

Introduction

On the Cinema Topic

TERESA DE LAURETIS, professor of the history of consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, has written extensively on film, literature, semiotics, and feminist theory. Her books in English include *Technologies of Gender* (Indiana UP, 1987) and *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Indiana UP, 1984). She is the editor of *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Indiana UP, 1986) and the general editor of the series *Theories of Representation and Difference* (Indiana UP).

WHEN I BEGAN teaching film, in 1971–72, at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, the campus did not have a film studies program. Indeed my Italian Cinema was the first film course ever to be offered there. The enrollment was spectacular—some 270 students, of whom over 200 completed and received a grade for the course. At that time, in the aftermath of student and faculty protest against the Vietnam War and the United States invasion of Cambodia—a time of horror that we seem to be condemned to repeat today with the Persian Gulf War—foreign language and other general requirements were being dropped or significantly curtailed; and such an enrollment opened up the vista of a rich field lying fallow and inviting institutional cultivation. In the next few years, more and more film courses sprang up in the curriculum. Art history, English, comparative literature, and mass communication departments hastened to hire part-time and junior faculty members willing to teach film or film-and-literature classes.

I say “willing,” instead of “trained,” because there were hardly any PhDs in film history or criticism then, to say nothing of film theory, a branch of film studies that was to develop in the late 1970s and thrive in the following decade. There were, of course, film critics and “filmologists” outside the academy, and inside were a few film lovers like me, who bravely seized the opportunity to teach film even though such low-prestige work carried the stigma of bread-and-butter courses and enrollment getters. We were by turns called on to teach film courses, resented for their popularity, and covertly disparaged for what was taken to be a lowering of academic teaching to the level of popular culture and entertainment. Consistent student demand, however, combined with the fast growth of film scholarship, conferences, and journals and of a market for scholarly books on the subject, eventually led to the establishment of a film studies major and the funding of a full-fledged department of film (production).

This microhistory makes no claim to chronicle the growth of academic film studies in this country, for it is quite possible that things developed

differently on other campuses. Ramona Curry, however, gives a very similar account in her history of the vicissitudes of the Society for Cinema Studies (SCS, so named in 1969) as it evolved from the earlier Society of Cinematologists (founded in 1959). While there were five universities with established film departments by the late 1940s and about a hundred “film appreciation” courses scattered across the country by the end of the 1950s, in 1963 “[c]inema studies was not yet recognized, indeed it did not exist as an academic discipline” (44). Or, in the words of one of the society’s founders, Robert Gessner of New York University, “[m]ovies’ and ‘scholarship’ . . . were not considered marriageable in the traditional halls of academe” (qtd. on 44). Thus the society was founded, according to Curry, as a learned society concerned with film as a liberal art and dedicated to “alleviating the film teacher’s ‘second-class citizenship’ in university faculties” (45). The change from learned society to professional organization (on the model of the MLA) that was reflected by the new name (SCS) and more inclusive membership occurred during the 1970s under the influence of “work emerging from Europe [and] new vocabularies learned in burgeoning intellectual and political movements (including new waves of Marxism and feminism) but drawn also from successive theoretical developments within academically well-entrenched disciplines of humanities and social sciences.” And it was not until the end of the 1970s that cinema studies became “legitimated as an intellectual and academic pursuit” (49).¹

Curry’s account, partially convergent with my experience in a particular institution, casts some light on the relation of film studies to the literary fields that constitute the province of the MLA, on the still-marginal status of film scholarship in the MLA today, on the relatively small number of submissions for this special topic, and finally on the place of film, and of the Division on Film, within the MLA.

Those who, like me, began teaching and studying film in the early 1970s and whose field of scholarly research and writing was literary criticism may remember the excitement and the sense of embarking on an intellectual adventure that we felt then. The new world of film scholarship—criticism, history, pedagogy, *and* theory—was unbounded by rules of propriety, methodological constraints, disciplinary traditions: routes were not mapped and all sorts of encounters might be made along the way. The first encounter, at that time, had to be with politics—and I do not mean politics as an academic discipline. This encounter was certainly not exclusive to film studies, for in those years politics was the first item on the campus agenda; but in the new academic areas of film, women’s, African American, and ethnic studies, some form of radical politics, precursor of what is now called the politics of difference, was central and integrated into the curriculum from the start. Hence feminism has been a significant and indeed a formative presence in film studies, then and now (although the field has regrettably remained for the most part white).

The second major encounter was with “theory.” This, too, ironically, was made possible by the low status and the openness of the nascent field.

Tools of analysis and conceptual paradigms, both domestic and foreign, could be eclectically used—no one monitored our teaching or imposed models of critical propriety and consistency with established canons. No one said that Freud was not an acceptable source for reading film texts, that structuralism and semiotics were not germane to aesthetic expression, that *Capital* could not provide an understanding of cinema. So, in our search for how to teach and write about film, we innocently jumped into theory, or, rather, into what is today called theory. Literary exegesis and critical notions such as genre, periodization, authorship, style, narrative conventions, and rhetorical tropes were part of our critical baggage, but they must be drastically rethought in relation to audiovisual forms of representation. Simple transposition would not do. Moreover, the multiplicity of codes both technological and semiotic involved in film production and reception—and the effort to account for film as a powerful cultural form on a par with literature, though spurned by the guardians of “high culture”—made us look for new ways to pose critical questions in nonliterary, technical, and scientific discourses.

Thus, like other “area studies,” such as women’s studies and Afro-American studies (as it was called then), and in spite of obvious differences from them, film studies *had to be* interdisciplinary; and paradoxically—we may speculate in retrospect—it had to be so to become an academic discipline. Its achieved academic and disciplinary status, now confirmed by the numbers of established degree programs in film and of doctorates granted by graduate departments of cinema studies since the late 1970s, is sustained by a distinguished body of film scholarship, a film-specific critical vocabulary, sophisticated instruments of textual analysis, and an elaborate theoretical framework that has influenced other critical discourses (the notion of spectatorship, to give but one example, has been productive in theater and performance art, and it is arguably more complexly articulated than its literary analogue, the reader).

Film theory, like film studies, has acquired a history, a disciplinary thickness, a depth of intertextual reference, and a highly specialized language that make it, some complain, inaccessible to the educated (literary) reader. Whereas in the 1970s we were considered mere entertainers of undergraduates, now our work often appears abstruse, overspecialized, or, worst of all, “jargony”—why can’t we write in plain English? how can we take film so seriously? For to many of our colleagues today, film is still an open and plentiful field: anyone can use films as teaching aids in literature courses (at least the students get the plot straight), and anyone can write intelligently on film (don’t we all have VCRs?).

The four essays that satisfy the special topic in this issue and that came to me at the end of their anonymous trajectory through the reviewing process are written in plain English (though some less so than others), and they take film very seriously. They are also the kind that travels well, that is exportable across disciplinary boundaries, that translates film-specific issues into issues for general critical consumption. No doubt they were accepted for that reason, and editorially nudged further in that direction,

further to educate the literary reader. Since my role as topic coordinator gave me no say in either the criteria for acceptance (which are set by *PMLA* and followed faithfully by its manuscript readers) or the selection procedures and only allowed me to solicit submissions of manuscripts that others evaluated (I return below to the problems inherent in the coordinator's role), I am pleased to find that the four extant essays are very interesting in their own right, though hardly representative of the field of film and cinema studies in its current state.

As it happens, the four essays fall within three of the many genres of film-critical writing: the textual analysis of a single film in relation to its author-director (reminiscent of auteur criticism), the history of the motion-picture industry, and the metacinematic reflection on cinema as an apparatus of representation. Perhaps ironically, I suspect, it is the last one, Anne Friedberg's "*Les Flâneurs du Mal(l)*: Cinema and the Postmodern Condition," that will appeal to the most *PMLA* readers, for the debt to literature and philosophy—to Baudelaire and Benjamin—that its title advertises, for its daring analogical extension of film to window-shopping and shopping malls, and for its critique of postmodern consumer society. In the transition from modernity to postmodernity, Friedberg argues, as the department store and shopping mall supplanted the arcade, the paradigmatic figure of modernity, the *flâneur* ("the male dandy who strolled the urban streets and arcades"), yielded to a *flâneuse*, the female consumer, "whose gendered gaze became a key element of consumer address." The essay's overarching conceit is that cinema reproduces the mobilized gaze of the modern *flâneur*, commodified for a postmodern televisual and film consumer-spectator "lost in time," or alienated in both time and space in "the postmodern condition." Cinema as a metaphor, and as the form of that condition, is also the trope on which Friedberg's analysis of Lizzie Borden's independent film *Working Girls* (1987) turns the filmmaker herself from artist into sex commodity.

Revisioning the history of Hollywood studio cinema, Leonard Leff's "The Breening of America" begins with a literary allusion: American film historiography relies on a familiar narrative, "the Hollywood roman-fleuve . . . that pits heroic writers and directors against philistine industry executives." Against this formulaic plot, the essay argues that Hollywood cinema history is more complexly overdetermined by social, economic, and moral issues and that these come into focus in the figure of Joe Breen, director of the Production Code Administration (which imposed what is generally known as "the Hays Code") in the 1930s. While film historians tend to write Breen up as the Hitler of American film censorship, more powerful and stricter than Will Hays himself, Leff suggests that Breen's own ambivalence and Irish working-class roots led him to pass such "subversive" or social-protest films as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Black Fury*, *Dead End*, and many others (in keeping with film-critical convention, Leff gives no director credit for these studio films, referring instead to their producers and studios). In a Foucauldian rather than narrative frame, then, Hollywood movies in the 1930s appear to have

“both produced and contained the ‘dangerous’—not that Hollywood produced it and Breen contained it,” and Leff reappraises the code as an apparatus that did not repress but rather regulated “the flow of power through the Hollywood studio system.”

Susan Linville’s “Retrieving History” is a close analysis of Margarethe von Trotta’s film *Marianne and Juliane* (*Die bleierne Zeit*, 1981) that reevaluates the film’s treatment of recent German history and establishes its central position, as a feminist film, in the New German Cinema. Arguing against the major critical works on recent German cinema—which belittle women filmmakers’ ability to engage “broad historical issues” and reduce their contributions to gender issues in the private sphere, to psychologizing, and to a narrow use of the domestic melodrama form—the essay forcefully presents von Trotta’s film as an alternative political and aesthetic representation of history. *Marianne and Juliane* problematizes rather than accentuates the split between public and private, through a feminist insistence on the necessary interdependence of the private and the social and thus on the political dimensions of subjective experience. The film, Linville argues, shows that Nazism, anti-Semitism, the radical Left, and the domination of women are all complicitous with patriarchal values and the law of the Father, and it lucidly examines these relations through deconstruction of strict binary categories such as bourgeois humanism and radical left politics, realism and self-reflexive avant-garde aesthetics, state violence and antistate terrorism (the film is based on the death in prison of Baader-Meinhof member Gudrun Ensslin, retrospectively investigated by her sister). By questioning the very terms *history*, *radical*, and *political*, the essay concludes, such feminist films “destabilize the very economies of violence and gender on which many visual accounts of German history depend.”

What might seem an outrageous conceit in the title of Marcie Frank’s “The Camera and the Speculum” describes, in fact, an already current practice of medical technology: a miniature video camera mounted on a penlike extension is inserted into bodily cavities for gynecological, dental, or other internal examinations, and the patient can watch on a monitor all that the camera sees. (The apparatus used by my dentist was capable of producing a videocassette, which he ejected at the end of the examination and delivered into my hands—“for your records,” he said—that I might conveniently replay it at home and carry on the surveillance of my own oral hygiene; his direction, recorded on the tape as voice-over, would henceforth regulate my performance.) Frank’s analysis of David Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers* (1988) traces the deployment of gynecological and cinematic technologies through the film’s thematics of separation and indifferentiation, which the essay examines both in the twin protagonists (both of whom are gynecologists, played by one actor) and between film and spectator. By choosing to ignore the twins’ homosexual bond (which is central to the novelistic version of the Marcus twins’ story, as, I may add, a similar bond is central to Peter Medak’s 1990 film *The Krays*), “Cronenberg transposes sibling incest [onto] the mother-child

relation as the paradigm of separation.” Thus, the essay argues, he recasts the nexus of “narcissism, paranoia, projection, and violence against vision” into a homosocial scenario where a third character, the woman who triangulates the twins’ relationship, embodies and bears the brunt of their misogyny. It is woman as mother that, here as elsewhere, serves as foil to the male fantasy of self-referential specularity.

In sum, the essays offer varied and distinctly interesting reading. All in all, they do make reference to both Hollywood studio and contemporary independent films, examine one feminist film in the context of another national cinema, and discuss the work of one Canadian director with some reference to film theory. It is to advantage that the special topic has provided the occasion for a film scholar to engage literary texts and for a non-film scholar to test the rewards of writing on film. Still, the critical span and richness of the field can only be glimpsed here, and film remains rather marginal to the scholarly concerns of the MLA. The fifty-nine submissions for this topic do not seem many, given a membership of 1,539 in the Division on Film as of December 1990, a division that has been steadily growing of late, from 1,215 members in December 1987 and 1,037 in December 1984,² and that total does not compare unfavorably with the figures for the more popular divisions, Literary Criticism (about 5,400) or Women’s Studies in Language and Literature (about 4,300), while the smaller divisions number from 250 to 400.

In accepting and carrying out the task of coordinating this topic, I have been encouraged by *PMLA*’s effort to represent not only the work of a significant sector of the association’s membership but, more important, a highly significant component of contemporary critical discourse and theoretical reflection on literary and visual representation. But it now appears to me, at the end of my task, that my efforts to attract submissions from a wide spectrum of potential contributors may have been undercut by the limitations structured into the very role of the coordinator. First, there was the problem of informing prospective contributors that they should either be or else become MLA members (and pay the not negligible dues). Then my description of the selection procedure, which afforded no opportunity for me to comment on a manuscript until after formal acceptance, might have sounded rather more like a disclaimer than a solicitation. In the two cases where I prevailed over a colleague’s hesitation to submit, indeed the manuscripts were “declined in present form.” In short, it seems to me that the restrictions imposed by the journal prevent the coordinator, however well-intentioned and dedicated, from being fully effective in promoting the publication of research in a marginal or nonliterary field, however significant.

But finally, perhaps the main deterrent was the formidable reputation of *PMLA* as the organ of a strictly literary academic association, with very strict standards of “traditional” scholarly writing—a reputation and standards stringently upheld by nearly all the manuscript reports I saw, which at times went as far as suggesting that a manuscript, well deserving publication, might be submitted elsewhere, namely, to a film jour-

nal. While tempted by the prospect of publication in a journal that carries considerable weight in the tenure and promotion reviews of English and other language and literature departments, some potential contributors were deterred by an “audience” (readership) they saw as uninformed about film study or by the likelihood that their work would be buried, not received within a space of live film-critical debate.

I share these concerns and would like to conclude my introductory remarks on this *PMLA* experiment, as it were, by asking my fellow members of the Division on Film some rather hard questions. Should there be a film division in the MLA? What purposes does it serve, for us individually and collectively? When there is an active professional association for film scholars and teachers and when the status of film criticism and theory is still in doubt among members of the *PMLA* Editorial Board, what do we gain by belonging to this division or contributing to a special issue on film?

While the present issue signals the journal’s commitment to include and encourage film-critical work, the continued and effective presence of film scholarship in *PMLA* clearly depends on the division members, those of us who work with film *and* literature and who are conversant with the critical and theoretical discourses of these fields. The future direction of the journal will depend in part on our willingness to take active roles in *PMLA* as both contributors and readers and thus to redefine its scholarly focus and reshape its critical standards in a way that addresses the particular concerns of cinema and film scholarship in the context of contemporary critical studies.³

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Vivian Sobchack, former president of the SCS, for giving me this reference.

² No prior figures were available, although the Division on Film was established, together with the other original divisions, at the time of the association’s 1976 reorganization. I thank Laurie Cohen, who was *PMLA*’s submissions coordinator while this issue was being prepared, for providing these membership figures.

³ I wish to thank John Kronik, editor, Judy Goulding, managing editor, and Laurie Cohen for their help and concern with this issue; Tania Modleski, Advisory Committee member, for her invaluable advice and support; all fifty-nine authors who submitted their work for consideration; and the many manuscript readers for their willingness to comment on the submissions and to contribute substantively to the final versions of the four essays selected for this issue.

Work Cited

Curry, Ramona. “Twenty-Five Years of SCS: A Socio-political History.” *Journal of Film and Video* 38 (1986): 43–57.
