

German Cultural History and the Study of Film: Ten Theses and a Postscript

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I should like to summarize briefly what I hope I learned in America. The first thing to be mentioned would be something sociological in itself and infinitely important for me as a sociologist — that in America, and even to certain extent during my English stay, I was constrained no longer to regard as natural the circumstances that had developed historically in Europe — “not to take things for granted.” My now departed friend Tillich once said that he was first de-provincialized in America; he probably had something similar in mind. In America I was liberated from a certain naive belief in culture and attained the capacity to see culture from the outside.

— Theodor W. Adorno¹

“Is there an honorable objection to the serious, humanistic study of film?”² Stanley Cavell’s rhetorical question of 1981 alluded to Film studies’ legitimization crisis as it entered the academy as a bona fide discipline. German departments in the United States, which have traditionally taught literature as an expression of national culture and identity,

1. Theodor W. Adorno, “Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America,” *The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930-1960*, eds. Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969) 366f.

2. Stanley Cavell, “Film in the University,” *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981) 265.

were especially reluctant to incorporate media and popular culture into their curricula. Was not cinema, as Spengler had declared in his *Decline of the West*, on the same level as boxing and poker?³

When I taught my first German film class in 1975 at the University of California at Irvine, forty-five miles south of Hollywood, I used films not as extracurricular supplements, but as aesthetic objects worthy of independent study in their own right. Drawing on theoretical and historical knowledge not only of fiction and narrative, but also of theater, music, and the visual arts, I presented the films of the Weimar Republic as multifaceted artifacts that spoke to students from different fields. It was this inherently interdisciplinary nature of film that appealed to me as well as to a rapidly growing number of students. (For administrators, it was more likely the lure of large enrollments than radical interdisciplinarity that finally made film acceptable.) While in Germany the student movement strenuously rejected the authority of high culture and the classical canon for the sake of *Trivialliteratur*,⁴ in Southern California the inclusion of film into the curriculum seemed nothing more than a natural response to the cultural environment in which one taught.

I never perceived the study of cinema to oppose or negate the study of literature. Instead, I embraced film as a new and exciting area of inquiry that, in the wake of the semiotic revolution, allowed me to read *all* cultural products as texts. Although semiotics provided a novel theoretical framework for analyzing the "language" of film, I never fully subscribed to the scientific terminology which permitted an ostensibly objective analysis, untouched by history and interpretation. In fact, I soon became skeptical about the uncritical and facile application of the "linguistic turn" to film analysis. Exploring alternatives, I turned to various models within the German tradition: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's dialectical critique of mass culture; Siegfried Kracauer's socio-psychological film historiography;

3. Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* quoted in *Kino-Debatte: Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909-1929*, ed. Anton Kaes (Munich: dtv, 1978) 4.

4. See, for instance, Jochem Schulte-Sasse, *Die Kritik an der Trivialliteratur seit der Aufklärung* (Munich: Fink, 1971); *Literatur für viele 2. Studien zur Trivialliteratur und Massenkommunikation im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Helmut Kreuzer (Göttingen/Zürich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975); Gunter Waldmann, *Theorie und Didaktik der Trivialliteratur* (Munich: Fink 1977); Peter Nusser, *Trivialliteratur* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991).

Georg Simmel's and Ernst Bloch's analyses of popular culture; and the media theories of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht. In retrospect, it appears as if the strong tradition of Weimar cultural history and criticism had offered me a shield against the extreme formalism of purely linguistic film analysis.

It is no coincidence that, for many of us, Siegfried Kracauer's historical study of Weimar cinema, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947), became the master narrative for the critical study of film within a national context. Written with moral fervor at the end of the war by a German exile in New York who once had been the foremost film critic of the Weimar Republic, Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* linked the history of Weimar cinema to the political history of the nation. Not unlike the contemporaneous American postwar re-education campaign of Germany, *From Caligari to Hitler* sought to identify those national character traits which might explain the emergence of Nazism in Germany. We sensed that Kracauer's didactic book was flawed in several ways: it was essentialist in its insistence on an innate authoritarian German character; it was reductionist, often simplifying the film's meaning potential to its storyline and disregarding the visual coding; and its telos was inherently deterministic: Weimar led to Hitler and fascism. Although we rejected Kracauer's claims about "the" Germans, we were convinced by his basic premise that films must not be separated from their political, social, and cultural habitat. We learned that films signify something not *in abstracto*, but concretely at a certain moment in time, at a certain place, and for a certain audience. They offer responses to burning questions; they are meant to resonate and to have an impact.

In the preface to *From Caligari to Hitler*, we read: "This book is not concerned with German films merely for their own sake."⁵ Kracauer was obviously less eager to analyze films as self-contained artifacts or as individual expressions of idiosyncratic artists than to situate them in the cultural, social, and political ambience from which they issued and within which they functioned. I never shared Kracauer's postwar desire to expose the "deep psychological dispositions"

5. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1947) v. For exemplary readings that place cinema in the larger cultural matrix, see Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995).

or some inborn German propensity toward fascism. However, I did (and still do) believe in the social power of film to influence perception and shape opinions. Kracauer's resolve to study all art, especially film, as a fundamentally communal enterprise has had a lasting influence and is shared by many contemporary cultural theorists. His questions still haunt us. How does film construct and negotiate national identity? How can one articulate the relationship between a film and its historical and cultural context? How does film function in the self-fashioning of a national culture? What are the political implications of writing film history? The recent "historical turn" in cultural studies brings these questions again to the fore. In the following I would like to present ten theses that explore some of the premises (and promises) of a new type of film historiography that is informed by the current interest in cultural history.

1. Cultural historians emphasize the various material conditions and ideological factors that define and shape the production as well as the reception of individual films. For them, films do not issue from a sovereign "creativity," but are part of a larger matrix involving class, gender, and ethnicity, as well as institutional needs and aesthetic desires. This type of film study constitutes an integral part of a history of culture, as understood in cultural anthropology: "Culture is not cults and customs," writes Clifford Geertz, "but the structures of meaning through which men give shape to their experience . . ."⁶ Studying foreign films as documents of a specific culture affords a glimpse of the various ways in which artists of another culture gave shape to their experience. To discuss, for example, a film such as *Metropolis* (1927) would mean probing the contradictory meanings of technological modernization, the plight of the working class, and the failed workers' revolution in the *specific* social and political milieu of Germany in the mid-1920s. The new cultural history is concerned with concrete local knowledge, which is always partial, fragmentary, and anecdotal; the new cultural history shies away from large claims about *the* culture of other countries. There is no unified culture about which we can generalize; instead, we must examine how individuals and groups of individuals construct meaning from the profusion of things they encounter. Seen from this perspective, films are

6. Clifford Geertz, "The Politics of Meaning," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 312.

but one, albeit a powerful, articulation of our need to "make sense."

2. Narrative fictions in film (or any other medium) do not exist in a vacuum but are part of a social and economic dynamic; they do not simply mirror society, they comment on it. In their own way, fictions intervene in on-going debates and often give shape to dominant discourses; they negotiate collective fears, hopes, and hidden anxieties; and they supply in their make-believe worlds precisely what cannot be had or said in reality. Filmic fictions are especially powerful in their ability to involve the spectator because of their semi-hypnotic presentation in a darkened public site. Although fictional experience is often articulated through stories that have not actually happened, it is not illusory; it is a distinct kind of social activity in which we engage for its own sake. As a form of communal self-reflection, films tell us stories about ourselves. Thus the fictional world of the movies should not be seen as the opposite of the factual realm, but rather as a site in which men and women symbolically express their understanding of life in a particular socio-cultural milieu.

3. Concerned with the conditions under which films come into existence, cultural historians of film reconstruct the political needs and aesthetic desires that films address and control. What forms and limits of the filmic discourse did the institution of cinema permit at a certain point? What could be expressed in film? What specific kinds of aesthetic pleasure were films supposed to offer — as opposed to the pleasures of reading, for instance? What role was cinema expected to play in the political and social life of a nation? What significance did "going to the movies" have at a certain time? Who — in terms of gender, age, class, ethnicity — actually went to the movies? And which movies did they choose to see? For example, early German cinema fulfilled altogether different social functions than the contemporaneous American cinema.⁷ Furthermore, the basic difference between a modern German auteur cinema and an American studio film must be emphasized when studying, for instance, films of the New German Cinema because the conditions of production have inscribed themselves in the very form of these films.

7. Anton Kaes, "Mass Culture and Modernity: Notes Toward a Social History of Early American and German Cinema," *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year History*, eds. Frank Trommler and Joseph McVeigh, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1985) 317-31.

4. In his essay, "Art as a Cultural System," Geertz argues that signs and symbols play a role in the life of society and that it is this role which in fact gives them their substance: "Here, too, meaning is use, or more carefully, arises from use, and it is by tracing out such uses as exhaustively as we are accustomed to for irrigation techniques or marriage customs that we are going to be able to find out anything general about them."⁸ Like Roland Barthes before him, Geertz suggests "turning the powers of semiotic theory . . . away from an investigation of signs in abstraction toward an investigation of them in their natural habitat — the common world in which men look, name, listen, and make."⁹ He pleads for "a social history of the imagination," for a history of symbolic systems that shape, and are shaped by, individuals and groups of individuals. Fictions fuel the imagination: they present alternative worlds (long past or far in the future) or they "resolve" existing conflicts in a make-believe setting, thereby lifting the reality principle for a few hours.

5. A cultural study of film explores historically specific contradictions and tensions between economics and aesthetics, intended and actual functions, genre conventions and idiosyncratic styles, historical structures and individual articulations. It also examines how economic, social, political, ideological, and institutional constraints are translated into constitutive elements of a specific film. Thus each film can be seen as a stage for the interplay of a large number of conflicting anonymous voices and discourses that are also found outside the text; they exist independently of the text and have in the past often served as the so-called "historical background" that helped to limit and control the excess meaning of the text. But because this "background" itself is accessible to us most often only as a complex cluster of published texts which themselves are in need of interpretation, the borders between text and context have become porous. What is now of interest are processes of circulation, negotiation, and exchange which occur at the boundaries between the film's fictional realm and the material world. "We can ask," Stephen Greenblatt writes, "how collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in manageable aesthetic form,

offered for consumption. We can examine how the boundaries were marked between cultural practices understood to be art forms and other, contiguous, forms of expression . . ."¹⁰ It is the task of the critic to construct discursive frameworks within which the film in question is most productively placed. A film like *The Blue Angel* resonates differently (and I would argue more fully) when it is linked to the discourses of sexuality and power that were widely debated during the late 1920s. *The Blue Angel* might resonate differently in the context of today's debates about gender, spectacle, and the voyeuristic male gaze. Students consistently find it challenging and liberating to select the intertextual framework according to their own specific interests — interests which are often informed by classes they take in other disciplines.

6. Fictions (filmic and otherwise) use rhetorical devices and thus "play" with (and reformulate) non-fictional discourses; they add ambiguity as well as the possibility (and necessity) of a multiplicity of readings. Ambiguous speech is one of the central distinctions between fictional and non-fictional texts. Any analysis must acknowledge and stress the undecidability inherent in fiction. On a basic semiotic level, a film is not a depiction of a reality which is "out there," but a system of signs, a construct in which every sign signifies, connotes, and resonates on a number of levels. Teaching film (no less than teaching literature) is a balancing act between teaching the system of film-specific conventions (for instance, camera angle and movement, lighting, editing, etc.) and teaching the articulation and inflection of that system in a specific film. While contemporary film theory explores the essential properties and processes of filmic communication, a film analysis invested in cultural history traces the contingencies of historically specific communication and focuses on the interplay between film and its surrounding world in all its political, social, institutional, and aesthetic dimensions.

7. "What films reflect," declared Kracauer, "are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions — those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness. Of course, popular magazines and broadcasts, best-sellers, ads, fashions in language and other sedimentary products of

8. Clifford Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System," *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) 118.

9. Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System" 119.

10. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 5.

a people's cultural life also yield valuable information about predominant attitudes, widespread inner tendencies. But the medium of the screen exceeds these sources in inclusiveness."¹¹ In addition to spoken words, written texts, sound effects, and music, film incorporates the whole visible world. Beneath the overt history of economic shifts, social agencies, and political machinations runs a history involving the everyday, the routine *Alltag*. How does film portray the private in relation to the public sphere? In his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Kracauer writes:

The small random moments which concern things common to you and me and the rest of mankind can indeed be said to constitute the dimension of everyday life, this matrix of all other modes of reality. It is a very substantial dimension. If you disregard for a moment articulate beliefs, ideological objectives, special undertakings, and the like, there still remain the sorrows and satisfactions, discords and feasts, wants and pursuits, which mark the ordinary business of living. Products of habit and microscopic interaction, they form a resilient texture which changes slowly and survives wars, epidemics, earthquakes, and revolutions. Films tend to explore this texture of everyday life, whose composition varies according to place, people, and time.¹²

Since its beginnings, the filmic medium has had a natural affinity to the physical world of everyday life. The first films shot by the Lumière brothers depicted domestic scenes, workers leaving the factory, a train arriving in the station. The film camera, as we read in an announcement of one of the first German film showings in 1895, was employed as a tool to reproduce "life in its full naturalness by means of electricity." The birth of film from the spirit of technology as well as its plebeian childhood in the amusement park kept it banned from the bourgeois culture for a long time (longer in Germany, given its strong tradition of *Bildungsbürgertum*). From their inception, movies recorded and shaped everyday culture. Any study of cultural practices, customs, and rituals, any study of *Alltagsgeschichte* would find films rich (and still mostly untapped) archival sources.

8. The embedment of film in the historical moment, specifically in the historiography of everyday life, in "local knowledge," positions

11. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of Germany Film* 6.
12. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (London: Oxford UP, 1960) 304.

the medium as part of the cultural production of a country and a period, as a complex appropriation of the world, and as a specific interpretation of experience. The institution of cinema thus participates in processes and practices of cultural exchange among various disciplines and activities: politics, theater, religion, philosophy, art, work, and leisure. Compared with the positivism of the old cultural history and the formalism of the New Criticism, the new cultural history emphasizes the dynamic and fluid relationship between cultural and social life at specific points of time and place. It examines the circulation of representations both inside and outside the domain of cinema and places film within larger textual discourses, favoring questions of negotiation and intertextuality over questions of influence. Filmic texts are empowered by *shared* emotions, stories, and dreams. If cinema is a breeding ground for daydreams and nightmares, for fantasies and myths (as Weimar cinema certainly was), what socio-psychological functions did it serve? Is film a "gigantic machine to model social libido," as Félix Guattari claimed in his essay "The Couch of the Poor"?¹³ Are movies equivalent to a psychoanalytic couch for those unable to afford analysis? Can film represent a non-existent, imagined, "possible" society? Is film history, then, a history of collective wishes and repressed desires; a history of emotions, anxieties, vicarious experiences, and illusions; a history, maybe, of what did *not* happen but was felt, experienced, remembered, enjoyed, suffered? A history of the unwritten?

9. Whoever speaks, Foucault once said, possesses the power to speak. It is not self-evident that certain films or certain movements or styles emerged in a certain country at a given time. What voices were repressed? What filmmakers did *not* have the power to speak, which films could *not* be produced or shown? This "breach of self-evidence," as Foucault calls it,¹⁴ is the basis for a critical film analysis that questions the very fact of a film's existence. If the manifest appearance of a text is no longer taken for granted, the text will gain the status of an *event* that has to be explained — not as an expression of an isolated creator but as a multi-leveled social product that was made to serve various functions: memory, compensation, distraction,

13. Félix Guattari, "Le divan du pauvre," *Communication* 23 (1975): 96.

14. Michel Foucault, "Questions of Method: Interview with M. Foucault," *Ideology and Consciousness* 8 (Spring 1981): 6.

education, and so on. Why, for instance, did a vampire film like *Nosferatu* appear in 1922? What were the questions to which this film was the answer? Does it have to do with the traumatic encounter of death in World War I? Does the stranger from Transylvania remind the contemporary audience of eastern Jews who had come to Berlin in the thousands? Does the film work through the war experience without ever alluding to it?

10. Focusing on the unsecured borders of the various cultural realms, cultural historians are engaged in constantly drawing and redrawing the lines between these realms; they study the symbolic dimension of politics as well as the political dimension of symbolic communication. All borders are open, and exciting forays into new territories lie ahead: anthropology, ethnography, archeology, history of science, medicine, and jurisprudence, to name a few. As the syncretistic medium par excellence, film incorporates numerous disciplines ranging from architecture to music, from theater to photography, from painting to acting. As a cultural document and event, film encompasses philosophical, sociological, political, and ethical dimensions; it carries class, ethnicity, and gender implications; and it is frequently invested in national identity formation. For Roland Barthes every text is "made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures. . . .¹⁵ Film has become a preferred locus for studying the various ways in which "many cultures" enter into a dialogue and separate realms of knowledge compete with each other.

To sum up: cultural history (1) examines existing cultural practices and products; (2) it explores the authority of a work (how is it deployed, created, acquired, distributed, transmitted?); (3) it seeks out notions of archive and discourse as entities that deal with film over and above (or together with) genre and authorship; (4) it analyzes the way in which genre convention as well as economic, social, political, ideological, and institutional constraints are incorporated and translated into material and constitutive elements of a text; and (5) it concludes that discourse is the system by which the world is not only represented and described but divided and administered, exploited and manipulated, contained and controlled. As an integrative site for a wide range of discourses and disciplines, as a

15. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 148.

nodal point of intersecting voices, film occupies a central position in contemporary cultural history. Within this framework I envision a future study of German film that (1) will not be restricted to film but will include related theoretical and philosophical, fictional and non-fictional writings, as well as intertextual references to other disciplines; (2) does not take cultural production as self-evident, but investigates the conditions and functions of a film's manifest appearance in a certain place at a certain time; (3) examines the historical field where films coexist with other forms of visual culture and other representations of the cultural and social realm; (4) will not take films as static objects for formal analysis but will reconstruct and trace the various ways in which they circulate in society, acquire specific meanings, and intervene in debates and practices.

Postscript: It is ironic that the recognition of film as a legitimate object of academic study comes at a time when film is threatened to be superseded by the so-called new media, by interactive television and virtual reality simulation. If in 1975 attention was almost exclusively focused on cinema, twenty years later the scope of inquiry has widened: film itself is now perceived as just one chapter within the larger history of visual culture and perception. It is no accident, I believe, that numerous books on vision have recently appeared,¹⁶ that questions of urban perception are being posed anew by prominent architectural critics and theorists,¹⁷ and that film is increasingly being analyzed within larger conceptual frameworks (such as modernism, technology, urbanism, etc.).¹⁸ Also the current interest both in the pre- and post-cinema era seems to reflect on the rise and fall of the primary medium of this century. Even if, in response to new media technology, the institution of cinema changes its status and

16. See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT, 1992); Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Definition of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993).

17. See Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: MIT, 1990); Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993); Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge: MIT, 1992).

18. See, for instance, Brigitte Peucker, *Incorporating Images: Film and the Rival Arts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995); Karin Bruns, *Kinomythen 1920-1945. Die Filmentwürfe der Thea von Harbou* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995); Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995).

function, the pleasure of looking ("the frenzy of the visible") will not change.¹⁹ Film studies is likely to become part of a history of visual culture that includes television, interactive video, and computer-generated images as well as media spectacles. Kracauer's basic impulse — to study film not in isolation — will become even more important in the future than it has been in the past.

19. See *Pre-cinema History: An Encyclopedia and Annotated Bibliography of the Moving Image before 1896*, ed. Hermann Hecht (London: Bowker Sour, 1993); Corinna Müller, *Frühe deutsche Kinematographie: Formale, wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Entwicklungen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1994); Siegfried Zielinski, *Audiovisionen: Kino und Fernsehen als Zwischenspiele in der Geschichte* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1989); *Media Spectacles*, eds. Marjorie Garber et al. (New York/London: Routledge, 1993); *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, eds. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: U of California P, forthcoming).

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