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A conversation with Pierre Sorlin about film studies, film and history, and European cinema

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As part of the series of conversations NECSUS has published with prominent scholars (see those with David Bordwell, Ian Christie, Richard Dyer, Anton Kaes, Laura Mulvey, and Vivian Sobchack), we spoke with Pierre Sorlin on his groundbreaking work in film and media studies. Educated as a historian, and working on interdisciplinary subjects such as totalitarianism and anti-Semitism, Sorlin shifted his interests from history itself to the role of representation for society, and the close relation between cinematic representation and historical narratives.

After teaching social history at the Université de Lyon, Sorlin worked for Université Paris 8-Vincennes, a newly-established university on the outskirts of Paris which played a major role in innovation within the humanities. In this capacity, he provided film and media studies with a pioneering reflection on the sociology of cinema and on the cinematic rendering of history. In the same period, together with friends and colleagues Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier and Michèle Lagny, he also produced major contributions on the representation of the Russian revolution and on French popular cinema of the 1930s. From 1989 onwards, the French scholar moved to the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3, where he paved the way for the reflection on European identity and film and audiovisual production, on Italian national cinema, on popular cinemas, and more recently on the role of the analogic image in the twentieth century, and on audiovisual aesthetics. Ceaselessly eager to test his method and assumptions on different subjects, to check received knowledge through historical survey, and to understand fully contemporary

developments, Sorlin has always and generously been a beacon for film and media scholars and a mediator between different European academic traditions.

Pitassio: Your work originates in history, and notably in your reflection in the 1960s on French and Soviet societies, and on antisemitism. Did social history and the concern for the role cultural production plays within national or supranational communities prompt you to expand into the image? Moreover, what recently struck me is a certain genealogy within the French debate, relating art practices, lay anthropology stemming from the Collège de Sociologie, and the inquiry about media, as Morin and Barthes well epitomise. How did this debate influence you?

Sorlin: When I began to teach history, at the University of Lyon, I used the cinema as an additional source, which allowed knowing people by sight, instead of merely relying on textual portraits and, in some cases, to 'witness' the course of events. For instance, while studying the history of the Third International, we studied the film shot during the congress of the International to gauge the relative importance of the different participants and the hierarchy in speeches. I give this example to show how naïve our approach was; we believed that a film was a recording of a sequence of events. The Collège de Sociologie, whose activities stopped in 1939, was almost forgotten in the 1960s. Morin had introduced an interesting idea: film is an avatar of the doppelganger, the double, which haunts many societies, but it was difficult to adapt such an idea to the study of films. At that time anthropology did not go further in the study of cinema. In the 1960s the dominant trend of analysis of art works was Structuralism, which Barthes applied successfully to literature but was of little use for cinema, which combines words, sounds, and images. Semiology was more useful since it attempted to take into account all the 'materials of expression' (Christian Metz) implemented in films. Films and television programmes had much to tell historians about the social history of the twentieth century and, in Lyon, it was what I wanted to study.

In May 1968 I was much impressed by the part television played in informing people outside Paris. News bulletins gave a joyful, then a frightening representation of the street demonstrations in the capital and, to a large extent, influenced public opinion; all the more so that the pictures, recorded in 16mm, were silent and were commented on in the studios by journalists. I lost the illusion of a pure reproduction of 'reality'. I volunteered for a new, experimental university, in Vincennes, near Paris, in which there was a film

department. In agreement with the students I decided that the cinema should be studied not as a complementary source but as an autonomous means of expression.

Pitassio: Did research on the sociology of cinema and cinematic representations of history, as Marc Ferro and more extensively yourself pursued, attempt to design an alternative space for film studies, which the glorious tradition of French social history fostered and nurtured, at a time when close analysis and textual semiotics ruled the debate?

Sorlin: It was just the opposite. Marc Ferro was an old friend; I knew his books but was puzzled by the fact that, in his excellent analysis, he took only the script into account. All he has written is excellent as textual studies but what about images, the motions of actors, and camera, lighting, and camera angles? I came to the conclusion that films being first of all visual productions, it was necessary to take recourse to methods dealing with images and only secondarily with words. The methodology of history was of no help in this respect, hence my resorting to semiology, but Metz and his followers were mostly interested in signification (the title of the most important books published by Metz), that is to say everything in structures and the content of images that may be significant for the public. Beyond signification I was curious about the emotional effect of moving images on spectators who follow the plot, but are also intimately affected by images.

Pitassio: *Sociologie du cinéma* (1977) was a major achievement in film studies. The book entails a wide array of paths for prospective research, which sometimes rapidly led to further inquiries, some others engendered a significant volume of research later on. For instance, the notion of the 'visible' you coined, i.e. what can be represented and perceived within a given historical society, immediately circulated and greatly influenced film studies. Conversely, sometimes it took longer for other clues to be fully embraced. For instance, I think of your suggestion of considering the community of persons responsible for producing moving images in social and cultural terms as a group determined and embedded in a certain ideology. Recent works on production culture, for instance those that John Caldwell initiated, elaborate on said assumptions. Why were some hypotheses more effective than others?

Sorlin: A hypothesis is taken up when it is resonating with concerns widely circulating in a society or in some sectors of a society. *Sociologie du cinema* was published in the last half of the 1970s, a decade in which people were anxious about the black or red terrorisms that jeopardised many European states, notably Germany and Italy. Television channels played a crucial

part in the diffusion of fear; spectators saw corpses lying in the middle of streets on a daily basis, carbonised vehicles, and bombed windows. Upsetting though it was, terrorism was a side-aspect of social life, but its constant presence on the small screen became obsessive. To a large extent what the eye sees looks more real than what is read or heard. Many situations are more comprehensible if we take into account what was immediately visible for members of a society. For instance, it is easier to understand why so many Italians enthused when their country, in June 1940, declared war on Britain and France. For years, newsreels and documentaries had displayed the strength and modernism of the Italian army, which, in images, seemed the most powerful in the world. The visible camouflaged the weakness of the military forces. The influence of moving images was so obvious in the 1970s that the notion of the 'visible' caught on.

Conversely, hypotheses do not hit when they do not ring a bell or when another premise prevents them from being considered. It is what happened with the proposition according to which, despite personal enmities and categorical conflicts, those involved in the making of films belong to a particular social setting, a 'milieu', which shares the same preoccupations and interests. The acceptance of such a suggestion was hampered in the 1970s by the notion of authorship. Film criticism developed, since its beginning, according to the model of literary criticism; films were studied, like books, as a function of their 'auteur' whose personal history, beliefs, and views were meant to reflect in their pictures. It is true that the strong personality of some film directors shows itself in their work, but their project is interpreted by the actors and the technicians; however managerial they are, they do not frame, light, or shoot the pictures, and they do not play the different scenes. An extremely interesting aspect of audiovisual media is that they are collective productions, born thanks to the involvement of a good many people who provide, at different levels, their original participation. Oddly enough such evidence was not perceptible in the 1970s, probably because critics and theoreticians were not filmmakers. You mention rightly John Caldwell, whose books on audiovisual productions and practice in cinema and television do justice to the joint work of different people – precisely, Caldwell is also a television producer, he knows that the director is at best a driving force, not an auteur in the literary sense of the word.

Pitassio: *Sociologie du cinéma* also reflects on producers and audiences in terms of hegemony and distinction: two crucial notions respectively originating in Antonio Gramsci's and Pierre Bourdieu's pivotal reflections, which

greatly influenced Anglo-Saxon cultural studies. Do you think this legacy was as lucky and influential within French film and media studies?

Sorlin: The obvious debt of *Sociologie du cinéma* towards Bourdieu relates to the concepts, previously developed, of habitus (intellectual and practical behaviours inculcated in people by their social environment and education) and cultural capital. In the wake of 1968 French cinematic studies were mostly influenced by Marxists theoreticians (Althusser) on the one hand and Reich on the other. Film specialists looked into the ideological distortions provoked by what they called 'the fictional, representative mode of film production' (identification of spectators with fictional characters, male domination, rigid marking of the plot by a beginning and a conclusion that channel the imagination of the spectator). However interesting it was, this point of view left aside two questions: 1) any film is the result of a compromise between all those involved in its making, those who will parade in Venice or Cannes, the director, scriptwriter, actors, and those who, practically, realize or carry through the film; a film is a social product; 2) the film exists only if it finds a public, the social image of a film is built by its spectators, a collective, the conflicting image depending greatly from the socio-historical context in which the film is released.

Pitassio: Your contributions on European cinema, and notably *European Cinemas, European Societies* (1991), circumscribed European production as a field of study. Furthermore, it clarified the advantages a comparative approach to European cinemas could offer: an encompassing look at the development of European society throughout the twentieth century, a comparison of production modes, and what you elsewhere name the 'points of fixation', i.e. images imbued with crystallised meanings we can all refer to as a common heritage. Furthermore, this work singled out the need for a notion of European cinema doing away with the distinction between *auteur* and popular production. Do you believe other works followed in this wake and fully embraced this comparative approach? And what further questions could European cinema studies ask?

Sorlin: You refer rightly to the date of publication of the book you mention. Today it would be meaningless to write a similar work. In 1991 the notion of European national cinemas was still significant; film production had not dropped in France and Italy, cinema attendance had diminished everywhere, but, thanks to the opening of cinema complexes often combined with supermarkets, the number of people going to picture houses had stabilised. More importantly European stars and film directors were known the world

over. In a European Union that was, in fact, a mere West European Union, a common experience – the Second World War, reconstruction, the economic boom, a slow economic deterioration – developed a sense of community, which was conflicting with the defence of national interests and traditions. I did not realise it at the time that the book was a requiem for European film production. In the following decade everything changed. Asian countries, whose movies were previously ignored, released highly successful films on the world market, digital devices radically modified the making of pictures, series produced by American companies eclipsed films with the young, spectators got used to watch films on computers or smartphones. Today, a comparative study of European cinemas is only of retrospective relevance.

Sociologie du cinéma and *European Cinemas* have their place in the century in which cinema was a particular means of entertainment and information, produced by a particular technical organisation, aiming messages at a public that received them but could not interact with them. That period is over; moving images are no longer a limited, specific tool of information or diversion, through computers, telephones, and digital devices they interfere constantly in collective or individual life. Most people are now amateur filmmakers and distribute, thanks to the social networks, their movies, which are sometimes of decent quality; American series attract a wider audience than films. Soon picture houses will close and cinematic works will be distributed exclusively by electronic means. The cinema is only a small sector of a generalised audiovisual communication, but it is also a laboratory for innovation and a model of carefully elaborated production. With *Sociologie du cinéma* looking out of date, I have substituted it with a radically different book: *Introduction à une sociologie du cinéma*, which revisits film production and consumption in the framework of an extensive use of audiovisual implements.

Pitassio: Since the late 1990s European cinema rapidly changed as a result of EU media policies. As Anne Jäckel already discussed in the early 2000s, beyond aids to distribution, festivals, and production, most of the money went to training a new cohort of screenplay writers whose work is more than ever designed according to the US media industry cast, in terms of narratives and mode of production. However, this new trend of European film and media industries moved beyond the parochialism you were pinpointing in your work. How do you evaluate these new circumstances?

Sorlin: There has been a big change in the functioning of European cinemas in the last decades, but only a limited sector has been modified. Most cinemas are quartered between three tendencies. A few producers, aiming at

an international market, become involved in co-productions which conform to the standards established by American studios: systematic recourse to digital devices, fast, contrasting editing, amplified soundtrack, visual and sound shocks. There is still a sector intended for a 'national' public, there are for instance in Italy films planned for the Christmas and New Year holidays during which entire families go to watch; there are also in different countries outlandish films hinting at the traditions, vocabulary, and cooking of some provinces, which amuse the fellow citizens but would look incomprehensible abroad. And there are films that are more or less experimental, financed by corporate philanthropy or patronage, which are never projected in cinemas but sometimes rescued by television channels for night screenings.

Pitassio: A notion you widely discussed and examined in *Italian National Cinema* (1996) and later on was that of national cinema. However, you depart from both the essentialist approach which your friend and colleague Michèle Lagny criticised in *De l'histoire du cinema* (1992) as much as from the dissolution of national cinema which the vivid debate on transnational cinema produced. You contend that the notion of national cinema, which resonates with the work of scholars such as David Miller, is a constructionist one, which nevertheless does not do away with the national as a specific public culture and sphere, determined by juridical frameworks, policies, and specific economics. Do you believe it still holds true today? If not, how did it change?

Sorlin: I was unhappy with the adjective 'national'. I thought that, at that time, there was still an Italian cinema, different from other cinemas, but that the word 'national', which implies confinement into habits, institutions, and a language, did not apply to the production of the peninsula. The publisher had launched a series with this title; I was obliged to accept it. There were (there are still) films that banked on the images of a sunny country and welcoming, friendly, smiling people, but there were many films that offered another vision of Italy, and there were works touching on problems or situations which were not specifically Italian. In the last third of the twentieth century Italian filmmakers, actors, and technicians got used to going abroad, either because they were invited or because they wanted to learn methods practised in other countries. Few people involved in film production never left Italy. David Miller defends the idea that common institutions and habits help maintain the cohesion of a nation; the question he raises is: to what extent is it possible, in our days, to speak of any 'national identity'? My perspective is rather different. I believe that there are features, customs, and rituals common to a good many of the citizens of a country, but this does not mean

that there are 'national' characters, identities, reliefs. A 'national' cinema should represent (if necessary in critical ways) what is distinctive of a given nation – but defining what makes a nation typically different from other nations is impossible, there are too many various elements in any nation and too many interferences between nations. It is true that in the heyday of Italian cinema, roughly speaking the 1950s and 1960s, in particular in Italian style comedies and melodramas, films circulated stereotypes that, for many foreigners, were typically 'Italian'. An ideological effect, nothing else. There are ways of frequenting picture houses characteristic of some communities; these are cultural habits, extremely superficial, that people abandon when they live in other surroundings. Again: there was, in the period mentioned above, an original Italian cinema, which was a commercial production and did not 'reflect' any 'Italian national character'.

Pitassio: A recent trend in film and media studies scrutinised film history as a tool to establish values, design narratives, circulate knowledge and film works within communities and across epochs. Recent works on the history of film studies, such as that of Dana Polan, or the collections of Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, or the one that Malte Hagener edited, illustrate how various ways to conceive film history serve institutional purposes and elevate certain works, directors, and styles, while neglecting others. You hinted at the role of film history as an agent in social knowledge about cinema a long time ago. What would you recommend to further survey, and what might be the pitfalls and perspectives of this subject?

Sorlin: In my view – but I know that many film historians do not agree – it is impossible to tell the 'history' of films because mainstream films, which follow well-established patterns, do not deserve a historical analysis (the patterns are timeless) and exceptional films, that are art works, transcend their epoch. At the same time, cinema is an industry that mobilises all those involved in production, including those who promote and sell, as well as a vast public. In this respect cinema is an important sector of social history, knowing how, and in what conditions it is manufactured, how people consume films, appreciate them, are influenced by them, is part of the general history of an epoch. The history of cinema was born between the two World Wars, in a period in which the aftermath of the First World War and the social tension aggravated by the Russian revolution and the growing danger of another war provoked nations to withdraw from international cooperation and focus on national destinies. That history was told nation by nation, despite the fact that directors, actors, and technicians did not stop moving from one country

to another. The national histories, patterned upon the history of literature, enclosed themselves inside the studios and isolated themselves from the social context in which they were produced. It is not bad to observe, now, an attempt to look at the social background in which films were made. This does not resolve the main problem: general history attempts to explain how the world changes under the pressure of events. Artistic invention and innovation do not develop linearly – what was shot yesterday does not condition what will be shot tomorrow (except for the mainstream cinema). The question that cinema historians should debate is whether it is possible to apply chronology to inventiveness.

Pitassio: Film studies in Europe loomed large over the past fifty years and acted as a spearhead for the humanities. However, when compared to other approaches to media in terms of fundraising and grants, other disciplines seem to be still prevailing. Do you believe film and media studies could foster and pursue common European strategies in terms of approaches, subjects, and associated partners, to strengthen our disciplines?

Sorlin: Audiovisual media play a fundamental part in informing our contemporaries and in social communication. The function of cinema is less far-reaching than it was in the past century, but the part played by other tools, notably video, is now paramount. Since it concerns mostly young people from different countries, who share common interests and concerns, a trans-European study of these media is necessary. It is what has already been put in practice by some international associations.

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