

Reflections on "A Critical Dialogue"

BY KASS BANNING

During the third week of May '86 at the University of Laval, in a suburb of Quebec City, the two Canadian film associations, the Film Studies Association of Canada (FSAC) and L'association québécoise des études cinématographiques (AQEC) met for their first joint conference. Following are some excerpts from a report Kass Banning wrote on the conference. We believe they not only continue to be appropriate but, considering the present state of filmmaking, film criticism, and film studies, have become even more important to political debate today.

"The universal 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 ghettos of the '60s, an attempt to revive the academy. Within its more anarchic realization, film study was originally set up to critique contemporary cultural formations. Moreover, film studies saw itself as a radical development, which included the marginality of film as an area of intellectual interest. In most universities, film studies was considered as either subordinate to English, as a "soft option" within the amorphous free-for-all of Liberal Studies or as a kind of evidence at best or as a visual aid at worst.

In spite of these obstacles to legitimacy, film studies has survived into the '80s; there are several departments and programmes at universities throughout the country. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether film studies'

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original goal, to critique cultural formations, takes place within these institutions. Skeletal historiography often replaces the original commitment to critique. Such 'crowd-pleasers' as Scriptwriting 101 and Hollywood Production Techniques 203 have additionally superseded the relevancy of film studies. Hence, in some institutions, the proliferation of industry-related courses have produced a generation of cultural illiterates. This is compounded by the fact that some departments which offer production divorce theory from practice. Students are more often than not ignorant of cultural contexts, and are seduced by promises of a future in the industry.

Given film studies' original outlaw status, how did it lose its commitment and shift to the safe orthodoxies of film movements, auteur and genre study. Parallel to other bodies of knowledge that consolidate academic respectability, film studies necessarily formed cultural hierarchies. It followed The Great Tradition—text-based analysis and privileged films made up the canon, representing the tastes of a particular social class. At this time, film scholars went into their profession because they liked watching and talking about films and were not encouraged to consider the methodological bases of their procedures. As film study became a distinct subject area territories were swiftly staked out, methodologies just as quickly became entrenched.

Today film studies is comprised of several warring paradigms: the empiricist, historical orthodoxies compete with various combinations of Marxist, feminist, post-structuralist and psychoanalytic approaches. Co-incident with these (often hostile) methodologies are the more home-brewed concoctions that compete for

authority over the object: for example, a self-educated film specialist, of "Popperian" persuasion, rails at the theoreticist turn in film study, old boys reminisce on the Golden Age of film scholarship when passion was enough and philosophers lament the loss of ontological concerns that have been trampled in the rush towards the latest theory.

Understandably, academics are wary of trading in their wellworn paradigms for new ones. Expertise does not constitute a neutral territory—it is indeed a form of investment, and we rigidly defend our positions. Familiarizing oneself with the developments in the past 10 years in the humanities is indeed an ominous task. Established film scholars respond by suffering with bemused antipathy the shift to theory. On the other hand, younger academics

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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 teachers 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 of film studies' Jericho: the sound of teachers being dragged screaming into the '80s by their students. Despite this chipping away at the edifice, these walls, however, remain solid with the obduracy of certain interests and of certain forms of evaluation.

In my view, it is the practice of drawing from, and beyond, the traditional formal disciplines that marks film studies' radical potential. We need these intellectual tools to avoid conceptualizing film in a narrow way. Within the humanities, it is generally acknowledged that we are now marking the close of an epoch of

specialization, moving toward the formation of disciplinary synthesis. Now is the time to re-evaluate Cinema Studies and place it firmly within this '80s critical context. This broadening, however, has yielded a vertigo of discourses and writing strategies. Misunderstandings occur; not surprising, given that dialogue moves across so wide a range of disciplinary and national traditions, obstructing direct engagement with the arguments, motives, and implications of the various positions. Understandably, this factor is often a deterrent for dialogue; very few scholars take the risk of standing on shaky ground, of speaking out of place. Instead, guerrilla tactics often stand in for dialogue and debate.

Ideally, the student of film should encounter the inherent problems of critical interpretation, and be forced to encounter the discursive foundations of film theory, the masterworks it has hybridized in order to seek legitimacy. This is not an easy task, and few Canadian film scholars are paragons of this practice. If one agrees that film studies is *not* a discipline, its efforts at legitimization, and its institutionalization have led to its present state of ossification. This state continues because film study, like any failing conceptual hierarchy, is prone to dogmatic and arbitrary entrenchment as its institutional effectivity is endangered.

Notwithstanding, it is film study's precarious status in the academy, its lack of legitimization, that simultaneously contributes to what some would call its unwieldiness yet enhances its potential for enterprise, for a more all-encompassing cultural analysis. It appears, however, that enterprise has been delegated to the marginalized approach courses—approach courses have had to take up the radical slack. Since the '70s, theory courses have become the dumping ground for radical theories that were infiltrating the film litany. Through these distinctions, the main body of film study is maintained as uncontaminated, neutral territory, free from the bias of a particular approach, outside the domain of politics.

The study of Canadian film is afforded a lowly status in most universities across the country. This lack of enthusiasm, I believe, is partly due to the proliferation of American academics who

Kass Banning is a film theorist and freelance writer living in Toronto.

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 one 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 France's 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 stress on 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 overriding economy.

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As with other bodies of knowledge, there is a direct relationship between film studies and Canadian film criticism. Some excellent analyses have 'trickled 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 Clandfield'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 takes 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 'decentredness' 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 particular slant. Their position is understandable, given that there is little opportunity for the average Canadian to view the films under analysis. Again, this situation is inextricably bound up with our underfunded system of distribution and exhibition. This much debated (and lamented) cul-de-sac cannot be developed here, but needs much more analysis.

In the face of the above obstacles described, we have come through. We persevere. How we manage to continue is remarkable. There is discourse on English Canadian film—in my view, most is shoddy, but there are exceptions, some is exemplary. It is noteworthy that these two organizations, FSAC and AQEC, combined, do not have enough members to warrant membership in a Learned Society. Regardless, these two linguistic communities do constitute an "interpretive community". On the other hand, this togetherness could represent the last

vestige of strength: an attempt to regroup and protect the tiny fiefdom of Cinema Studies from colonization: a necessity for keeping the wolves of established disciplines, Sociology, English for example, and the not-so-established Cultural Studies and Communications, at bay.

These challenges come at a time when we have to meet them. There is an empirical base to film study, but a critical approach to the discipline is necessary—without throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Film studies' trials cannot be resolved by importing new theories. What has to be tackled lies on a more profound level and no single strategy can do anything but conceal the inherent complexities and necessary diversities of response. We need methodological debate, rather than integration.

We should not expect a rational consensus on this or to proceed smoothly. Disputes such as this have been endemic to intellectual life in the last century, one has only to recall the brouhaha which followed the New Critics' claim that Latin and Greek needn't be taught. The question is not that one can no longer teach Fellini and Bergman, but the terms in which they have been examined must be rethought.

I believe that it is the desire for community, 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 nations, methodologies, and the sexes and opened up a site for future dialogue— it was a beginning. ●

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