuleshov, V. I. Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov, the *Poetika Kino* and all of Sergei Eisenstein's writings through his magnificent *Non-Indifferent Nature*, Béla Balázs, Rudolf Arnheim, Erwin Panofsky, Hans Richter, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin, among other important figures. Chronologically, the genre is brought to a close by the post-war writings of André Bazin (still, probably, the most influential texts in the history of film aesthetics) and Kracauer's *Theory of Film*. It is tempting to date the end of the aesthetic discourse with Bazin's death in 1958 and the publication of Kracauer's *Theory of Film* in 1960. (Curiously, Kracauer mentions Bazin nowhere in this book despite its enormous bibliography, which nonetheless includes other important sources in French from the era of filmology.) However, this argument ignores the place of the 1971 publication of Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed*, still one of the most misunderstood books, both conceptually and historically, in writing on the cinema. But, as I already suggested in *The Virtual Life of Film*, Kracauer's *Theory of Film* and Cavell's *The World Viewed* stand together in their very different ways as the grand closing gestures of a certain way of thinking about film. And part of their richness, and why they remain compelling works today, is that they represent both the closure of a certain kind of thought and the opening up of new philosophical vistas to which we still have not properly adjusted our vision. They remain, in many ways, untimely works.

A period spanning nearly fifty years and two continents: What criteria would justify bringing so many diverse figures, and so many conceptually rich texts, together on a single territory of such geographical, linguistic, and historical diversity?

First, this territory, and the set of criteria populating it, must be considered as open and variable. In this respect, the different discursive modalities of aesthetic writing on film, individually and together, are best considered as open sets, indeed something like a genre in Stanley Cavell's logical characterization of that concept.[6] A genre, of course, must contain a definable and delimitable set of criteria according to which membership in the set can be discussed, accounted for, and debated. Membership in the set does not require that each text exhibit or conform to all the criteria, however. Rather, it suffices that all members share at least some significant number of elements in common. The salient features of a genre, and candidacy for membership of individual texts, are therefore open-ended: new conceptual features, definitions, and questions are not limitable in advance of critical evaluation. Characterizing a genre, then, does not mean identifying a set that has been closed off in the past, nor establishing a rigid typology. It requires attentiveness to both repetition and change as well as contradiction, for genres are future-oriented, seeking change and mutation.

The trick, then, is to assess and evaluate commonalities and family resemblances that persist across that repetition, which produces new members of the set until the salient elements change and recombine in such a way that a new genre emerges. The recognition of a new genre – in my example, a new discursive modality of film theorizing – equally requires contests, or tests of negation. These contests are not historically linear; the time of repetition and contestation can be lateral, moving backwards or forwards across related groups of texts or arguments. A new genre thus emerges through a process of derivation where there is no a priori standing or necessary set of features that an instance must exhibit to qualify as a member of the set. Indeed, members will emphasize or exhibit different or further features of the discursive set, and some feature or features will inevitably sit uncomfortably within the set formed by the other members.

One last feature, especially characteristic of discourses of theory and the generic transformations of aesthetic writing on film, bears mentioning here. The emergence of a new discursive modality often suppresses its discontinuities with earlier genres by retrojecting its logic, vocabulary, and conceptual structure onto earlier genres and discourses. This would be another way of characterizing ge-

---

6 See in particular Cavell's discussion of genre in *Pursuits of Happiness: the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, 1981, pp. 26-34, *Contesting Tears: the Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, 1996, pp. 3-14, and "The Fact of Television" in *Cavell on Film*, William Rothman, 2005, ed., pp. 59-85.

neric contestation or tests of negation. For example, in his essay on "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," Bazin resituates the history of film style not as a break between the silent and sound periods but rather as a contest between "faith in the image" or "faith in reality." Rather than defining the technological history of cinema as a break between the silent and sound periods, one finds the ebb and flow of a constant evolution towards deep focus cinematography. Expressionism or montage are in contest here with composition in depth as a persistent stylistic option. In a founding work of the structural discourse, "Cinema: Language or Language System," Christian Metz remaps the conceptual history of the aesthetic mode with respect to the problem of language, thus transforming the unruly precedent debates on film art as a continuous debate on the question of signification or meaning. When the cultural discourse emerges after 1968, Eisenstein or Benjamin are re-read in the context of a materialist and ideological discourse that wants to recover or reconstruct a continuous history of left aesthetics in film, thus rendering the history of film theory as a Marxist theory and history. Very often, these retrojections involve conceptual remappings and replacements of the idea of theory itself.

In this respect, attention to discontinuities in the set is as important as to its continuities. This is crucial for understanding so-called classical film theory, which I will focus on for the remainder of this essay. Before 1950, with some few very notable exceptions it is rare to find writing on cinema that characterizes itself as theory or theoretical, as I have already pointed out. In the great variety of texts produced in this period, what might be recognized today as film history, criticism, or dramaturgy blends with the conceptual innovation or invention that is more characteristic of the activities and rhetorical strategies of film theory or aesthetics. This observation still leaves unresolved, of course, the question of how to characterize logically a theory of art or of an art form like film? Indeed, the idea of theory, and what constitutes a theory in the aesthetic, structural, or cultural modes, is something of a moving target.

Nevertheless, as I suggested earlier, the aesthetic discourse confronts film as a problem, above all because the new medium is perceived to sit only uncomfortably within the then current philosophical discourse of Art or the aesthetic. Indeed, in the first forty years of its existence, film is testing, even negating, the "genre" of Art itself; its very existence and evolution undermine and throw open the questions of how to settle the identity of a medium or art form, and how to value, or not, the subjective aesthetic experiences it inspires. The insistence of the questions – What is film? Or what is cinema? – thus demonstrates the difficulty of making film visible and intelligible as an object of explanation and evaluation, and therefore, the object of a theory. And at the same time, the persistence of

these ontological questions undermines confidence, as did modernism in general, in the concepts that previously assured the identity of art forms and categories of aesthetic judgment. In this manner, theory, in film or in art, first emerges as a form of explanation in confrontation with a problem, and this problem arises because of the variability or ephemerality of the objects writers are trying to frame or picture. What can be learned from the variety and contentiousness of writing on film, especially in the silent and early sound periods, is that here theory is less a form of unifying and systematizing a body of knowledge about an object than a mode of activity or of conceptual engagement, a manner of interrogating one's self and debating with others about the nature of what counts as a (new) medium and how to describe its subjective effects and cultural significance. There is also the question of responding to larger historical pressures being brought to bear on the concept of art in general, as Walter Benjamin was so well aware.

In my account, this observation neither turns the aesthetic discourse towards theory or away from it. These writings are neither pre-theoretical nor another kind of theory or an alternative to theory. Could the early experience of film have been accounted for otherwise? My concern, rather, is to indicate at least in outline how the ontological force of the new medium confronts writers struggling to comprehend the experience of modernity through their experience of film. The wild inventiveness of the aesthetic discourse was a continuing and contradictory response to the perceptual and conceptual vertigo elicited not only by the novelty of the medium, but also by the velocity with which it was continually reinventing itself and responding dynamically to larger historical and cultural forces.

At the same time, we need to be attentive to the deeper and more complex genealogical network of concepts that thread through these writings philosophically, linking them in sometimes direct and indirect lines, if not errant displacements, to wider debates in the philosophy of art. It is important, first, to recognize in the aesthetic mode the conceptual and rhetorical form of the systematic aesthetics of the 19th century, especially in German philosophy, that would have formed the philosophical background of most of the writers. Here definitions of the medium or genre of art are motivated by criteria that delimit and typify major artistic forms such as poetry, music, dance, painting, sculpture, and architecture, often in ways that reproduce, explicitly or implicitly, the idealist system of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetic* and its promulgation in the late nineteenth century in the works of Bernard Bosanquet and others. In most characteristic accounts, the aesthetic, or what counts as an instance or medium of Art, is thus framed by enunciative a prioris that define the horizon of all that can be said or thought within this discursive register. These are the conceptual grounds of the discourse, which include: the criterion of self-identity (that the existence of a medium of art

must be typified as a pure genre); the criterion of substantial self-similarity (that each genre of art is produced from a medium, here defined as a single substance or a closed set of qualities); and finally, the definition of unique aesthetic a prioris for each medium, that is, sets of formal or stylistic options that are solely characteristic of the genre and its medium.[7]

These enunciative a prioris define the horizon wherein the aesthetic discourse curves back upon itself. Contrariwise, the openness of the genre is assured, paradoxically, by the historical persistence of a discourse on aesthetics as a conceptual vocabulary that is challenged and undermined by the very object(s) it is trying to define or construct. From Canudo through Benjamin, the more one tries to defend film as Art through the conceptual vocabulary of system aesthetics, the more film, as Benjamin so eloquently put the case, redefines the question of What is Art? What continues to fascinate about pre-War writing on film is that it poses problems without "solutions" – a discourse that raises more questions than answers. The wild proliferation of "aesthetic a prioris" throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s – *photogénie*, *cinégraphie*, close-up, montage, etc. – is best characterized as something like the generation of concepts in open-ended series of explanations or accounts that vary positively in their *failure* to come to terms with defining art, or film, in the framework of a systematic aesthetics. In fact, the success or failure of a "theory" is irrelevant here; what is at stake, and what the authors strive for, is conceptual invention and innovation commensurable with the newness, the modernity, or contemporaneity of film as a means of expression. A new genre of discourse thus emerges through the gradual erosion and contestation of historically precedent concepts. Indeed one might say that what characterizes the historic period of modernism is that "theory" emerges in the confrontation with and transformation of "aesthetics." It becomes the sign, as it were, of an opening on the discursive horizon toward a new territory.

Here we confront one last twist, and one that takes us away from film, but perhaps illuminates the form of life theory expressed in the 1920s. Georg Lukács' second major work, *The Theory of the Novel*, was composed in 1914-15 in the time of the European march towards total war. It was first published in the *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* in 1915 and printed in book form in 1920, just after the conclusion of the war. Folded into the work,

7 See for example my *Reading the Figural*, 2001, pp. 30-44 and *The Virtual Life of Film*, pp. 31-41. Carroll also adds what I have characterized as an "injunctive argument," where the definition of media require an exclusiveness – deriving from their substantial self-similarity and aesthetic a prioris – that discourages or prohibits uses contrary to those criteria. In my account, the injunctive criterion was not as widespread or consistent as Carroll seems to believe, and it is contrary to my characterization of both discursive and artistic genres as open and variable.

then, is a sense of a break in history and the suffering of a discontinuity where reason is disjoined from the world and society. And there is another turn, presented in Lukács' retrospective account of his youthful work in the 1962 Preface to the re-publication of *The Theory of the Novel*. There is very little retrojection here as the elder Lukács takes pains to criticize his younger incarnation (always referred to in the third person as a kind of pre-historical self), for offering, in his own words, "a fusion of 'left' ethics and 'right' epistemology" in the years before discovering his own scientific perspective in Marxist philosophy, whose outcome was the controversial and still compelling *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) (Lukács 1971, p. xx). The Preface is thus a history of erring paths and epistemological breaks.

My interest here is not to review Lukács' arguments concerning the history of the novel as a social and philosophical form but rather to make present and perspicuous what language game he was playing in offering a "theory of" the novel in 1914-15, especially in his pre-Marxist period, and how this might render perspicuous what theory might have meant to early aesthetic writings on film. This task is made more difficult in that neither in the book nor in the retrospective preface does Lukács offer an explicit account of the logic and value of theory as distinct from aesthetics, the philosophy of art, or of *Kunstwissenschaft*, all of which would be more common characterizations for the period. In an era when theory is still rare, how to account for its presence here as if it were a pelorus sighting a distant land where few had so far traveled?

Considering its time and place of composition and publication, one of the most striking aspects of Lukács' book is its Hegelianism. Lukács' reference to his fusion of left ethics with right epistemology provides an important signpost for the stakes of theory at this historical moment. Lukács relates that the book was written under the influence of Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber, and that the influence of Dilthey's 1905 study of *Poetry and Experience* was deeply felt, in particular. In turning to Hegel, Lukács was rejecting the neo-Kantian formalist and positivist aesthetics then dominant at the time, which for the younger Lukács contaminated even Dilthey and the "human sciences" school. And in turn, aesthetics seemed implicitly not the right way to characterize this approach, but rather, theory. Lukács is responding sympathetically, no doubt, to the critical reaction of Dilthey and other philosophers to positivism and historicism, a reaction which was strongly present in other ways in the turn of the century reception of Nietzsche. At the same time, he implies that his youthful fascination with Hegel is analogous to that of the young Marx as a pre-scientific though necessary preliminary step toward a correct (theoretical) understanding of history and its relationship to art or literature. Theory has another special role to

play here as the critical response to a felt crisis in history, a crisis where other practical and conceptual possibilities seemed blocked, or as yet unthought or unthinkable. Lukács relates that *The Theory of the Novel* was conceived in a period of deep existential as well as historical crisis, "written in a mood of permanent despair over the state of the world," and where "nothing, even at the level of the most abstract intellection, helped to mediate between my subjective attitude and objective reality" (1971, p. 12). What I want to suggest here is that theory signifies the response to this crisis, at once ethical and social, wherein one no longer feels at home in the world and where the movements of history are experienced not as progress but rather as the headlong rush into catastrophe or cataclysm.

This is where the turn to Hegel seems strange, and where philosophy seems no longer to console or to provide a searchlight guiding humanity toward reason. As Lukács relates, for Hegel history is continuous – a steady progressive march towards reason –and in moments of historical change or transformation only art becomes problematic as the signifier for one form and Idea replacing another. Art becomes problematic, or rather, confronts philosophy with problems calling for conceptual clarification, "precisely because reality has become non-problematic" (ibid. p. 17). Philosophy is the solution to art's ontological puzzles as humanity continually re-finds and refines itself in reason. For Lukács, however, the novel is expressive of a lived crisis in history, one where the world and history have gone out of joint and where art is unsure of its place. This is why the prose of life – poetry or philosophy – are "here only a symptom, among many others, of the fact that reality no longer constitutes a favourable soil for art; that is why the central problem of the novel is the fact that art has to write off the closed and total forms which stem from a rounded totality of being – that art has nothing more to do with any world of forms that is immanently complete in itself" (ibid. p. 17). The novel, it would seem, is less Stendhal's mirror held to life than an irregular or broken crystal that presents the world in fragments.

The historical realism of the novel is the historical crisis of modernity. Here the desire for totality, as represented in the perfectability of aesthetic form, or as a relation of identity between the subject and world or the subject and reason, all come to grief, and not for artistic but rather for historical and philosophical reasons: "there is no longer any spontaneous totality of being", the author of *The Theory of the Novel* says of present-day reality. A few years later Gottfried Benn put the same thought in another way: ". . . there was no reality, only, at most, its distorted image" (Lukács 1971, p. 18). In this respect, in concluding the 1962 Preface, Lukács makes explicit that the desire to create a theory of the novel was not intellectual, but rather ethical: "that the author was not looking for a new literary form but, quite explicitly, for a 'new world'" (ibid. p. 20). In or through

theory, Lukács understands that the progress of art is unfinished and falls into fragments in humanity's confrontation with the emergence of modernity and the global scale of violence of the First World War. In this respect, Lukács' appeal to theory is a reversal of Hegel. Where philosophy or metaphysics have failed in history, there is little left but to turn to theory. Like Marx and Kierkegaard writing after Hegel, the aim of theory was not to affirm existing reality as the culmination of history but to criticize existing reality as spiritually and historically incomplete and insufficient. Finding no solace in art as either the image of a perfectable world or a world guided by reason, one turns to theory.

Expressing in its forms a crisis both ontological and historical, the novel presents history in a state of traumatic change; for the young Lukács this transformation was potentially destructive and chaotic. History would present him with new compass points, however – the Russian revolution of 1917 and the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919. As a mode of art the novel is not the completion of a stage in history, but rather the anticipation of a new historical shift forged in violence. The young Lukács experienced this historical violence as a barrier – he had to find his way in theory. Retrospectively, the elder Lukács sees the problem posed by the novel as one of an anticipated revolution, which called for a response not from philosophy or metaphysics, but from theory as the complement to revolutionary practice. In turn, the history of the novel is something like the prelude to this theory. Theory turns to, or turns into, praxis in the extent to which it is capable of thinking change. In this respect, knowledge will no longer be theoretic – the static and contemplative standpoint of abstract thought and pure reason – but rather turns through theory to what is concrete, actual, and capable of transformation. Just as art was for Hegel the not-yet anticipating the completion of the system of philosophy, theory after Lukács was the always-to-come of world revolution as anticipated in the "problematical" structure of the novel itself. At the same moment, another group of writers were working through the problematic experience of modernity in relation to another form, one whose relation to art was not only uncertain, but which also threw up a challenge to the reigning concepts of aesthetics – cinema.

Hegel announced the end of art (and perhaps the beginning of modern philosophy), but the concept of free art also signaled the completion of a vast social change indicative of a new, modern relation to art. By the early nineteenth century, artworks were definitely becoming objects with a special kind of value. And from Winckelmann through Hegel, the scientific study of art recognized ever more strongly and complexly the historical nature of this value. But it would take another hundred years before the twentieth century avant-gardes would undermine and disturb, before philosophy or art theory themselves, the

concept of beauty as the axiological foundation for concepts of art. Indeed the emergence of art theory, as distinct from the philosophy of art or *Kunstwissenschaft*, is inseparable from a certain politicization of art in critical theory – whose great critical exponents included Lukács, Bloch, Benjamin, Brecht, and Adorno – that still recognized aesthetic experience as a unique perceptual domain or activity, but which placed questions of significance and value in relation to and recognition of art's penetration by the commodity form. Film and aesthetic writing on film has a special place in this account not only as the emergence of a new and perplexing expressive mode – for many writers the very expression of modernity – but also one that was in historical tension with the transformation of aesthetic by the commodity form and capitalistic exploitation of culture and aesthetic experience.

What Lukács suggests, and what we see in the first aesthetic accounts of cinema, is that the call for theory is the appeal to the new, the actual, or the contemporary – what breaks from the past to anticipate the future. At the same time, embedded within the concept of theory is a discontinuous history of conceptual usage whose genealogy is as long as it is incomplete. Each time we evoke or invoke theory in the humanities, we lift the weight of this history on our backs, or more likely, we tread lightly upon it, as if to leave undisturbed the bones of our ancestors, unaware of how many geological layers lie beneath our feet. And while a genealogy of theory seeks conceptual clarity, it cannot confuse this desideratum historically with the search for origins in either science or philosophy. Not one identity, many lines of descent.

## References


Aristarco, Guido (1951) *Storia delle teoriche del film.* Turin: Einaudi.

Balázs, Béla (2001) *Der sichtbare Mensch*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Benjamin, Walter (2002) "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility" in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds.) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Cavell, Stanley (1981) *Pursuits of Happiness: the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Cavell, Stanley (1996) *Contesting Tears: the Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cavell, Stanley (2005) "The Fact of Television" in William Rothman (ed.) *Cavell on Film*. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 59-85.

Lukács, Georg (1971) *The Theory of the Novel*. Translated by Anna Bostock. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Rodowick, D. N. (2001) *Reading the Figural*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Rodowick, D. N. (2007) *The Virtual Life of Film*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Rodowick, D. N. (2007) "An Elegy for Theory" *October* 121 (Summer), pp. 99-110.

Rodowick, D. N. (2008) "Dr. Strange Media, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Film Theory" in Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (eds.) *Inventing Film Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2001) *Philosophical Investigations* II, § vi. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.