Reflections on “A Critical Dialogue”

BY KASS BANNING

The universality of the language has been found” (spectator at an early Lumière screening, 1896).

The nature of film studies is heterogeneous and eclectic—there is no fixed orthodoxy. Like most areas of study that represent the social organisation of knowledge within formal education, there are often violent differences of opinion. Given the present status afforded film studies in the academy, it is essential to define our parameters: whether film studies is a discipline, or a field of study. What follows are some very schematic reflections on dialogue on Canadian film that grew out of the conference. The problems particular to this dialogue were magnified at this meeting.

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Film studies. How to examine something that is difficult to classify itself, which is, at best, a critical “indiscipline.” Historically, film studies was an attempt to answer the contingencies of an era, it was an attempt to break out of the disciplinary ghettoes of the ‘60s, an attempt to revive the academy. Within its more anarchic realization, film study was originally set up to magnify at this meeting.

...teachers (are being) dragged screaming into the ‘80s by their students.

fight for their long-term investment in it. Of course, this tension does have an Oedipal ring—competition between generations, between the tenured and the not tenured. But old ways die hard. Incursions have left film scholars feeling breathless with indignation. Nevertheless, their anxiety says something about the legitimacy of film studies’ parentage. It is not therefore, surprising that a chorus is heard along the walls...
have tenured teaching positions here in Cinema Studies programs. In the past 10 years, Cinema Studies has provided a haven for American academics, often constituting the second wave of Americans, hired by the first wave who were hired in the late '60s. Within this rather large group, I have noted a higher degree of obduracy, a clinging to the old orthodoxies. (I do not wish to endorse a narrow nationalist posture by claiming that Americans have not made contributions. I can recall a fellow, arriving in the late '70s, who observed the 'gap' in Canadian film scholarship and forthwith became an expert in the field. ) Michel Marie (a scholar from Université de Paris III) claimed at the conference that he could not discern any difference between the English-Canadian papers and the general tenure of American film scholarship: perhaps his comment has some bearing here.

(With Quebec film teaching, on the other hand, Canadian content is much higher than the rest of Canada and indigenous Québécois examples are cited more often than not.)

In English Canada, economic realities inform how and how often Canadian film is taught. With the considerable budgetary restraints, the predominant interest in Hollywood film culture often eclipses Canadian choices in the selection of films purchased and studied. American film courses are more popular with general film students and departments often depend on body count so American films are purchased. Now that film budgets are all but frozen, the interlibrary loan system (a co-operative lending system within Ontario, for example) cannot adequately supply a thorough curriculum of Canadian film. We are locked into this repetitive cycle, this overreaching economy.

"So-called critical writing often consists of descriptive reviews or publicity, often initiated by the filmmakers themselves."

As with other bodies of knowledge, there is a direct relationship between film studies and Canadian film criticism. Some excellent analyses have tricked down from the academy: for example, the 'father' of Canadian cinema studies, Peter Harcourt, has laid the groundwork for a second generation of Canadian film scholars. David Candfield's, Michel Houle's, and Germain Lacasse's work on Quebec cinema are exemplary and the historical contributions of Pierre Veronneau and Peter Morris are invaluable. Bruce Elder's writings on experimental film have additionally contributed to Canadian film scholarship.

Coincident with this scholarly level of activity, so-called critical writing often consists of descriptive reviews or publicity, often initiated by the filmmakers themselves. Rhetoric and personal impression often take the place of serious analysis. In this way, criticism is often reduced to the homogeneity of local advocacy which results in little polemical debate. There is much work to be done on the mutual implications between Canadian film and film criticism, and not because the relationship is necessarily immoral. But indoctrinated protocols of film appreciation do need tracing through all their extensive ramifications. Because of these tendencies, there is the possible danger that Canadian film criticism will be removed from the claims of criticism and change. To counter this, Canadian film study must arm itself with extreme self-consciousness about the constitution of value, a film study that treats the antecedent valuation of film history itself as the proper subject of its own inquiries. But all of this is empty rhetoric when one realizes there is no forum for debate—there are no scholarly venues that specifically deal with Canadian film. (This 'decenteredness' is compounded by the fact that there is no existing film program in Canada which offers a doctorate. Students are regularly sent to study south of the border, often to second grade universities, which remain committed to the approaches initiated in their undergraduate studies.)

The occasional interview or review is included in our cultural magazines, which have no direct editorial control. But the occasional effort to write about the constitution of value, a film study that treats the antecedent valuation of film history itself as the proper subject of its own inquiries, can obscure the need for commonality, the age-old Canadian desire for definition that would tame the anxiety of difference that precipitates such meetings as this colloquium on Canadian and Quebec cinema. Like the spectator at Lumiere's screening, we came to investigate whether the universal language of film can obscure difference. At the very least, Canadian and Quebec Cinema: A Critical Dialogue underlined the irreconcilable differences between nationalities, methodologies, and the sexes and opened up a site for future dialogue - it was a beginning.

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